

Genuine choice

About this series

This information sheet is designed to help non-Aboriginal organisations find better ways to deliver effective and relevant services to Aboriginal people who are experiencing intergenerational poverty and homelessness. It is part of a series capturing key learning and ideas from the award-winning Wongee Mia action learning project, in Western Australia.

Importance of genuine choice

Wongee Mia is an action learning project. It's service model is built on the experiences and choices of the people it supports. It is a common experience for Aboriginal people who have experienced intergenerational trauma and poverty to be given limited or no choice. The following examples demonstrate how the project has sought to actively address this issue.

Yarning – how we learn

The family and community are pivotal in the design of Wongee Mia, and they have been actively involved in creating, designing, and formatting a project that suits their specific needs. The first step involved setting up a series of yarning sessions. These were not formal meetings, with co-design tools and structured processes, but simply involved sitting, talking, and listening to each other. From the first session, people voiced how they wanted the project to work, and the worker used these as cues to sketch out a job description for the team. These yarns became a new

narrative for the project and how it would work differently for the community. This involved agreeing on topics to discuss, a safe place to meet, how often meetings should be held and the importance of having food at yarning sessions.

Appointment free diary – how we work

In the initial yarning session, people were very clear that they did not want the worker to make appointments. Instead, they wanted her to respond to requests for support and drop-in visits. Within this conversation, the worker openly asked about what this meant for weekends, and they acknowledged that she did not work weekends, or after-hours, and would take time off for holidays, sickness and her own family.

Although this has involved some adjustment for staff, it has been an important mechanism to give people, who face complex challenges and frequent crises, a sense of control and the capacity to seek support when they need it. The worker is based at the Ruah Centre, in Perth, which is open every morning on a drop-in basis and often frequented by family members. It is opposite a park which is commonly used by the group. Once family members are housed, workers also visit them at home.

The result of this approach has been a more organic and natural way of providing support. It has also been surprisingly more efficient as the workers' days are not disrupted with cancelled appointments. Instead, each day brings a range of opportunities to

assist people with the issues of greatest interest and significance to them. In a single day, a Wongee Mia worker can see up to 20 people. If team members are unavailable, people are aware that they are busy helping other family members.

The yeah/nah list – who we work with

In the first year of the project, we identified that we would need to collaborate with Aboriginal organisations to learn more about how to work with the community. Rather than limiting the connection to existing working relationships, the project reached out to organisations that were recommended by the family. What started as a simple survey, became known as the 'yeah/nah' list, as family members preferred to give a simple 'yeah/nah' answer rather than rate services on a scale.

People were asked about local Aboriginal services around the Perth CBD. Some, particularly mental health, alcohol and drug services, were not well known. Others had mixed levels of trust with the community. Nyoongar Outreach Services was identified as the one most known and trusted by the family. The Wongee Mia worker connected with this service and arranged to do shadow shifts to learn from their practices. It was clear that the Aboriginal outreach workers had a deep knowledge of family members, an understanding of their stories, and relationships that helped them readily connect with people. The support they provided was also direct and immediate, helping people get to safety and transporting them to family.

Family-led priorities - what we do

Giving people genuine choice sometimes means prioritising work beyond the usual scope of a support service. The Wongee Mia Elder asked the project team to convert an old VHS film into a modern format so it could be shared. The recording was of his mother, Wongee, the matriarch of the family and project's namesake. Once the video was converted, the Elders and the community were invited to The Ruah Centre to view the film, in which Wongee talked of her younger days, her vision of family kinship, family ties and family bond. This was a highly emotional event, which brought the community together and they spoke about how it showed them their interconnectedness in the eyes of the Aboriginal community.

Homelessness week - when we do it

In 2019, two Perth support organisations ran a special event for Homelessness Week, opening their day centres for extended hours to provide a safe overnight space for women. During the week, one centre opened around the clock, while the other was open from 7pm-7am. Staff from both organisations were asked to man the roster. The Wongee Mia worker spoke to family members and Elders about how she could make best use of her time - doing her normal job, helping staff the emergency roster, or a mix of the two. The response was overwhelming supportive from family members and Elders who said women would feel safe knowing they were being '*watched over by one of their own*'. The worker filled five of the midnight-7am shifts that week.

Key questions for your own work:

- How can you create opportunities to ask the people you support for suggestions about how your service should work?
- Start with 'yes'. Image simply saying 'yes' to requests from the people you support - then working out how to make it possible.