

A Strategy for Well Being

Uwankara
PKanyintjaku
Palyanyku

Public and Environmental Health Program

Stephan Rainow
Public Health Officer

The primary long-term aim of this program has been to secure a living environment within which people are able to make healthy life choices. On the APY Lands this requires interventions at the micro, meso and macro levels. Unfortunately, the capacity of the program to influence macro level systems, policies and dynamics has significantly reduced over the past year.

Governments both federal and state have increasingly become not only funders but also the planners and managers of programs. At the same time there are shifts of responsibility occurring between the South Australian and the Australian governments that impact on the quality of service delivery at the local and regional level. Whilst governments jockey over who has responsibility for funding of municipal and essential services, gaps in the availability, reliability and suitability of these services at the community level have been widening. It is important to never lose sight of the fact that whilst governments and agencies remain conflicted by often opposing interests and by policy shifts, at the community level Anangu are attempting, often with a subsistence income, to wash their children and their clothes, purchase and prepare healthy foods and safely dispose of waste and rubbish.

Housing development on the APY Lands is poorly planned and coordinated, especially in relation to ensuring that relevant housing standards and codes are adhered to, and that the downstream impacts on power and water supply are properly allowed for. State government departments and agencies themselves are concerned about their technical capacity and available funding in relation to the proper planning, coordination and resourcing of essential services infrastructure on the APY Lands.

The situation is both urgent and parlous, and calls for an enhanced and robust coordination of essential services infrastructure planning and delivery for the APY Lands within the South Australian Government.

Housing

The UPK program has had an influence on the design, construction and maintenance of housing on the APY Lands for over twenty years. The principles and practices for housing design, construction and upkeep are well recognised both nationally and internationally and documented in the National Indigenous Housing Guide, the Fixing Houses for Better Health program and Housing for Health projects carried out by NSW Health. Currently the program's ability to influence these issues on the APY Lands is negligible however. There is no Housing Standards Forum or equivalent and no collegial ongoing dialogue with SA Housing.

Environmental Health Workers

Funded in 2009-10 by DPC-AARD and 2010-11 by SA Housing this program employs up to seven Indigenous Environmental Health Workers (EHW) and one supervisor based in Kalka.

The scope of the program is broad, flexible and locally responsive. This is evidenced by the high level of demand for the program. There is a need to build a critical mass of activity in this area through more formal links and coordination with both Bungala CDEP and Regional Anangu Services.

Activities include monitoring and effecting minor repairs to water and waste water systems and associated health hardware, cleaning houses and yards, fire management, pest control and dog health.

Dog Health

Commenced in 1990, this is the longest sustained Indigenous dog health program in remote Australia. Critical to the success of the program is the ongoing access to veterinary services and targeted pragmatic activities to control population numbers and improve the health of the dog population.

The current predominant issue is malnutrition affecting the dogs. Containment could be improved through a discreet fence and gate upgrade program.

Over the last 12 months more than 2,000 ivomectin baits have been consumed, 338 females have been implanted or given a fertility control injection and 263 dogs euthanised. Dr Robert Irving has been providing his services since 1996 and is well known in the communities. This program receives a high level of direction and interest from the community members and dog owners.

Mai Wiru Regional Stores Policy Implementation Project

There were two main aims of this project. One was to develop and establish a regional governance and management structure for the Mai Wiru stores on the APY Lands and the second was to provide support to the stores to ensure their viability, promote healthy food choices and ensure a level of food security. These aims have been achieved albeit under extremely difficult circumstances and within a stressed and fragile political and social environment.

A new body, known as the Mai Wiru Regional Stores Council Aboriginal Corporation, was incorporated under the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations on the 29th of April 2010.

In May 2009 the Mai Wiru Support Team began an extensive participatory consultation and planning process with all store committees, community councils and regional bodies. The content of the consultations were complex and often difficult for Anangu to understand given that English is not the main language spoken, the low literacy levels and the limited conceptual understanding of economic and business principles and practices. Several options were canvassed, including that of seeking an alliance with an external auspice such as Outback Stores. On the 6th of October 2009 at a Mai Wiru Regional Stores Policy Committee meeting a motion was passed "that a new regional organisation be formed on the APY Lands to manage the Anangu owned community stores in partnership with the local store governing committees, and that the membership of this new organisation be the incorporated community store organisations."

There is no doubt that there has been a policy shift over the past fifteen years in relation to remote community stores as governments come to understand the pivotal role stores play in determining population health outcomes and that economic factors alone cannot be the

sole criteria in assessing the overall viability of community stores. FaHCSIA now have a Food Security Branch and have initiated a COAG Food Security project. Both FaHCSIA and DoHA have funded stages of the development and implementation of the Mai Wiru Regional Stores Policy. The SA Government have recognised remote community stores as an essential service. Despite these major policy shifts, full recognition of the level of investment required to achieve sustainable stores that promote affordable healthy foods in remote locations is still some way off.

The Health Council continues to argue the need for a subsidy to be applied for those stores in remote areas where there is a high cost of living and a low-income base. A subsidy is essential if a healthy basket of goods is to become affordable. Six years ago the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling under contract to Nganampa Health Council produced a model for the application of a subsidy at the point of sale. Governments never seriously assessed this model. There was no cost benefit analysis carried out.

The Health Council has consistently argued for a cost of living study on the APY Lands to no avail. In the absence of such a study, and given that remote communities are excluded from the Household Expenditure Reviews carried out by the ABS, there is no reliable measure of poverty or household expenditure capacity for the APY Lands. Until there is a rigorous study that describes and defines the regional economy on the APY Lands, both selecting the right targets for intervention and measuring change remain problematic.

Although community stores are at the economic fulcrum in the regional economy they have never been adequately regulated hence the all too common cycle of staggering along and then going bust. The Health Council maintains that affordable access to healthy foods and personal health hardware will require a subsidy in the context of a growing, regulated local economy.

There is a plethora of compounding factors and variables that impact on the ability of store owners to better regulate product and price, and build a food security capacity. These include the difficulties in sustaining human resources and infrastructure in remote areas and managing the inherent tensions between local and regional politics.

At the local level the new regional board faces some big challenges. A key objective must be to develop a clear set of tasks, roles and responsibilities for both the local store committees and the regional board and management team. Infrastructure requires upgrading, local employment needs to be sourced and better deals negotiated with suppliers.

Relying on the income of Anangu alone cannot significantly increase store turnover in the short term. Increases will occur once credit facilities are activated which will allow for a range of credit transactions commonly used by government and other agency employees. A recent initiative from the SA government that should increase turnover is the capacity to purchase store items for a range of their programs.

Activities to improve nutrition are detailed elsewhere in the annual report but it is noteworthy that communities are taking decisions to control the sale of certain products in their stores. Two recently published academic research papers describe these initiatives – one that addresses the issue of smoking on the APY Lands and another that describes and discusses the impact of withdrawing full strength sugar drinks from one particular community store. Both pieces of research relied heavily on quality data provided from the Grocery Manager point of sale system.

Whilst the auspice for Mai Wiru project has now passed from Nganampa Health Council to the Mai Wiru Regional Stores Council, the Health Council will continue to provide informal support and advice to this key initiative for improving the health and well being of Anangu on the APY Lands.