

Building authentic relationships

About this series

This information sheet is designed to help non-Aboriginal organisations find better ways to deliver effective and relevant services to Aboriginal people who are experiencing intergenerational poverty and homelessness. It is part of a series capturing key learning and ideas from the award-winning Wongee Mia action learning project, in Western Australia.

Building relationships with the neighbours

Reports of noise, neighbour disputes and complaints can be a challenge for any tenancy. Loud voices, large numbers of visitors staying overnight and property damage, can raise strong feelings and concerns, particularly with non-Aboriginal neighbours, who may not understand behaviours and family relationships. It often results in complaints. In our work with Robbie, we learnt that this tension could be reversed by building authentic relationships with neighbours that help to build a community support network around Robbie. The Wongee Mia team focused on conversations with Robbie's neighbours, to help them understand his experience of homelessness, build empathy and work with the project to support him. This shifted the neighbours' attitude, from challenging and antagonising Robbie, to being part of his informal support. The team established a 'just a phone-call away' relationship, so Robbie's neighbours could reach out to staff if they had any concerns, or connect with Robbie's Elders so they could work

together to support him. A neighbour, who previously complained about Robbie to the Department of Communities, now contacts the project or the Elders for help, and usually out of concern for Robbie's welfare. Robbie is also protective of his neighbour when family members visit.

Building relationships with other organisations

The Wongee Mia project was established in response to the large number of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness. The team quickly learnt that more support services would be required and that they needed to work closely and learn from successful Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and to ensure this support is culturally safe. The team has built trusted working relationships, particularly with Noongar Mia Mia and Nyoongar Outreach, joining Noongar Outreach on evening patrols and working closely with Noongar Mia Mia to secure housing that would be managed through Noongar Mia Mia's Indigenous housing standards. This has significantly expanded the support network available to Robbie and his family.


Building relationships with the family

To build authentic relationships, you need to support what is important to people. The Wongee Mia family has experienced significant grief and loss. This has an enormous impact on family members and their capacity to

engage in support activities, yarning sessions or to follow through on plans. The manner in which the Wongee Mia team supports the family through trauma, demonstrating its willingness to 'walk-the-talk' and build authentic relationships. In one example, the project covered the costs of organising and arranging elements of a funeral for a well-loved family member. This helped establish deeper trusting relationships with the family, particularly senior family members. Until this time, Elders had been quite distrustful of mainstream homelessness and support services. By helping fund the funeral, and working on the day to help with food, project workers made a meaningful statement of commitment and respect towards the family. In turn, the family became more actively involved in supporting the project by participating in yarning and working closely with the Wongee Mia staff. The project has since helped with other funerals and requests for assistance, looking for ways to say "yes" rather than declining requests that seem outside the usual scope of the work.

Trust and respect

At the heart of this learning is an acknowledgement of the importance of trust and respect as the bedrock of authentic relationships. This is demonstrated through the many and varied experiences described in these information sheets, which hinge on a deep-seated respect and commitment to learning local culture, working through Wongee Mia family Elders and respecting the families' choices.



The project is committed to ensuring that Robbie and his family remain at the centre of all interactions. The project's interconnected caseload facilitates this commitment, recognising his whole family and the people and events that impact them. Workers and managers are open to sharing something of themselves, so interactions contribute to a genuine two-way relationship. This approach extends to project workers authentically engaging with neighbours, Elders and other Aboriginal-controlled organisations to ensure they trust in Wongee Mia and believe in its intentions.

Crucially, trust and respect underpin the way the project deals with conflict. There have been a few occasions where mistakes or differences have arisen. These are taken very seriously and approached with an emphasis on listening and a willingness to be vulnerable, to acknowledge responsibility, and respect other people's emotions and experiences. Conflict is not seen as a situation that needs to be controlled, but as an opportunity to learn. Staff and managers openly share their emotions and a deep empathy for the lived experience of family and elders is crucial for earning their trust and respect.

Key questions for your own work:

- **Can you reach out to neighbours and help build connections with them both as a worker and with the people you are supporting?**
- **What is the most important thing right now for the person you are trying to support and how can you help them with it?**