

September 7, 2021

Employment Branch,
National Indigenous Australians Agency
C/- ISEP@niaa.gov.au

RE: Submission in response to Indigenous skills, engagement and employment program (ISEP) discussion paper

Dear Sir/Madam,

In 2016 in response to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiries, the Latrobe Valley was designated a Health Innovation Zone by the Victorian government to support communities in Latrobe to improve their health and wellbeing. The Zone gives voice to community aspirations in the planning and delivery of better health and wellbeing outcomes, and where a process of co-design with individuals and organisations is actively encouraged.

The Latrobe Health Advocate was appointed by the Victorian Minister for Health in May 2018, to offer independent advice on behalf of Latrobe communities to improve health and wellbeing service systems in Latrobe City. The role provides community-wide leadership for the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone while maintaining a focus on strategic outcomes and systemic change.

Since commencing in the role, I have sought to understand how people in specific communities can best have their voices heard and what makes engagement meaningful for them. The aim of these conversations is to:

- Design, develop and implement ways of engaging that support specific communities to participate more fully in systemic change to improve health and wellbeing.
- Consider that the purpose of engagement and the engagement itself may be different for different cohorts
- Focus on community conversations and engagement questions that are specific to the selected cohorts and update the engagement model to reflect communities' experiences and engagement preferences.
- Analyse community voice to determine systemic issues for service innovation and improvements.
- Advocate to governments, agencies, service providers, businesses, industry, community members and Latrobe Health Assembly.

In 2020 I met with individuals and groups from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities in Latrobe and asked them;

- What is important to you, not just in terms of health but more broadly?
- What are your health and wellbeing challenges, opportunities and aspirations?
- Having taken part in community engagement, what did you like and not like about that experience?

During COVID-19 restrictions I met with people remotely; with individuals either by video or telephone and where appropriate talked with groups of people via video or teleconferencing. Where it was possible, I met with people face to face in places where they felt comfortable and safe. The insights and themes of those conversations are contained in my report, *Engagement Inspiration from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Latrobe*. A copy is attached for your information and can also be accessed on the following website:

<https://www.lhadvocate.vic.gov.au/publication/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people-engagement-report/>

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The insights are particularly relevant to the questions regarding region-focused and local community approaches. My office learned a great deal about engagement from the communities we heard from, and I encourage you to consider these and other insights from the report as you consider how the ISEP can be delivered in Latrobe. In particular I urge you to be mindful of the context in which people live their lives and the significant stress and mental suffering that is currently being experienced by communities as they grapple with the ramifications of the response to COVID-19.

- **Be there, be yourself and show that you care**
 - We heard that it takes time for things to change, and that people can be wary of other's intentions. People told us that they want to be able to look us in the eye and read our faces. Our actions had to match our words.
- **Show leadership and facilitate a journey towards self-determination**
 - The people we spoke with talked about the importance of leadership and facilitation. This helped us to clarify our role in helping Aboriginal communities in Latrobe. We were encouraged to have the know-how and judgement to facilitate conversations to bring people out and to step back at the right time to empower others.
- **Walk alongside people in their homes, streets, and neighbourhoods**
 - Reaching out to people in places where they spend their time, demonstrates a greater degree of care and interest. With the right approach it can be a powerful way to build relationships and understand the context in which people live their lives.
- **Different ways for different Koori voices**
 - There is no single way to engage with all Aboriginal people in Latrobe. We were encouraged to think about ways to make planned engagement activities such as town meetings and forums, safe and culturally appropriate by using Koori flags, colours, and drawings. There was a common suggestion from the Aboriginal people that we spoke with that we don't use formal surveys and paperwork.
- **Give space and don't chase**
 - In reaching out to people inviting them to share their stories with us, we learned that it was better to be informal and flexible in our approach. When we heard from Aboriginal People about our approach, we received feedback about the importance of knowing when to step back if someone was not ready to engage and knowing when to be there when someone may need more help.
- **Working together to achieve equity**
 - Aboriginal people in Latrobe shared a message with us that the solutions to the long-term problems that have impacted their families can be determined at a local level and do not need to be prescribed by governments. We heard about positive steps forward and a desire for more people to work together to address all the social determinants of health for Aboriginal people in Latrobe.
- **A Latrobe Valley that has no 'sides'**
 - People talked to us about living in a black and white world. We heard stories about families and friendships that are free from assumptions and built on a mutual respect for different cultures. We heard about the ongoing impacts and challenges that come with assumptions that can be hard to wipe off.

People talked to us about how their Aboriginality travels with them through life and comes into every aspect of what they do day-to-day. At school, at work, playing sport, at the shopping centre, they are always Aboriginal. This may seem obvious however, when we started to think about how we all adjust our thinking and our behaviours depending on the setting we are in, we realised the constant struggle that some Aboriginal people may feel as they navigate their way through a world that may not always be understanding or inclusive of their culture and their history.

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Following our engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Latrobe my office posed a series of questions for decision makers. These same questions can be asked of governments as they reflect on the capacity of the system to change and to develop ways of working that improve the outcomes for communities across Victoria.

- Identify change agents in your organisation, how can you support them to undertake their role?
- What can you do to enable a whole-of-organisation approach to cultural awareness and inclusion to prevent the responsibility falling onto the shoulders of individuals?
- How do you develop partnerships with Aboriginal organisations and what can you do to strengthen these?
- How do you encourage flexibility in your processes and services?

A service developed from the ground up has the potential to hear from communities about what they need and how those needs can be effectively met. Engagement of this type needs to be community centred rather than agency centred if it is to achieve that goal. I commend you for taking the time to listen to communities who will respond to your invitation to participate and encourage you to consider the expertise in the community; people with lived experience, who may not be associated with organisations, and to seek out the advice of those whose lives will be touched by this program.

Should you require any further information or if you have any questions regarding our Engagement Model and the Engagement Inspiration report attached, please contact my office on 1800 319 255 or via email at info@lhadvocate.vic.gov.au

Regards,



Latrobe Health Advocate