DARU Presentation

9/7/2019

Thanks to DARU for inviting Grampians Advocacy to be part of today’s presentations.

*Grampians disAbility Advocacy acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to Elders past, present and emerging. We particularly pay our respects to the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and to Aboriginal Elders of any other communities who may be here today.*

Here to talk about Wimmera Indigenous Advocacy Project

Funded by Vic Govt Disability Advocacy Innovation Fund over two years 2017-19

I’d like to start with a little bit of background about the Wimmera region of Victoria. The Wimmera region covers 42,000 sq kms in the west of the State and has a population of about 55,000. It boasts the Little Desert, the Malleefowl, searing hot days, frosty winter mornings, breathtaking sunsets, the silo art trail and a range of diverse communities. Major cities and towns are Horsham, Warracknabeal and Nhill.

The only really practical way to get to the Wimmera is by car, especially if you have a disability.

Vline is the public transport provider, and provides a combination of train and coach, with timetables subject to change at a moment’s notice.

So by car from Melbourne it’s an hour and a half to Ballarat, then an hour on top of that to Ararat, then an hour and a quarter on top of that to Horsham, then another hour to Nhill, if you are going that far. And from there it’s only another hour to South Australia. So you’re looking at a 4-5 hour road trip – one way. So we’re talking a truly rural/remote region. I’m telling you this by way of explaining why we are a small contingent today. It was not possible for staff of the Goolum Goolum Co-op or the Elders group to attend in person, but we do have a video to show you a little later on featuring Aunty Alva Taylor. Meantime, due to the circumstances, the community has said that it’s okay for me to speak on their behalf about our project.

Time to introduce those who are able to be here – Fiona Tipping is our Indigenous advocate for Ballarat; Fiona is a proud Palawa woman who is a member of the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative and has been providing advocacy at the Co-op for eight years. This has been done without any specific funding for this work. Likewise our Wimmera advocate Trudy Joyce – unfortunately not able to be here today – has worked with Goolum Goolum Co-op for five years prior to the grant funding.

Kim Wiese is a proud Gunditjmara woman from the south west region of Victoria and our Indigenous advocate for the Wimmera; she has joined our Horsham advocate Trudy Joyce in working with the Elders group and the Family Services team at Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative in Horsham. The Wimmera project funding has allowed GdA to concentrate its efforts on forging a strong relationship with the Co-op and to employ an Aboriginal person as an advocate.

Today GdA and RIAC have been invited to talk about how we have utilized the Disability Advocacy Innovation Grant to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability in our respective regions. We’ve been asked to detail the outcomes and learnings of our work over the past two years. To do this from GdA’s perspective I have to take you back in time a little first.

I want to give you a bit of the background to GdA’s Indigenous Program because the Innovation Grant and the work associated with it does not exist in a vacuum. In fact, it would have been difficult to achieve anything if it did.

GdA has been working on improving its engagement with Indigenous communities in our region since 2008. In some ways the Innovation funding was the culmination of a long term effort to improve our relationships with Community. We knew there was an unmet need. So we accessed additional funding to employ a project worker and we set about building relationships. In 2010 we contracted researcher Joanne Richie to produce a groundbreaking report titled “Indigenous People with a Disability: Population Distribution and Service Use in the Grampians Region”. This helped us to further understand the task we were undertaking. For instance, we learnt that there is no word in Aboriginal language for disability. Another thing the research revealed was that the rate of disability among Indigenous people in the Grampians was about 50 percent, as compared with 20 percent in the general population. This point was also made by Scott Avery in his presentation “Culture Is Inclusion” at DARU in February.

About eight years ago our advocate Fiona Tipping started attending the Ballarat Co-Op one day a week. She didn’t see the need for an office or a meeting room. Fiona’s advocacy began at the tea room table on the busiest day of the week and has continued in this way ever since. Other organisations are now adopting this method as the ideal way to build trust and form relationships. We are grateful to BADAC CEO Karen Heap and the members and staff who welcomed GdA into Community. This was aided in no small part by the fact that Fiona has been formally recognized as one of the Ballarat “mob”.

So with the backgrounding done, it brings me to the point of talking about the Innovation Fund and engagement with Community in the Wimmera. Once again it’s important to note that our work with Goolum Goolum Co-op in Horsham did not begin with the Innovation grant. GdA’s Horsham advocate Trudy Joyce had been establishing connections with Community for many years before the grant became available. The great advantage of the Innovation Grant was the significantly increased resources that allowed us to focus on consolidating and formalising our relationship with Goolum Goolum, as well employing an Indigenous person as an advocate.

Many people in this room have already been working with Indigenous communities without specific funding in the same way we did, so I apologise in advance for speaking about lessons you have probably already learnt. We are by no means the experts on this topic. We’re just happy to share our experiences so far.

For those yet to embark on the journey of forming relationships with Co-ops there are a number of key points to keep in mind, while at the same time acknowledging that each one is different and it is not a case of “one size fits all”. We have noticed enormous differences between the two Co-Ops where we work which are at different ends of the region. Yet there are also many commonalities.

So here goes – in no particular order

1. The Co-op is the central hub, the place all services come from. It is a trusted space and a safe meeting place. So it’s important to take the time to set up the mechanics of your relationship – MOU, introductions to key people, Elders, the CEO, Board membes and staff in the Co-op. It’s important to have the support of all from the start. Tell people how your organization can value add to the amazing work that is already being done at the Co-op in really difficult circumstances. Initially we talked about GdA’s knowledge of the NDIS as a way of demonstrating a particular area where we can help, but there are others. Consult with Co-op members about what advocacy should look like in their domain.
2. It’s important to gain an understanding of the history of dispossession and oppression experienced by Indigenous people since white colonization. Ask people about the history of the Co-Op you will be working in and with. Learn about the Stolen Generations. If you don’t you may find it hard to relate to the hurt in the hearts of so many and the deep distrust of Government departments and authoritarian institutions. Most importantly visit the First People’s Disability Network website and read Scott Avery’s book “Culture Is Inclusion” to gain an understanding of the complexities of transgenerational trauma and its effect on Community.
3. It’s impossible to overestimate the importance of listening. Elders have explained to us that people are “shy” and often don’t speak their minds for a variety of reasons. So be prepared to sit down for a while, listen, yarn, talk about whatever people want to talk about. It helps to engage in an activity while talking. Try and explain things simply and avoid jargon. Dedicate the time to building trust and the respectful relationships will follow.
4. Be authentic. Admit the things you don’t know. Respectfully ask people about their experiences, the things that are barriers for them. Don’t assume you know what it’s like to be an Indigenous person if you aren’t one. And don’t be afraid of making mistakes or saying the wrong thing.
5. Indigenous staff at Goolum Goolum have told us of the importance of being visible at the Co-op, just being around, and making an effort to connect if you don’t already have connections with Community. Go to NAIDOC Week and local celebrations. At Goolum Goolum our advocates visit with the Elders group one day a week, share lunch, do art or craft, or just talk. It’s in this context that issues that require advocacy are raised. In short, you just have to be there. Relax and spend the time. Tokenistic efforts are easily spotted.
6. Acknowledge that Indigenous people have many complex issues that affect their lives. Family, health, disability, financial, legal, education, employment – and there are many more. Again, consult Scott Avery’s book for information about intersectionality. Many calls for help are crisis driven and concern basic human rights, like the right to housing and the right to family connection. This is where it is essential to work in conjunction with the Co-op so that the whole support team is working in the same direction. There’s always a lot going on. Don’t be surprised or offended if your advocacy program is not always front of mind for people in distress. Just keep trying to engage and be there when people are ready. A lack of contact for a while does not mean you are not needed. As a result it’s often necessary to keep a case “open” longer than you normally would.
7. So to sum up, be prepared to do things differently. Be led by Community. Be open to change. Be flexible. Be real.

Just a final comment on funding. The resources made available through the Innovation Fund have been invaluable in establishing a sustainable relationship with Goolum Goolum. We have been able to employ an Indigenous person as an advocate, which has meant a lot to the Co-op and to us.

But I do need to acknowledge that Community engagement takes time, and therefore a grant of any less than two years is not sufficient to get anything like the desired outcomes. Of course the ideal model is recurrent funding for Indigenous advocacy, but we’ll have to wait and see on that one.

Anyway that’s enough from me. I would like to share with you all a short video featuring Aunty Alva Taylor responding to a series of questions about GdA’s Indigenous Advocacy program asked by our Wimmera advocate Trudy Joyce. Our sincere thanks to Aunty Alva and Trudy for creating this video for today.

After RIAC’s presentation there’ll be time for questions and discussion.

Thank you.