2016 Aboriginal Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Forum – Celebrating Success

Waminda - South Coast Women's Health and Welfare Aboriginal Corporation
Waminda Healing House

Acknowledgement
We would also like to acknowledge Aunty Grace Crossley who has been integral to the planning and implementation of the Healing Journeys; Also former Waminda Supervisor Lesley Roxbee and Richmond PRA for their support.

Introduction
Established in 1984, Waminda is the only organisation in NSW that is owned and run by Aboriginal women to provide our own health and welfare services. Through our innovative Healing House model, Waminda has developed a holistic response to the mental health, spiritual, cultural and physical health needs of our community. The model is designed and led by Aboriginal women under the guidance of our Elders. The women Elders participate in Waminda's Elders groups, healing groups, our Board, our clinical and casework services and our cultural programs. Their voices are powerful in the design of our Healing processes and programs and there is a commitment to pass on cultural knowledge, identity and healing.

Practice innovation
Common issues for many of our clients have been the complex combination of mental health diagnosis, comorbid drug and alcohol use, homelessness, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Many of them have experienced childhood and transgenerational trauma and have conflicting relationships with their Aboriginal identity, family and community which leave them socially isolated and vulnerable; for these women, healing means coming to terms with the harm that has been done to them in a supportive and healing environment, rebuilding relationships with safe and responsible role models in the family and community, and better understanding of the nurturing values of Aboriginal family and culture.
Description of our model

The Healing House program is a culturally safe place for Aboriginal women and women with Aboriginal families to connect with cultural life and practices, with the right to access knowledge, skills and healing in their own way. The Healing House program also provides the opportunity to work in partnership with mainstream services to ensure clients are supported and have access to all the services available to them from a place of understanding of cultural knowledge and practice’s.

The clients identify their needs and Waminda responds holistically by providing empathetic, trauma informed care tailored to their individual needs for their social and emotional wellbeing, to build on their resources and their capacity whilst they are on their healing journey.

Many of the Aboriginal women and women with Aboriginal families that access the Healing House program are living with some or all of the following issues; grief & loss, transgenerational trauma, trauma, colonisation, sexual abuse, substance abuse, domestic and family violence, social isolation, stolen generations, removal of children, Grandparents raising grandchildren, community and juvenile justice issues.

Compounding on this the women are the carers of their families and other community members, this is further compounded by the fact that many of the women have serious health issues such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart and kidney disease to name a few.

What is the Healing House?

The Healing House is a space of being, a place of ‘remembering’, a safe place for revitalisation and reconnection. In this place a woman may be nurtured with the opportunity to gain perspective on where she is at on her healing journey.

There is no judgement in this place. Women are seen for who they are, not what they’ve been through or what they may have done or seen. There is liberation from their many roles in community as mother, sister, daughter, wife, aunty, friend, cousin, Elder and the list goes on.

Women are asked – what do you like to do? What are your interests? What are your hopes and dreams for the future? Most of the women have been in fight or flight mode for so long that they have lost touch with whom they are and live in a constant state of action and reaction. The Healing House provides the space to rebuild their identity, and reconnect with Country, Culture and Community with the support from staff, Elders and peers.

There is no time limit on the women’s Healing Journey as each person’s story is unique to them. When the women first come to the house, they see only their problem, single story. When trust, rapport is built in the relationship the women will then begin telling us their preferred story, their multi stories.
Vision Boards/Care Plans
When women first attend the Healing House they create a vision board which speaks of who they are as a person and what their strengths are and what their hopes and dreams are for the future then a care plan is developed with them to set goals and to identify what the Client would like to achieve by attending the Healing House program. The care plan then supports the social and emotional wellbeing of the Client whilst on their healing journey.

Staff may home visit with Clients or meet with them in a space where they feel comfortable to build rapport and give support in a culturally safe environment. Due to the complex needs of the women there are many different options for the Clients to participate in, including the following:

Recreational Support
The Healing House staffs provide one on one recreational support. Staffs find out about the clients interests which then inform the types of recreational support that follow. Some of the options for recreational support are bush walks, trips to the beach, journey meditations, art therapy, narrative therapy, chakra balancing, henna hands and Australian Bush Flower Essence sessions. All of these options are provided by Waminda Healing House and Wellbeing Staff.

Healing House Women’s Group
The Healing House Women’s Group is a Healing House Client support group who come together weekly to yarn and collaborate on art projects. This group is supported by Healing House Staffs, each other and Women, whom through participating in the group have gained confidence, self-esteem, are reconnected with community and return to the Group as mentors. This Group has created art for the Healing House that speaks of their journey together to healing through coming to the Healing House. This Group’s recovery rate has been very successful with several of the Women entering into the workforce and participating fully within the community.

Carers Support Group
The Carers Support Group runs weekly. One session a fortnight is generally educational which covers a variety of issues that Carers face in their roles and provides strategies and coping skills to add to their caring capacity. The second session of the fortnight is recreational; this consists of an outing, art therapy or sometimes just catching up over lunch and having a yarn.

The Garden Project
Women from the Healing House also participate in the Garden Project which is about learning to be self sufficient and growing herbs and vegetables in the Healing House Garden. This food is then used in the Healing House to gain knowledge about healthy eating, cooking and nutrition, herbal and bush medicines.
Short Courses and Workshops
The Healing House hosts workshops and short courses provided by our partners Anglicare, Catholicare and Aftercare throughout the year. These sessions address the different needs of our Clients as expressed by them in their care plans. When a number of Clients express similar issues we work closely with our partners to provide support and education on the topics that are chosen. These sessions can run from a couple of hours to around six to eight weeks.

Respite
Respite is offered to Women. This can mean for a couple of hours in the day to twelve weeks stay. Some Women choose to come and stay themselves and some like to have other Women from the support groups to come in at the same time. There are two double rooms, one of which is set up as a family room. Whilst the Women stay in the Healing House they are offered to join the Groups that are offered in the House to gain skills to help them cope when they leave the House and go back home. There is also opportunity to have Health Checks, join the ‘Dead or Deadly’ team for Wellbeing Support and have access to Recreational Support.

Healing Room
The Healing Room is a separate room set up for counselling purposes, where women are able to have counselling sessions with a counsellor three days a week. Participants are offered alternate therapies which are there to compliment their medical/clinical therapies rather than to replace them. Some of the therapies on offer are energy healing/reiki, chakra balancing, journey meditation, narrative therapy, sacred art, ear candling, natural herbal/bush remedies and Australian Bush Flower Essence.

The Cultural Healing Programs
Cultural healing programs are a key to the innovative and culturally-specific delivery model. These programs build community connections and cultural identity as part of the strategy to address intergenerational trauma.

Cultural Women’s Program
Provides support for Aboriginal women in the Shoalhaven to meet together, have yarning circles, to provide community leadership, to heal together, and to celebrate and transmit culture at annual women’s gatherings. Through these women’s gatherings a South East Aboriginal Women’s Council is forming.

Young Women’s cultural Program
Provides a fortnightly group program and outreach cultural activities and camps with support and education by women and Elders to transmit cultural education and provide peer and community support. The program includes activities such as: basket-weaving, pipping, fishing, traditional food gathering, making of bush medicines and natural beauty products, language, dance classes, and learning the protocols of yarning in Circle.
Healing on Country
Healing on Country occurs when we take Elders and respected community healers to visit sites of local significance, such as traditional spirit places and birthing places with younger women, allowing for healing of trauma gently in the bush, at freshwater and at saltwater. Elders share songs, stories, language, yarning and ceremony associated with that place. This allows for natural and traditional healing to occur and a positive reconnection with land, family and culture. This occurs through day trips and camps.

Art as Healing
Art as healing is about art with intention, through the process of creating the piece of art, the participant’s story is reflected back to them and insights are gained. This includes visual arts such as painting, carving, weaving, as well as dance, song, clap sticks. It includes both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal arts allowing for the expression of trauma particularly for those who are less verbal, builds trust and relationships with workers and Elders, and develops pride in identity, and achievements. This occurs through group and individual healing programs as well as at camps.

Cultural Exchange Program
This involves cultural exchanges between Shoalhaven Aboriginal women and other Aboriginal communities in Australia (and eventually internationally). It allows for the exchange of song, dance, ceremony, Inma and for spiritual healing by traditional healers (eg Ngankari from desert communities). During the exchanges the women share their practices with other women from different communities with different Cultural practices by doing this the women affirm their Cultural knowledge and identity. This in turn raises self-esteem, pride and a sense of connection and belonging.

Yarning circles
Topics for yarning circles are chosen and facilitated by the participants. Yarning circles provide an opportunity for the women’s voices to be heard, on issues that directly affect them in a culturally safe place.

Healing Journeys
The Healing Journeys came about after conversations with Aunty Grace Crossley and talking about our other Cultural programs. The idea was to reconnect with the songlines and water paths following them and connecting with the stories of the places and other women in other communities. She spoke of the songlines that connect the whole of our country and in fact the whole earth. The Healing Journeys became about bringing people out of separation and isolation by Elders accompanying women on journeys along the South Coast songlines and providing education about traditional sites of significance, and family and community links. During a conversation with Karina Lindsey and Helen Backhouse from Richmond PRA in Nowra, they spoke about joining with us and bringing along the women that they were working with. The added support meant that our first ‘Healing Journey’ could begin.
Findings and outcomes
Evaluation of the Healing House has shown it effectively attracts and retains the target group. Outcomes include reduced hospitalisations, reduced mental health crisis, reduced stress on carers, children returned from foster care, housing, employment, and successful completion of parole.

More than these findings and outcomes is the testament to the incredible resilience, generosity of spirit and capacity to love and grow of the women that share their Healing Journeys with us.

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