

Connecting with Koori culture

A Koori-specific AOD pilot program – developed by Caraniche and commissioned by Justice Health – reveals rich learning and reconnection for Aboriginal offenders.

Designed to address the lack of culturally appropriate criminogenic AOD programs available to Indigenous offenders in Victorian prisons, the Koori AOD program begins with a Welcome to country performed to formally acknowledge the commencement of the group and welcome the group members and facilitators onto the lands of the local Dja Dja Wurrung people.

"This is a unique group AOD program because it focuses primarily on Koori and indigenous culture," says the pilot program's co-facilitator and Caraniche Psychologist, Jayson Rom.

Over three months, Jayson and Indigenous Elder Aunty Trudy Cooper facilitated the 44-hour pilot program twice a week at Loddon Prison Precinct, exploring the role of culture in the lives of Indigenous offenders. For many of the participants, this is new territory or an opportunity to reconnect with their cultural roots.

The participants were Indigenous men aged between 21 and 45. Aunty Trudy says the Koori Program is about "developing conversations they have never had the opportunity to have before."

"One of the biggest surprises for me was that the men were very disconnected from culture," she says. "They know they're Aboriginal but they don't know what that means. They have to fit in with mainstream but they've lost their culture too."

The Koori AOD program was commissioned by Justice Health in 2015 and developed by Caraniche in consultation with the Koori Program Advisory Board and with cultural supervision from Aboriginal Consultant, Nicole Cassar.

Grounded in a set of cultural principles, the program design was informed by national guidelines like the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Mental Health and Social and emotional Wellbeing (2004-2009).

The program content is also underpinned by culturally relevant theories of offence-specific rehabilitation and behaviour change, as well as incorporating cultural elements of psychological wellbeing and spirituality.

"The Koori AOD program is an opportunity for the men to share their own stories around culture. They are then more able to reflect on how drugs and alcohol have impacted their connection to culture," says Jayson.

Opposite page: This painting was produced by the men participating in Pilot 1 of the Koori Program, at Loddon Prison Precinct in 2016. Participants have kinship ties to various Aboriginal communities, including the Yorta Yorta, Gunaikurnai, Yawuru and Quandamooka People. Caraniche would like to acknowledge the artist of this work, Jordan Secombe, who has granted permission for it to be published by Caraniche.





Caraniche would like to acknowledge the artist of this work, Sheldon Blunt, who has granted permission for it to be published by Caraniche.

One participant initially said he was only doing the program so he could be granted parole. At first, he mocked the cultural activities and was often late to sessions; but later, he began attending sessions on time and engaging more openly in group activities and conversation. He has since approached Caraniche wanting to engage in individual counselling.

"One of the things I brought up quite often with the group," says Aunty Trudy, "is that they will say 'drugs are part of our culture' and I quietly remind them that it's an introduced thing in our culture. That's not who we are... that usually hits them a bit."

According to Aunty Trudy, one of the challenges working with Aboriginal people is that Australia has "a long way to go towards reconciliation" and acknowledging its history – something that she sees impacting younger Indigenous people.

"If you go back to your grandparents', they could have been raised up on a mission," she explains. "Our younger generation may pick up on how that's impacted certain family members, but they don't know how to manage the past."

The pilot program was delivered to only a small group of men. "Some of them didn't like each other when they started," says Aunty Trudy, "but they developed a friendship. They look after each other now, in there as well as outside of prison."

Mid-way through the program, a local Aboriginal man performed a smoking ceremony.

"A lot of our program is about healing, so the smoke from the ancestors is healing for us," she explains. "We asked all the aboriginal offenders to join us, whether they were in the program or not."

"I now have offenders asking me cultural questions when I go into prison to do an acknowledgement to country," says Aunty Trudy. "They're giving me their interpretation of totems, rainbow serpents and smoking ceremonies."

Since the pilot, Caraniche has established an Aboriginal Reference Group and are developing clinical guidelines for staff when working with Indigenous people. The program has ongoing support from the Department of Justice and Regulation and is set to roll out more widely in the coming years.

Throughout the program, participants "developed a connection to culture and each other," says Jayson.

For Aunty Trudy, the program encouraged participants to connect with their culture for their whole life. "We talk about loss, grief and family. We encourage them to make different decisions when they get out."

"Hopefully they feel like they've got a few more choices."

“The Koori program is an opportunity for the men to share their own stories around culture.”

– Jayson Rom, Koori Program Co-facilitator and Caraniche Psychologist.