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Dedicated staff at Wirrimbirra transform the lives of Aboriginal families and children in Western NSW

Wirrimbirra is an Aboriginal family preservation service that is transforming the lives of vulnerable children and families in Western NSW.

Wirrimbirra is part of the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. It provides support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who are experiencing challenges in their lives, so families can stay together and their children can grow up safely with kin and on Country.

Despite numerous reforms and changes to legislation over the past few years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be over-represented in the statutory child protection system. The findings of independent reviews into out-of-home care in 2015 and 2019 led the department to change its services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

In 2018 and 2019, more than 60% of children in out-of-home care in Western NSW were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, compared to the average of 40% statewide. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children also accounted for 54% of new entries into out-of-home care, compared to 40% in the rest of NSW. There was also a shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander foster carers and very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander out-of-home-care services in the region.

Responding to these challenges, the department created a small team in August 2019 to design an Aboriginal family support service. The team had a core group of departmental staff in Western NSW, who were assisted by expert Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners. The team developed a proposal to pilot an internally commissioned model for providing Family Preservation Packages under the Permanency Support Program. It also proposed redesigning the service model to draw on traditional cultural approaches, underpinned by legislated Aboriginal Child Placement Principles.

Wirrimbirra is a Wiradjuri word meaning ‘to keep...to preserve’. Core components of the model include yarning, dadirri (deep listening), connectedness and healing. One of the unique aspects of the service is the ‘family coach’ who provides intensive in-home support to families, a role that was traditionally embodied by aunties, uncles, nans, brothers and sisters. The service model also brings in community Elders to offer healing, cultural and life skills support.

The department's executive endorsed the model, and the service was allocated 30 Family Preservation Packages for an initial period of two years. Wirrimbirra opened its doors in March 2020, with a dedicated shopfront in Dubbo. The Wirrimbirra approach is underpinned by an 'enabling' model of support, one that assists families to identify their own support needs and to gain practical life skills that over time. It can translate into positive and sustainable everyday behaviours, when it's time for Wirrimbirra to exit.

While it is still early days, over the first 18 months of operation Wirrimbirra has assisted many families with intergenerational trauma and complex needs. It has provided services to 62 families with a total of 145 children. This includes giving intensive support to 20 families with a total of 60 children. The families have had ongoing involvement with child protection services and the children were at high risk of entering care.

Wirrimbirra also provided individual services – including transport, mentoring, respite, family contact and holiday programs – to 22 families with a total of 47 children. Through its 'No Wrong Door' policy, Wirrimbirra has assisted more than 300 'walk-in' community members who were seeking information, advocacy or just a safe space to yarn. The organisation is transforming the lives of not only the clients but also those of employees. The service has grown from opening with three staff members in March 2020 to currently having 38 employees, 90% of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Further, 32 local community members have been recruited to the role of Family Coach. Wirrimbirra's learning and development strategy offers an entry-level pathway into the social services industry and provides employees with mentoring to develop their skills. Since opening, Wirrimbirra has:

- successfully supported mothers to take babies home from hospital who were at risk of entering care at birth
- improved children's school attendance and educational outcomes
- supported parents to break the cycle of long-term drug and alcohol use.

The dedicated team has put a huge effort into making this service a reality. Their shared vision would not be possible without community consultation and the diligent work of the initial project team. Wirrimbirra has achieved a high level of engagement with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations. It also contributes to the NSW Premier's Priority: Keeping children safe, protecting our most vulnerable children and breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

“We recognise that family and community is at the heart of shaping a child's journey through life. We feel very privileged that the Aboriginal Community have embraced Wirrimbirra. We have been able to create a culturally safe space where our community feels safe to walk in and seek support.” –Wirrimbirra team member

A formal evaluation of the service is planned over the next 12 months to assess its impacts on key indicators such as reducing re-reporting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to the helpline and reducing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering into care. The service delivery model is scalable and the feasibility of expanding it to other high-needs communities with identified service gaps is being explored. Wirrimbirra has also recently expanded its services into Central West NSW and is looking to expand into other locations.

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