

IFECSA 2001 CONFERENCE

**INTEGRATING INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY**

“ENDING OFFENDING – OUR MESSAGE”

WORKSHOP PRESENTATION

BY

**NORTHERN TERRITORY CORRECTIONAL
SERVICES**



**PRESENTER: CHRISTINE FITZGERALD
MANAGER OFFENDER PROGRAM MANAGEMENT BRANCH
NOVEMBER 27th 2001**

INTRODUCTION

Major factors associated with offending and recidivism in the Northern Territory are poor employment prospects, weak skills and low education levels, poor socioeconomic standards, and the harmful use of alcohol and other drugs. Through a collaboration between Northern Territory Correctional Services (NTCS) Prisoner Education Unit and the Alcohol and Other Drugs Unit a holistic intervention project known as “Ending Offending Our Message” has been introduced which addresses offending behavior and at the same time specific VET learning outcomes and competencies.

Alcohol-related offences account for approximately 75% of all imprisonments in the Northern Territory. Combined with a high recidivism rate (35%) and a prisoner population consisting in the majority of Aboriginal people (66%) from remote and rural communities, the need to develop culturally appropriate and relevant educational and alcohol interventions in the custodial setting is self-evident. In addition, cognisance of community expectations regarding reparation and public safety must remain an ongoing priority for those working in the area of offender rehabilitation. The “Ending Offending Our Message” project aims to address these issues. Current Government policy and legislation pursues a ‘tough on crime’ approach, however the Government is also committed to prisoner education and rehabilitation. The challenge with the “Ending Offending Our Message” project has been to develop a prisoner education/rehabilitation program that is:

- ⌘ politically acceptable;
- ⌘ cost effective;

- ✎ culturally sensitive and appropriate; and
- ✎ provides tangible outcomes in regard to reducing recidivism and increasing employment opportunities on release from prison.

“ENDING OFFENDING OUR MESSAGE” PROGRAM

Over 250 adult male and female prisoners in Darwin and Alice Springs Correctional Centres have been involved in the “Ending Offending Our Message” project. This project represents an innovative and collaborative approach to interventions for Indigenous people in correctional settings. Using art and music as its primary mediums, and incorporated into nationally accredited training modules, participants are exploring, conceptualising and sharing with others their stories about drinking and offending and the impact this has not only on themselves but also their culture, country, family and community. Through this process of mutual discourse alternative patterns of alcohol use are explored, promoted and reinforced not only within the Correctional Centres but also through consultation and promotion within participants’ home communities. A number of language groups, covering most of the NT are involved including Western Arrernte, Walpiri, Luritja, Kunwinjku, Murrinh-Patha, Gupapungu, Anindilyakwa, Tiwi and Yolgnu.

Participants are enrolled in nationally accredited modules and units from the following courses:

- Certificate II in Art and Craft;
- Certificate in Entry Level Music Industry Skills;
- Certificate II in General Construction;

- Certificate I in General Education;
- Certificate II in Introductory Vocational Education;
- Certificate I in Initial Literacy and Numeracy;
- Certificate in Access to Employment and Further Study; and
- Certificate I & II in Business.

The interactive website “Ending Offending Our Message” (www.ourmessage.org) developed by participants is one element of the overall project. This medium documents the various elements of the project including artwork, music and personal stories of the participants, along with special projects and general information about NT Correctional Services. In the first ten months there were over 15,000 hits on the web site.

Three Art exhibitions have been held at the Fannie Bay Gaol Museum in Darwin, and two exhibitions in Alice Springs. Participating low security prisoners performed songs they had written as part of the project at the opening ceremonies. The first exhibition also traveled to Melbourne in May 2000 at the request of the organisers of the Next Wave Youth Festival. The content of much of the music and artwork reflects on the choices made by the offender prior to imprisonment, the effects of their crime on the victim and the realities of prison life.

The “Our Message” music CD containing songs written, performed and recorded by participants was released in June 2000. The current Art exhibition and music CD will tour to remote communities (in particular those communities where participants come from) in 2002. This tour will not only showcase the work

completed by participants but will also facilitate the processes of restorative justice. It will present an opportunity, particularly with some younger and more vulnerable members in these communities, to spread the message that education and training is important, and that alcohol, drug use and crime do not pay,

PROGRAM AIMS

Overall, the “Ending Offending Our Message” project focuses on the following main themes:

- **Reducing recidivism** by increasing employment prospects on release. The major factors associated with recidivism are poor employment prospects, limited education and the harmful use of alcohol and other drugs. The potential saving to the community by reducing recidivism is hundreds of thousands of dollars per annum in incarceration costs alone. Arguably, this cost would be far greater if both the fiscal and emotional cost of crime were included.
- **Reducing the negative consequences of alcohol and drug use** through an exploration of the relationship between alcohol and offending, and participation in therapeutic alcohol and drug programs.
- **Enhancing the process of restitution and reparation** to the community. The process of mutual discourse between the prisoner and the community will encourage further dialogue between the offender and their home community. (One of the fundamental principles of ‘restorative justice’ is to further involve the community in the process of ‘justice’). Furthermore, any profits resulting from the sale of artwork and music are redirected into community-based projects (e.g. Victims Of Crime Assistance League).

- **Fostering Partnerships in Aboriginal Development.** The project provides Aboriginal inmates with the opportunity to:

1. *achieve greater ownership of issues affecting their lives;*
2. *enjoy improved health and education outcomes; and*
3. *experience an increase in employment and enterprise on release from prison.*

The “Ending Offending Our Message” project facilitates development of skills which enhance the participant’s employment opportunities on release. For instance, the number of Indigenous people involved in the art and music industries far exceeds the Indigenous proportion of Australia’s population (2%). In 1998 Indigenous artists produced 68% of Australian art sold overseas (Australia Council 1999). During the same period 23% of contemporary music sales were from Indigenous performers. The mediums of Art and Music present an opportunity for Indigenous people to be employed in these activities in their home communities where very few other work opportunities exist.

- **Ensuring a positive educational experience.** Individuals who have never participated in VET activity within the prison environment (and in most cases in the community) have eagerly participated and many for the first time in their lives have had a positive educational experience. The project has provided a learning environment that is realistic and allows each individual to learn in a context that fits their worldview. A significant outcome of this is the jump in successful completions of literacy and numeracy modules by individuals previously involved in only music and art courses. The program has also elicited a desire to learn, and an acknowledgement of the value of

education by participants. Thus the development of an educational ethic by these participants will facilitate education of children in the community as these adults/parents value the outcomes of learning. Clearly, addressing offending behaviour will result in safer, healthier and more harmonious homes in the community. Arguably, improved lifestyle for children will facilitate their access too, and engagement in schooling.

Further, the “Ending Offending Our Message” project meets the strategies developed in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 2000 – 2005 (ANTA 2000). This vision for vocational education and training for Indigenous Australians sets out to achieve:

A vocational education and training system which renews and shares an Indigenous learning culture with all Australians in a spirit of reconciliation, equity, justice, and community economic development and sustainability.

The “Ending Offending Our Message” project involves Indigenous people in decision making, achieves flexible delivery outcomes, exposes participants to information technology, and forges a closer link between VET outcomes for Indigenous people and their community development and employment opportunities. Further, the project facilitates cultural affirmation, self-determination, reconciliation, and collaboration and dialogue between Indigenous organisations, government and other stakeholders.

EVALUATION

From the inception of this project a strong emphasis has been placed on building in evaluation to the process. This has involved 'tagging' each participant so that his or her future progress can be recorded. In addition a large group of stakeholders have been identified and asked to contribute feedback as to the projects efficacy and relevance. The flexibility built in to the project allows for changes to content and delivery to be made easily without compromising the overall integrity of this innovation. In addition to considering the process elements of the project the evaluation will examine the impact and outcome of the project.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the "Ending Offending Our Message" project is a an intervention for Indigenous prisoners that is underpinned by a holistic and integrated approach to address behavior, and to facilitate the development of skills and knowledge that will assist individuals to successfully reintegrate into the community on their release from custody.

REFERENCE

Australian National Training Authority (2000) *Partners in a Learning Culture – Australia's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategy for Vocational Education and Training from 2000 to 2005*