

The Hon Jenny Macklin MP
Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
Minister for Disability Reform
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

24 July 2013

Dear Minister

Feedback on Stronger Futures Aboriginal Workforce Development Strategy

Thank you for inviting us to provide feedback on the *Draft Stronger Futures Aboriginal Workforce Development Strategy* ('the Draft Strategy'). The Atyenhenge-atherre Aboriginal Corporation and Jesuit Social Services are working together to meet the aspirations of Eastern and Central Arrernte people in Central Australia. As part of this work, the Atyenhenge-atherre Aboriginal Corporation has recently received funding for the delivery of Stronger Futures services under a *Communities for Children* facilitating partners' contract.

We welcome the Draft Strategy and hope that it leads to action to build meaningful employment and professional development pathways for Aboriginal people in remote communities. This letter provides feedback that relates specifically to questions 4, 5, 7, 8 of the Draft Strategy. As described in greater detail below, our key proposals to inform the strengthening of the Aboriginal workforce in *Stronger Futures* are:

1. Benchmarks for travel allowances and resources for remote workers be set and realistically budgeted for within the operational models for services. Examples of good practice in resourcing remoter workers to be shared to encourage the spread of such practices.
2. Explore potential for organisations in different remote communities to collaborate in supervision and support for remote Aboriginal workers when they work across communities.
3. Promote the use of local suppliers and services by Stronger Futures providers in their supply chains.
4. Develop and pilot a model for ongoing on the job coaching to be provided to Aboriginal workers in Stronger Futures delivery organisations.
5. Cross cultural training that is provided to Stronger Futures workforces in remote communities be tailored and delivered by the communities where services are located.
6. The Stronger Futures Workforce Development Strategy and the Aboriginal Employment Plans are independently and adequately funded over and beyond funding provided to deliver the Stronger Futures services.

Background

The Atyenhenge-atherre Aboriginal Corporation ('the Corporation') was incorporated in 2010. The corporation is built on family and community relationships and cultural connections of Eastern and Central Arrente people who live in Santa Teresa, Amoonguna and Alice Springs. The focus of the Corporation is building the capacity of this community to reclaim and rebuild its decision making processes that recognize traditions and knowledge, to support the continued development desires, and to develop financially viable businesses.

Jesuit Social Services provides mentoring and governance support to the Aytenhenge-atherre Aboriginal Corporation. This role arose from our wider capacity building, advocacy, and leadership development work in Central Australia which began in 2007. At the heart of our approach is a process of inter-cultural dialogue with First Australians. Our organisation has worked with disadvantaged people and communities for over 36 years. We seek to change policies, practices, ideas and values that perpetuate inequality, prejudice and exclusion.

Our response has been formulated through consultation between representatives of the Aytenhenge-atherre Aboriginal Corporation in Santa Teresa, Jesuit Social Services Central Australia program staff, and the Jesuit Social Services Policy and Advocacy Unit in Melbourne.

Comments on Draft Stronger Futures Aboriginal Workforce Development Strategy

1. Workforces in remote areas

The Draft Strategy must take into account the fact that the Stronger Futures Aboriginal workforce in remote areas is likely to be working over significant distances. The Corporation is in a Stronger Futures Districts that includes the communities of Santa Teresa, Apatula, and Titjikala. These communities are nearly 500 kilometers apart. Recruiting and then supporting and developing a workforce to work across large distances can be challenging. The Draft Strategy, particularly its focus on collaboration, should develop initiatives to deal with these challenges.

One area for further development the strategy should consider is promoting consistency and effective practice in providing travel allowances and other resources for remote workers who work across communities. Benchmarks for travel allowances should be set and realistically budgeted for within the operational model. Examples of good practice in resourcing remote workers should be shared to encourage the spread of such practices.

Another area of focus, should be on sharing of resources and expertise between Stronger Futures providers in supervising and supporting their remote workforces. Often organisations will have different capacities to support and develop workers depending on location, community, and family relationships. Collaboration and sharing of staff supervision and development resources between providers in different communities should be encouraged as a way to provide more intensive support and development for workers in remote communities. More will be said about this below.

2. Providing meaningful work

The Aboriginal jobs commitment in services and programs under Stronger Futures is welcomed. Stronger Futures programs, through the employment of local people can play an important role in remote economic development. The most obvious example is how outsiders come in to build new houses or undertake maintenance, with local people rarely involved. To be a reality, this will require strong links with the Remote Jobs and Communities Program, a fact noted in the Draft Strategy. Of particular importance is the need to ensure local community members are provided with training and skills development necessary to meaningfully meet the skills needs of the local Stronger Futures workforce. At present, there is concern within remote communities that training has been provided without clear pathways into meaningful employment. The Stronger Futures workforce provides a clear employment

opportunity to reverse this pattern, by providing scope to provide meaningful training and professional development in the context of known employment opportunities provided through the Stronger Futures roles.

Stronger Futures can play a role in the economy within remote communities. This can be through direct employment of local people, and also through indirect flow on effects of employment and the purchase of local goods and services. We are aware that often service providers will have arrangements with external suppliers. However, efforts should be made under Stronger Futures to promote use of local suppliers and services. Here, the notion of workforce should extend through the supply chain of Stronger Futures providers. There may be a need to factor this in when calculating the costs of delivering remote services. This approach takes a longer term view to developing the capabilities of communities.

3. Building the skills to do the work well

A major issue, identified in the Draft Strategy, is the need to develop and retain Aboriginal staff within the Stronger Futures Workforce. It is often a challenge to develop staff who deliver public services; funding can be limited for such activities and confined to short periods of time. Our organisations believe that greater effort needs to be directed to building the capabilities of the Stronger Future Aboriginal workforce so that they can progress within their roles and their wider careers. This goes beyond training, which is often limited to one-off or short term exchanges of knowledge. We acknowledge the value placed on formal and informal mentoring in the Aboriginal employment plans to support staff development and retention. We believe, however, that this should be extended to include a model of 'coaching' focusing on ongoing skill development.

Coaching is different to mentoring though the terms are often used interchangeably. Both involve an experienced hand helping a learner to gain confidence in new knowledge and skills that affirm their culture and identify and help them become more effective workers. Coaching is a key skill of a mentor and an effective mentor will have well-developed coaching skills. In the context of different communities, this will include an understanding of different cultural ways of learning. While mentoring is process and relationship oriented, coaching is essentially about skill acquisition and is action and performance oriented. Goals are clearly defined towards achieving identified outcomes. The evidence base around the successful implementation of new programs and the transfer of learning from the training room to practice increasingly includes an emphasis on workplace coaching¹.

By contrast, the experience of training in communities where we work is often of 'fly in fly out' trainers who deliver certificate I or II. There is an absence of ongoing support to build the skills needed for jobs that are actually available or skill levels required to deliver more complex jobs. As a representative of the Corporation said in the consultation for this response, "We don't want people who just train us and go away and leave us. We want people to come back and forth and follow up what we are doing." We strongly advocate that a model for ongoing, on the job coaching be developed and piloted explicitly targeted at delivery of the Stronger Futures roles, to complement the provision of supervision and training of the Aboriginal Workforce within Stronger Futures programs.

4. Cultural competence

Clearly a culturally competent organisations is necessary to support and meet the needs of Aboriginal people within the workforce. We have seen some positive examples of this in Central Australia. Some workplaces have factored in flexibility and rotation arrangements for workers to assist Aboriginal staff manage family and cultural obligations such as sorry business. These arrangements need to be formalised and factored into working arrangements and the capacity of organisations. Community leaders in Santa Teresa who we consulted with believe it is critical to the

¹ Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M. & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231)

authenticity of organisations delivering Stronger Futures programs, both as service deliverers and employers, that they have sufficient understanding and familiarity with local cultures, and appreciation for its value.

The provision of cross-cultural education, tailored and delivered in collaboration with members of the actual community where services are provided, not by outside community or city based enterprises, is essential. This will build the understanding of Stronger Futures workforces of the communities in which they work.

Another major issue is that of communication. English is a second language for large numbers of Arrente people, and communications issues with English can impede their ability to understand expectations, convey wisdom, and develop professionally. Within workplaces, greater investment and support must be provided to develop English communication and literacy skills in members of the workforce from remote communities. There should be similar investment and support for developing local language skills of members of the workforce not from the local community.

5. Resourcing

We fully support the aim of the Stronger Futures Aboriginal Workforce Development Strategy to assist agencies and organisations delivering Stronger Futures services to increase their capacity and build on their current efforts to effectively recruit, develop and retain Aboriginal staff. Our suggestions above, should strengthen the understanding of what is required to provide this assistance. We question, however, how this assistance is itself to be supported and resourced? We note that the *Appendix Two – checklist for Aboriginal Employment Plans* states that “The form and scope of individual plans *and the resources available to implement them will vary significantly according to the size of the agency or provider...*” (italics added). This suggests that responsibility for resourcing the strategy is that of the service provider. This is totally unviable in the case of small providers such as the Corporation which lacks the resources and infrastructure to invest in such workforce development strategies. It is essential therefore that the Stronger Futures Workforce Development Strategy and the Aboriginal Employment Plans are independently and adequately funded over and beyond that funding provided to deliver the Stronger Futures services.

Conclusion

Once again we thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Strategy. We believe that investment of goodwill and resources in workforce development initiatives can have a positive impact on the communities where we work in terms of the quality of services delivered, and in providing the opportunity for local people to participate in service delivery.

We are happy to discuss in more detail any of the issues discussed in this letter. You can contact us on 03 9421 6700 should you wish to discuss.

Yours sincerely



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Atyenhenge-atherre Aboriginal Corporation



Julie Edwards
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