

The Elders Visiting Program:

A Northern Territory Government initiative involving Aboriginal inmates and Community Elders.....

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Overview

Background to the Elders Visiting Program

Video snapshot

Why evaluate?

Evaluation project design

Key findings to date

What next?



History of the EVP

- The Elders Visiting Program commenced in 2004/05 with funding from the Australian government through the then Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission of \$120,000. This funding ceased at the end of 2005/06 financial year. The four original participating communities were Tiwi Islands, Groote Eylandt, Katherine region.
- In 2006/07 NTCS maintained the program on \$50,000.
- In 2007-08 the EVP received an increase in funding under “Closing the Gap” and expanded from the original participating communities to include Yuendumu, Barkley tablelands region, Lajamanu and Kalkarinji.



Objectives of the EVP

For Elders to engage in culturally relevant interventions with Indigenous prisoners in order to increase the likelihood of successful return to community on release from prison.

- Maintain cultural and community contact.
- Encourage and assist prisoners to change behaviour.
- Assist in developing appropriate and meaningful release plans.
- Important cultural link between Indigenous prisoners & corrections staff.
- Advise on cultural and community issues which impact on a prisoner choices or ability to address their offending behaviour.
- Keep the community informed on the offenders progress and pending release.
- Help to prepare the community for the prisoners return.



INSIDE the Elders Visiting Program



Why Evaluate?

- Evidence based approach
- Proactive not reactive for funding
- Continuous quality improvement.



Objectives of the evaluation

1. to document the critical factors that have underpinned the development of the EVP thus far
2. to review the performance and outcomes of the EVP against its stated aims and objectives
3. to document and review the processes and practices of, and relationships between, inmates, the prison service, relevant government agencies, Elders and their respective communities
4. to highlight the strengths and limitations of the EVP in order to make recommendations on how the program can be improved and/or expanded



Approach – Evaluative research

Tell the story of the Elders Visiting Program:

- look back at the experiences and issues for the EVP across the period of 2004-2008;
- watch closely at what happens in the program across 2009 and 2010
- suggest changes and improvements for the future of the program from 2010 onwards

The evaluation aims to take both:

- an „outcomes“ perspective whereby we record and examine the program effects; and
- a „process“ perspective whereby we closely examine and question what is going on in the program



Methods and data sources

Key methods include:

- Semi-structured formal interviews with prison staff and other government stakeholders
- Semi-structured conversational style interviews with Elders, inmates and relevant community members
- Document analysis of applicable departmental and prison policies, procedures, reports and other literature
- Direct observations of Elders and prison staff working with inmates
- Review of statistical data collected on Indigenous incarceration and recidivism



Key findings

- Wide ranging perceptions about the role of visiting Elders
- Wide ranging understandings about, and expectations for, the program within and across stakeholder groups
- Numerous logistical challenges as well as competing social, cultural, economic and environmental influences impacting on program deployment
- Major challenges to and great care given by NTCS to the recruitment of Elders so as to ensure appropriate and safe Elder involvement.
- Evidence of the program playing a part in shifting prison culture – of inmates, of custodial staff, of prison management and policy officers.



Expectations of inmates

Passive

Hearing about home and family

Listen to the trappings of post release behaviour.



Transactional

Relay messages to home and receive responses from family.

Help from Elders to prepare family, community, victim for their release

Need to set up talks or education for women back home. They make trouble. You don't even need to touch them and they can send you back.

Provide help with parole, a place, programs on the outside

Elders can help us in community - can set up a group to help us when we get out



Expectations of custodial staff

Oppositional

I don't know why we should pay these people to come in and talk to their own countrymen – they should do it for free....

They don't do anything but stand around & shake hands – more civilians walking around means more work

Some of these Elders were inmates before and now we make special arrangements for them – treated like royalty, they are....



Supportive

When Elders are here there is a calm about the place...a lull...in a nice way.

It's good to have a mix of strong role models, even if they've been inside before

Opportunity to use Elders' cultural authority to manage inmate behaviour.

One prisoner was acting out on the morning of a visit so I made sure he had some time with the Elder.



Expectations of Elders

To support peoples wellbeing inside to make them feel better by taking good stories to them, and by taking their stories back home

Just being there and talking – helping with the inmates' loneliness

Change thinking and lifestyle...set young people on the right track.

Get inmates to take on their leadership responsibilities

Give assurance that they are still welcome in community – not condemned for the rest of lives

Bring trust and trustworthy news

Reduce numbers of inmates and stop them going back to prison

Tell men that prisons not your home – that they miss out on important things – ceremony, funerals, children grow



Other expectations

Police and Parole Officers in community

No expectation or engagement with Elders

- miss opportunity to have Elders resolve matters
- ignore cultural authority of Elders



Overburden Elders with unpaid work

- expect Elders to be „eyes and ears“ in community
- expect Elders to closely monitor and supervise

Government

Provide a conduit between inmates and their families/communities and to prepare inmates for release



Reduce recidivism



Conclusion

The Elders Visiting Program is delivering on its primary objectives by....

1. supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous inmates through maintaining links to community and culture while in prison; and
2. working to improve the reintegration prospects of Indigenous offenders by talking about behaviours that lead to incarceration
3. exploring with inmates their post-release plans, obligations and expectations for returning to community.



Conclusion

Numerous implications for program are becoming clear.

- recruitment & orientation of Elders
- clarification, promotion and resourcing of the role in and out of the prison
- training and engagement of custodial staff
- design and use of buildings and open space in prison
- sustainability of program

Through further analysis and the trailing and monitoring of program changes, it is expected that the program will continue to provide practical and meaningful support to participating inmates and better prepare them for post-release community life



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