

Counselling in Aboriginal bushfire-affected communities: evaluation and future opportunities

Summary report prepared for NSW Aboriginal Land Council and the Paul Ramsay Foundation by Mark Ragg and Megan Williams

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Background

In late January 2020 NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC) contracted Aboriginal Counselling Services, with whom it had a previous successful relationship, to provide an initial round of trauma counselling to the Aboriginal community in Mogo, which had been devastated by the fires.

Members of the Mogo Aboriginal community expressed their desire for a second round of trauma counselling to be undertaken. NSWALC consulted Zone staff and Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) chief executive officers (CEOs), who expressed their desire for counselling services. Paul Ramsay Foundation provided the funding.

In April 2020 Aboriginal Counselling Service, a mental health service that provides intervention and therapeutic counselling for families, individuals and communities, was contracted to provide counselling services. In December 2020 Yulang Indigenous Evaluation was contracted to support NSWALC's evaluation of the program and to provide guidance on next steps.

Counselling provided

Covid-19 severely impaired the ability of Aboriginal Counselling Services to visit affected communities for engagement and counselling. Planned visits were also affected by sorry business and by the trauma afflicted by the bushfires of summer 2019-20, compounded by floods in February 2020 and ongoing deaths in communities.

Table 1: Counsellors' community engagement and counselling

Measure	Actual	Target
Community visits for trauma counselling	22	20
Trauma counselling sessions	12	40
People attending trauma counselling sessions	68	400

Source: Aboriginal Counselling Services

Evaluation process

Covid-19 also seriously impaired the evaluation process, as we could not leave our Sydney base to visit affected areas. Planned interviews and yarning circles were also affected by the trauma suffered from the fires and floods, and ongoing trauma from the devastated land and the ongoing deaths in communities.

Table 2: Evaluators' interviews and yarning circles

Measure	Actual	Target
Telephone/Zoom interviews	9	30
Yarning circles	0	7
Case studies	0	3

Source: Yulang Indigenous Evaluation

NSWALC and Yulang reached agreement that due to the difficulties in both the counselling and the evaluation, Yulang would take over the reporting of the work and develop two possible models for future expansion.

Evaluation findings

In summary, we found that:

- there is a tremendous need for counselling, with the trauma of bushfires and floods compounding pre-existing trauma from the ongoing effects of colonisation and dispossession
- the approach to counselling, and the service delivered, were strongly supported by those who took part
- most participants thought it was important that the counsellors were Aboriginal, although some said that adding non-Aboriginal counsellors was acceptable
- most participants thought it was important that the counsellors were from out of the area, and so had few connections in the local community, as this preserved anonymity
- the urgent need to deliver counselling affected the way the project was put together – while there had been preliminary discussions, they had to be short-circuited to gain the funding
- whether or not the LALCs are the right vehicle to provide counselling will depend on the circumstances of each LALC and their level of resourcing and capacity, as well as other structures and services in the local area or region.

With respect to any future counselling, we found that:

- there was a strong consensus that future counselling should be supported
- there was a range of opinions over whether or not LALCs were well placed to support the counselling, and whether or not Aboriginal Medical Services should become involved
- a pilot approach on a smaller scale may be worth considering.

Future opportunities

We present two possible models, and suggest that a minimum funding cycle of four years be used, to give time for engagement and to form the trusting partnerships that are essential.

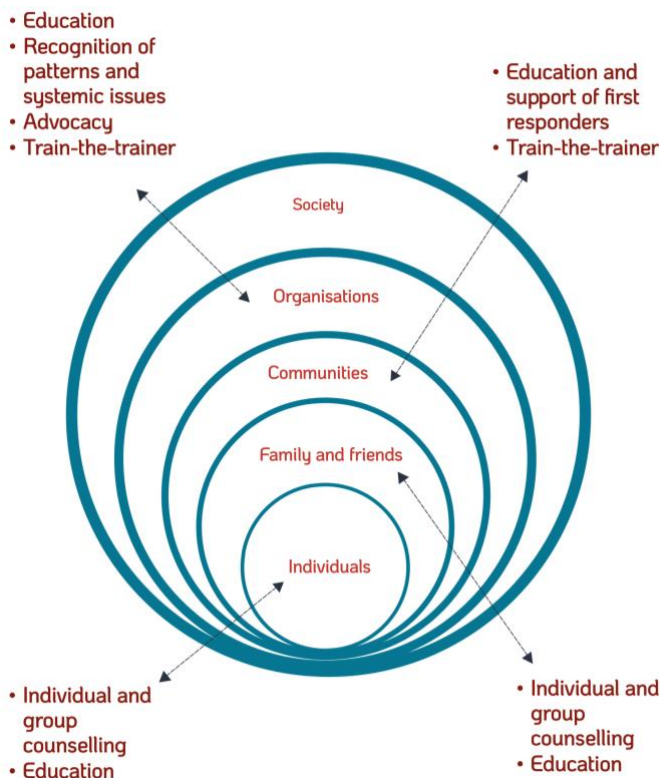
Model 1: Hub embedded in communities

Under this model, NSWALC would fund Aboriginal Counselling Services or a similar organisation to establish a hub on the North Coast of NSW, or the South Coast, or perhaps both. That hub would offer an ongoing presence and resources for communities within a couple of hours drive.

In this model:

- individuals and their families and friends are all offered individual and group counselling, along with education about the impact of trauma and ways to think about trauma, emotions and responses
- first responders within communities, which includes parents, friends, teachers, LALC staff, police and more, are educated about how to respond to trauma, and about the services available
- first responders are also offered train-the-trainer education so they can provide peer support and be a repository of information on counselling within their communities
- organisations working with communities are offered education and support for train-the-trainer, along with support to recognise patterns and systemic issues, and support with advocacy.

Figure 1: A multi-level empowerment model of counselling



Model 2: Partnership with an Aboriginal-led program

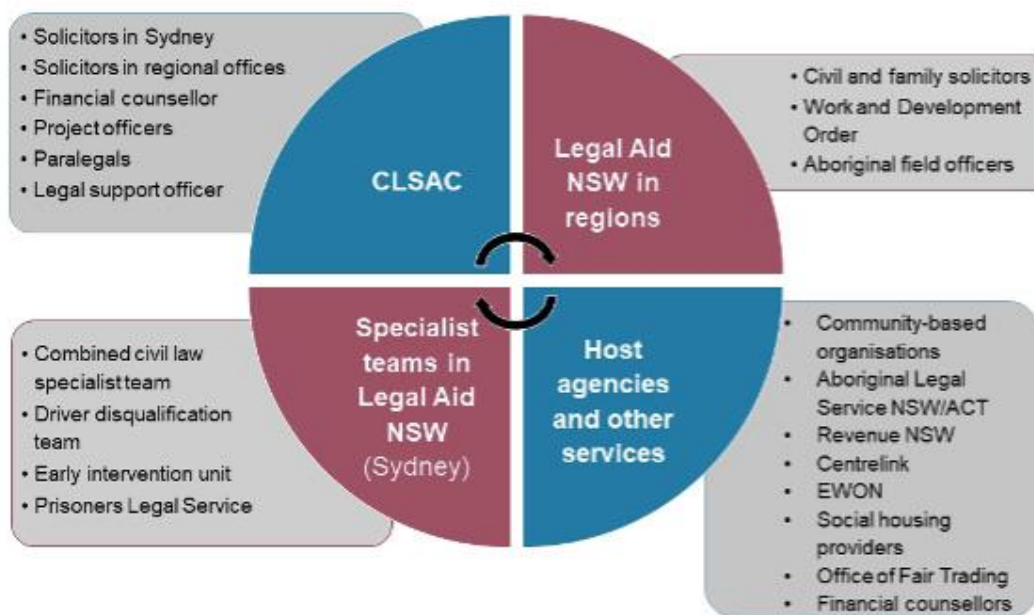
Forming partnerships with other services and agencies to provide outreach allows multiple agencies to coordinate and provide a range of services in one visit to a community, which reduces the burden on the community.

An example is Legal Aid NSW, which hosts the Civil Law Service for Aboriginal Communities (CLSAC), which is a specialised service led and largely staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. CLSAC began in 2013 as the *Money Counts* project in response to predatory behaviour by consumer lease traders, and has grown to offer:

- regular outreach to 22 selected communities, designed in part by those communities, and to several correctional centres
- a free telephone advice service to all who require it.

CLSAC works in partnership with many different organisations – see Figure 2. Its community-based partnerships offer a basis for trust by the community, a referral base and physical locations in which to engage.

Figure 2: Model of staffing of outreach



Source: Williams & Ragg, 2019

NSWALC could explore the possibility of becoming a partner of a service like CLSAC, and providing counselling services through CLSAC's regional and outreach models. The benefits of adding counsellors to an existing successful outreach service are that:

- it reduces the time and resources required to build a service
- it offers entry to communities that may otherwise be hard to reach
- it moves towards creating the holistic services that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations wish to offer
- it offers access to legal, financial and other services to those who attend for the counselling
- it reduces the burden on communities needing to negotiate new arrangements.