The Vincent Fairfax Ethics in Leadership Churchill Fellowship to investigate Indigenous youth leadership projects for implementation in remote Australia - USA and Canada

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Signed: Anna Flouris

Dated: 5th November 2012
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Introduction and Acknowledgements

Following the philosophy that a preventative approach to volatile substance abuse (VSA) will be the most effective, youth programs have been operating in several remote Central Australian Indigenous communities for a decade. Coupled with supply reduction strategies, there is evidence that they have impacted on the prevalence of VSA, in addition to the physical, mental, emotional and social well being of youth in the region.

My fellowship has allowed me to review an Indigenous youth leadership development program in the United States and Indigenous youth VSA-specific treatment centres across Canada. The aim of the research is to identify components of these programs that may be modified as relevant for the remote Central Australian setting, including preventative and developmental youth programs, as well as treatment for VSA clients. The lessons learnt throughout the research will inevitably inform our current programs in the region, to support and further develop communities and young Indigenous leaders.

Many people have contributed to this fellowship, and to each of them I extend a very big thank you! Firstly, to all involved in the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia and the Vincent Fairfax Foundation, for the amazing opportunities such fellowships afford, but for also affirming the significance of the research topic, which is clearly a passion of mine.

To all of the people throughout the Central Australian desert for their continued support – friends, colleagues, youth workers, program participants, families and community members. I’d like to specifically thank the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS) team, including Blair McFarland, Tristan Ray, Dacqmar Guascoine, and all the staff and youth workers I’ve had the pleasure of working with over the years. What a dynamic team!
To all of my new friends and colleagues abroad, I cannot express my gratitude and utmost delight to you all. Your hospitality, knowledge, professionalism, resilience and humour took this fellowship from research project, to life experience. In particular, Debra Dell of the Youth Solvent Addiction Committee in Canada – a strength to all around her, a mentor, friend, and tornado chaser!

The amazing staff and clients I met throughout Canada – there are too many names to list, but I’d like to thank you for opening your homes and hearts to me, for allowing me to disrupt your schedules, share stories and meals, learn from each other and build friendships. Broadly, you are Ka-Na-Chi-Hih Specialized Solvent Abuse Treatment Centre, University of Saskatchewan, Nenqayni Wellness Centre, and all involved in the YSAC Saskatchewan Inhalant Conference and the Truth and Reconciliation Gathering. A particular thank you to Vincent Simon, Willie Alphonse, Colleen Dell and each of the elders and chiefs – you are truly inspirational people. A further thank you to Dr Silvia Cruz who I met at the inhalant conference, and later opened up her home and laboratory to me in Mexico City (a relevant but not official part of the fellowship), who taught me more about inhalants, art, Mexican cuisine, culture and history!

Similarly in New Mexico – the dynamic crew in the National Indian Youth Leadership Program and their fearless leader McClellan Hall. Of special note, a big thank you to Emily and Miles King, Susan Carter, and the TANAY team (Ben, Eric, Felicia and Bilson), who bent over backwards to ensure I got the most out of my time with them.

Finally, this fellowship would not have been possible without the continued love and support from my family and friends – you all know who you area and how you support me, and for that I thank you.

Please note that this report and related works have been undertaken in the course of my personal and professional development. The opinions, insights and findings of this report are made by me personally and do not necessarily represent the views, aims and objectives of the Central Australian Youth link-Up Service.
Executive Summary

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The Vincent Fairfax Ethics in Leadership Churchill Fellowship to investigate Indigenous youth leadership projects for implementation in remote Australia - USA and Canada. As a result of this project, a model of youth leadership programs for Indigenous youth living in remote Central Australia has been proposed, which may impact on the frequency of volatile substance abuse.

Highlights
- Visiting Kan-Na-Chi-Hih Specialized Solvent Abuse Treatment Centre in Ontario and Nenqayni Wellness Centre, in Vancouver, Canada;
- Attending the Truth and Reconciliation Gathering and YSAC Inhalant Abuse Conference in Saskatchewan, Canada;
- Meeting the inspiring staff from various treatment centres in the Youth Solvent Addiction Committee;
- Meeting internationally recognised experts at conferences;
- Witnessing and experiencing traditional healing practices and cultures such as sweat lodges, Pop Wows, public performances and more; and
- Meeting the amazing team of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project in Albuquerque and Gallup, New Mexico, USA.

Key Conclusions and Recommendations
- A well-funded and governed Indigenous holistic VSA treatment program could severely impact on the lives of young people and their families;
- A model is proposed for Indigenous youth leadership development in remote Central Australia, although further consultation is necessary;
- Adequate funding is needed to staff, train and accredit both a VSA treatment facility and a leadership program; informal training considered;
- Consultation and partnerships within the sectors require strengthening;
- Recognition of youth services as essential services by the Northern Territory and Federal Governments, and thusly funded (strategically); and
- Regular national/regional forums to discuss issues for young Indigenous Australians, including VSA and treatment;

Implementation and Dissemination
Further development of the youth leadership model for Central Australia is needed as well as funding and resources to bring such vital programs into play. Dissemination of the project findings will involve a number of methods including informal and formal meetings, conferences, presentations, articles and face-to-face interactions, with local and federal stakeholders.
## Fellowship Program

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Main Body

Purpose

Volatile substance abuse (VSA) has been a chronic problem in Central Australia for decades, previously crippling many remote Indigenous communities. Whilst recent supply reduction strategies have helped (specifically the dissemination of low-aromatic OPAL fuel throughout the region in 2006), one of the primary causes of VSA (boredom) has not been suitably addressed (CAYLUS 2008; Standing Committee on Community Affairs 2009; Shaw 2009). Regular youth programs in several communities in Central Australia have had a great impact on the prevalence of VSA incidents (d’Abbs P. & Maclean, S. 2008; Shaw, G. & Payne S. 2009), whilst also improving young peoples’ physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing (Lopes, J. et. al. 2013 in publication).

With the philosophy that a preventative approach to VSA will be the most effective, it is imperative to explore ideas of how to engage and impact on young people such that they make more positive lifestyle choices. I was therefore very keen to visit an accredited youth leadership development program designed specifically with, for and by Indigenous people – of which there are few in this region.

Furthermore, I was interested in exploring the strategies for minimising the likelihood of further participation in VSA for existing clients, especially through residential programs, which are structured to modify a client’s lifestyle, long-term. There are few residential treatment centres for youth in Australia that are VSA specific (d’Abbs, P. & Maclean, S. 2008.) and suitable for Indigenous youth living in remote locations (Shaw, G. et. al. 2011), thus visiting such treatment centres in Canada may help identify strategies of the programming that could be utilised during youth programs. Indeed the Australian federal government has reiterated the significance of consistent, longer-term funding for programs under the Petrol Sniffing Strategy, as well as the establishment of safe houses for those at risk of harm from intoxicated sniffers and rehabilitation facilities for those suffering from VSA (Australian Government 2010). It is timely then to further explore these.

The National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP) – Overview

The National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP) began in 1985 in Gallup, New Mexico. The NIYLP’s mission is to nurture the potential of Native youth such that they can be contributors to a more positive world, through adventure-based learning and service to family, community and nature (Project Venture, NIYLP website – www.niylp.org). They are a non-government organisation, and
largely funded through grants and private donations.

The NIYLP offers various programs in youth leadership development, each based on their program, Project Venture (PV). PV is the first Native American “prevention” program to be nationally accredited, and found to be amongst the most effective programs serving high-risk youth and Native American populations, including youth who abuse or have been abusers of volatile substances.

Through PV, NIYLP provides direct services to youth in schools, tribes and communities. It has been implemented in over 70 communities and currently operates in 19 states in the USA and 10 sites in Canada in various provinces, and is growing. Their international office in Albuquerque, New Mexico, also offers training and technical assistance for agencies wishing to implement Project Venture.
"Project Venture, as a program model, incorporates the best of two worlds – values and customs common to the Native peoples of Turtle Island and the most effective ideas from the science-based world of prevention and youth development. Project Venture represents our best effort to strike a balance between traditional wisdom and evidence-based prevention”.

McClellan Hall, Founder (NIYLP, 2011)

PV is an intensive, yearlong program (up to 200 contact hours per child annually), which is implemented in a specific sequence, with increasing complexity over time. It uses a strength-based approach for positive outcomes, and was developed and is guided by cultural teachings and Elders. It operates through schools, as well as in after-school hours, with annual camps at the conclusion of the school year. PV targets adolescents and young teens, and includes six essential elements:

- Positive youth development;
- Engagement with nature;
- Experiential activities (setting a challenge, having the experience, reflecting on it, and then adapting to it);
- Connection to community and service;
- Skills development for personal growth; and
- Culturally relevant activities and teachings.

Whilst PV doesn't require prescribed cultural teachings, it does aim to provide a framework. NIYLP believe that traditional values of Indigenous people can be practiced today, despite the changes that have taken place in the tribes and communities. The values that need to be taken into consideration when developing culturally appropriate youth leadership models include:

- Family—the most important unit in Native American culture;
- Service leadership – service to others and the broader community;
- Spiritual awareness – traditional spiritual teachings;
- Reconnecting to the natural world – observing, reflecting upon and interacting with the natural world;
- Challenge – risk taking activities that invoke reflection of oneself;
- Meaningful roles – in families and community in order to develop positive social skills and self-worth;
- Recognition – celebrating “rites of passage” and successes;
- Responsibility – a vital element in the development of capable youth;
- Natural consequences – actions are followed by positive and negative consequence;
- Respect – of self and others; and
Dialogue – intergenerational.

NIYLP staff are based in towns, either in Gallup or in the city of the Albuquerque, and frequently travel to relevant pueblos (Native American communities) and nearby towns. Compared to Central Australia, the distances traveled here are much shorter, and in better conditions, with most staff travelling no more than 2 hours per program day (up to three days per week, year-long). A group of two to five staff will make up one team, and work with participants from one pueblo or program for the year. Each program usually supports 15 to 30 participants from that pueblo, depending on the number of staff and referrals for that region, and youth are often referred to the program through hospitals, health clinics, schools and on corrections orders.

In the first weeks, staff travel out to the pueblos and meet with all the relevant stakeholders, including schools, health clinics, police officers and families of the participants. They spend about 20 hours of contact with youth every week, and initially work on building a rapport with the participants, and building teamwork. They often begin their programs during school time, and over the programs progression, begin running more after school and weekend activities, and encourage family members to also get involved. Over the course of the year, the staff visit the youth more frequently, conduct more challenging activities, and have increasing expectations on participants.

A typical program will include activities such as water safety, music, dance workshops, rock-climbing, camping, ropes-course, cleaning the local zoo, cooking, cleaning the camp, bush-walking and so much more. Over the course of the year, participants are expected and encouraged to take on more of a leadership role in these activities – from participating to running a few of them (as relevant), including setting up their own camp sites. At the end of every school year, the participants from all of the programs and pueblos throughout New Mexico come together, for a 1-week camp, to celebrate their successes, and make plans to move forward. Indeed, some of the participants remain involved in the program for more than one year, some eventually working for the program.

The core youth leadership goals are relevant to the individual, and to the larger group. Through the PV program, NIYLP aims to support young people to become leaders by improving their cooperation, communication, problem solving skills and trust issues to build teams and grow respect amongst the participants. Additionally, young people are trained in skills such as first aid, food handling, technical skills, and service delivery, and supported in return-to-school programs and/or employment pathways, similarly to some youth programs in remote Central Australia.

Witnessing various aspects of PV in action throughout New Mexico, and meeting
both staff and participants alike, was truly inspiring. The fact that PV has been successfully implemented throughout 70 different communities indicates the validity of the guiding principles and the PV model, despite differences between any two populations. It thus begs the question of how the model could be modified to suit the remote Central Australian Indigenous context, especially in remote communities where youth programs are already in operation, consistent and engaging. Such a model is discussed in the coming sections, including some of the cautions and limitations that require consideration before implementing any youth development programs.

**The Youth Solvent Addiction Committee (YSAC) – Overview**

Formed in 1995, the Youth Solvent Addiction Committee (YSAC) is a network of federally funded First Nation Treatment Centres throughout Canada. Each centre specialises in working with a specific target group, often gender and age specific, to tailor the treatment program accordingly. In order to provide a focused approach to VSA treatment nation-wide, this network of treatment centres frequently met to support each other, share ideas and challenges, and plan a targeted and comprehensive approach to VSA treatment for young First Nations and Inuit people.

In 1998, this network formally became the YSAC (a coordinating body of the treatment centres), and by July 2012 all of the centres in the network were formally accredited. This collaborative approach has also led to the development of best practice guidelines for VSA treatment for youth (YSAC, 2005), and a common foundation for all of their treatment programs (refer next section).

YSAC is composed of representatives from each of the treatment centres, who meet quarterly, and has one employed coordinator based in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Key responsibilities of this role include delivery of training to the treatment centre staff, supporting evaluation of programs, coordinating professional support for staff, development of best practice guidelines, program development, networking and partnerships, accreditation of centres and research projects.

Whilst all of the treatment centres have a different target group, they are similarly funded and governed, and held up to the best practice guidelines. They all have similar outcome indicators based on a holistic treatment model and the four areas of the Medicine Wheel— to positively impact on the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical well being of the clients, and are measured by pre and post treatment evaluations. Some centres also offer follow-up to clients who have returned to their homes, and prevention and treatment outreach programs. They vary in duration, usually from four to six months, but some lasting...
as long as two years, and can be gender and age specific, often operating on a rotation, e.g. the first 4-month program targeting females aged 10-18 years, then the next targeting 19-25 year old females.

Although each treatment centre specialises in VSA, it is common that youth have other issues that need to be addressed, including but not limited to alcohol and other drugs. It is thus common for all centres to have policies and procedures regarding the security and locking up of the facility, including ‘privileges’, from access to sharp instruments, to unaccompanied trips outside of the centre. This is the case irrespective of whether the centres are town-based or located on reserves.

Youth can be either self referred or referred by families and on corrections sentences. However, all centres require youth to participate in the treatment voluntarily, based on the notion that such a commitment by the young person is necessary to maximise the potential for meaningful change. Making healthy lifestyle decisions, such as acknowledging the need for oneself to enter treatment, is considered a part of the development of young leaders.

**YSAC philosophies to maximise treatment outcomes**

From all of my interactions with YSAC – one on one meetings, visiting treatment centres, reading material and attending their annual conference, it became clear that each treatment centre has similar approaches to achieving their goal – maximizing the impact of treatment of young people, thereby minimising the likelihood of them returning to/continuing with VSA. Broadly, these approaches include:

- Traditional Native teaching and healing practices, combined with individual and group counseling as well as recreational based therapies;
- Qualified (largely First Nations) staff with access to professional support;
- Utilises a strength-based approach, including behavioural change through positive reinforcement and nurturing emotional intelligence, resilience and leadership skills;
- Promotion of positive lifestyle messages, education (formal and informal) and developing lifeskills; and
- Voluntary participation by youth, with encouragement for family participation as relevant.

**YSAC centres throughout Canada**
The YSAC centres and their specific focus for youth VSA treatment include:

- Charles J Andrew Youth Centre
  - Located in Sheshatshiu, Labrador
  - Focus on males and females aged 11 to 17 years of age
  - 16-week program

- Leading Thunderbird Lodge
  - Located in Fort Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan
  - Focus on males aged 12 to 17 years of age with intensive outpatient program for teens and young adults (16-21 years old)
  - Block intake and individual intake on a case by case basis

- Whiskyjack Centre
  - Located near Thompson, Manitoba
  - 22-bed residential program
  - Includes alcohol and other drug treatment (dedicated beds)

- White Buffalo Youth Centre
  - Located in Sturgeon Lake First Nation near Prince Albert, Saskatchewan
  - 10-bed residential program
  - Outreach services to nearby communities including education

- Nimkee Nupigawagan Healing Centre
  - Located on the Thames First Nation, Ontario
  - Focus on males and females aged 12 to 17 years
  - 16 week program – gender based
  - Outpatient treatment services offered on a case by case basis

- Nenqayni Wellness Centre
  - Located in the Deep Creek Reserve near Williams Lake, British Columbia
  - Focus on female youth and families
  - 16 week program for youth; 8 weeks for families with alcohol and other drug related issues

- Ka-Na-Chi-Hih Specialized Solvent Treatment Centre
  - Located in Thunder Bar, Ontario
  - Focus on males 16 to 25 years old
  - 4 – 24 month program, including support for employment pathways

- Hobbema Young Spirit Winds Society
Located in Alberta
Focus on males and females aged 12 to 17 years
Outpatient youth treatment centre (10 weeks), day treatment and mobile program
Brain Gym – refer below

Note: During my fellowship, I only visited the two treatment centres outlined below. Information gathered about the other centres was sourced from reading materials, meetings and conference proceedings.

Ka-Na-Chi-Hih Specialized Solvent Treatment Centre

Ka-Na-Chi-Hih opened in 1996, but received its first client in 1997. It is an urban residential program, with 12 beds, focused on older males, aged 16 to 25 years. Approximately 60% of the clients are from Ontario, but like all YSAC centres, their intake covers all of Canada. In fact, several of the clients present during my visit were youth from one reserve. Naturally there are both benefits and limitations to this. Although youth from the one location initially proved a great support for each other, it was noted that this had the potential to separate them from the rest of the group, and could have implications during group counseling sessions and for their individual treatment.
offers off-site trade training (e.g. hospitality). For these reasons, this centre in particular has continuous intake throughout the year, and long waiting lists.

Similar to other centres, Ka-Na-Chi-Hih uses a holistic framework of traditional and contemporary healing practices based on the Medicine Wheel. A typical daily schedule for clients includes meals, morning and evening group circles, educational workshops including life skills development, individual counseling, drumming, physical activity, arts program, an outing and recreation.

During my visit, more than 50% of the current clients had graduated from the four-month program - two graduating whilst I was there. Once graduated, these clients were allowed increased independence from the program, including unaccompanied visits into town, and an opportunity for supported formal education. It is perhaps one of the reasons that clients rarely abscond from the centres, despite the close proximity to town and other services. When asked why they decided to stay, one client remarked, to “learn a trade”, and in further discussions I learnt that for that client, it was not something he previously thought possible. He’d never really been interested in employment before, but during his time in treatment, that had changed.

Senior staff in the treatment centres emphasised the responsibility of clients as decision makers, and the importance of consulting them when developing their recreational program. Less experienced staff that did not undertake this strategy, found it more difficult to motivate clients, especially in the evening recreation program. They quickly modified their approach, thus allowing maximum participation by youth in activities that were meaningful to them and to the group.

Nenqayni Wellness Centre

Nenqayni opened in 1981, and was formally accredited in 2001. It runs a 16-week young girls program (for up to 10 girls per intake) as well as an 8-week family program, in separate buildings on the same facility. It is located remotely on the outskirts of a First Nations reserve. The family program operates on a rotation, with some treatment programs specific for single-parent families, and others for nuclear families, where either one or both parents are affected by alcohol and other drugs, including VSA. The family program has an intake of four families in every rotation, and therefore has a 6-month waiting list.

The daily schedule for female youth is similar to male youth at Ka-Na-Chi-Hih, however, Nenqayni also has a school, day care centre, arts building and gymnasium, and this is factored into both the female and family program. Whist children of the families are in school, the adults are in counseling sessions and
workshops, with time allocated for strengthening families after school time. This includes structured and unstructured events as well as outings, and reveals the benefit of the remote location of this facility. Furthermore, it’s distance from the nearest town, Williams Lake, encourages further responsibilities of families in the program, as they can seldom leave the facility to access stores – planning and budgeting for breakfasts and snacks, is thus an integral component of the program.

The two programs operate independently of each other, however clients are served lunch and dinner at the same time, in the one dining room, along with staff. This allows for positive interactions of clients between the programs, and a friendly basis for which staff and clients can interact. It was common to see particular adult clients, take on a supportive and maternal role for the younger clients, strengthening the importance of family dynamics for clients.

Whilst there, the family program clients graduated form their 8-week treatment program. I was fortunate enough to experience first hand the impact of the sweat lodge in healing, which is an integral component of the holistic Nenqayni programs. One participant explained how weekly sweat lodges helped her re-connect to her culture and ancestors, and open her thoughts to people who surrounded her. She felt that this would give her the strength to refrain from using alcohol and other drugs when she returned home, as she now understood the impact it had on the people around her.

At Nenqayni, there is a dedicated position to follow-up with clients once they
have completed their treatment and returned home. They largely communicate via telephone and social media, providing some outreach support as needed. This is particularly significant as there are few preventative programs in reserves in Canada, as previously mentioned, and so as much support as possible is needed for clients once they have returned home, often to the same circumstances as when they entered treatment.

**Interesting initiatives regarding VSA treatment and prevention**

During the afore-mentioned interactions with various people in Saskatoon, I came across some interesting initiatives and ideas regarding VSA treatment, leadership and prevention.

*Emotional Intelligence*

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a training module frequently offered by YSAC to treatment centre staff. The training allows staff to learn how to facilitate a series of 10 workshops with their clients, each of them interactive and engaging, to support the maturity and understanding of their emotions and emotional responses. The four main goals of the workshops are to:

- Increase emotional vocabulary;
- Increase empathy;
- Increase emotional and behavioural pattern recognition; and
- Consequential thinking.

EI is measured by an online self-report survey, where responses from the clients are compared with a “credible normal group”. At Nenqayni, young people who recently underwent the training reported significant changes in the EI competencies – to know, choose and give of oneself.

*Brain Gym*

Brain gym is an interesting philosophy integral to the treatment program offered by Hobbema Young Spirit Winds Society in Alberta. It is offered during their 10-week outpatient youth treatment centre, as well as their day treatment and mobile outreach program (visits to reserves, schools, etc).

Brain Gym is a light physical workout for the brain, and includes short and fun exercises to stimulate synapses in the brain, thereby increasing productivity and minimizing boredom. In this treatment centre, it is used with art therapy, play therapy, adventure therapy, talking circles, brainstorming, role modeling, plays, power-point presentations, and other interactive methods, to educate youth in a
group. It can be used to educate people about the harms of VSA, to teach healthy lifestyle messages, etc., in an engaging and meaningful manner.

**The Governance Bundle**

Recently, the board of Nimkee Nupigawagan Healing Centre in Ontario created the Governance Bundle, as methodology for closer bonding between members of the board, and the various roles and First Nations they represent. The Bundle is made up of eight items (e.g. an eagle feather), with each item having specific meaning and thus representing a member of the board.

However, together, the bundle has a more spiritual meaning – the bringing together and binding of each First Nation’s values and traditions. It implies that all Nations are equally valued and respected, and therefore have an equal responsibility in governing the treatment centre. It is thus considered a great honour to be the keeper of bundle, and that responsibility often lies with the executive director of the treatment centre.

**Issues for Indigenous youth living in remote settings**

My fellowship proved that there are similar concerns faced by youth in remote Central Australian communities as exist for Indigenous youth in Canada (living on reserves) and the USA (living on reservations). Amongst them are:

- Poverty
- Poor health
- Low socio-economic status
- Cultural dislocation
- Remote location – often leads to inequitable resource allocation
- Isolation
- High levels of boredom
- Low levels of literacy and numeracy, including computer literacy
- English as second or third language
- Lack of opportunities for appropriate education and training, including leadership and governance
- Limited access to services, and inadequate funding of local services
- High staff turn over in the region – limited skills transfer
- Limited funding for programming
- Limited infrastructure
- Anti social behavior and lack of compliance with rules and cultural law
- Little consultation with Indigenous people in service provision, especially youth

Undoubtedly, all of these factors need to be taken into account when developing
programs to further develop leadership skills amongst youth, and in the prevention of VSA.

The most striking comparison between Central Australian remote communities and other places visited during the fellowship, is the emphasis in Central Australia on VSA prevention versus treatment, counseling, etc. This largely occurs through the provision of local youth development programs and supply reduction measures such as the use of low aromatic (OPAL) fuel. However, as previously mentioned, this is not consistent among communities within the region, and often dependent on current funding, infrastructure and personnel available to that community.

In Canada, there are up to 300 NADAP workers – caseworkers based in reserves employed under the National Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Program. However, staff operate during normal business hours, and have little or no capacity to run preventative programs for youth.

**Lessons learnt – Significance of Prevention**

Whether visiting well-funded treatment facilities in Canada, attending conferences, or exploring youth leadership development projects in New Mexico, the clearest lesson was the significance of prevention in VSA, and as a part of this, the need for consistent, well-structured, multi-faceted youth programs that are centred around Indigenous culture and youth leadership development. It emerges clearly that in fact, prevention, coupled with supply reduction strategies and good treatment measures, should be an essential component of VSA management.

Clients at the treatment centres reported that in their reserves/communities, there was little to do for most young people, apart from school and some family activities such as fishing. Indeed, all agreed that it would make a big difference in their communities if they had something fun and engaging to do daily. Similarly, VSA staff attending the Inhalant Abuse conference in Saskatoon were overwhelmingly supportive of youth development programs in reserves, and felt that they were an integral component of VSA management and prevention.

In Australia, the value of prevention programs was highlighted when the *Eight Point Plan* was implemented by the Federal Government, which included the expansion of Opal low-aromatic fuel across affected areas as well as the provision of alternative diversionary activities for young people (Community Affairs Reference Committee 2006; d’Abbs, P. & Maclean, S. 2011; Urbis 2008). Certainly, a dramatic decrease in the prevalence of petrol sniffing has since been reported in the region (CAYLUS 2008; Standing Committee on Community Affairs
Lessons learnt – Considerations in developing youth leadership programs in Central Australia

The primary objective of my fellowship was to explore the way various youth programs engage in prevention and treatment of volatile substance abuse and from this, to develop recommendations regarding youth leadership training in remote Central Australian Indigenous communities. This section of the report outlines the lessons learnt and potential challenges from the prevention and treatment programs, to inform the development of a youth leadership program model for Central Australia.

The relevance of Indigenous ownership – a team of qualified and skilled First Nations and Native American people, dedicated to positive outcomes for young Indigenous people, lead each program and are involved in the planning and implementation of the programs.

Indigenous and quality governance – all of the programs were managed by a board that comprised largely Indigenous people from various First Nations, who are knowledgeable in governance principles and supported in their roles and responsibilities. In Central Australia, the federal government has governance training available for older community members, however, this training is only valuable for people with basic literacy levels.

Indigenous culture in healing – staff in each program were dedicated to the values, traditions, beliefs and customs of Indigenous people as a foundation for the development of their programs, and placed high value in the role their culture could play in both VSA treatment and prevention. This is also seen in some remote Central Australian communities where traditions and culture are held strong, however, a sense of cultural dislocation in other areas is increasing over time. It is therefore essential to work with elders and youth alike to enshrine these customs and beliefs in the foundation of newly developed youth programs, preventative and treatment based alike.

Holistic approaches – all programs combined traditional healing practices with contemporary models of treatment and prevention, aiming to improve on the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional wellbeing of young people. This often included working outdoors and supporting youth to connect with nature.

Multifaceted structured programs – each program comprised a range of regular, structured activities to keep youth engaged in a meaningful way and exercise all components of the body and mind. This strategy catered to the
diverse characteristics of participants. This often included physical activities, arts, crafts, games, workshops, music, counseling services, special projects, healing practices, personal challenges, nutrition, confidence building activities, connectedness to nature and so on. In Central Australia, the often low education levels amongst Indigenous youth would need to be taken into consideration when planning activities, and developed to suit and further develop their literacy and numeracy levels, and emphasizes the need for appropriate training.

**Targeted programming** – the needs of male and female youth, depending on their age, are different, thus gender and age-specific programs are common and are less likely to have distractions.

**Hours of operation** – programming was available at different times: during and after school, evenings, weekends and during school holidays.

**Funding and resource allocation** – this was particularly evident in Canada, where treatment facilities are well resourced, and thus could fund high levels of staffing, to allow for good staff to client ratios, as well as ongoing training and support for staff and clients of the programs. Naturally, infrastructure and resources will dictate what programs can be offered to youth. Given the lack of infrastructure in remote Central Australian communities, it has proven difficult to house qualified staff and youth workers in the community with youth. In these communities, youth programs are usually run by local staff, that are not likely to be trained or qualified appropriately, and thus such programs are often sporadic and often unstructured or unplanned. Over the years, the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service has received funding from the Aboriginal Benefits Account (from mining royalties in the region) to build and renovate youth program infrastructure locally, in recognition of the importance of youth programs in VSA prevention and healthy lifestyles for youth.

**Staffing** – often a team of largely Indigenous staff with varying expertise worked together, including youth workers, counselors, psychologists, teachers, cooks and administrators. Staff from various programs or treatment centres were also encouraged to collaborate and support one another. Emulating this in Central Australia could be difficult given the lack of communication and information technology in the region (limited phone, computer and internet access) as well as the often low education levels of Indigenous people in remote communities. This, however, further emphasises the need for leadership development training amongst the region’s youth.

**Staff to client ratio** – high staff to client ratios allow more concentrated work to be done with participants. This could prove challenging in Central Australia with funding restrictions and the large numbers of youth in remote communities, that are likely to participate in youth development and diversion programs.
Training of staff – training and continuing education opportunities are frequently offered to staff to develop their skills better, with many staff working for their respective programs for a decade. A common obstacle in Central Australia is the frequent turnover of staff, perhaps offering continuing education to workers may minimise the turn over. Another proactive approach observed during the fellowship that could be adopted includes the investment in recruiting and training a pool of casual staff for treatment programs. This already occurs to some extent in Central Australia for youth prevention programs, but due to the small population of the region, staff are frequently located all over the country, and employing them can be expensive and time consuming as you need to plan their travel to the relevant community.

Service projects – empowering youth by supporting them to create their own projects that allow them to service their community. This was particularly striking with the NIYLP where funding does not allow high staffing levels, and volunteering occurs via service projects. This approach has several benefits including essential life skills development for young people, benefiting the community at large, and also showing to community members that these young people are positive role models who can contribute to their communities.

Formal education – all treatment centres emphasise formal education, with many programs also providing training and support for skills development, such as a trade or first aid certificates. Whilst formal education would prove challenging for some people in Central Australia due to the often low education levels of people living in remote communities, ongoing mentoring by qualified staff and other informal education strategies could also be used to achieve similar results.

Life skills – informal training techniques used to deliver life skills that young people can use when they are in their communities, including arts and crafts, cooking, painting, gardening, and service projects. Many youth workers in Central Australian remote communities often lead activities that promote life skills, however the frequency and extent to which they can do so is often dependent on the funding available. In addition, the local school may conduct similar activities, but again this is dependent on funding, and the interest of the teacher involved.

Leadership skills development – emphasis on challenges and activities to build essential leadership skills such as self-confidence, respect, cooperation, decision-making and trust. Although youth programs operating in Central Australia could offer this, it is difficult, time consuming, and best done with a high staff to client ratio. Youth workers are faced with the ever-growing task of planning, implementing and evaluating a program of meaningful activities for youth in the
communities they work in – that’s often up to 50% of the community’s population, and can be up to 150 young people per program. A focused leadership program that support and collaborates current functional youth programs would be ideal.

**Experiential Learning** - setting a challenge, having the experience, reflecting on it, and then adapting to it.

**Role modeling** – there was an expectation in all programs that staff and youth alike were role models for one another.

**Positive youth imaging** – emphasis on positive images for young people, viewed by themselves and the society around them as positive contributors to their communities.

**Positive reinforcement** – used in place of a disciplinary model throughout the programs to build positive health images of oneself and the world.

**Consultation with youth** – Some aspects of the programs were flexible and often developed in consultation with young people. This highlighted the role of young people as decision makers, and increased the likelihood of meaningful engagement from participants. In one instance, this included working with youth to develop the rules of the program, and consequences for breaching said rules. In Central Australian Aboriginal culture, governance and leadership have historically been roles undertaken only by older members of the community. It is therefore essential that community consultations include individuals of varying age groups and perspectives, with the understanding that Elders and community leaders may need some convincing to see the benefits of collaborating with youth.

**Safety and wellbeing** – staff were often aware of the safety and vulnerability of participants, including their physical and emotional safety, and often factored this into their planning of programs. Cyber safety has been a recent concern, with treatment centres and prevention programs limiting the photography of their clients (need of parental permission) and limiting client’s access to the internet, in particular to social media sites.

**Program length** – although program length varied between treatment centres and prevention programs, it is evident that time is needed to affect significant attitudinal and behavioral change amongst youth, especially VSA clients, where a lengthy program allows for building of skills over time. The common length of time for a treatment program was four months, with a minimum yearlong leadership development program. Similarly in Central Australia, the greatest successes in youth development lies with consistent long-term programs,
especially as they are best placed to recruit, train and support local staff and participants.

**Importance of evaluation** – this is essential in program development and adaptation to ensure a meaningful program.

**Follow-up and connection to community** – staff in treatment centres commented on the difficulty for clients once they graduate from the program and return to their communities, and the importance to follow-up with them and offer some outreach support where possible. Similarly, the yearlong prevention program has proven the benefit of working with youth locally, to help them identify their supports and coping mechanisms around their homes. In Canada, each treatment centre has a toll free phone number so that clients can receive follow-up services and keep in touch as needed once they return home. This could not work easily in Central Australia given the lack of mobile phone network and lack of access to functional phones in communities, especially in private settings (functional public phones are often located at the local store). Furthermore, due to the large geographical land mass of this region, adequate staffing to travel to remote locations would be an essential component of follow-up and support.

**A model for youth leadership development in Central Australia**

Given the lessons and considerations mentioned above, further considerations for the youth leadership development programs are outlined here. As previously mentioned, some youth programs operating in Central Australia could offer this training to an extent, however it will be difficult and time consuming, and best done with a high staff to client ratio. Given the significance of youth development programs in VSA management outlined in this report, multi-faceted, continuous youth programs should be in place throughout the region. In communities where such programs are already in place and well attended, this model for youth leadership development could be implemented to compliment the current program.

Youth workers are already faced with planning, implementing and evaluating a program of meaningful activities for youth in the communities they work in, whilst mentoring and supporting training initiatives for local staff - local community members who are often unqualified with low education and literacy levels. Given young people comprise approximately 50% of the community’s population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), they can have up to 150 young people per program. A focused leadership program that supports and collaborates with the current functional youth programs would be ideal.
In Central Australia, a functional youth development program is one that is well funded, staffed by experienced people, mentors local staff, operates at different times, targets various age ranges and genders, and is multifaceted, thus catering to different characteristics of young people in a community with appropriate infrastructure (Fietz, P. 2006). Such programs are an essential service in each community, but do not exist in most of remote Central Australia. In almost every community, there is a semblance of a program, but many are not as well rounded or funded to meet the real needs of the community. Where strong youth development programs exist, youth leadership development programs could have a positive impact.

Few youth leadership programs are accessible in Central Australia – they are seldom targeted at Indigenous youth, and fewer still can reach them in the remote locations they live in. The National Indigenous Youth Leadership Academy (NIYLA) is a recent initiative that has tried to breach the geographical barrier – it is a networked social-action based leadership initiative for young Indigenous Australians (NIYLA, 2012). However, access for youth in Central Australia would still be limited due to the often low literacy skills (including computer literacy) amongst this population, and minimal access to computers and other information technologies in remote communities.

The most fitting is perhaps the Jaru Pirrjirdi (Strong Voices) Project, a youth development and leadership program undertaken by the Mt Theo Program, and based in the remote community of Yuendumu (WYDAC, 2012). Targeting 16 to 25 year olds, the core components of the Jaru Pirrjirdi Project are similar to those of Project Venture – building confidence, experience and capacity, service as youth workers for their community, formal education, culture, skills development (e.g. film-making), mentoring and future pathways. Furthermore, this program is operated by local youth workers and elders and embedded in the long-term youth program in that community. However, Jaru Pirrjirdi is only operational in one community in the region, and dependent on adequate funding and youth infrastructure, as well as appropriate staffing. Given the difficulty of funding and recruiting youth workers in remote communities, trying to emulate the Jaru Pirrjirdi project in other communities (with additional staff and infrastructure needed per community) would prove difficult, especially where there is no current youth program.

Similarly to Project Venture, a year long program that targets a small number of youth in a community that are engaging in their communities’ youth program, could have an impact in Central Australia. Initially, the program will need to be piloted with a few communities, and a maximum of 20 participants in total. Working in partnership with school teachers and/or youth workers in the community, mentors would run the leadership development program beginning with specific activities for participants in their communities throughout the year,
and then focused camps where all of the 20 young people could come together biannually for a week long leadership camp (outside of their communities).

Town-based staff could travel out to remote communities where there is an active and consistent youth program, and work with a group of youth from that location. In this model, you would only require a few staff (up to three in the pilot) to partner with other key agencies and stakeholders, to provide the yearlong training to about 20 youth in the region. Initially, staff will spend 1 week of every third week based in a community, working with local youth workers, teachers and elders, building rapport with the participants and community members, and working on strengthening the group of participants. Similarly to Project Venture, over the course of the year, the staff would visit the youth more frequently, conduct more challenging activities, and have increasing expectations on participants. Ideally, those employed on the program would already have a rapport with the relevant community and its members.

Participants will be nominated by teachers and youth workers in the relevant communities, who already have long-standing relationships with community members, and from there an informal selection process will recruit no more than five participants from each community. In the pilot, a maximum of four communities should be considered. It is common for Indigenous people in Central Australia to migrate between communities, and this will need to be taken into consideration, as there can be large distances between communities. For this reason, targeting youth aged 12 to 16 years of age is appropriate, as you can still work with them through the local school, irrespective of the community they are currently residing in or visiting.

Participants would be consulted when developing the program, and could include a multitude of activities with similar outcomes/experiences for participants:

- improved confidence and self worth;
- improved cooperation;
- improved decision making and problem solving skills;
- trust and respect for one-self and others;
- better understanding of their roles and responsibilities within their families, communities and wider society;
- connection to the natural world;
- spiritual awareness (mostly run by elders and supported by staff);
- greater social skills;
- improved communication, including intergenerational dialogue;
- celebrated successes; and
- sense of achievement, especially through service projects.

Furthermore, participants would learn relevant practical and life skills, such as
food handling and basic first aid. Activities could include but are certainly not limited to: music workshops, dance workshops, hiking, informal presentations, swimming, cooking, setting up a camp site, hunting, making musical instruments, planning, running and participating in sport, camping, and so much more. In most cases, participants will be expected to reflect on the activity, journal and discuss any issues, concerns or triumphs that may arise. Over the course of the year, participants would be expected and encouraged to take on more of a leadership role in these activities – from participating to running a few of them (as relevant).

Twice yearly, during the winter and summer school holidays, the participants from each of the communities (total of 20) could come together, for a 1-week camp, to celebrate their successes, and make plans to move forward, including setting up a service project. The camp would be run with staff and elders from the communities, as well as any visiting artists or experts as relevant. For example, an artist could work with the participants to develop a service project, such as the painting of a mural for a public space in their community (if approved by other community members of course).

As previously mentioned, this model is based largely on my experiences during this fellowship and previous work in the field. However, given the differences between individuals and communities in Central Australia, it is essential that this model be recognised as flexible – it would inevitably vary slightly between participants, communities, and over the years, depending also on the elders and stakeholders involved in the program.

Following from the lessons outlined above, the following points should always be considered when developing such a leadership program in Central Australia:

- pilot with 20 participants, at least 3 facilitators and 3-5 elders, artists, or people with specialised skills, as relevant;
- targeting young people aged 12 to 16 years of age;
- mentors deliver program with support form partners on the ground, i.e. youth worker or school teacher;
- consultation with and led by youth, elders and other community members, note: historically in Central Australian Aboriginal cultures only elders have a role in leading their family, and there may be some opposition from elders and senior members of the community, for youth to participate in such a program. However, in recent years, youth workers in the region have reported that some elders in their community believe such training is essential, and requires the input and governance of elders;
- staffed by experienced mentors in partnership with elders, youth workers, teachers and community members who are identified role models in their communities;
• culturally appropriate activities;
• cultural teachings and intergenerational knowledge transfer;
• holistic and based on a positive youth development model, using experiential learning theories;
• multifaceted activities with educational outcomes, including engagement with nature through adventure therapy;
• specific skills development including certified as well as informal training;
• focused on life skills and leadership skills development;
• some gender and age-specific activities;
• group as well as individual activities/tasks;
• use role modeling;
• include at least one service project, where youth provide a service to their own community, either alone or in partnership with other participants from their community;
• be safe;
• evaluated after each program, so that it can be modified as needed;
• budget (refer items below); and
• timing of camps – need to be during the school holidays, when it is not too hot, and the weather is dry (rain can limit the use of dirt roads).

The budget must also be considered when developing such programs, especially for camping and adventure therapy for young people, which should include but not be limited to the following:

• site hire, bills, insurance (workers compensation and public liability);
• vehicles, fuel, maintenance;
• food – for camps in particular but snacks during year-long programming;
• full kitchen including pots and pans, detergents, etc.;
• tables and chairs;
• mattresses for sleeping;
• linen, towels, sleeping bags, pillows, pillow cases;
• some toilet, kitchen and laundry facilities including toilet paper and detergents (could include fire pit);
• first aid supplies and training;
• Girl/Personal box, e.g. tampons and such;
• Bathroom supplies – toothbrush, soap, personal hygiene/person;
• sports gear, props, arts 'n' crafts supplies, etc.;
• toolkit;
• graduation party, including gifts for kids – water bottle, photos, t-shirt;
• stationary, e.g. for journaling - for reflection and different ways to express self;
• computers and software;
• cameras – video and still cameras;
• Cost of experts (remuneration of elders and artists as well as their travel,
food, and supplies);
• Adventure gear - make their own day pack to include - clothing, socks (wool/polyester), shoes, rain jackets, beany, hat, gloves, torch, whistle, maps, water bottle, first aid kits (personal), lip balm, sun protection;
• travel of participants and staff/mentors; and
• administration costs.

Several considerations have been presented here as essential in developing youth leadership training. These suggest that different young people and communities may be involved in the same leadership development program, however, the programs themselves would be tailored to suit the individual and so would vary between individuals and from one community to the next.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the successes of various strategies towards minimizing the frequency and impact of volatile substance abuse, largely petrol sniffing, in Central Australia, the region is still prone to sporadic outbreaks of sniffing. Usually, those involved are a core group of young people with long-term VSA issues. Sadly, young children often witness this and copy the behavior themselves, perpetuating the cycle further. Certainly, VSA in Central Australia still impacts on the lives of young people, their families and communities.

Undoubtedly, such young people would greatly benefit from treatment and prevention programs including leadership development training. There is a lack of residential treatment facilities within the region, and limited urban programs that are VSA specific. The YSAC treatment centres I visited during my fellowship proved that a well-funded and governed Indigenous holistic treatment program could severely impact on the lives of young people and their families.

Furthermore, Project Venture provides a solid foundation for the development of a leadership development model for Central Australian Indigenous youth in remote communities, which is integral to the prevention of VSA and promoting positive lifestyles and healthy decision-making. Such a program could compliment a consistent and multifaceted youth program if already in operation in a remote community. Considering the lessons learnt, a model has been drafted to implement a long-term leadership development program. Further consultations with key agencies and service providers in Central Australia would be needed to further develop the program.

Below is a list of the key recommendations from this project that should be implemented in Australia:

In setting up a treatment facility in Australia:

1. Setting up a residential treatment facility – points to consider as outlined in lessons learned;
2. Support in the development by inviting YSAC representatives and coordinator to work with local experts and community members to plan and develop the facility and program;
3. Adequate funding to staff, train and accredit a centre;
4. Regular national/regional forums to discuss issues regarding VSA and treatment;
5. Training to include visits to YSAC centres; and
6. New treatment facility to be an associate member of YSAC.
In setting up youth leadership development programs:

1. Youth services recognised as essential services nationally;
2. Northern Territory and Federal government - Strategic planning around funding youth development programs regionally, in remote Central Australian Indigenous communities;
3. Northern Territory and Federal government – funding of youth leadership development programs accordingly;
4. Supported through the development and funding of a model program;
5. Consideration for such programs to become a part of the educational curriculum in remote Central Australia;
6. Partnerships with key service providers in the region to develop and implement program;
7. Support from the Department of Sport and Recreation and Department of Education to implement program including support from community-based teachers and the principle of participants in the program;
8. Adequate funding for staff including training and professional development;
9. National recognition of informal training for local, community-based staff; and
10. Adequate funding to set up a temporary camp facility, permanent facility to be considered based on success of pilot program.

**Dissemination and the personal challenge**

As a Churchill Fellow, the responsibility lies largely with me to disseminate the conclusions and recommendations of this project. My personal challenge is to make these public, and support any agencies or stakeholders interested in pursuing them to bring about improvements locally and nationally. My key challenge is to work with other agencies, government departments and community members, to further develop a youth leadership model for Central Australia, and from there, seek funding and resources to bring such vital programs into play.

I maintain professional affiliation with those I met during my fellowship, and intend to provide all interested with this research report. I also expect to develop further as a professional through informal meetings, formal presentations and so on, whilst disseminating these findings, locally and nationally, as well as through memberships, journals, and attendance at seminars and conferences.

There are several avenues for dissemination of the recommendations that need to be pursued, outlined below:

**Locally – Central Australia and the Northern Territory**
Informal presentations and meetings with youth service providers, including all levels of government, community members, and the Departments of Sport and Recreation, and Education;

Informal presentations and meetings with various stakeholders to discuss results, and further develop a youth leadership program model;

Formal presentation of key conclusions and recommendations at community events, local forums and conferences, including VSA specific, educational and sport and recreation conferences – contribute to program development;

Formal and informal meetings with key youth agencies and representatives from NT youth sector;

Facilitate an exchange between relevant staff in Australia, Canada and the USA;

Facilitate dialogue between government departments, service providers and community members – program development;

Promote informal education and training for local staff;

Seek additional funding to pilot program; and

Media and youth advocacy for the Central Australian region.

Nationally

Dissemination and discussions of key conclusions and recommendations via the Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service website and magazine – distributed locally and throughout Australia, to funding bodies, government departments, members of parliament, policy makers, youth service providers and other relevant stakeholder, etc.;

Informal and formal presentations and meetings with various stakeholders and government departments to discuss results, and further develop a youth leadership program model;

Facilitate dialogue between government departments, service providers and community members – program development; and

Facilitate meetings regarding youth advocacy.

In all discussions and presentations of this research, I have been and will continue to acknowledge the Winston Churchill Trust of Australia and promote the Churchill Fellowship to interested and likely candidates.

References


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