

The story of establishing a mental health service in a remote Aboriginal community

A partnership between Sunrise Health and
Neami National

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This document tells the story of Neami National and Sunrise Health working together to establish a mental health support service in Ngukurr—a remote Aboriginal Community in the Northern Territory. It provides a background to the project and the partnership between Neami and Sunrise and gives details on what happened during the project and the challenges that the team faced. This partnership took place in 2014.

About Neami National

Neami National is a community mental health service supporting people living with mental illness to improve their health, live independently and pursue a life based on their own strengths, values and goals. Neami provides services in around 50 diverse communities in Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, ranging from the inner-city and suburbs to regional and remote areas.

About Sunrise Health

The Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation's main purpose is to improve the health and wellbeing of the people in the region east of Katherine in the Northern Territory, using a holistic approach that includes a high standard of medical care, the promotion of social justice and the overcoming of the sickness that affects so many people in the region. This is done through health clinics and health education, mixing together traditional Indigenous culture and mainstream medicine.

How did the project come about?

Sunrise approached Neami to support it to establish and deliver the Personal Helpers and Mentors (PHaMs) service in Ngukurr. The Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS) provides funding to community organisations to deliver its PHaMs service around Australia. PHaMs services¹:

- assist people aged 16 years and over whose ability to manage their daily activities and to live independently in the community is impacted because of a severe mental illness;
- aim to provide increased opportunities for recovery for people whose lives are severely affected by mental illness; and
- take a strengths-based, recovery approach.

PHaMs service provides increased opportunities for recovery for people whose lives are severely affected by mental illness, by helping them to overcome social isolation and increase their connections to the community. PHaMs workers provide practical assistance to people with severe mental illness to help them achieve their personal goals, develop better relationships with family and friends, and manage their everyday tasks. One-to-one and ongoing support ensures the individual needs of the PHaMs participants can be addressed. They are assisted to access services and participate economically and socially in the community, increasing their opportunities for recovery.

In 2013, DSS was making funds available to establish PHaMs services in remote communities. Sunrise was successful in gaining funding from DSS to establish the service in Ngukurr, NT. Up until this point, there was no PHaMs service in Ngukurr.

Sunrise needed to establish the service in a short amount of time. However, it had not delivered a PHaMs service previously so it was looking for a partnership with an organisation that had experience in delivering PHaMs services. As a result, Sunrise approached Neami to provide support and mentoring for its staff to establish and deliver the PHaMs service in Ngukurr.

¹ From the Department of Social Services website<<https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/mental-health/programs-services/personal-helpers-and-mentors-phams>>

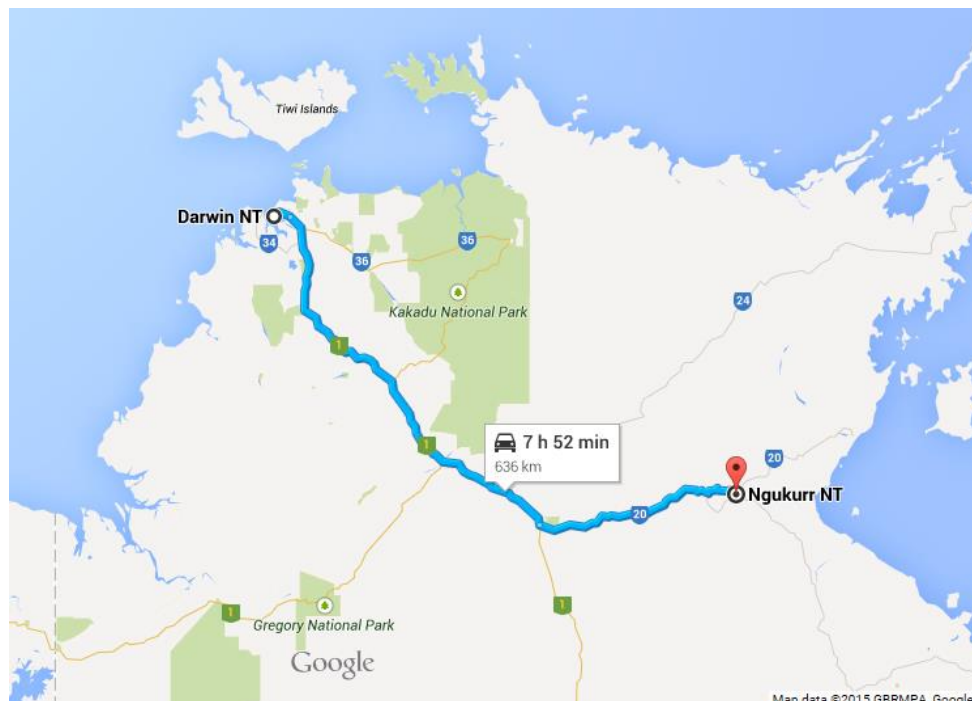
Ngukurr

Ngukurr is an Aboriginal Community alongside the Roper River in south-east Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory.² It is around three hours by car from Katherine and has around 1,000 residents.³ It is a closed community so a permit is required to visit. There are 7 language groups in the community but the universal language is Kriol⁴.

Ngukurr has extreme weather. For substantial parts of the year, Ngukurr can be cut off to vehicle access because of flooding. In other times, it can be a hot place. For example, the mean maximum temperature in the hottest month (November) can be as high as 39 degrees Celsius.⁵ Just to compare, Sydney for example, during its hottest month (January), has a mean maximum temperature of 26 degrees Celsius.⁶

There is a health clinic, school, store, arts centre, motel, airstrip, government office and a police station at Ngukurr⁷. Although there is a health centre, there are few specialist mental health services in the community. Urapunga and Hodgson Downs are nearby homeland communities.

Location of Ngukurr



From Google Maps

² Ngukurr / Urapunga Community Profile Katherine East Region Remote Area Health Corps 2009

³ About Ngukurr, Roper Gulf Regional Council <<http://ropergulf.nt.gov.au/our-communities/ngukurr/>>

⁴ Ngukurr / Urapunga Community Profile Katherine East Region Remote Area Health Corps 2009

⁵ Bureau of Meteorology <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/averages/tables/cw_014609.shtml>

⁶ Bureau of Meteorology <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/averages/tables/cw_066062.shtml>

⁷ About Ngukurr, Roper Gulf Regional Council <<http://ropergulf.nt.gov.au/our-communities/ngukurr/>>

Satellite photo of Ngukurr



From Google Maps

Developing relationships

This project was the first time Sunrise and Neami have worked together. Sunrise approached Neami because of the experience Neami had of delivering PHaMs throughout Australia.

As part of the partnership, Neami agreed to train, coach, mentor and support Sunrise staff in the Collaborative Recovery Model and apply it in a culturally appropriate way to deliver PHaMs outreach services to support the community in Ngukurr.

Neami uses the Collaborative Recovery Model to underpin the delivery of its support services. The Collaborative Recovery Model was developed over a number of years at the University of Wollongong and incorporates evidence of practices that have previously assisted people living with enduring mental illness. It is influenced by positive psychology, psychosocial rehabilitation principles, motivational interviewing and the stages of change model.

Neami together with Sunrise selected two Neami support workers to travel to the Northern Territory and support Sunrise staff. Due to the remote location and the difficulties in accommodation, the Neami staff worked in the Northern Territory for one week out of every month for 9 months from March to November 2014. The two staff members had extensive experience in delivering support services within the Collaborative Recovery Model. There was strong engagement and support of the senior management at Neami with the Neami CEO, Arthur Papakotsias, and other senior managers visiting Ngukurr, prior to the two Neami support staff started their role.

A group of the project staff



From left to right: Cody (Neami), Geoff (Sunrise), Jade (Neami)

Both organisations entered the partnership holding mutual respect for each other. Even though Neami's role in the project was to be coaches and mentors, Neami viewed the project just as much a learning experience for Neami as it would be for Sunrise. This mutual respect for each other was fundamental in building a trusting relationship. Neami was sensitive of not imposing its way of doing things but adapting to the needs of the Sunrise staff and the local community. Having mutual respect meant there was equality in the partnership.

The partnership was largely driven by Sunrise. Even though Neami was brought in to provide mentoring, it was Sunrise which determined the form of the mentoring. The mentoring and support Neami provided was driven by what Sunrise staff wanted and needed. This organic and flexible way the relationship developed was fundamental to its success. Applying rigid tasks and timelines would not have suited the location, the culture and the challenges of the project. It would also have hindered developing close working relationships between the staff and the community.

Although Neami had made preparations and some of the Neami staff had experience working in a remote Aboriginal community, the staff were still going into an unknown and unusual situation for them and the organisation. As such, when recruiting the staff, Neami was looking for staff that were open and flexible. This open flexible nature was a key in ensuring the staff were able to develop close working relationships, and ultimately friendships, with each other.

The Sunrise staff were themselves generous, open and flexible. For many, establishing the PHaMs service in Ngukurr was the first time they were working on providing mental health support service. They were also working with new people coming into their community. The Sunrise staff were able to develop relationships with Neami staff where they gained the knowledge and confidence to deliver support in their community.

It is a testament to both organisation and staff that they were able to form a partnership working across different cultures and in a remote challenging environment. One example that symbolises the close relationship that developed between the workers is that during their time in the community Neami workers were given 'skin' names. These are part of the kinship system in Aboriginal societies—a way to divide society into named categories and a way for people to interact with each other, without which makes it more difficult to interact.⁸ Sunrise staff said that the Neami staff having skin names helped with integrating with the community. Neami staff were also given Sunrise t-shirts to wear which helped to decrease suspicion within the community. It was also imperative that the team were connected to a key community person who assisted with taking away suspicion within the community as well as to connect with community members and possible future consumers.

A group of Sunrise and Neami staff members



⁸ Central Land Council <<http://www.clc.org.au/articles/info/aboriginal-kinship>>

Day-to-day work

The role of Neami was to work with the Sunrise staff in establishing and delivering a PHaMs service in Ngukurr. It included providing coaching, mentoring and support to the Sunrise staff. As part of this, the project team carried out a variety of activities.

The day-to-day work for the project team varied greatly. Each visit by the Neami team to Ngukurr included different activities, so no two visits were alike. However, team building was an important aspect of all visits.

Initial activities of the project team were a mixture of training, coaching and mentoring. The team worked to identify strengths in self, in the team and in the community. The team also worked on building confidence and sharing cultures. For example the team would brainstorm by the billabong with a billy of tea. Fishing together and yarning together also played important roles in developing relationships and learning from each other. In addition, the team looked at case management planning and networking within the community. The Neami team mentored and provided coaching to the Sunrise team on identifying ways to do this.

The training that the Neami staff provided to the Sunrise staff was centred on recovery-oriented practice and on meeting the specific needs and challenges of the community. These training included:

- Using the Collaborative Recovery Model
- Alcohol and/or Drug use
- Motivational interviewing
- Mental health diagnosis
- Risk assessments

The aim of these training activities was to provide the staff with the basic knowledge around providing outreach support. This was especially important as the new Sunrise staff had no previous experience of working in a mental health support role as the project employed community members as support staff. When providing information and coaching to Sunrise staff, the different literacy levels of staff needed to be taken into account.

The training provided one avenue for team building and empowering the Sunrise staff. For example, as part of learning about the use of the Collaborative Recovery Model, staff completed 'Good Life Albums' which is included in the Model to understand and visualise what the person would like for their future. In another activity, the staff completed—as most consumers would—Active Health Plans, to explore what might evoke stress and identify sources of support. These types of activities not only provided knowledge for staff on ways to provide support to consumers but also to better understand themselves and each other.

Providing support to consumers

From the early months of the project, the Sunrise team, along with the Neami staff provided outreach mental health support to consumers in the community.

Relationship building between the staff and consumers was the main focus of the visits. Quite often the support visits included activities designed to create bonds between the workers and consumers that were culturally appropriate. These activities included going on fishing trips to the nearby river or going to find bush tucker or bush medicine. One aim of these activities was to support the consumers to reconnect with parts of their culture as their culture would play a major role in their recovery.

Most of the support activities were done as a group. There would be Sunrise and Neami staff working together with a group of consumers. The staff, when appropriate, also took the family and friends of the consumer in the activities as way to create greater bonds between the staff and consumer as the families are central to the life of the people in the community.

It could take a long time for staff and consumers to build a connection. The initial visits were often spent on getting to know each other.

Fishing along the Roper River



Apart from outreach support, the staff also worked on promoting the service as well. For example, they set up a stall in a local festival to promote the Sunrise Health service and provide information on mental and physical health and maintain wellbeing. They provided information on smoking cessation, which is a major health issue for the community.

Sunrise Health stall in a local festival



When the project started, there was no office space that was available for staff to work from. However, in August 2014, the Wellness Centre at Ngukurr was opened and the staff started to work from here. This not only provided a base for staff but also a location for locals to drop in and meet if they needed support. The Centre has been a success as staff have reported that there is a flow of people visiting the Centre daily to seek support.

Wellness Centre at Ngukurr



Challenges of working a remote outback location

Working in a remote outback location like Ngukurr presented the team with challenges. It took the Neami team around two days to travel from their homes to Ngukurr every month. The travel included flying from Melbourne / Sydney to Darwin and driving from Darwin to Katherine and then onto Ngukurr. The drive from Katherine to Ngukurr is around 4 hours which the teams had to travel frequently during their visits. The long distances meant that the team often worked very long and tiring days.

These long days often took place in extreme weather. These ranged from an oppressive heat to major floods. In the first month of the project, Ngukurr was cut off from Katherine by major flooding which meant that the team could not visit Ngukurr for that visit.

Living and working in a remote location and being cut-off on occasion from other areas also gave some of the staff a sense of isolation that one might not have in a metropolitan area. While being in a remote location could be relaxing for some—getting away from the hustle of a big city—for extended periods it could be stressful. This sense of isolation combined with working long hours and driving extensively had been stressful for staff. Compounding the stress was a lack of access to some self-care activities like exercising in gyms or lap swimming. However, these challenges may also have assisted staff to form closer relationships with each other. For example, staff said they told personal stories to each other on their long drives.

Because Ngukurr is in such a remote location, there is lack of infrastructure for the staff and community. There is a lack of office space and accommodation for visitors into the community. The lack of office space—at least initially before the Wellness Centre opened—made it challenging for all project staff to provide support services. And the lack of accommodation made it challenging for the visiting Neami staff to base themselves during their visit. Sometimes accommodation was 40km away from Ngukurr. There was also a shortage of cars and office equipment which added to the challenges around infrastructure. The remote location also meant that there was a lack of extra training for staff or it took a long time to provide the extra training.

Additionally, everyone in Ngukurr has to pay much more for basic life essentials like food, which can cost up to 50% more on average than in a metropolitan area.

The Sunrise staff were drawn from the community which gave the project a sense of local ownership. However, this also provided some challenges. Ngukurr is a small community which meant that there were challenges for staff working within the community because of they could know the consumers outside of the support work. Also, some skin relationships prevented people from working together.

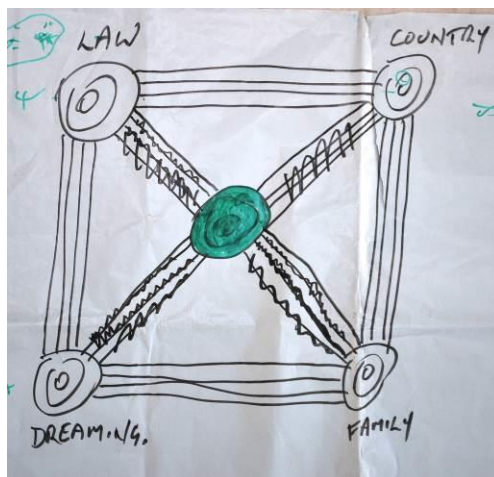
Working in a culturally diverse place

Ngukurr, apart from being in a remote outback location, is also a culturally diverse place. This presented project staff with both challenges and rewarding experiences for learning and growth. Not only did staff work across the indigenous / non-indigenous cultural differences, but there is diversity within the indigenous culture in the area as well. For example, there are 7 different language and 50 family groups in the community.

Although the Neami staff had some experience working in an Aboriginal community previously, this project was nonetheless a different learning experience for them and the organisation as a whole. The staff were able to learn more about each other's cultures and gain a greater appreciation.

Land (or country) holds a unique place for the Aboriginal community. As the Neami staff learnt that the connection the community has with the land is so deep that for example, leaving the place means losing part of one's self. As some of the Sunrise staff explained, there are four areas that support the person (or spirit) – country, law, dreaming and family. Breaking down of any one area results in the person 'dying'. Neami staff said that they gained a deeper appreciation of the land and bush setting as a result of working in the community.

Four areas that support spirit



The four areas that support the person (centre) are law, country, dreaming and family.

An Aboriginal cultural concept that the Neami staff learnt about was the 'Tree of Life'. The roots of the tree are the people and events that ground the person like country, law, dreaming, family, etc. The ground is the circumstances and environment that surround the person. The trunk represents the strengths of the person. The fruit are the things to remember and the leaves are the people worth remembering. Branches are the horizons—"what I want to do", wishes. The person can "compost" the thing or people that may have hurt or are not worth remembering to turn them to valuables.

Challenges facing the Aboriginal community

Like many remote Aboriginal communities in Australia, in addition to challenges faced in living and working in a remote location, the people of Ngukurr face other severe challenges.

There is a lack of services in the community compared with a larger town. There are not many specialist services, especially specialist mental health support services. However, some community service programs are starting through Sunrise Health, for example Men's Health Program.

This lack of services, in part, plays a role in the reduced wellbeing of the people in the community. Many people live in poor and overcrowded housing and are often hungry due to lack of money. The suicide rate is very high. Alcohol abuse is also substantial. These challenges are compounded by the impact of trauma on the people and the community

However, despite these challenges the staff noted that there is still a sense of warmth in the community where people look out for each other. For example, although the community may not have the resources to improve their housing, they are concentrating on the relationships they have with each other and gaining an understanding their sense of self and identity.

Project staff



Achievements

The partnership between Neami and Sunrise created a model for establishing a PHaMs service in other communities, where the local knowledge of Sunrise was combined with the service delivery experience of Neami. This sort of partnership could be replicated in other communities that require similar support services. For those that were involved in the project, they were able to learn about each other cultures and developed friendships with each other that are still continuing.

This service has a sense of community ownership and pride as it is staffed by locals. Sunrise and Neami empowered the locals through training and support to provide support to their community.

Although the involvement of Neami staff ended, Sunrise is continuing to provide support in Ngukurr. Dozens of people in the community visit the Wellness Centre daily and the Sunrise team provide outreach support to community members.