



ChildProtectionPeak

Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Child Protection Peak Limited

Palm Island Community Company
Sharing our Practice Wisdom



1. About the Organisation

The Palm Island Community Company (PICC) is a not-for-profit organization which was established in 2007. It is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation committed to principles and protocols of self-determination through the provision of whole-of-life services for people of the Island that reach across generations. It is innovative, community driven and designed to support and strengthen the social, cultural and economic fabric of the Palm Island community.

It has focused on building the social infrastructure of a remote Island, creating local jobs and delivering vital human services to the community. PICC is supported by the belief that the residents of Palm Island are entitled to have ready access to a range of reliable, high quality human and social services like those to which most Australian's have easy access to.

PICC's vision is to create a healthy, resilient, and productive Palm Island. Values of responsiveness; empowerment and empathy; leadership and responsibility; integrity and productivity; engagement; transparency and accountability guide all the work of the Palm Island Community Company.

A large proportion of the Palm Island population (32 percent) is aged 14 years or younger. As a result, PICC provides a large proportion of their services to target the needs of Palm's population of children and families.

Some of the services PICC provides are the Family Wellbeing Centre, Safe House and Family Participation Program. The Family Wellbeing Service offers support services to families in need. The Service offers support and help such as personal support and development, information and advice, parenting skills development, budgeting, and household skills development. The Service also coordinates activities such as the Women's Yarning Circle and the Elders Advisory Group.

The Safe House provides short-term residential placements for children and young people under 18 years old who have been referred from the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women. The service provides a place for children and young people on Palm Island that require out-of-home care to remain in their community, allowing them to stay connected to their family, culture, language and country.

The Family Participation Program (FPP) supports families to take part in child protection decision-making. The program facilitates family-led decision making, which is an independent process to enable families and children to have voice.

2. The Community

Palm Island, the main inhabited island of the Palm Islands group, is 50 km east of Ingham, and 70 km north of Townsville. It is part of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and whales can be seen in Palm Passage.

In 1918 Palm Island was selected by the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, to replace the cyclone damaged Hull River Aboriginal reserve north of Tully.



Over the next 20 years dispossessed Aboriginal people were removed to Palm Island, notorious for its conditions and harsh supervision. Employment opportunities were very restricted, and most families were dependent on relief payments. Forty-two language groups were brought together on Palm Island. They called themselves Bwgcolman ('many tribes').

In 1957, angered by the treatment of women and a cut in wages, residents staged a 'strike'. Ringleaders were identified and they with their families were expelled. The community aimed for greater social determination and a community council was formed in 1966 but dismissed in 1974. Assessment of Palm Island at that time found that Palm Island was still being run like a penal settlement with heavy restrictions including on movement of its citizens. Departmental rule and supervision ended in 1986 when a new community council was given title to the island.

However, Palm Island has been left with many challenges from the past including over 40 different tribes to coexist. The draconian rule that existed has also resulted in a loss of language, loss of ceremony and the system of organising families and communities were broken.

The white system changed everything it broke down our laws so we don't have access in the same way to the knowledge of our Elders that would have kept families together.

All of the different tribes of Palm Island have different thoughts about bringing up children with most families having different views. We have worked now to create a new way, with identification of community elders – they are identified by the community and chosen by the respect they hold.

3. The Challenge

With limited relevant services to support families, parents or individuals concerning issues relating to Child Safety. Parents and families lacked support and information to empower them, to understand their rights when liaising with such as Child Safety, Magistrate Court, Family and Domestic Violence Services.

Under the Act our families' lives were controlled, as a result families, especially our older people are still scared of government intervention. They think that white people are still there to control them, so the transgenerational trauma of those times is still very strong in our people. It has created a lot of fear and makes it hard for families to trust.

So, when the opportunity came up to create a Safe House, we saw this as an important step to support our children and families. The Safe House provides placements for up to four children and young people who are subject to ongoing intervention by the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women. Typically, resident children are on Child Protection Orders and are referred by the Department.

In 2017 we were able to add the Family Wellbeing centre. The centre provides culturally appropriate advice and help to Palm Island Families and their children who are in need of assistance to stay safe and together. Through the centre we can provide education programs, casework, workshops, referrals, information and group activities. The Family Participation Program is also hosted at the Safe House and provides cultural advice on child protection and supports families who are at risk or subject to child protection orders.



It was very important to have the safe house – there were a lot of children in care on the mainland – we thought this was a really good idea to start bringing children back so they can get to know their families – children came back, and they did not even know their own grandmother.

When it started up, we wanted to build a whole environment we did not want a dormitory style that had been used in the past. We had to make it as homely as possible, because people were fearful and were very critical – we had to make sure that the community knew we were trying to keep child safety out of people's lives. We have succeeded in doing this over the years.

For us the Safe House put us in a good place to get our kids back and drive reunification. We knew it might take time for families and kids to get to know each other, but they are back on country so they can get to understand their own history and have a chance to be part of the community, a sense of belonging and to grow in their understanding of where they come from. When the community see these kids, the community embraces them, and they can feel part of a bigger wider family.

Our Model for the safe house, family participation and family wellbeing is therefore based on the need of individuals, families and community. This includes information on family genealogy, cultural background, and connection, family history and strength, and linking them to support mechanisms such as other services. We focus on building individual and family strength.

To do this we have staffed our services with local people. We have all grown up together we understand the genealogy of our families. We understand their story within our own experience, and we can help support our children and families build their connections and understanding of their own family's history.

We grew up under the act and we know first-hand the impact of this on the social and emotional wellbeing of our families. Our families don't have to explain this to us it is understood by us. We have worked hard to build the trust with our families because of the levels of fear they had that we were just like the department and would take away their children.

Our programs are aimed at being more responsive to our families and keep their children out of the child protection system. Because we have such strong linkages with our community, we can bridge the gap and talk with families and the department and create a better understanding. Our work is based on helping our children to locate their identity culturally and increase their sense of belonging in how they fit into this community.

"For our families working with the Department feels like a David and Goliath situation – it has so much power in what is happening to our children. Our job is to try and get the department to listen to David."

Given our history we know children's families and how they came to be on the Island. One of the strengths of Palm Island is that we all look out for each other's children, we know what is happening and when we work with other services, we support them to engage with families including locating them to ensure they are meeting their obligations.



"I give the children little history lessons, how Palm Island came about, take to the beach and collect traditional food, I help them to understand how we are connected. They are from this country, so this is very important to help build their identity and how they fit in our community – it supports their connection to country – so they grow up, so they feel they belong here."

The combination of flexibility, community knowledge and size of community allows us to do so much more than other places like Townsville or Brisbane. Even when families are disengaged, we can find someone who knows that family and connect to build trust and inclusion.

For example, in the safe house here we have an internal program here for the mums. Often when we would get a notification from child safety, and they would want mums to work on numerous things in the case plan. But we don't have these things on Palm Island, so we developed our own program to help mothers learn parenting skills, developing trust between mother and children to assist with reunification. This was part of establishing a system of strength and care for our families.

We also have established partnerships with other services on the Island. We know these services we meet up with the partners we check on how parents are going, are they turning up are they having difficulty we should know about. Services such as drug and alcohol, diversionary, solicitors, dv services, school, mental health, NDIS – because we are a close knit community if we find a gap here, we sit down and work out a way to meet the need.

The practice standards of QATSICPP are the basis of our theory, they make sense to us they are something we practice intuitively. We use them to guide us.

The QATSICPP training provided information and skills which complement our delivery of service. The Palm Island Community Company has also provided opportunity for staff to have training and attend conferences to gain current information, establish networks and share best practices.

Our models have grown over time. The training offered to us by QATSICPP and PICC has been very important to us in building our skill and knowledge and continuing to grow.

4. Outcomes Achieved

"We help our children and families to learn to live with one another. As we have over 40 different tribes, we have learnt to live with one another and survive and adapt – these will be important skills for our children to learn from us"

One of the strengths of PICC is that we have a stable staff and have built strong relationships with families and services. Departmental staff change all the time, and this is difficult for us, but one of the reasons it is important that the Department pay attention to our knowledge as we are the constant in families lives and will be able to drive the greatest changes.

Doing whatever needs to be done, we can support families move through whichever program it is and get the service they need – families should not need to worry about or care who is funding the service – they just need the service, and we are the ones that have to adapt and provide flexibility

We have established and strengthened relations with individual, families and the community. We focus on good connections, communication, and we work on being consistent with clients to drive



positive results, even if we cannot create change, we keep trying because we are committed to our families.

We have raised the profile of our services through promotional events and activities and developed strong partnerships with stakeholders. Most importantly we have empowered our families by providing information and support in their interaction with other services.

“But respect is our most important ingredient in driving our outcomes. The most important thing to create change is trust and this cannot happen without respect”

Our recent independent impact evaluation found that:

Local Indigenous knowledge – The local Palm Islanders working for PICC ensure that culturally safe services are delivered appropriately.

Connector – PICC is improving health and wellbeing outcomes through empowering Bwgcolman families and the Palm Island community. PICC helps connect Palm Island residents with the right services at the right time and facilitates the connection between families and highly specialised human services providers.

PICC is relevant (wanted and valued) by most community and stakeholders. Almost all staff surveyed (91%) felt that working for PICC allows them to contribute to making a positive difference in their community and that PICC was focused on achieving positive outcomes for the Palm Island community.

To deliver the right services to the right people at the right time in the right way requires skilled local staff and cultural knowledge. PICC has enabled approximately 400 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff an opportunity for employment and to develop their skills and capacity. PICC has been able to contribute to improving programs and policies through thought leadership, advocating for community members, consulting with community, showing compassion and challenging the status quo.

The literature supports community-led decision- making, self-determination and empowerment as important mechanisms for improving health and wellbeing indicators.

Effective

Stakeholders and staff say that without PICC it would be very difficult to connect individuals, families and the community to the right services they need at the right time. Services say that working with PICC enables them to deliver culturally appropriate services and to engage with clients and community. As well as connecting people to services, PICC also delivers effective high quality funded services, evidenced by program performance reports, quality audits and client outcomes. PICC has had to be creative and innovative to maximise potential outcomes from what may be limited, constrained or short sighted, or short term funding agreements.



Participation

We have a focus on participation. This includes regular consultation with families to encourage their input including through meetings, phone calls and home visits. We really focus on empowering our families by communicating information in a language they can understand. Sometimes our families can be very mobile and can appear to drop off the radar, but because we have such strong linkages we can work with the extended family and provide update information on how they are progressing. We often include children in family and case discussions depending on their age.

Prevention

We are lucky at PICC we have a lot of services in our organisation, including playgroups, diversionary programs, a woman's shelter, yarning circles for men and women and based on the needs assessment with families we can refer them to the right service. As a service we have developed intervention programs to support reunification for families.

The Parenting Training Program is internal at the safe house and provides an environment for parents to renew relationship with their children and teach practical hands on parenting skills. We have seen increased visitation with children as a result and the growth of self-confidence in parents. This has strengthened the relationship between parents and children and has also supported a stronger relationship for families with the service.

Connection

Our program has strongly supported family unity. We do a lot of cultural activities with children that involves, teaching them how to collect traditional food such as oysters, cockle, and care for country.

We use a lot of this outdoor time to teach children their cultural history and constantly reinforce their connections. We plan these activities which lets us embed our cultural teachings and including learning about respect. This cultural connection has reinforced our children's identity and helped re-establish not only their relationship with their families and communities, but it has renewed their relationship with the land and the sea.

Most of our own families are also always engaging with their own families so when our children are resident on the Island, they can get that connection and support going. Having the FPP has also been great, we can help families to learn about their culture and their family tree, helping them to join the dots and work out how to help each other and strengthen their families. Connection is so important. If the connection is broken the children and the families are lost, so our work in building a network of support and re-establishing connections is critical.

Partnership

Our service has a good rapport with local services within PICC, other local services in the community including visiting services to the Island.

We work with other services and our clients to keep each other informed and updated. But it is very important to have respect and listen to our clients as this is their story.

Mutual respect and understanding of what services do and their aims, forms the foundation of a strong partnership between all parties. Open and transparent communication, and information sharing is the glue that bonds our service with various organization.



Since our service is still in the development stage, we have not used MOU's or partnership agreements. We may do this in the future. However, our local knowledge of families, community, and relationship with other service, and including scope of practice, policies, and local protocols has been our guide which aids in delivery of service.

Placement

Placing families with other families is more appropriate than using foster carers, but sometimes we find that the Department of Child Safety make it hard for families to take children.

Our primary focus is to try and keep children with their families. If it is not possible to live with your mother and father, we try to support other family members to take children to keep them in their culture and their country.

As a part of this we also work on assisting families with reunification. We support parents to link to local services and address the issues that are preventing them having their children in their care. We support parents in the important job of rebuilding relationship through attending medical appointments with families, supporting them to attend the PICC Playgroup program and engage in outdoor events and celebrations.

At this present moment we are strongly working with one Mother to reunite her with her children. We use the five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle to guide us - we are using this model to work with the mother and the department to help her achieve that goal for her.

5. Lessons Learned

1. Listening and working with other services and sharing ideas to create a strong case plan with your families is very important to driving success
2. Not everything goes to plan there will always be some conflict, disagreements amongst families or other challenges. So, it is important to monitor the journey of families, adapt your practice to suit family's needs, analyse the gaps in the service or develop a program based on their needs. It is always important to be reflecting on how you engage with families including your own communication style.
3. The five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle: Connection, Placement; Prevention; Partnership, Participation are wholly integrated into our service and at the heart of how we practice.
4. Attending trainings with other services increases your knowledge, including better understanding of what they deliver and how to better your program most importantly it also lets you better yourself.
5. Every Community has a different view on their upbringing, so as the FPP we must know the dynamics with the families and must have strong relationship with our stakeholders and have a good communication with our clients & other services by switching language between us.



6. What would you like to do in the Future?

We would like to strengthen our data collection and even possibly develop a data base that will let us capture our outcomes more substantively.

It would be good to establish some more formal partnership agreements which may assist us in enhancing service delivery for families

Having a strong service model would enable us to advocate more for reunification and change our relationship with the Department. Many of our families are still very afraid of the Department. Having an ability to draw on our evidence and challenge departmental decisions, would support us to have greater self-determination and give our families the feeling that we are finally moving from out from under the act.

7. Key Messages

The Cultural Leadership provided by the staff at PICC, drawing on their local community knowledge and experiences is providing children and their families with the opportunity to strengthen their own identity helping them build pathways to their stories and history.

It also allows enables culturally adaptive programming, ensuring that programs are meeting local community circumstances. This includes being able to adapt to the local cultural context, including responding to emerging issues and stresses. This increases not only cultural safety for families, but also ensures that more families are able to access services that reflect their understanding and are supported to build greater skills within a culturally supportive environment.

Cultural Connection for children and families is critical to healing and strong social and emotional wellbeing. We know that strong cultural identity is a pathway to building resilience for children across their lifetime.

Research demonstrates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who are removed from their families, experience poorer physical, psychological, and social outcomes than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are not forcibly removed (Hunter et al 2020)

Recent reviews of current practice urge practitioners who are supporting children and adults who are experiencing intergenerational or more current trauma, the connection to culture supports healing and recovery, because of the protective and resilient properties it imbues (Menzies, 2019).

This highlights how important the work of the PICC Family Wellbeing Centre, Safe House and Family Participation Program is undertaking in restoring children and families to a strong identity, growing their cultural connections and supports. The importance of this framework for practice cannot be overstated.





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