

## A partnership approach: utilising environmental health workers to deliver health messages

Melinda Edmunds and Dr Melissa Stoneham, Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia; Chicky Clements and Ray Christophers, Nirrumbuk Aboriginal Corporation, WA

### An introduction to the project

Getting Your Messages Out to Remote Communities was a workshop program for Aboriginal Environmental Health Workers (AEHWs) in Western Australia, which aimed to transfer a range of skills and strategies needed to deliver environmental and public health messages to community members and organisations. Environmental Health Workers (EHWs) are critical to effective community-based environmental health programs in many regional and remote communities.

### The partnership

The program was a joint initiative between Nirrumbuk Aboriginal Corporation, which is based in Broome, and the Public Health Advocacy Institute of WA (PHAIWA). PHAIWA and Nirrumbuk had worked together on previous projects and were able to utilise each other's strengths.

PHAIWA's role was to develop the content and deliver the courses in conjunction with a Senior EHW from Nirrumbuk, Chicky Clements. PHAIWA has expertise in developing key messages, delivering health education and evaluating message retention and behaviour change.

Nirrumbuk has expertise in Aboriginal environmental health, Indigenous mentoring, health promotion, successful project delivery, securing community engagement and participation, community-based partnership development, the cultural significance of messages for Aboriginal people, and ensuring the cultural security of transferring knowledge. With the expertise of these two organisations combined, it proved to be a very successful partnership.

### The workshops

Initially, a two-day workshop was offered to every AEHW in Western Australia. This was followed up six months later by a one-day workshop which reinforced the key themes from the initial workshop, allowed participants to discuss how they applied their learnings in the field and provided additional information to assist with message evaluation.

The workshop was piloted in Broome and, after some amendments based on feedback, the workshops were then facilitated in the following locations:

- Kalgoorlie
- Geraldton
- Port Hedland
- Warakurna
- Halls Creek.

A total of 52 AEHWs and Aboriginal Health Workers attended the workshops.

In all cases, small groups were formed around the key messages, to then spend almost one day planning out the community project that would wrap around the key message. A simplistic program planning guide was provided to assist with this planning exercise, and the workshop facilitators once again assisted all groups to complete this process.

### Environmental Health Workers

The overall philosophy of the workshops was, encourage AEHWs to think differently about their jobs. These key workers are often caught up in the cycle of providing services for their communities, instead of with their communities. The AEHWs provide services above and beyond their core business, with a common example being the repeated clean-up of people's private yards. The workshops aimed to provide the AEHWs with the skills and knowledge to frame and deliver messages that are relevant to their issue and target audience, to encourage community members to take more responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, which would then allow the EHWs to work at a more strategic level.

It was important that the workshops considered health within a broader context (e.g. inclusive of housing, education) and linked the message and project development with local Environmental Health Action Plans. Another objective of the workshops was the strengthening of collaborative partnerships to enhance coordinated and integrated approaches to engaging communities and implementing community-based projects.

### So did it work?

An outcome from each workshop was the preparation of at least one environmental health project that pushed beyond the boundaries of their everyday work. The following project proposals were developed as part of the workshop series:

- dog health in Kalgoorlie
- cockroach eradication in Geraldton
- community clean-up in Bidyadanga
- car body clean-up in Cheeditha
- smoking and children in Warburton
- development of environmental health promotion resources for state-wide use
- yard clean-ups in Warakurna (locals taking control)
- trachoma prevention for young adults in Kalumburu
- aluminium can collection in Halls Creek
- car body clean-up in Balgo
- development of PowerPoint presentations (general) in Newman
- clean up in Billiluna.

The six-month follow-up workshops identified a number of challenges in implementing these project plans. However, we had eight projects commenced, five completed, a number of PowerPoint presentations developed by AEHWs for the first time, and the remainder of the projects are continuing.

### Conclusion

This workshop series recognised the critical role that remote Aboriginal Environmental Health Practitioners play in maintaining and improving the community's health under extremely difficult circumstances. These workers possess skills and knowledge that are critical to any program that aims to close the gap.

### For more information

Melinda Edmunds  
Senior Coordinator  
Public Health Advocacy Institute of WA  
Curtin University, Faculty of Health Sciences  
GPO Box U1987  
Ph: 08 9266 1544  
Email: melinda.edmunds@curtin.edu.au

### Glossary

PHAIWA Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia