

Staffing and recruitment

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.

Importance of staffing

Any project succeeds or fails because of the quality and commitment of its staff. In a project like Wongee Mia, staff performance is heavily based on relationships and trust. The trust of the family, and Aboriginal communities, is strongly linked to their faith in individual workers, rather than the organisation that employs them.

First nations staff

To date, both Wongee Mia staff have been of Maori descent (Tanui/Ngapuhi and Ngapuhi). They have brought their own knowledge of Indigenous practices and cultural protocols. Family Elders have responded by sharing their own culture which has helped the team engage more readily with local Noongar cultural practices.

“Being able to incorporate ‘Whakawhanaungatanga’ (respectful relationships) into my daily practice means establishing links, making connections and relating to the people I meet by identifying, in culturally appropriate ways, the whakapapa linkages, past heritages, points of engagement, or other relationships. Working with “our mob” has helped me gain respect and understanding of the cultural similarities we share, which helps guide me in the way I work with family members to achieve their goals. ‘Whakawhanaungatanga’ is about working together as a family when things are falling apart. It is about being there for each other, as one, to ensure everyone is walking side by side and not behind each other.”

Wongee Mia worker

As the project begins its next round of recruiting, workers have been talking to family members and Elders to ensure their preferences to inform recruitment decision. Current feedback is that the family would like a mix of staff, so the project is taking the opportunity to list one position as a 50D role (ie specifically for an Aboriginal staff member) while the other will be open with Aboriginal people encouraged to apply.

“The difference with being of Maori decent and working in this role is that I can work outside the square. I am not directly connected to the family, so nothing becomes personal. Some Aboriginal groups prefer not to work with their own people because their business will be circulated all over Perth. On the other hand, some prefer to work with their family members, so they do not need to tell their story to others. I understand this because Maori are family-orientated too. We do everything as a family/extended family, eg. cooking, eating, celebrations and working. This is why some prefer to work with other nationalities or non-related workers.”

Wongee Mia worker

In a joint action learning session with Aboriginal-run housing provider, Noongar Mia Mia, the team discussed the challenges Aboriginal staff and organisation face when they are expected to work with their own and maintain mainstream professional boundaries.

“When working with my own mob back home, I am a great believer that you need to work with the whole family, not just the individual. If a family member is referred to me, I will try to hand them on to someone else, however there are times it cannot be helped as we as Maori are connected to each other somewhere in our lineage. Therefore, if I end up with a family member to support, I lay all the cards on the table and ensure they understand that our relationship is professional, and it needs to stay that way.”

Wongee Mia worker

Elders involved in recruitment

When bringing on a second staff member, the project invited a family Elder to sit on the interview panel. This changed the nature of the interviews because people were not simply answering questions about how they would work with a specific cohort, but directly answering to a senior family member about how they would support

his mob. The family were also aware that their Elder was part of the selection process, which gave the new worker a head-start in building trust. The project manager and worker benefited from spending a day working alongside the Elder in a collegial way. It is important that he was paid for his time and contribution.

At the time of writing, the project is beginning another recruitment round. This began with consulting family members and Elders about what they wanted from their new worker and listening to their preferences, which included mixed gender and a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff. It is critical to the project that family members contribute to these decisions, rather than managers or staff deciding what they think is best. Interviews are planned over two phases. This will include a larger informal yarning session, where any family members who wish to participate can come to meet potential candidates and have a say in who they think should be offered interviews. It is hoped that two Elders will be on the interview panel providing support for each other and increasing the family's influence in decision-making. All family and Elder participants in this process will be paid for their time.

Cultural Supervision

Good supervision creates a space where the supervisor brings to the table knowledge, values, strategies, and a commitment to the best outcomes. Staff bring an understanding of what is happening with the people they are case managing. This provides the platform to share ideas, grow each other's strengths and manage hard conversations to ensure progress for the people we serve.

“When you have staff who walk two worlds - First Nations and Wadjulah world - you both need to immediately seek clarity on what this means and how this makes sense in the work we do for our community.”

Wongee Mia worker

The Wongee Mia project is exploring what cultural supervision looks like, including scenarios where both staff member and line manager come from First Nations communities, and when only one does. Culture and the experience of working within your own and others' cultural protocols become part of day-to-day conversations. Taking time to share stories about culture and lived experience is also important.

Key question for your own work:

- How can you break down systems and processes into bite-size chunks so they are easier for people to understand?
- What can you do to make people who need resources more visible to the systems that can help them?