

Opening a Dialogue and Moving Towards a Sustainable Relationship

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Abstract

The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Co-operative Ltd (VAHS) and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) present a case study. Each charts their progress in moving towards a unique relationship. They describe the benefits to an increasing number of Indigenous people, the workforce of the MFB and the people of Melbourne.

In 2001, contact between the organisations was instigated by the Access and Equity Advisor of the MFB. A dialogue opened, which resulted in the planning and staging of community and cultural events. The MFB also obtained assistance in setting realistic goals for engagement with the Indigenous community. A training program promoting Indigenous awareness was implemented across the entire MFB workforce.

By the end of 2003, regular dialogue was in progress at an organisational level. At the beginning of 2004, two experienced firefighters were asked if they were interested in meeting members of VAHS to assist them in issues related to fire safety. From that initial meeting, there have been increasingly frequent conversations between these firefighters and an expanding number of members of the Indigenous community. These conversations have led the firefighters to a youth group, an elders' organisation, an educational organisation and health organisations. As they listen and respond by assisting in meeting the needs voiced in these discussions, firm relationships based on mutual respect are being formed.

In this strengthening, ongoing relationship there are no organisational barriers or barriers created by fear of bureaucracy or racism. The results, and the process, continue to be valued by all involved.

Keywords

Australia, Indigenous, fire safety, Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Co-op Ltd, Metropolitan Fire Brigade

The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Co-operative Ltd (VAHS)

The First VAHS: 229 Gertrude St, Fitzroy

The history of Aboriginal health care needs within Victorian began as an early struggle for the rights and recognition for the Aboriginal people to determine their own affairs, prior to the establishment of the VAHS in 1973. The VAHS was established in 1973 in a shop front in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. It was set up by a group of Aboriginal volunteers, with a volunteer doctor, in response to the need for an appropriate and accessible health service.

139 Gertrude St, Fitzroy

The VAHS fought for funding to move to larger premises in 1979, an old Venereal Disease clinic in Gertrude Street, which was in poor condition and already too small to house the VAHS medical and dental programs.

186 Nicholson St, Fitzroy

Much effort was put into acquiring funding for a new purpose-built building at its current premises in 186 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy. It moved to its new premises in 1992.

The VAHS today

The VAHS is a registered cooperative and is controlled by a board of seven Aboriginal directors elected by the Aboriginal community at an Annual General Meeting each year. The VAHS holistic approach to health care, with the emphasis being on preventative medicine, enables it to provide much more than clinical services to the Aboriginal community. The VAHS, now in its 30th year, has withstood a history of oppression, but is steadfast in remaining under the control of the Victorian Aboriginal community, and to its legacy is still A Home Away From Home.

Community control

The VAHS is seen as a hub of a strong community controlled organisation for the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal people from all over Victoria name the VAHS as a meeting place whenever they come to Melbourne — it is truly seen as a central meeting place.

VAHS services

The VAHS services many Aboriginal people. Across the board statistics estimate some 15,000 dental patients and 18,000 medical files. The frontline intake and assessment team respond to some 300 telephone contacts a day.

The VAHS is a leader in the development of culturally appropriate health care delivery to the Aboriginal community. It provides health and medical services to an extremely disadvantaged and

subjugated people, with limited resources. Its resources, in comparison to many mainstream health service providers, are extremely limited, yet it is able to provide more than a medical service to its community and people.

Holistic health programs

The VAHS is one of many Aboriginal community controlled health services throughout Australia which share the umbrella organisation, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO).

The VAHS practices and promotes a holistic approach to health in line with NACCHO, which describes its holistic health definition as:

"Health does not simply mean the physical well being of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the whole of the community. For Aboriginal people this is seen in terms of the whole-of-life view incorporating the cyclical concept of life-death-life, and the relationship to the land. Health care services should strive to reach the state where every individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, and thus bring about the total well being of their community."

National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO Charter 1979)

Aims of the VAHS

- To provide a culturally appropriate health care service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, delivered in a holistic way
- To raise the general level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health.

Current activities and population served

The VAHS provides services to Aboriginal community members from all over Victoria. The main catchment area is metropolitan Melbourne, with the majority of clients coming from the northern and western suburbs.

Programs

Services are delivered through four program areas: clinical programs; family programs; women's and children's programs; and community health programs.

Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB)

The MFB slogan is 'Protecting our Community' and this is where the commitment of the organisation lies.

As a community safety organisation with a proud 112-year history, the MFB is committed to providing quality protection from fire and other emergencies in the Melbourne Metropolitan Fire District (MFD) and in Country Fire Authority (CFA)/MFB Mutual Aid Areas.

The MFB engages its community through a variety of campaigns and programs. MFB firefighters are seen working closely with Melbourne's diverse communities across all age groups to promote community safety and coordinate emergency prevention activities.

In total, 1550 firefighters provide community protection, education services and emergency response from 47 strategically located fire stations and specialist departments, of which the Community Education Department is one.

Additionally, more than 240 corporate staff provide essential management services to the organisation including training, community education, community development, facilities management, mechanical engineering, finance, corporate planning, information and communication services.

The MFB protects property valued at close to \$200 billion and vital community infrastructure. During daylight hours they protect around three million people.

Strong partnerships with community stakeholder groups, other emergency service organisations and private industry throughout metropolitan Melbourne are critical to ensuring the MFB is an effective community safety organisation.

The MFB's Community Education Department is part of the Community Safety Directorate within the organisation. It has the role of managing a range of research, community awareness, education and safety programs on fire and emergency prevention and preparedness.

Community Education works with a wide range of strategic partners including local and state government, peak bodies, other emergency service organisations and statutory authorities to identify and respond to the needs of high-risk groups within the community. These include primary school-aged children, people with disabilities, senior Australians and people from Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Community Education works with and supports MFB Fire Fighters and other emergency services in empowering their local communities to be fire safe and aware.

VAHS and MFB relationship building

The MFB recognises that each community has its own needs and concerted effort was made to find out how to have a meaningful working relationship with metropolitan Melbourne's Indigenous community. As a result, the MFB has participated in a number of initiatives in recent years in an effort to establish ongoing partnerships.

In 2002 the MFB undertook a significant consultation process with Indigenous community leaders and organisations to identify key fire safety issues within their community. Concurrently, in 2002 the Community Education Department participated in Indigenous cross-cultural awareness training delivered by a member of the local Indigenous community and this raised MFB awareness and provided basic understanding. The MFB were major participants in opening Reconciliation Week in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005.

Against a background of mutual understanding and growing respect, in January 2004 Community Education Department staff Jurgen Sildatke and John Russell of the MFB met with the VAHS, which was seeking assistance in developing and implementing training for their staff in emergency procedures and evacuations for their Fitzroy Community Health Centre. The Health Centre provides medical assistance and support to the local Indigenous community, and includes general practitioners, dentists, psychologists and physiotherapists among the medical staff. The Health Centre is also responsible for administering and delivering a carer program for elderly and/or infirmed members of the Indigenous community within their homes.

From that initial meeting it was realised that there were many opportunities for the MFB to assist the Indigenous Community to improve fire safety within the community. This meeting resulted in Jurgen and John regularly visiting VAHS to assist in developing emergency procedures and provide staff training. Meetings were informal conversations which allowed natural growth in the relationship. As the partnership with VAHS developed, it was identified that the Community Education Department could also provide a safer home environment to many elderly and infirmed Indigenous people through the provision of a Carers' Program to provide fire safety training for members of their established carers' network. As part of the overall assistance, a customised training package on home fire safety was developed for the carers who regularly visit homes within the Indigenous community.

The training provides carers with the knowledge, understanding and awareness of fire safety issues so they can promote clients' safety in their homes. This also allows the carers to make recommendations to their clients based on fire safety knowledge they have gained during the course. A home fire safety checklist was also developed for the carers to assist them in this

process and to provide information back to a coordinator at VAHS detailing current fire safety levels for this at-risk group. In addition, a home fire safety booklet was specifically designed to be culturally sensitive using art work from the local Indigenous community. This booklet gives strategies on providing a safe home environment and what to do in the event of a fire for members of the Indigenous community.

The Health Service is a centre of activity for the community, with many people from Melbourne and surrounding areas utilising the health care facilities. Jurgen and John found that regular contact, becoming familiar faces and having a very informal approach are the key to gaining mutual respect and trust when meeting new people. Key people involved in previous meetings with the MFB slowly introduced Jurgen and John to other members of the community working in various Indigenous organisations.

Meetings are informal with a coffee; often someone would drop in on the meeting to ask a question of a meeting participant and Jurgen and John would be introduced as fire fighters from the MFB helping with various issues regarding the particular premises. These impromptu contacts are always worthwhile because they often initiate further word-of-mouth connections with regards to fire safety issues.

In consultation with various Indigenous organisations and with their sense of ownership of programs and printed materials, the MFB has been able to reach many members of the Indigenous community who were otherwise isolated from contact with the fire service.

This partnership is not based on a government initiative, nor does it have dedicated funding attached. The MFB has seen this as part of its overall community strategy to be inclusive of all cultural groups and recognise that the Indigenous community's culture is different to that of the dominant culture.

The openness of the MFB, without timeframe constraints, outcomes, stated targets, or barriers created by bureaucracy or racism, was welcomed by the community and Indigenous organisations largely because our approach differed to other government institutions, some of which have led to mistrust within the community. The MFB's approach of 'How can we work together to promote safety?' rather than 'We'll tell you how it is to be done' has resulted in partnerships/relationships forming that benefit both the Indigenous community and the MFB. "You can ask me bros how to do it; don't *tell* me how to do it" (Mick Edwards, community member).

Benefits for the Indigenous community

- Fire safety information to wider community on a continuing basis
- Fire safety training at organisational level
- Fire safety delivered directly to the community through established organisational carer networks
- Fire safety information delivered in a culturally appropriate manner
- Potential to reduce the risk of death, injury and trauma
- Potential to minimise property loss and damage
- Improving communication with a government agency such as the MFB
- Supporting the on-going process of reconciliation
- Cross-cultural awareness between fire service personnel and the Indigenous community
- Mutual respect and trust
- Firm and lasting friendships at a personal level
- A feeling that our culture is valued by a government organisation.

Benefits for the MFB

- Fire safety delivered directly to the community through established organisational carer networks
- Supporting the on-going process of reconciliation with the Indigenous community
- Improving communication with the Indigenous community
- Opportunity to reach all sections of the wider community
- Mutual respect and trust
- Cross-cultural awareness between fire service personnel and the Indigenous community
- Greater understanding of Indigenous culture
- Recognising and understanding cultural significance of fire
- Firm and lasting friendships at a personal level.

Chronological history

In 2001 the MFB Board endorsed an Access and Equity Policy, which was a commitment to ensuring MFB services were accessible by all members of the community. As part of that commitment, the policy offered a workforce that more accurately reflected the composition of our community.

In 2002 the MFB undertook a significant consultation process with Indigenous community representatives. The report titled 'Reflecting our Role in a Diverse Community – Indigenous Community Consultation Report' was undertaken with guidance from Indigenous community leaders and included outcomes of meetings with over 15 community leaders and organisations.

The brochure *Ignite Reconciliation in Victoria — Understanding Indigenous Smoking Ceremony and Fire Regulations in Victoria* was produced and distributed by the MFB.

Also, the Indigenous Community Advisory Committee was established to implement report recommendations. Representatives included Indigenous community leaders, VAHS, Indigenous Issues Unit at the Department of Justice and MFB staff.

Furthermore, in 2002 the MFB participated in the following community events:

- NAIDOC Week Family Day — hosted by the MFB at the Abbotsford Training College
- Reconciliation Week — the MFB partnered with Reconciliation Victoria and Melbourne Museum to launch the opening.

In 2003 the MFB again partnered with Reconciliation Victoria to host the opening of Reconciliation Week. The MFB also launched artwork depicting the Indigenous history of fire and a smoking ceremony. Indigenous awareness training was implemented across the corporate and operational workforce.

In 2004 the MFB participated in the following community events:

- Sorry Day — MFB Fire Fighters walk from City Square to steps of Parliament House then to VAHS
- NAIDOC Week — MFB Richmond Fire Station's fire truck and 'SmokeBuster' (fire safety bus) attend celebrations at Billabong Park in Collingwood
- Royal Melbourne Show — Indigenous artwork placemats laminated and given to families during the ten days' duration of the show
- Camp Jungai, Rubicon — female Fire Fighter Nyree Gill delivers fire safety information to Indigenous women's camp
- Christmas, Parkies Inc., City Square — Santa (Kutcha Edwards), Eastern Hill Fire Station ladder platform delivers Santa to Melbourne City Square
- Christmas, Parkies Inc., Collingwood — Santa (Reg Edwards) Richmond Fire Station's fire truck delivers Santa and 'SmokeBuster' (fire safety bus) on hand to laminate placemats and distribute show bags and fire safety information
- Christmas, VAHS — laminating of Indigenous artwork placemats for community Christmas party
- Reconciliation Week — MFB hosts event which includes a station tour of Eastern Hill and smoking ceremony.

In 2005, the MFB participated in the following community events:

- National Day Of Healing (Sorry Day) — Fire truck follows walk from Federation Square to Parliament House and then to Billabong Park in Collingwood
- MFB commission Indigenous Artist — Alister Thorpe for Eastern Hill Fire Station's fire truck to provide Indigenous artwork incorporating a fire safety message on both sides and rear of vehicle
- Reconciliation Week — MFB hosts event, which includes launch of Indigenous artwork on Eastern Hill Fire Station's fire truck by Indigenous artist Alister Thorpe. The event also incorporated Indigenous cultural performances, fire safety displays and a tour of the MFB's Media Production Services.

The developing relationship between the MFB and the Indigenous community

The relationship continues to develop between the MFB and the Indigenous community and includes working with:

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service Co-operative Ltd (VAHS)

- Developing emergency procedures, Warden's Training Courses, 2003 and 2004
- Carers' program and training, 2004 and 2005
- Australian Safer Communities Awards, 2004
- RACV Fire Awareness Community Service Awards, 2004 — Winner.

3CR (Community Radio) and 3KND (National Indigenous Radio Service) interviews

- Promoting fire safety, 2004 and 2005
- Smoke alarms, maintenance and replacement of batteries, 2004 and 2005
- Winter Fire Safety campaign, 2004 and 2005
- Summer Fire Safety campaign, 2004 and 2005
- Promotion of National Day of Healing (Sorry Day), 2005; participation of fire truck in walk
- Promotion for launch of Indigenous artwork with a fire safety message on fire truck, 2005.

Melbourne Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation (MAYSAR)

- Youth Employment Program (currently under development), 2004 and 2005
- Emergency procedures, 2004
- Emergency Response training, 2004.

Aboriginal Community Elders Services (ACES)

- Emergency Response training, 2004 and 2005
- Emergency procedures, 2004.

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)

- Carers' training, 2004 and 2005.

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI)

- Fire Safety training, 2004 and 2005
- Kindergarten and childcare emergency procedures, 2004 and 2005.

Aboriginal Advancement League (AAL)

- Christmas party 2004, Aboriginal Advancement League — Santa, Northcote Fire Station's truck and 'SmokeBuster' (fire safety bus)
- Emergency procedures currently being developed, 2005.

Conclusion

From an Indigenous perspective, except for emergency calls, the community felt isolated from the range of services of the MFB. Furthermore, employment opportunities within the MFB were not considered or were considered unattainable. As the partnership and relationships between the MFB and the community has grown, trust has developed in a government organisation. Access to and knowledge of a new partner has allowed many doors to open. Possibilities of employment for the Indigenous community are also now a consideration. Each project is born out of an idea or by introducing the MFB to other community members. In this way, the little things become significant and new ideas take on their own identities and become possible, thus enabling the MFB to be engaged in many different areas in the Indigenous community. The programs of many organisations do not allow for cultural differences and treat Indigenous participation as an afterthought — or an 'add-on' — in order to *appear* to be equitable, accessible and inclusive.

From an MFB perspective, the scene has been set; the organisation is proud of the partnerships that it is building with the Indigenous community and is moving towards sustainable relationships. The culture of the organisation will now allow for others to follow in our footsteps. A precedent has been set for other communities to be treated individually, equitably and inclusively.

References

National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation 1979, *NAIHO Charter*.