Welcome to

Innovation in Aboriginal Child and Family Services

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Chair: Dr Daryl Higgins

This webinar is part of the Knowledge Circle webinar series:

http://www2.aifs.gov.au/

Please note: The views expressed in this webinar are those of the presenters, and may not reflect those of Knowledge Circle, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, or the Australian Government
VACCA

• The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) was established in 1977 as a statewide Aboriginal community controlled and operated service

• VACCA’s objectives include
  • the preservation, strengthening and protection of the cultural and spiritual identity of Aboriginal children
  • provide culturally appropriate and quality services which are responsive to the needs of Aboriginal communities
Data Context

Number of Children in Out-of-home Care as at 30 June

Aboriginal Children

- 2003: 507
- 2004: 531
- 2005: 526
- 2006: 552
- 2007: 626
- 2008: 660
- 2009: 734
- 2010: 816
- 2011: 877
- 2012: 1,028

103% increase

Non Aboriginal Children

- 2003: 3,539
- 2004: 3,778
- 2005: 3,882
- 2006: 4,242
- 2007: 4,426
- 2008: 4,396
- 2009: 4,549
- 2010: 4,653
- 2011: 4,801
- 2012: 5,179

46% increase

Source: Report on Government Services 2012-2013, Department of Human Services (analysis)

Source Report on Government Services 2013 (data), Victorian Department of Human Services (analysis)

Number of children in out-of-home care is the number of children aged 0-17 years as at 30 June each year.

‘Non Aboriginal’ includes children whose Aboriginality is unknown.
Lost culture, lost family, lost community

Aboriginal children in Victoria’s child protection system

• 10 times more likely to have a child protection concern substantiated
• 15 times more likely to be placed on a protection order
• 16 times more likely to be in out of home care.
• One in ten Aboriginal children experienced an out of home care placement, compared to one in 164 non-Indigenous children.
Lost culture, lost family lost community

Children’s contact with their parents is limited

Of 367 Aboriginal children in Department of Human Services stability project

• 93 (25%) had had no access with their mother in the past 6 months.
• 168 (46%) had had no access with their father

Children are often placed apart from their siblings

• 74 children with three siblings in out of home care but only 26 who lived with three siblings. (DHS stability project)
• Four of 15 children were placed with their siblings; the remaining eleven children had siblings spread across up to six placements (VACCA permanent care review)
Lost culture, lost family, lost community

Maintaining Aboriginal children’s connection to their family and community and supporting Aboriginal children’s identity frequently does not occur:

Of 367 Aboriginal children in DHS stability project:

- 239 children (65 %) had not been the subject of an Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making meeting
- 212 (58 %) had not been subject to a reunification attempt with their family
- 309 (84 %) did not have a Cultural Support Plan
- 100 (40 %) had no recorded Stability Plan
- 54 (15 %) had no current case plan
Factors impacting on over representation

• **Structural inequities** – differential presence of risk factors to which there are inadequate responses

• **Socio-economic disparities** – higher levels of poverty, homelessness, poorer health, education, unemployment, imprisonment

• **Parental issues** – drug and alcohol, family violence, mental health, cognitive impairment

• **Worker perceptions and attributions** – influences the way information about Aboriginal caregivers and parents is represented
Under – representation in support services

Aboriginal children spend longer in care
Less likely to be reunited with family
Although markedly over represented in child protection receive proportionally fewer services
Data from services indicate Aboriginal higher engagement in short episodic interventions
Aboriginal services primarily funded for tertiary services
60% families presenting to VACCA Integrated Family Services referred from child protection for family violence. Early data is encouraging where program is stemming flow of children to OOHC.
Aboriginal Children’s Cultural Rights

• Based on Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Aboriginal children/young people have rights pertaining to:
  – Maintenance/connection to Aboriginal people
  – Maintenance/involvement in Aboriginal forms of expression
  – Maintenance/involvement in Aboriginal culture

• Rights pertaining to information and service access

• Rights to have their day to day experiences reflect cultural values
Embedding Aboriginal knowledge on identity formation into our child and family welfare practice?

• One’s identity is a lifelong process, one in which events, activities, community and society influences engage the child in a process of self discovery.

• Aboriginal people address identity formation by providing experiences that will inform the child’s spiritual, emotional, mental and physical self.

• Importance of tribe clan, nation identity must be understood in order to fully recognise the impact of separation or disconnection from cultural knowledge to prevent a present day “Stolen Generation”
Cultural Connection

Cultural connectedness for Aboriginal children

• Spiritual – stories of creation link children to ancestral knowledge and kinship values

• Emotional – interaction and communication encourage healthy identity development

• Wellbeing – identity confusion impacts on wellbeing. Contact with a child’s birth family and community lessen identity confusion

• Physical - the ability to explore self through activity is a powerful experience

As Indigenous peoples we have systems to keep children connected through our:

• Elders

• Ceremonies

• Stories

• Kinship structures and support networks

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Collective society

• Aboriginal worldview values kinship as foundation of social life
• Aboriginal children develop identity as related to everyone in community
• Spirituality is the cornerstone of identity
• Child lives their culture through interactions with community
• Traditional view that children are gifts from the creator
• Elders play a critical role in the identity formation of Aboriginal children
Aboriginal organizations operate in two worlds, each with their own set of values and requirements. For success, both sets of requirements need to be met.

These differences are identifiable in a number of areas:

- Community
- Governance
- Management processes
- Staffing practices
- Infrastructure
- Business rules
- Service delivery
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Clients, staff and the community not seen as distinct groups with very different needs and expectations</strong></th>
<th><strong>Staff and clients largely distinct groups and do not broadly socialize together or see themselves as part of a close community</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal community expect their organisations to voice the political aspirations of the community self-determination</td>
<td>Mainstream CSO’s aren’t seen as needing to representing on everything</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisations grew out of a rights focused agenda</td>
<td>Organisations largely grew out of church and charitable base.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play a significant role in the community, for example, host children’s days,</td>
<td>Community focus approach not integrated into service delivery; part of CSO’s framework</td>
</tr>
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<td>Community seen as members of different First Nations</td>
<td>See Aboriginal community largely as homogenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board members elected on basis of Aboriginality and community involvement – this is seen as key determinants of expertise/skills and knowledge required to govern</td>
<td>Board members selected on basis on qualifications, expertise, profile and ability to bring financial gain &amp; reputational value to CSO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role complexity; Directors have governance role similar to mainstream yet community members have direct access to Directors. Staff able to state their views of the agency to Directors without manager’s knowledge)</td>
<td>Well articulated lines of accountability. Clients rarely have access to Directors</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authority and respect resides in the person as well as the role</th>
<th>Authority resides more in the formal role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stronger focus on verbal communication (decisions may take longer to make)</td>
<td>Strong focus on written communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business rules may require broader community involvement eg Directors will meet with local ACCO Board if holding a meeting in another community</td>
<td>Business rules focused on internal agency</td>
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</table>
| Conflict of interest is understood as:  
  • Part of business that needs to be managed eg quality of care concerns  
  • Can be seen to add value; staff/managers know the real issues | Conflict of Interest seen as needing to be avoided |
| Aboriginal community norms need to be considered eg views of respected Elders, attendance at funerals | Organisation part of dominant culture |
## Management Practices

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<th>Relationship of critical importance</th>
<th>More formal structures in place</th>
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<td>More competing stakeholders with high demands – community, staff, government and mainstream</td>
<td>Fewer stakeholder demands per organizations and narrower definition of stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>organisations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsibility for staff’s personal wellbeing is also a management responsibility</td>
<td>Risk management approach to wellbeing of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial systems in place to support staff</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Acknowledge staff coming from traumatised background</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Acknowledgement that staff experience racism as part of their work</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboriginality is seen as a key management competency; cultural knowledge and focus on maintaining</td>
<td>Part of dominant culture so unaware of pervasiveness of its impact on organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginality of the organisation part of discharge of management functions</td>
<td>structures, service delivery, management processes etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorising environment</td>
<td>Staff working with Aboriginal families get paralysed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Race not seen as excuse for poor practice, bad decision making</td>
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### Service Delivery

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<th>Child is seen as central to community not just a client</th>
<th>Child seen as part of the client group</th>
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<td>Narrative approach rather than clinical or diagnostic</td>
<td>Clinical and diagnostic approach</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Explicit articulation of theoretical approaches-interventions tied to particular approaches (gestalt, solution base therapy)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Personal relationships seen as key intervention to achieve changes</td>
<td>Distinction b/n personal and professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key service principles: Aboriginal child’s cultural identity is fundamental to their overall well being and culture as treatment and resilience</td>
<td>Culture seen as an add on to Best Interest and not seen as a key treatment intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing cultural/racial abuse seen as part of intervening in children and families lives</td>
<td>Lack of acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of racism and its impact on Aboriginal clients and staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clients experience of system built on 200 years of child removal policies and practices</td>
<td>Clients not part of institutionalised child removal policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled cultural advocacy required as part of everyday practice</td>
<td>Not advocating on behalf of Aboriginal children’s culture poor practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance of pervasiveness of community trauma and its impact on individuals, family and community</td>
<td>Interventions focussed on individual rather than seeing the child in the context of the community</td>
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Sector Perceptions

- CSO’s (& Govt) view it as problematic if all Aboriginal agencies do not reach consensus about an issue/ initiative-no assumption made that all CSO’s need to reach agreement
- Differences b/n Aboriginal agencies viewed as community politics-CSO differences seen as part of normal business
- Aboriginal $’s tied up in CSO’s generally not on the table for discussion-only Indigenous specific $’s on the table
- CSO’s often see capacity building as one way, we need to learn from them-rather than it’s a two way process
- Deficit approach to Aboriginal organisations
- Devaluing of cultural knowledge (don’t want to pay for – want for free)
- Cultural competence seen as additional burden rather than adding value to organisation and improving practice
Examples of learnings

Richness of my personal and professional learning and grown as a result of being in an Aboriginal organisation

Re-examination of principles-personal and professional role

Political context better understood as part of day to day practices

Racism alive and well in welfare system

Inclusiveness of the community extraordinary

Resilience of Aboriginal communities

Strong Advocacy still required

More powerful that I say good things than if an Aboriginal person does
What guides our practice?

- Child Safety
- Cultural awareness & cultural safety
- Family decision making/decision making input
- Looking After Children - Care Plan meetings
- Holistic Child focussed, family centred practice
- Trauma informed
- Value meaningful partnerships
- See culture as a treatment modality
- Building resilience
Background

In 2008, a sibling group of 3 children, aged under 3, came into care due to family violence, substance abuse and transient

At entry into care the children were not identified as being Aboriginal - the 2 older children were Aboriginal, the youngest child had the same mother but was not Aboriginal

By 2010 it was established that the two oldest children were Aboriginal

The children were placed with maternal grandparents who were non Aboriginal - also caring for their own 4 children

There was no contact with either parent or paternal Aboriginal family
In 2011 they were referred to VACCA’s kinship care program - so what did we do?

- Access assessment of paternal family
- Cultural awareness work with the maternal family
- Reconnect the parents with the children
- Commenced a permanent care assessment of the maternal family
- Developed a functioning care team
Maternal grandparents were struggling:

- Decision made that children needed to be moved due to Quality of Care concerns

This meant VACCA:

- Undertook to assess paternal grandparents
- Transitioned children into the care of parental grandparents
- Facilitated children attending medical appointments
- Helped children understand their culture and attend cultural events
Key Problems encountered

- Racism
- Collusion
- Poor cultural information
- Limited Assessments
- Unwilling to engage with services
- Lack of active CP case management
- Fragmented history
- Grief and loss and trauma
- Blaming
Outcomes

• Children in a safe placement: support provided
• Achieved compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and its intent
• Developed and maintained connections to the children's Aboriginal family
• Children now connected to their Aboriginal community
• Children have a meaningful Cultural Support Plan
• Better health outcomes for the children in that they have put on weight, regular health checks, 1x child now wearing his glasses
• Children are more settled emotionally e.g. No bed wetting, children experiencing emotions freely / spontaneously
• Pulled together information from multiple sources to inform a best interest assessment and plan
• Children are no longer in full time day care and are spending time in the family home
• Children are now celebrating birthdays and Christmas
• The children are described as being very happy and enjoying their childhood
• Eldest child now attending Kinder and being prepared for school next year
• Children in the process of being permanent planned to Abl. grandparents
• The rights of these children are being honoured and met as in the charter of rights in OOHC 😊
This presentation will highlight two of the many community and cultural programs that VACCA has developed and delivers:

- The Possum Skin Project
- Koorie FACES Family Strengthening Program
What guides our community cultural programs?

- The voice of community
- Culture as a protective factor
- Cultural strengthening
- Holistic child focussed, family centred practice
- Trauma informed
- Build resilience
Family strengths are highlighted
Interactive activities that engage

- Understanding
- Bonding
- Sharing
- Caring
- Stability
- Love
Possum Skin Cloak Program

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Connected by culture
Learning traditional designs and creating contemporary designs
One of the finished cloaks
“It’s meant a lot to me to share knowledge that I was taught when I was a child, because some of these children haven’t got anyone to teach them anything. It feels good to give them the information that connects to them as well. Because some of these children don’t feel connected and through doing the possum skin cloaks and making the little wrist bands and talking while they’re working and telling them about the birds, how we’re all interconnected and nobody is ever alone, no one’s ever alone because we are interconnected. And these children, I think they are finally getting it. We’ve helped the ones that are sort of connected to my country and it’s given them an idea where they’re connected and so they’ve started to put their finger on how they’re connected, so that’s good.”

Aunty Esther Kirby
Victoria home to much innovation in Aboriginal child and family welfare:

- First Aboriginal Child Welfare Organisation
- First state to fund Aboriginal advisory role to CP
- Strong Aboriginal child and family welfare across state
- First Aboriginal Children’s Commissioner
- Lead in many areas: cultural support plans, Aboriginal Therapeutic Care, ACSASS, Aboriginal Child FIRST – Integrated Family Services
- National recognition best practice, SNAICC, AIFS
- Progressive legislation – Aboriginal Guardianship
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Questions