

Working with Elders

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.

Taking time to build relationships

It takes time to build trust and building relationships with family Elders requires a long-term effort and commitment. To do this, many small steps contribute and these steps are different in each relationship. With Wongee Mia, the first step was establishing trust with Robbie, the project's first tenant. He knew, and had been supported by, the worker prior to the project being established. Starting with a worker who was known and trusted by family members was a significant factor in enabling the project to build and grow.

In the first year of the project, there was a strong emphasis on building trust. The care they showed for Robbie brought the worker's reputation, and that of the project, to the attention of Elders. Providing project support for a family funeral was another key turning point (and is discussed in another of this series of information sheets). The worker focused on meeting people and spending time with Elders, getting to know them and their family ties through storytelling,

making connections to immediate families and extended families. It was during one of these conversations, that the Elders gifted the family name *Wongee* to the project. The honour and importance of this is deeply felt by the project team and reinforces their responsibility to help and work alongside family members.

The second year was characterised by achievement as the project's reputation continued to build in the community, and opportunities were sought to actively involve key Elders in the work. Throughout this time, workers often met with key Elders and sought advice on family dynamics and culture. One Elder, in particular, is a strong advocate for his people and has become a strong supporter of the project. He works alongside the project and has made a substantial contribution including:⁶

- Attending a disruptive behaviour meeting with the Department of Communities to successfully advocate for Robbie's tenancy.
- Building relationships with neighbours and taking a role in 'growling' at family members when their behaviour puts tenancies at risk.
- Sitting on the interview panel to recruit a second worker.
- Co-presenting about the project at the UWA Social Impact Festival.
- Co-authoring a journal article about the project with workers and project evaluators.

Resolving conflict

An important factor in building good relationships with Elders is being able to resolve conflict. When issues arise, the project embraces the responsibility, recognising that the capacity to have and resolve meaningful conflict is part of the trust process. Resolving conflict builds deeper trust. Addressing conflict is also important because it shows respect and care for relationships. The following approaches are examples of mechanisms used in the project:

- Openly listening to concerns – not challenging, but deeply hearing what is worrying people.
- Acknowledging responsibility – owning when things could have been done better and when mistakes have been made.
- Meeting on neutral ground – e.g. in a park not at the service or Elder's home.
- Relying on relationships – having the worker with the strongest relationship initially hear and address concerns.
- Involving the manager – showing respect for Elders as senior people within the family by having senior people within the organisation hear and respond to concerns.
- Family dynamics – sometimes the family themselves address the conflict e.g. the Elder's wife has from time to time stepped in to calm a situation.

⁶ Note: The Elder was paid for his time on the interview panel, presentation and journal article as this was directly working for and supporting the project not just helping his family members.

Elders are not clients

The Elders we work with are not local Elders from the wider community, but the direct Elders of the family members we support. A critical part of the relationship with the key Elder in the family is that he and his wife are not 'clients'. They are advisors to the work. This impacts on the respect given to them, the way they are treated and the way they are spoken about inside the organisation. Early in the project, the organisation's CEO met with the Elder as *'the leader of the organisation meeting with the leader of his family'*. The project manager has built a relationship with key Elders by attending events, working alongside them on initiatives and activities, like the ones listed previously, and sharing occasional meals.

Like his family members, this Elder also has a history of trauma and faces financial challenges. However, the couple have been securely housed for many years and are treated as leaders. Assistance is provided in recognition of the work they do for the project, rather than delivered as emergency relief for people in need.

This difference is evident in the way Ruah responded when an issue arose between the key Elder and another Ruah service. The service did not apply its usual process but sought advice from Wongee Mia staff around how best to engage and resolve the concern. Wongee Mia staff encouraged a sit-down yarning session *'of equals'* to build a relationship, rather than usual service led *'applying the rules'* approach.

Organisation-wide involvement

Another example where the project built strong connection with Elders was through Ruah's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). Ruah's Innovate RAP aims to build authentic relationships with Elders in the communities where Ruah programs and services operate. Wongee Mia supported Ruah's RAP by bringing its relationships with Elders into the wider organisation. Yarning with the Wongee Mia Elders enriched the project's understanding of Reconciliation and the team was able to share these learnings with the rest of the organisation through the RAP working group. The views of Wongee Mia elders

complemented the Elders Ruah was working through its involvement in Curtin University's Looking Forward - Moving Forward Project. This helped the Elders see that the respect for their contribution extended beyond the Wongee Mia project. The involvement of Wongee Mia staff in the RAP working group also helped promote the project and contributed to it being highly visible in the organisation, expanding the reach of its learnings. Many of the *'ways of doing'*, implemented by Wongee Mia, have been adopted in the corporate RAP. This includes utilising an action research approach, incorporating an informal yarning format, and the style in which RAP working group meetings are conducted.

Key question for your own work:

- Can you identify the Elders in the family and community you support and how you can build a working relationship with them?
- When your service has conflict or issues arise with Elders, are you able to take a position of vulnerability and accept responsibility for your part in the situation?
- When you are working with Aboriginal people, do you seek out opportunities to share the learning and knowledge with others in your organisation?