Appendix A

**A GOOD PRACTICE MODEL FOR YOUTH PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT
IN SOUTHERN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA**
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Background

The provision of youth services in Aboriginal communities has generally been ad hoc, irregular, and based on the assumption that young Aboriginal people have the same aspirations, needs, and interests as mainstream Australian kids. In addition, those youth programs that do exist are tend to be subject to the vacillations of community functionality, the insecurity of ongoing funding arrangements, and the difficulties of recruitment and retention of quality youth workers.

Young Aboriginal people in the remote southern region of central Australia are often bored, in bad health, hungry, and faced with inconsistent care from family members or struggling with the pressures of maintaining relationships with young partners and with parenting responsibilities. Many turn to escapist practices for relief or engage in risky behaviour designed to attract the attention of families. The consequences of these behaviours may damage the health and well being of individuals, as well as contributing to severe social disruption and trauma in Aboriginal families and communities.

The demographic profile of Aboriginal communities in the southern central Australian region shows an age pyramid heavily weighted at its base towards young people, with over 52% of the population aged 24 or under. Around 44% of the population is in the 10-24 age groups. Regarded as the lifeblood of their communities by their families, these children and young people are central to the ongoing vitality of unique Aboriginal identity. For these reasons there is a clear imperative to the provision of meaningful services for young people living in these communities. Unfortunately, the instances of sound youth community programs are far too rare.

The operational model for developing youth programs in Aboriginal communities is almost invariably premised on mainstream youth programs, in which young people are isolated from their families, and role models and activities alike are drawn from popular culture. Typically stuck in the 'Sport and Recreation' approach to youth work, and delivering football trainings and the odd weekend disco, these programs fail to gain and retain the attention of young people in a meaningful way.

In order to decrease levels of risk behaviours (such as petrol sniffing and vandalism), and to provide young people with meaningful alternatives, youth programs must take account of the culturally specific aspects of young people's lives. In these communities, most young people cease school attendance at 15 years, boys are initiated at adolescence, and girls and young women play important roles in the provision of care to infants. The cultural imperatives of Aboriginal kinship systems continue to dominate the relationships, behaviour and aspirations of young people.

The following principles of youth program development are broadly based on the experience at Docker River, where a strong and vibrant youth program has been in operation for two and a half years. Whilst personal and social well-being is not easily quantifiable, the Docker River program has already notched up some significant achievements. The program has reduced petrol sniffing by 80%, turned school attendance around from the community with the lowest to the highest levels of attendance, and dramatically improved young people's health. Levels of anaemia, underdevelopment, and underweight

children now approximate or equal mainstream Australian population levels for children of these age groups.

This description of the features of youth program development draws on the Docker River model, but is intended as a guide only. A fundamental component to the success of the program at Docker River has been the involvement of young people themselves, and the support of their families and the community. Rather than seeking to be prescriptive, these principles emphasise the necessity of developing each program in accordance with local needs and community conditions. The involvement of young people and their families ensures that youth program initiatives are locally driven and not externally imposed.

In summary, these are the core principles of good practice in youth program development:

1. Resources and infrastructure;
2. External coordinating youth services management body;
3. Skilled and committed youth workers;
4. Regularity and consistency of activities;
5. Gender and age status appropriate activities;
6. Activities which are meaningful, stimulating, and culturally relevant;
7. Promotion of self-esteem and coherence for young people in their lives with their families;
8. Involvement of role models;
9. Promotion of strong intergenerational relationships;
10. Knowledge of families;
11. Community development and participation.

The Features of Good Practice in Youth Program Development

1. Resources and Infrastructure

There is an urgent need for a shift in thinking about the nature and content of youth services across the region. Youth services need to be recognised as of equal, if not more importance, as other essential services on communities, and be resourced accordingly. Youth programs which feature the above principles can function, at least initially, on relatively basic resources and infrastructure. The following list represents the minimal level of resourcing required to develop successful youth programs:

- Two youth workers, one male and one female;
- Designated community housing adequate for the needs of these two workers;
- Two 4WD vehicles, preferably Toyota troop carriers, to enable the maintenance of gender separate activities – one Toyota for girls, and one for boys and young men;
- A youth program base or headquarters, in the form of a youth centre, such as the Recreational halls commonly found on communities. This building would ideally be multi-purpose, containing a large open space for indoor sports and games and other activities, a kitchen, storeroom and possibly extra smaller spaces which function as areas for smaller group activities;
- A range of equipment to be built up over time. Basic items would include sporting goods, camping gear, kitchen and cooking utensils. Further equipment needs would unfold gradually in accordance with the scope of the program;

- The provision of line management of the youth worker positions, including access to support, supervision, training, and human resource services.

Many youth programs become unnecessarily focused on the need for the newest equipment and extensive infrastructural development. There is a case to be made for modest infrastructure in communities, as over-resourced facilities can become targets for resource benefit and political manipulation. In addition, youth program facilities are always heavily used and therefore need to be simple and easy to maintain.

2. External Co-ordinating Youth Services Management Body

Youth diversion and development policies have typically emphasised the need for 'community responsibility'. This assumes a high degree of community capacity, when communities are frequently divided, riven by internal family politics and by dysfunctional administration. Equally, some communities are characterised by exceptionally good local governance, however the inherent challenges of remote Aboriginal community governance mean that this may be highly changeable. In addition, community administrative systems are usually overburdened and unable to provide youth workers with the requisite support they need in order to maintain the delivery of youth services. This places the sustainability of youth programs at risk.

An external co-ordination body for youth services, such as the NPY Women's Council or CAYLUS (Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service) or a new special purpose organisation would be able to perform crucial youth services such as human resource management, external co-ordination and networking, and youth advocacy. Community councils alone are unable or ill-equipped to supply this level of servicing. The existence of this body thereby acts as a safeguard to ensure that youth programs, their funding, or their workers do not flounder along with the vacillations of community functionality.

3. Skilled and Committed Youth Workers

The problems associated with the lack of a stable, skilled youth workforce are commonplace in communities across the southern region. All too often youth worker positions are filled unsuitable people as qualified youth workers are always lacking. Similarly, inexperienced community members often find themselves attempting to manage the substantial logistics and administration of providing programs for over 50% of the local population without sufficient support, and in the face of massive community and family pressures. Throughout these familiar scenarios, it is young people who inevitably stand to lost the most.

Youth workers employed in these positions need to be multi-skilled, with the ability to plan and implement a broad range of activities, and to maintain and repair equipment and infrastructure, drive long distances, manage bush trips with dexterity and confidence, provide crisis support and care, mentoring, referrals, health treatments and counselling and support to young people and their families. A substantial amount of administration, planning and reporting is also required of youth workers, including the rigors of applying for ongoing funding grants. The most critical aspect of youth work is the ability to develop relationships with young people and their families. They must be capable of understanding the complexities of Aboriginal family life and of using this understanding as a reference point for working with and supporting young people. Needless to say, this requires enthusiasm, commitment, and energy.

4. Regularity and Consistency of Activities.

Far too often, youth programs in these communities are impermanent, unstable, and fleeting. Youth workers, as well as funding, come and go with rapidity. Short-lived bursts of activity tend to do more damage than good, as youth workers arrive with a rush of ideas and activities, only to be gone in a matter of weeks or months, or before most of these big ideas can be implemented. The expectations of young people, briefly raised, are once again dashed leaving an ever-deepening void.

A basic level of youth program provision must be constant, involving a platform of daily or near-daily activities to provide a reliable and stimulating environment for young people. Gradually youth programs develop their own regular pattern, on which young people and their families can rely.

Regular and consistent activities are of particular importance for young people during the school holidays, periods known to induce high levels of boredom and potentially outbreaks of petrol sniffing.

5. Gender and Age Status Appropriate Activities.

During the period between childhood and adulthood young Aboriginal people in the Central Australian region proceed through various developmental categories distinguishable by levels of biological and social maturity. Ritual processes and institutions such as initiation for boys serve to further demarcate these age status categories. Gender separation at adolescence is also maintained. A range of social expectations, responsibilities and behavioural protocols are attached to these gender and age status categorisations.

Youth programs need to uphold these protocols and cultural obligations by featuring separate activities for children (*tjitji)* age 3-11, young women (*kungka)* and young men (*wati* or *yungpala*) age 12 upwards. New initiates are required to distinguish themselves in behaviour and practice from uninitiated boys and younger children according to their newly acquired status as young men. Similarly young men and young women are expected to maintain minimal interaction.

The need to provide meaningful and consistent activities to the different categories of young people presents ongoing practical challenges in the operation of youth programs. Once an activity has been identified as 'for *tjitji*' or 'for *kungka*', for example, this effectively prohibits other categories of young people from engaging in the same activity.

Relevant activities must be developed which cater exclusively for these gender and age status categories. The capacity to provide exclusive activities is dependent on having male *and* female youth workers and a platform of constant, ongoing regular activities for younger children.

6. Activities which are Meaningful, Stimulating and Culturally Relevant.

Typically limited by funding regulations and by mainstream assumptions about young peoples' needs, most community youth programs are lacking in depth and focused on the 'Sport and Recreation' model of youth work. Young people need to engage their bodies *and* their brains, and youth programs should include a range of multi-dimensional activities which go beyond this to include educational, cultural, and Recreational components. Meaningful activities should focus on the fostering of self-esteem and confidence in young people, and be based around such themes as personal development, nutrition, positive adolescent health, and the development of valued cultural skills.

7. Promotion of Self-Esteem and Coherence for Young People in their Lives with their Families.

The relationships Aboriginal children and young people have with family members are critical to the process of growing and learning; for the development a whole person, and for the reproduction of the social order. The social obligation to look after, care for, nurture, and nourish young people is shared by family members as young people move through the different age status categories. In order to be effective, youth programs must seek to support these crucial socialisation processes.

Mainstream youth program models which envisage a category of 'youth' isolated from intergenerational structures of socialisation, from mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and from younger children, are culturally inadequate.

Young people keenly desire to gain the attention of their families, and youth programs need to be directed towards achieving this goal in a positive way. Activities must be designed which cultivate both the expression of youthful identity as well as a strong sense of pride, stemming from the consciousness that what they are doing makes their families proud. The core objective of the program at Docker River is 'to make young people, and their families, proud'. The accomplishment of this goal effectively enables the development of coherent and meaningful young lives.

8. Involvement of Role Models

Young leaders from within the community can play a fundamental role in the provision of relevant and consistent activities. The involvement of a number of young men and women who demonstrate leadership qualities is vital in directing, supervising and managing youth program activities. They are also essential in ensuring an awareness and observance of local cultural protocols, community tensions and familial dynamics, which youth workers from outside may overlook. Community youth leaders are typically self-selecting in that they express an explicit sense of wanting to make something happen on their communities. The involvement, guidance and support of a group of young leaders, which may be in the form of a community 'Youth Team' or youth committee, ensures that the ideas for activities which make up the youth program come from young people themselves. These young leaders are able to represent the voice of young people within the community and are crucial role models for their younger kin who follow their example.

In the Docker River example, the Docker River Youth Team meets regularly to discuss all details regarding the operation of the youth program, including planning upcoming events, and discussing issues or problems which may have arisen with the program or with individual young people. This forum also serves as an entry point for any and all youth related business, so that both community members and external service providers are able to consult with the Youth Team. The Youth Team represents the community at meetings, attend leadership and youth development training, and promote the youth program widely within the region. Selection of new members of the Youth Team is made by existing members, with some young people trialed initially on probationary status until they have proven their suitability for the role. The crucial role played by the Youth Team is broadly acknowledged and a position on the Team is much sought-after.

9. Promotion of Strong Intergenerational Relationships.

The introduction of mainstream models of learning and development such as school and Recreation has significantly altered the way in which caring and rearing of children was managed in the past.

Mainstream institutions separate children and young people from multigenerational structures of socialisation and fundamental aspects of cultural knowledge transfer may be impaired as a result.

The participation and support of older family members is of critical importance to the success of youth programs. Senior family members are able to give advice on the cultural content of youth programs, and strongly influence the levels of broader community support upon which programs are ultimately reliant.

Youth programs should aim to foster strong intergenerational relationships and to encourage intergenerational transmission of knowledge. A range of intergenerational activities may be supported within youth programs, including day trips and camps for bush tuckering, hunting, damper making, *inma* (ceremonial) training, seed and bush medicine collection and preparation, artefact making (such as digging sticks, spears, boomerangs), and involvement in visits to country and sites of significance, and land management work. These activities should consist of young people together with senior members of their families.

10. Knowledge of Families

The centrality of family is evident in every aspect of young people's behaviour. A large component of youth program work focuses on development of intervention strategies with families to divert young people from high risk behaviours which are both individually and socially damaging. In order to have a chance of success, these strategies must be founded on finely-tuned understandings of the dynamics of young people's lives with their families. Youth programs need to begin developing detailed family reords, such as family trees and family histories, which can be used to aid workers in their attempts to support young people and their families.

Past programs have rarely placed any emphasis on a thorough understanding of family dynamics, yet it is clear that it is these dynamics that are at the core of the issue for many young people on communities. Knowledge of family is the key to the understanding of the problems facing individual children and should be a core responsibility of youth workers.

11. Community Development and Participation

The constant presence of inter-generational interaction and the participation and guidance by community members and youth leaders means that the program is part of an overall process of community development. This ensures that youth development does not become a segregated domain within the community that only furthers generational dislocation. Crucially, this also means that youth development is of benefit to the whole community, and that youth development is the task and responsibility of the community at large.

Conclusion

Youth programs on Aboriginal communities have historically been accorded the lowest of priorities. In addition, through a combination of under-resourcing, mismanagement, and neglect, they have often been dysfunctional and ineffective. Only recently, and probably prompted by a combination of petrol sniffing related deaths and sensationalist media reporting, has the need for youth programs been recognised as critical, and of equal, if not more importance, than other basic community services.

The principles and practices outlined above were developed in collaboration with young people and in accordance with cultural expectations and protocols. They are intended as a guide upon which the history of ineffective youth program delivery can be turned around. Rather than prescribing a formulaic model which will work everywhere, these principles and practices suggest that the most effective programs will be those developed in accordance with the specific needs, conditions, and aspirations of young people, their families, and their local communities. This submission posits a radical rethinking of the entire approach to youth program development. It is this kind of approach that is necessary before true gains can be made that will provide real opportunities for young people to develop strong youthful identities for the future, and for the future of their communities.