

# Qualitative evaluation of Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place

## Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a qualitative evaluation of Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place (WNLP), a community-based, residential diversion program that aims to support Koori men to complete their Community Correction Orders (CCOs). WNLP is a key part of the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA), and plays a significant role as a statewide program that assists Koori men to address their offending behaviour. Clear Horizon Consulting, along with partners Storyscape and Dardi Munwurro, was engaged by Corrections Victoria (CV) to conduct the evaluation.

### Introduction and methodology

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are overrepresented in the criminal justice system due to a range of complex socioeconomic and historical factors. The Victorian AJA aims to reduce Koori overrepresentation in the justice system through initiatives implemented as a partnership between the Victorian Government and the Koori community. A key objective of the AJA is to strengthen community-based rehabilitation programs and alternatives to prison. WNLP is an initiative under the AJA, and aims to contribute to the achievement of this objective. Commencing in May 2008, WNLP is a live-in facility and program for Koori male offenders serving CCOs. At WNLP, participants receive rehabilitative support, work and training designed to reduce their risk of reoffending in the future. This takes place within the context of holistic 'cultural strengthening' whereby a range of structures and systems have been put in place to strengthen the participants' connection to culture, country and community.

The purpose of this qualitative evaluation was to gain an understanding of the role of cultural strengthening in supporting desistance from offending and allowing WNLP participants to successfully complete their CCOs. The evaluation methodology incorporated four methods: a document audit and literature review, semi-structured interviews with 25 strategic and operational informants and with 22 previous and current participants of WNLP, a digital storytelling workshop at which seven participants were supported to make a short film about their experience at WNLP, and six visits to WNLP to observe activities and conduct informal discussions with participants and staff.

### Key aspects of the WNLP model

There is very limited literature on the concept of cultural strengthening and how it is implemented in practice. As a result, there are few available frameworks to draw from in order to analyse WNLP in light of best practice. For this reason, the evaluation focussed on providing a robust explanation of the approach to cultural strengthening at WNLP, informed by stakeholder consultation and observation.

There are eight key aspects of the WNLP model that have enabled the achievement of outcomes for participants and the local community. WNLP adopts a holistic program model, and cultural strengthening processes are embedded within and central to this model. Within this holistic model, a highly individualised approach is taken to each participant and his needs. WNLP has established a culturally safe physical environment that incorporates locally significant totems as well as traditional protocols around meeting places. The isolation of the WNLP site enables participants to take 'time out' away from distractions and negative home influences. There was extensive Koori input into WNLP's design and there continues to be Koori involvement in the program's oversight and governance. Moreover, all core staff are Koori men, who act as strong role models. Elders and

Respected Persons play an important role in providing cultural advice and mentoring participants. The voluntary nature of attendance means that participants tend to be more committed to the WNLP experience.

While the model has been highly successful and was praised by strategic informants and participants, there are three main challenges facing its implementation. Firstly, WNLP has no residential, specialist staff who can provide intensive support around issues such as substance misuse, family violence or mental illness. This leads to a second challenge, namely the extent to which WNLP can offer follow-up support to issues raised by men during, for example, men's circles. WNLP is also unable to offer the opportunity for families to be extensively involved in participants' rehabilitation. This is the result of the geographic isolation of the site, as well as the constraints around specialist capacity to address family issues. Although these challenges impose constraints on the WNLP model, it must be considered whether it can or should be the role of WNLP to provide these kinds of services and support. A third challenge is the isolation of the site. While identified as a benefit for many participants, travel time and distances are an issue for participants, WNLP staff and program facilitators.

### **Outcomes and effectiveness of WNLP**

As of 26 February 2013, 211 Koori men had attended WNLP and 42 per cent successfully completed their stay. A further 40 per cent voluntarily self-discharged before completing their stay and 19 per cent were discharged for compliance issues.<sup>1</sup> The remaining six per cent were current participants at this time. The average length of stay was about 2.5 months, and over two thirds (68 per cent) of participants stayed for three months or less. The evaluation found that initially engaging men was a challenge, and although the facility can house 18 men it has never operated at full capacity. Due to the geographic isolation of the site, a number of Koori men experience difficulties in leaving their families. Feedback from strategic and operational informants suggested more could be done to promote WNLP and make the process of initial engagement (including referral, assessment and organising logistics for men to attend WNLP) as efficient as possible.

Participants highlighted a range of cultural and educational programs that had the greatest impact on them during their stay. A number of participants praised the Koori Cognitive Skills program because it had helped them see their decision-making in a new light and improved their problem solving ability. The Aboriginal Cultural Immersion Program was also highlighted as an important opportunity to learn more about the history and traditional protocols of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Other participants valued employment-focused courses that increased their confidence and provided them with skills that could benefit them in finding work in the future. A clear challenge for WNLP in delivering programs and activities is the level and capacity of staff. In particular, the instability in the Program Manager position made it difficult for WNLP to consolidate existing programs and explore other options.

While at WNP, participants have the opportunity to take time out and reflect while spending time with other Koori men. The chance to 'have a yarn' and share experiences was seen as a crucial part of the healing process. The development of connections with other Koori men in the same situation provides participants with an invaluable support mechanism during their attendance at WNLP and, for some, beyond their time there. A number of participants encountered other men who were linked to their family networks and learnt more about their own history as a result. Another

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<sup>1</sup> Please note these figures do not take into account participants who may have had multiple stays at WNLP. Participants may have voluntarily discharged but returned at a later stage to successfully complete the program.

immediate benefit of involvement in WNLP is that participants have the opportunity to complete the terms of their CCOs. In general, participants felt it was easier to complete community hours at WNLP than elsewhere as they faced fewer distractions.

Feedback from all participants indicated they had learnt more and felt stronger in their culture as a result of their attendance at WNLP. This suggests that the WNLP approach to cultural strengthening is effective. At the same time, however, it was difficult for the evaluation to establish overarching findings about the role of cultural strengthening at WNLP because the matter is highly complex, individual and difficult for participants to articulate. For participants who had had little contact with their culture prior to attending WNLP, the experience offered a chance to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and be introduced to Koori protocols and traditions. Other participants, who had grown up with extensive exposure to culture, benefited in different ways. For them, attending WNLP was a chance to 'step up' and fulfil leadership or mentoring roles based on their knowledge of culture, and to teach other participants their knowledge. In addition to the benefits experienced by participants, there is evidence that WNLP plays a role in building cultural awareness throughout the justice system and in the local community around Yarram.

The impact of WNLP on men once they complete their time at the facility (successfully or otherwise) is a complex issue to unpack. For some participants, the time spent at WNLP and the changes they experience may make it difficult to transition back into their 'everyday' lives. Indeed, while all of the participants interviewed highlighted the positive aspects of their involvement at WNLP, many also pointed to the challenges they faced at home in integrating the resulting changes into their lives. These challenges encompass a range of external factors beyond the control of WNLP such as employment, access to transitional support after leaving WNLP, peer and family pressure and ongoing substance abuse and mental health issues. Despite this, however, there is evidence that some WNLP participants have been able to make difficult decisions to change their lives, extricating themselves from environments they no longer want to be a part of. There are several cases in which participants have made dramatic transformations to their lifestyle and have desisted from offending as a result of their experience at WNLP. In these cases, the individual's motivation to change was a critical factor, and the availability of ongoing support from other service providers enabled some individuals to maintain the positive gains they made during their time at WNLP. However, it is also imperative to recognise that the process of change is complex and for many participants, WNLP is only an initial step in a longer-term course of change. Several participants benefited from more than one stay at WNLP, and often returned with more commitment to the program and greater willingness to change.

## **Conclusions**

WNLP is widely valued and supported throughout the justice system, and is an important statewide diversionary initiative under the Victorian AJA. While WNLP has been effective in enhancing cultural identity among its participants, the extent of this varies from individual to individual. For some, enhanced cultural identity is simply a reinforcement of their existing views and knowledge (that is, of country, culture, identity and community); for others, particularly those with little knowledge of their culture, the experience is an 'eye-opener' and a potentially pivotal experience in their lives. Past participants highlighted the importance of meeting other Aboriginal men at WNLP (including staff, ERPs and other participants) and the relationships they formed with them. Despite the challenges participants face on returning to their home environments, there is substantial evidence that, in a number of cases, Koori men have been able to make sweeping and transformative changes to their lives.