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The Standing Committee on
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

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Inquiry into Indigenous Employment

Yulella is aware that you are asking for examples of positive outcomes leading to improved outcomes in employment. In writing this submission, I would like to point out that it is just as important (if not more so) to look at things that have not worked, and why. This submission will address both aspects as we believe that without addressing both sides, the inquiry is likely to miss addressing the ineffective aspects and then not be anywhere near as successful as it may be.

In the last two and a half years, Yulella has concentrated on running courses for young people, that are aimed at addressing their real needs to become job ready. We have identified the following aspects of the path from unemployment to successful employment, and many of these aspects of the training and subsequent support are necessary for most Indigenous people who want to get a job.

The first aspect we are addressing is that we can't take for granted that any of the people we're working with has any knowledge or understanding of what work in mainstream is all about, nor how to get it and then subsequently how to survive in it. The support that many mainstream (mostly white) families are able to provide to children in their schooling and subsequent search of a job, is not present in many (perhaps most) Indigenous households. Indeed, there is often a negative and/or hostile outlook towards anything non-Aboriginal, that makes it highly unlikely that children will be positive towards employment, or will understand what needs to happen to get into a job and then keep it.

Then there is the aspect of peer pressure that acts against success. What we have to address as part of our course is that each of our participants leaves work and then mixes with other people his/her own age who haven't the motivation or encouragement to move away from the norm, and who will actively discourage others from doing so. We do this by trying to forge a bond between the young people on the course, to make a positive feedback loop. Last year this had the added spin-off of stopping some of the friction between young people in Meekatharra as they got to know each other better

A further aspect is finding opportunities for people to try out the work they think they'd like, so that they can find out whether or not the job is what they think it is, and then whether or not it suits their temperament and skills. Without this opportunity for work experience, we often find that people get work but don't last because they find that what they thought they'd like, they actually don't. Our experience is that when a participant reaches the stage of being disillusioned about the job, rather than try to talk to someone who is a whitefella and therefore who is not expected to be sympathetic in any way, the employee just stops going, and the employer chalks it up to being just another typical blackfella who can't be trusted to do anything right. We address that problem by using mentors for the employer and the employee.

Another problem we have to address, is the participant's limited knowledge of what jobs actually entail, and their lack of exposure to many of the vocations available in Australia today. We have addressed this by running an employment experience camp in Perth, where we take the participants around to lots of worksites and look all sort of work being done by people. If possible we try to get the participants to talk to the workers about what they actually do.

Then there is the aspect of support needed to help the person to get used to the rhythm of employment. By that we mean getting up in time for work and then getting there on time, correctly dressed and prepared to get on with it. And doing that day after day after day. We have set up off site mentors who may even go around and wake people up for 2 or 3 weeks, and get them to work, then monitor attendance very closely and eventually reduce that to once in a while.

Another aspect addresses the way we will help employees to survive racist treatment in the workplace, or what they perceive to be that behaviour. Co-related to this is what employees may perceive to be unreasonable requests or standards and ways of being treated, that may be seen to be normal work behaviour by others. Mentors help here as well.

Also important, is the fact that people who have to travel long distances to get a job of their choice, may then suffer homesickness and really miss the support and regular contact with family that they are used to. We are drawing up a register of Yamatji People in other parts of the state, to act as surrogate families for young people who go away, to help to address that. We would expect those people to act as a local family, and include the young people in their activities, and be someone they can talk to in addition to their mentor.

In order to ensure the success of the course, we are trying to put together a staff which are as far as possible Aboriginal people, and if not, we look for staff who have successfully worked with Aboriginal people before. If that is not possible, we appoint a mentor for the person who provides feedback on performance and the way they are operating. Staff are then responsible to mentor all students to support and encourage them at all times, and to point out in appropriate fashions when behaviour needs to be modified. In the early stages of the course we go around to student houses and pick them up if they don't attend on time, and go and talk to them in their own homes about their problems, helping them to find solutions if possible. This may continue for some time, depending on the participant's needs.

I would like to say that this course has been a huge success in its first year, but that is not the actual case. It has had some real effect on the young participants, not the least of which is the reduction in violence in Meekatharra between young people. We have also helped some of the participants to focus more on what they actually want to do, and the sorts of jobs they are not suited to. Several of the first year participants are doing the course for a second time as they were very young during the first one, and didn't get as much out of it as they could have. In addition, we found that the GATE course was not the one to tie the training to, as there isn't enough "hands on" in it. This year we are using a construction course.

Four or five of the first year participants are waiting for a horticulture course to start in 3 weeks or so because the initial course awakened their interest in this aspect, and we are seriously undertaking a study of the opportunity for a nursery growing dry area plants, that could provide employment for them all.

It is early days yet, the committee of Yulella agreed before the project started that it may be a 20 year project, but they are committed to it, even though it hastens slowly.

Our one regret is that government agencies have been very reluctant to assist in real material ways, and DEWR, which has the main responsibility for training and employment, basically told us to go away last year, and had no way of being entrepreneurial enough to try something that didn't meet their rigid programs.

It would appear that this inquiry is looking for alternatives to the programs and methods that have failed in the past, and I hope that it may result in more dialogue between government and people who want things to happen, and then some action to support people who want to have a go in different ways.

In addition to the comments above, I feel it is extremely important to point out that without the \$ to do innovative things, they won't get done.

There are a lot of factors that have led to failure in the past. Not the least of these is the assumption that mainstream programs will work. They don't because they are designed for white people who live in cities or large towns and they miss key elements that would support success.

Another factor is the reluctance of both State and Federal governments to spend some real money to assist success. An example of this is the CDEP System. To commence this system some 27 years ago, communities were given the unemployment benefits for the people who wanted to be participants, and they then paid them when they did their weekly work. To administer this system, money was excised from the budgets of the then DSS and CES, so that the community had something to pay a manager, office and bookkeeping staff, and to buy some small items necessary to get it started. A small amount of capital was also provided. Without any additional funding (except inflation creep) this program is now supposed to provide training and have job outcomes. Try comparing that to the Work For The Dole Scheme (WFTD), that has no such demands. Though there was some transfer of training funds to ATSIC about 13 years ago, the first thing the Howard government did when they came into power was to reduce ATSIC's funding by \$120million, so the training program disappeared. I have attached a comparison of CDEP and WFTD to this so you can see the inequity of the way CDEP participants are being treated. You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. A project that was designed to get people to work on local community projects, can not be expected to provide people who are mainstream work ready. Give us the extra resources (treat us equitably), and I'm sure there is a way.

I would like to write a lot more on this topic, but am much too busy to spend any more time on a submission to an enquiry that I fear will be superficial, and therefore a waste of my energy. I hope this is not so, but the last 15 years has led me to believe that it will be so. Please contact me if you are seriously looking to change things for the better.

Ron Bradfield
Manager CDEP Yulella
3 May 2005