

Engaging Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders to Create Safer Communities

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Abstract

This paper highlights a number of innovative, locally developed and collaborative solutions to service delivery issues, and the opportunities and challenges to effectively engaging with Indigenous communities. It illustrates how the Department of Emergency Services has been able to meet those challenges and provides an opportunity to share learnings.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, located in Far North Queensland, have a high level of need for pre-hospital care services as a result of relatively high injury rates. These communities are also prone to cyclones, severe storms and bush fires. The geographic isolation, tropical climate and limited community infrastructure of many of these communities make them especially vulnerable in times of emergencies and disasters.

The Department of Emergency Services has implemented a project aimed to develop and implement innovative approaches to delivering a diversity of emergency services including pre-hospital care, counter-disaster and fire and rescue services.

This project involved a combination of extensive research and wide community consultation. A key focus of the project was appropriate community engagement processes to ensure the outcomes were compatible with Indigenous cultural beliefs and practices.

The project has implemented strategies that directly contribute to building safer Indigenous communities. The project has delivered outcomes that minimise the risk and impact of accidents, emergencies and disasters in the targeted communities.

Keywords

DES, remote Indigenous communities, QAS

Introduction

The involvement of community stakeholders in planning policy, programs and services is crucial to the legitimacy and effectiveness of public policy and government services. This is particularly so in the area of

emergency management where planning and decision-making have a direct impact on personal safety and the protection of property and the environment.

The Department of Emergency Services (DES) delivers ambulance, fire, search, rescue and disaster management services, along with a vast number of community safety programs, to 3.75 million Queenslanders across a total area of 1.77 million square kilometres. The fact that the department provides services covering all phases of emergency and disaster management across a single portfolio makes it unique in Australia.

Services are provided by almost 8000 staff working alongside and supporting more than 85,000 volunteers in organisations such as the State Emergency Service, the Rural Fire Service, Australian Volunteer Coastguard and Volunteer Marine Rescue associations, and Local Ambulance Committees.

Because the department is represented in every community in Queensland, regardless of size or location, it is ideally situated to tap into the considerable knowledge and expertise residing within communities to inform policies and services.

To capitalise on community linkages and networks, the department has shifted focus in recent years from response and recovery to prevention and preparedness. In support of this shift, the department is taking a proactive approach to engaging communities to identify, prioritise and address their individual emergency management needs and to tailor services and community safety programs. This is particularly so for remote Indigenous communities which have diverse and complex needs, and limited resources.

Partnering with Indigenous communities

Queensland has Australia's second largest Indigenous population and many live in remote locations in Cape York and the Torres Strait. Those remote locations are often exposed to natural disasters and therefore building the emergency management capacity of these communities is a key priority.

The department is working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to provide a range of services including pre-hospital care, counter disaster and fire and rescue services, and is also working collaboratively with Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders to build their capacity to prepare for, prevent and respond to a range of emergencies and disasters in their respective communities.

The department is working with communities to design and deliver innovative and flexible models of services and community safety programs that meet the unique needs of each community. Underpinning this engagement approach is an active Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment and training program seeking to ensure the department is more representative of the community it serves.

The DES commitment to more effective engagement in Indigenous communities emanates from the top, with Director-General Michael Kinnane supportive of more inclusive planning and decision-making. The result of this high-level commitment is a range of structures, systems and processes across the department supporting improved engagement practices and increased engagement capabilities.

In 2003, the Director-General established the DES Indigenous Coordination Unit based in Cairns. This unit works closely with the DES Community Engagement Unit to engage with Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around emergency management and community safety initiatives.

The unit coordinates resources from a multi-service perspective and ensures collaborative consultation and negotiation with relevant government, non-government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to meet their specific service delivery needs. In partnership with allied agencies, the unit contributes to the development and implementation of community plans.

The department has demonstrated its commitment to improving the safety and security of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders in Queensland through the development of a strategic plan. The *Strategic Plan for Indigenous Australians 2005–2008* is a blueprint for the department's two-pronged approach to improving quality of life for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders by focussing on both service delivery and employment opportunities.

Also notable is the establishment of an Indigenous Australian Reference Group — a state-wide advisory group providing Indigenous-specific advice to the department on:

- policies, procedures and protocols
- employment and professional development opportunities
- service delivery models to meet the needs of Indigenous communities.

Enhancing the capacity of remote Indigenous communities to prevent and respond to health care emergencies

In 1995, the Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) commissioned research into the provision of vital pre-hospital care for the state's remote Indigenous communities. The research identified the need for a comprehensive policy framework aimed at increasing access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ambulance services.

The challenge was to provide organisational infrastructure for the development and implementation of a pre-hospital care model, which addressed the specific health and cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The QAS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coordination Unit was established as an outcome of the QAS report *A Pre-Hospital Care Model for Isolated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities*, with the aim of implementing a comprehensive policy framework to provide ambulance services and community capacity building for Indigenous people. The framework included guidelines for culturally and clinically appropriate service delivery to urban areas, as well as rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The guidelines included the requirement to identify opportunities to share resources and to integrate and coordinate programs/projects with other health care providers.

The *Pre-hospital Care Model for Isolated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities* was an innovative scientific study into the establishment of a pre-hospital care ambulance service model and established an unquestionable need for ambulance services in remote Indigenous communities. It also recommended that pre-hospital care services are well integrated into primary health care systems and ambulance services must be tailored to meet individual community needs.

A recommendation of the *Pre-hospital Care Model for Isolated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities* report was to further study the smaller Aboriginal communities in Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait Islands.

In addition to the report mentioned above, QAS has produced two further reports concerning various aspects of service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote and isolated communities throughout the Gulf of Carpentaria, Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait region. They are:

- *Enhancing the Capacity of Cape York Communities to Prevent and Respond to Health Care Emergencies and Injuries* (September 2000)
- *Enhancing the Capacity of Islander Communities to Prevent and Respond to Health Care Emergencies and Injuries* (July 2001).

These reports provide a blueprint for the further development and enhancement of QAS services to Indigenous communities. Many of the strategies and recommendations of the reports have been implemented or are currently being progressed.

Further recommendations from the reports include the following:

- QAS to proceed to appoint field officers to provide training in first aid, life support, pre-hospital emergency care and injury prevention to communities throughout Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait Islands

- QAS to investigate funding sources to resource homelands/outstations and communities for the provision of pre-hospital care resources such as first aid equipment, basic life support and advanced life support training.

Effective Engagement Mechanisms

QAS Field Officers

QAS Field Officers have been appointed in Indigenous communities in the Cape and Torres Strait to assist in the establishment or further development of effective arrangements for pre-hospital emergency care. The officers:

- work with councils, health care centres, health staff, State Emergency Services (SES) and Rural Fire volunteers and staff of other services to identify strategies for improving pre-hospital emergency care arrangements and non-emergency health care transport
- provide assistance, advice and training where problems occur or where technical or logistical difficulties arise that impact on pre-hospital emergency care arrangements
- provide training and development in pre-hospital emergency care to health/clinic wardsmen, security officers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Care workers, SES and Rural Fire volunteers and other nominated members of the community
- work with Indigenous communities to increase the capacity of community members to respond effectively and appropriately to health care emergencies and to injuries or their prevention by ensuring that members of the community have basic first aid training and injury prevention training and ensuring that training is regularly updated
- provide training in advanced first aid and basic life support and injury prevention for at least two members of each family group and ensuring the training is regularly updated
- work with the communities through the Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait Islands to identify and assist to prepare community members for employment within QAS
- assist with responses to pre-hospital care emergencies when in a position to do so
- assist with health promotion and health education programs.

The QAS Field Officers also gather and compile relevant demographic and geographic data and information about the health care needs and injury prevention issues to enable informed service development in the communities throughout the Cape York Peninsula and the Torres Strait Islands.

The training and development conducted by the QAS Field Officers in the remote communities and homelands builds capacity within the community and gives individual people skills that can assist them in gaining employment. It gives Indigenous people a feeling of pride in achieving a worthwhile qualification that they can also utilise within their own community. The programs are specifically developed to enhance

personal qualities and skills such as self-confidence, leadership, teamwork and a sense of place in the community.

The strong relationships developed between QAS Field Officers and community members are imperative for developing and maintaining strong, long-term relationships and partnerships with Indigenous communities. The DES presence in these communities and the mutual commitment of both the communities and department help maintain and develop the reconciliation process.

First Responder Program

The First Responder Program is a component of the Queensland Emergency Medical System (QEMS) aimed at improving links between patients and emergency health services.

Members of communities that include SES and Rural Fire volunteers are trained to provide basic life support skills and respond to community medical or accident emergencies to render first aid until the arrival of ambulance services, air medical services or medical care from Queensland Health.

The First Responder Program has been implemented in a number of Indigenous communities across the State. In the Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait Islands the program has been implemented at Moa Island and St Pauls and will be expanded to the communities of Pomppuraaw, Badu Island, Warraber Island and Yam Island.

Emergency Services Cadet Program

The Emergency Services Cadet Program has been introduced in a number of Indigenous communities in Queensland. Cadets are school-aged children trained by State Emergency Service volunteers, Rural Fire Training officers and QAS Field Officers. The Emergency Services Cadet Program training includes skills and knowledge in first aid, general rescue, communications, map reading and navigation.

First aid and injury prevention programs

Many Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders throughout Queensland have now received training and have been successful in obtaining certificates in first aid and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation. This training is of paramount importance, especially in remote areas where immediate medical attention is unavailable. Knowledge of basic life support skills allows community members to commence appropriate treatment prior to the arrival of medical care.

It is imperative that early treatment intervention is administered and should contribute to a reduction in mortality rates. The implementation of first aid programs increases the capacity of locals to respond to incidents and emergencies and enhances employment opportunities.

The recommendations of the QAS reports, to provide first aid, injury prevention and pre-hospital care training to people in the remote communities, has enabled Indigenous people to gain employment. Much of this employment is with Queensland Health in the primary health care centres as ambulance drivers, wardsmen and security officers and has assisted them in gaining their qualifications.

Employment opportunities

In recent years, the department has recruited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into the permanent, part-time and volunteer ranks of the Queensland Ambulance Service, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, Rural Fire Service and State Emergency Service.

DES is committed to increasing the employment opportunities for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders and a recruitment program is conducted on a regular basis, encouraging Indigenous people to apply for positions across the emergency services.

Recruitment of Indigenous staff assists in the provision of culturally appropriate responses to patients, and optimises liaison within Queensland communities. From an operational perspective, service delivery is enhanced through the employment of Indigenous ambulance officers, firefighters and SES volunteers as their knowledge of cultural issues, family histories and communities enables more effective response and recovery services.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are acknowledged as peers in their respective communities and this enables people to feel more comfortable and accepting of the assistance provided by emergency services.

Conclusion

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders live in diverse locations across Queensland, with some in discrete communities in remote and isolated coastal, island or inland areas. DES is committed to supporting these remote Indigenous communities through the provision of appropriate and effective emergency services.

It is widely acknowledged across DES that effective engagement around service delivery and community safety programs will result in productive partnerships with Indigenous communities and key stakeholders, including other government agencies. It will also result in more effective and sustainable community outcomes.