

Program Snapshots – Koorie AFV Program

Mallee District Aboriginal Service (MDAS)

8 October 2021

Centre staff spoke with Greg Sloan and Brody Flowers from [Mallee District Aboriginal Service \(MDAS\)](#), about how their Koorie Adolescent Family Violence Program (Koorie AFV Program) supports young people through cultural engagement. The program follows a 7-week semi-structured schedule that incorporates cultural healing components and the flexibility to respond to the needs of individual participants. A key aim of the program is to empower young people and connect them with additional supports.

Greg and Brody painted a picture for us of the situation in the Mallee District: workers in the Koorie AFV Program have been noticing a trend of young men using violence, whose fathers are coming through MDAS' men's behaviour change programs. Repercussions of this cyclical violence are also seen in the broader community, where Greg described an increase in gang-related crimes, including gun violence.

We discussed what was required to effectively engage and begin work with young people who are using violence. The Koorie AFV Program uses an assertive outreach model to do intake where they meet where the young person is at and sit down in a safe space (e.g., by the river, in a community space, etc.). When having conversations with young people, they also highlighted how important it is to be non-judgemental and use attentive listening with the young person.

Greg describes many of the young people using violence as having lost their connection to culture. At the 2020 Symposium, Greg talked about the importance of cultural healing activities when working with Aboriginal young people. For many young people, the opportunity to re-connect with their culture might start by going out on Country and walking barefoot on the earth, to regain a sense of feeling grounded. For young men, activities might involve painting their journey on clapsticks, and then sitting and talking about this journey with others. Young women have opportunities to do traditional activities together like basket making and weaving. These types of activities are essential to the way the program is run. This approach of focusing on healing and strengthening culture is well-supported by research which finds that violence and trauma can be largely overcome through protective factors such as connection to Country, culture, and family.¹ Having strong connections to culture supports better outcomes overall for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.²

The Koorie AFV Program also offers a mentoring aspect to this program where Elders and young people who have already been through the program come in and work directly with the young people. The mentors refer to the young people as 'brothers and sisters' and emphasise that they are 'our future'. Incorporating community-led interventions such as these ensures that interventions with young people are safe, appropriate, engaging for young people, and that they effectively address the complex, intergenerational traumas within

¹ Onnis et al. 2020; Hunter et al. 2020.

² Renshaw 2019.

these communities.³ Mentors not only build trust and rapport with the young people, but also create opportunities to role model pathways without violence.

The program also has brokerage to support young people engaging with the service, for example, if they need a new phone to stay in contact with supports the program can help get them a new one or if a young person has a particular interest and they stay engaged with the program, they can support them in getting equipment (e.g., if they like cricket, the program can get them a cricket bat).

While the program offers promising interventions for young people using violence, there have certainly been challenges in service delivery since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Greg and Brody spoke about the difficulties in remote service delivery as it is hard to meet with the young person face-to-face and engage with them without be able to use body language. This challenging experience of remote service delivery has been experienced by other practitioners across Australia, with research finding that a lack of access to technology and restricted service capacities made it difficult to build rapport and trust.⁴

The key takeaway from this conversation with Greg and Brody is that finding identity through culture is central to the healing process which supports reduction in the use of violence. Findings from the research suggest that cultural healing programs like the Koorie AFV Program provide young people with an exit from the cycle of violence and allows them to reidentify with cultural values.⁵ As such, MDAS' program provides young people with the opportunity to heal and strengthen their connection to culture which then allows for further therapeutic and case planning goals.

References

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³ Hunter et al. 2020.

⁴ Hunter et al. 2020.

⁵ SNAICC, NFVPLS, & NASILS 2017.