

To: NSW Parliament Legislative Council  
Health and Community Services Committee

**Inquiry into the provision of drug rehabilitation services in regional, rural and remote NSW.**

8 December 2017

Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) is an association of Walgett NSW Aboriginal Elders formed in 2000 as an initiative of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS) and incorporated in 2005. Aims are to support Walgett Elders' wellbeing and their work to strengthen Aboriginal cultural values and community development.

Our community has built strong Aboriginal organisations in the face of daily adversity, changing governments and their priorities. Our organisations are our strength, and those who work with them benefit from their experience and corporate knowledge gained over 30 years of operations. Walgett's Aboriginal organisations deserve to have their capacity guaranteed as they are our valuable asset from which the large efforts required for our community - if they are to succeed, must be built on.

DEG's members and staff suffer from witnessing violence, deaths and crime in our extended families. Drug, alcohol and gambling addictions are present in feedback loops also containing unemployment, inadequate housing, low incomes, childhood trauma, cognitive impairment, mental illness, family violence, low education outcomes, distance from services, past denial of services, separation from family members, Country and languages. We witness our rivers and Country also suffering from over-extraction, over-development and climate change. High energy costs are causing alarm in an already disadvantaged community. Decades of neglect are reaping a grim toll but we believe solutions are within reach. We appeal to government to listen to experts in our community and elsewhere because we require you to take leadership and support us to move towards wellbeing.

DEG and WAMS have developed a Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework (Framework) *"Moving Forward to Healthy Communities"* which advocates for the provision of holistic, community designed and led integrated services<sup>1</sup>. The Office of the NSW Ombudsman and the NSW Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs and for Health have been introduced to our Framework but we request further opportunities to provide in-depth input into NSW planning.

The provision of services that will lead people away from addiction and prevent future addictions is an important component of our vision for creating a healthy community. DEG believes that the resourcing of a community-led holistic approach will be expensive but if well-resourced and supported, will reduce our community's misery and trauma and present cost-savings to Treasury and the nation. Piecemeal, unco-ordinated approaches are no longer acceptable.

DEG has pursued partnerships in order to build capability, design, implement and share evidence-based approaches. Walgett's other Aboriginal organisations WAMS and the Walgett LALC have also developed strong partnerships.

---

<sup>1</sup> advocacy document summary attached - endorsed by the Walgett Gamilaraay Aboriginal Community Working Party May 2016.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li is a recently-established collaboration led by the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) with UNSW and other supporters working to improve the wellbeing, social, built and physical environment and life pathways of Aboriginal people in Walgett. Yuwaya Ngarra-li promotes two-way learning between Walgett's Dharriwaa Elders Group and a range of UNSW faculties, and is keenly supported by Vice-Chancellor Ian Jacobs.

Recently DEG, with support and advice from Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, Orana Haven Aboriginal Corporation Drug & Alcohol Rehabilitation, Weigelli Centre Aboriginal Corporation and UNSW researchers made an unsuccessful tender application to NSW Health for a new Aboriginal women and children residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation service to be located on country near Walgett. In the process we designed a model using elements of success identified by our partners, and offered rigorous evaluation. We are happy to share this model with the Committee.

DEG is currently accommodating a modest new initiative for Orana Haven and Weigelli Centre – the Western Primary Health Network's Walgett Aboriginal Hub. This promising new service has begun to care for Walgett addicts and triage their journeys back to wellbeing. We are unsure of this under-resourced program's future and again, are happy to share early learnings with the Committee.

DEG is convinced of the need for services to provide therapeutic interventions for children suffering from trauma, and has advocated for school nurse navigators to case manage children and their families' interactions with therapy. Teachers require specialist support to work with children with mental and cognitive disabilities to enable them to participate equitably in education, and to ensure all students to have access to high level teaching and learning opportunities. Culturally appropriate therapeutic support is needed for children who have experienced trauma and violence, including on-Country.<sup>2</sup> Children require a safe-house from which to attend school and other activities. Regular structured activities are required for different age groups. Young people require housing and a supported accommodation service. Children and youth require drug & alcohol services<sup>3</sup>, understanding of healthy relationships and youth workers to support and mentor their ongoing skills development & employment<sup>4</sup>. Social enterprises are required to create new employment. DEG is currently seeking support for a SMaRT micro-factory<sup>5</sup> to produce high-value items from locally-produced waste. DEG seeks to lease the rarely-used NSW RMS sub-depot in Walgett for this purpose. We would appreciate pro-active support from Committee members for this proposal. Those with a mental illness and cognitive impairment, including children, need health management BEFORE they encounter the Justice system<sup>6</sup>. Supports are required for individuals before and after they leave residential rehabilitation services, detention centres and jails. Education and lifeskills must be provided to children and adults when they are in jails and detention centres. Local jails and detention centres may facilitate

---

<sup>2</sup> Yuwaya Ngarrali has brought UNSW Education to Walgett to provide professional development for the Walgett Connected Community School beginning in February 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Providing triage, pre detox and after care services

<sup>4</sup> Yuwaya Ngarrali has briefed BCA National and Asst. Minister for Education, Regional Development Australia and is seeking engagement with Jobs NSW

<sup>5</sup> <http://smart.unsw.edu.au/>

<sup>6</sup> Yuwaya Ngarrali is working with WAMS, magistrate and legal supporters to develop a Walgett version of MERIT which we seek support for. We are currently planning a meeting for March 2018 which will inform this service design.

family cohesion and our community's economy. Locally-based water compliance and other environmental policing units will provide local employment, restore faith in governments and contribute to community wellbeing. A community energy efficiency trouble-shooter position is required to support our work to relieve energy poverty<sup>7</sup>. The impacts of Stolen Generations on the Walgett Aboriginal community must be better understood by Walgett services and healing activities delivered by local Aboriginal organisations in partnership with dedicated professionals, supported.

Highly skilled professionals must be pro-actively recruited to work alongside local Aboriginal positions. For every new skilled position imported to Walgett a full-time local Aboriginal trainee position must be provided to insert local knowledge and 2-way learning. NSW agencies must be resourced to undertake local Aboriginal community induction processes so they are given the best opportunity to understand their service-users. NSW agencies must be resourced to ensure all employees are trauma-informed and capable. Sustainably built energy-efficient housing, staff accommodation and buildings from which to operate new services (both in town and on-Country) are required. DEG seeks support for a private/government investment mix required for this large building effort. Other services in regional centres may have access to church or other empty buildings. Walgett does not.

I have attempted to sketch in this letter the situation and solutions available to the NSW Parliament. We currently do not have the resources to properly brief you now, but request future opportunities to provide more details. I trust you will also benefit from the many services and experts in the field and would be pleased to recommend advisers if that would assist.

Yours sincerely



Wendy Spencer

Project Manager Dharriwaa Elders Group.

---

<sup>7</sup> One of the findings from a Walgett study undertaken by Yuwaya Ngarrali with Aidan Alexander of the UNSW Photovoltaic Engineering Faculty and DEG.

