

Special report
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Yalata News

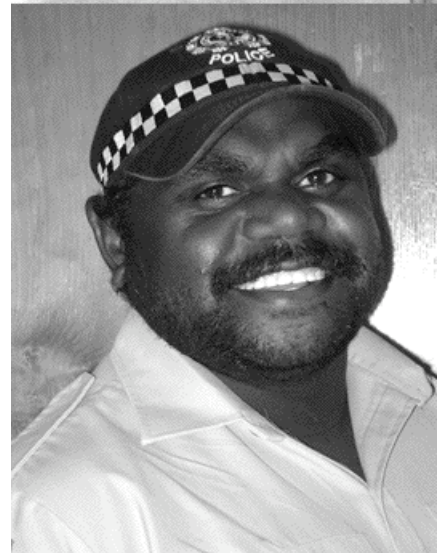
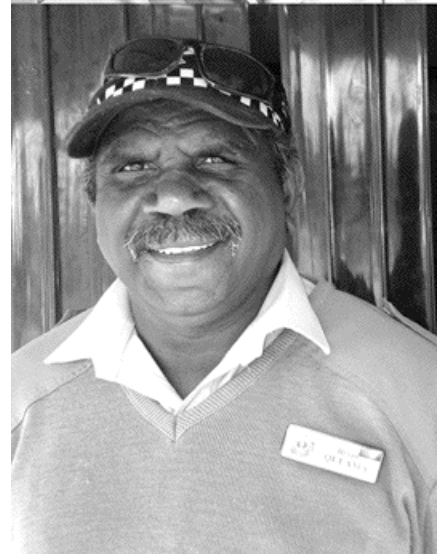
Petrol sniffing problem responds to teamwork

Policing an area of west coast South Australia with a landmass bigger than England is no obstacle to SAPOL's Chris Kummerow taking very good care of business at Yalata base. With an Arts/Theology degree, Police Academy training, and his current work on a graduate Bachelor of Law degree (with a strong emphasis on Indigenous law - native title and customary law) Chris brings valuable skills to his work.

Community Constables Brian Queama and Roy Day provide crucial local knowledge and support to all Yalata's policing. Brian's years of police experience and knowledge of local people and conditions coupled with his expert tracking skills are fundamental elements to good policing at Yalata. Roy is now working on a Certificate III in Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Counselling. His extension studies take him to Port Augusta and Adelaide where he discusses what works in other communities with fellow students, returning to Yalata with fresh ideas. Together with Chris, and with across agency support, they have worked on a successful strategy to mitigate the effects of petrol sniffing on the community.

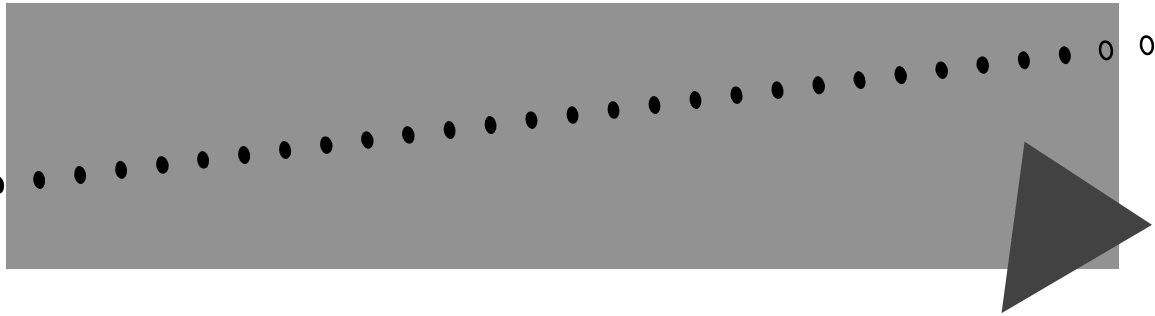
The sense of shame for Aboriginal communities identified as 'sniffing' communities is accompanied by having to endure petrol sniffing's tangible effects: roof rocking, property damage, break-ins, theft, violence, unacceptable noisy behaviour throughout the night, and the pain of observing the decline in health and social behaviour of sniffers. After his December 2006 arrival, community soon made Chris aware that it was keen for police to take a firm stand against the problem. With an estimate of more than twenty active sniffers, Chris drew on his experience as an intelligence officer, and along with Brian and Roy, devised a zero tolerance plan: Tullawon Health Clinic, Yalata School, Families SA, and Drug and Alcohol SA collaborated when necessary.

Distinguishing the core group from the hangers-on was essential. Community and staff supported the initiative by coming forward with information about known sniffers present in the community, those at large who smelled of petrol, who was sniffing, where, and at what times. Once identified, policing target packages were assembled for each of the core group members, comprising photos, histories, bail conditions, and anything enforceable that could be policed.



From top: Constable Chris Kummerow, Community Constable Brian Queama, and Community Constable Roy Day.

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The police consulted the community extensively, always asking ‘Have you seen it happening? Who is the problem?’ It was necessary to view sniffers as users and dealers, and to determine who was committing serious criminal offences. Community members were clear about the need to remove the core sniffers who they knew were recruiting young kids into sniffing.

Constant daily checking on sniffing locations was key. Through their persistence, police would often catch sniffers once, only to find them sniffing again half an hour later. They sometimes caught the same youths two or three times a night. Under such pressure, sniffers moved away from the community and out into the scrub, or by the sewage ponds, telling no-one in the community of their whereabouts: police soon found them.

Chris, Brian and Roy used discretion with non-core sniffers, cautioning them, taking their petrol away, placing them immediately with a responsible adult, and informing their families of the identity of their associates. Collaboration with other agencies by notifying them with relation to follow-up support drew the net around the problem with a view to working towards a better future for all youth involved.

This intensive approach identified fifteen core sniffers, of whom several were later incarcerated on break-in offences associated with sniffing. Core sniffers with previous offence histories were arrested and placed on strict bail, while some problem sniffers were placed in well-supervised accommodation in Adelaide in order to keep them away from substance abuse for a useful period of time.

Tullawon Health played a role: when informed about sniffers’ identities and the times and locations of their sniffing, staff raised sniffing as a health problem when offenders presented for health checks, even though to date there is no enforceable treatment.

Police alerted Families SA when sniffers were caught as part of an intensive collaboration involving many meetings and phone calls. Police abided by care plans implemented by Families SA by knowing about and supporting the family members and adults nominated for contact and supervision.

As the problem subsided, Principal Grant Fiedler of Yalata School approached Chris about truancy that he believed may lead to further petrol sniffing activity. Chris began following the school bus in the police car, using the vehicle’s flashing lights and sirens and encouraging young people to jump in the car with him and taking them to school.

When bailing juvenile petrol sniffers, those concerned looked at ways of returning them to school. There were written, signed court conditions requiring school attendance. One boy had school attendance tied to his desire to be involved in football training. Others participated in outdoor activities such as hunting with Ken Smith of Drug and Alcohol SA.

Chris Kummerow doesn’t pretend that targeting sniffers for other offences is a solution. All that he, Brian and Roy can do is policing: he believes that petrol sniffers need enforceable treatment and support. He would like to see petrol sniffing included on the state-wide Drug Diversion Referral Program, preferring to refer petrol sniffers to this existing program.

Following the success of the intensive team approach, feedback from community is positive. It views itself more optimistically, people are enjoying quieter, safer nights and school attendance is back up. Associated offences - break-ins of all types and assaults – have plummeted. Yalata is now a more peaceful place.

Report by Susie Surtees, Yalata Community