

Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
Child Protection Peak Limited

**Promising Practice Case Study**  
**Kurbingui Youth and Family**  
**Development**



Centre of Excellence



ChildProtectionPeak

# Kurbingui Youth and Family Development Promising Practice Case Study

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# 1. About the Organisation

Kurbingui Youth and Family Development ('Kurbingui' hereafter) is a community organisation that is leading the way as a mentor, educator and role model for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the greater Brisbane, Moreton Bay and South-East region. The organisation has grown from a small boxing club in 2001 with a vision "to be a deadly organisation that supports our mob on their journey".

Kurbingui's mission is to build a flexible, sustainable organisation based on cultural values that can empower community to reach their potential.

Kurbingui offers services to Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander community members, families, young people and children delivering various community services and support across areas such as employment and training, family support, support and specialist services, domestic and family violence, alcohol and substance abuse, cultural education and engagement, recreation and sports, and group workshops for young people, men and women.

At the core of everything Kurbingui does is a deep respect for local Elders.

The Brisbane Northside Elders Group was formed in late 2014 as a consequence of the Elders in the region coming to Kurbingui and supporting staff and community members. The founding members of the group include Aunty "Chick" Hazel Fisher, Aunty Cepha Roma and Uncle Alex Davidson with support from Aunty Shirley Finn. Their tireless work included encouraging other elder members of the community to join them as part of the group or as guests to undertake different forms of assistance including but not limited to:

- Providing support to staff and community members through mentoring and coaching
- Advocating for children, young people and their family members
- Providing support in the everyday operations of Kurbingui in ways such as participating on recruitment panels, representation at stakeholder meetings, assisting with the coordination of activities, programs and other community events
- Undertaking 'Acknowledgements' and 'Welcome to Country' (where culturally appropriate)
- Lobbying decision makers about the implementation of recommendations following reviews in the areas such as health, child protection, education, corrective services, men's and women's services, domestic and family violence and youth justice.

While Kurbingui Board of directors, senior management and staff have always supported the Elder community members in their work, in 2016 the group approached the Board to formalise their group under the organisation's auspice.

Further, in 2016 the Elders group received an award from the Queensland Child Protection Committee to acknowledge their work in partnership with government and non-government agencies to contribute to the reduction of the over representation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander children and young people in statutory care.

While the group members and their guests work tirelessly across all areas of the community service sector, they have continued to focus their attention whenever possible to reducing the numbers of children and young people in statutory care, reducing the number of young people and adults incarcerated or involved in the youth justice system, and supporting people where possible around the areas of mental health and wellbeing.

## 2. The Community

According to Census 2021, over 250,000 Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander people live in Queensland (an increase of 35% from the previous Census). Of this, 40% (almost 100,000) are resident in the areas Kurbingui operates and services, with an actual increase in number over the last five years of almost 30,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents.

Importantly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders are, on average, younger than non-Indigenous Queenslanders with approximately one-third (35.4%) aged less than 15 years, compared with one-fifth (18.9%) of non-Indigenous Queenslanders. This means that there are high numbers of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the region, and when other social and emotional wellbeing factors are considered, the population data points to demand for Kurbingui services increasing exponentially. Indeed, this increasing demand for services is reported by staff and stakeholders alike.

## 3. The Challenge

With the increasing demand, some key challenges for Kurbingui include the number of referrals relating to domestic and family violence, families generally under stress and increasing homelessness across age cohorts

*It feels like every second referral is for DV and we have a lot of homelessness including reports of young children sleeping in the shopping centre*

The challenge Kurbingui has sought to address is how to provide a holistic, wrap around service model when the way government funds programs pushes organisations to replicate the silo mentalities of the State and Commonwealth government departments. As those working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families know, the challenges and complexity that families face are not separate from each other. The intersection of issues demands integrated rather discreet support services that take this intersectionality into account.

When support is provided within funding, program and/or operational silos families experience more stress as they have to tell and re-tell their stories over and over. This increases families' trauma, pain and suffering, as well as the shame families who can feel when "there is a cast of thousands telling them they are broken"

*Because departments work in silos, there is an example of a carer who is caring for nieces and nephews and now being asked to leave social housing because she is working full-time to support them and deemed to be earning too much*

Kurbingui has taken intentional and strategic steps to ensure that while the organisation receives funding from multiple funding streams and departments, clients have a sense that there is integration and a holistic approach being taken at the program and services level. Cultural knowledge is at the core with the Elders providing guidance and wisdom across all programs and services. Partnerships ensure there is collaboration and coordination across services and location.

## 4. Outcomes Achieved

The key outcome has been the provision of a culturally safe, integrated and holistic service built on the strengths of Elders, families and communities and where families and young people know they can come for assistance.

Success is built on understanding the importance of Elder knowledge, and this defines the work, programs, supports and organisational culture. Importantly, as Elders have felt their concerns were listened to their social and emotional wellbeing has improved. Their involvement in establishing the HALT Collective<sup>1</sup>, seeing their knowledge and wisdom being enacted by the Department, and then seeing how so much had changed and the work being done with families had improved their outlook and overall health

*We have established a culturally safe workplace for the mob ... we are ever present for the community, and they know it. They know they can come to Kurbingui and get assistance*

A key priority for Kurbingui is to reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are in the child protection system.

*Because the Elders are such a part of what we do they see how families speak about HALT and how they ring up after incidents on the weekend to ask them if their case had landed at HALT yet as they were hoping this would prevent an escalation of response.*

With Elder knowledge as the foundation of everything the organisation does the organisation has seen positive outcomes through the Family Well Services (FWB) it provides. This has led to almost 60 per cent of families having all or partial needs met through FWB services, and where families have had all of their needs met, 91 per cent stay out of the child protection system (within 6 months) after going to FWS. Further, families report feeling safe and more in control with their lives as well as healing of inter-generational trauma slowly being addressed with trauma-informed care being key to success.<sup>2</sup>

Through being a key participant in the HALT Collective, Kurbingui's expertise and knowledge has led to additional and significant outcomes.

An examination of the HALT data from 2021 highlights 277 unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children subject to an Intake and Assessment (I&A) presented to HALT. In only 11 cases (4 per cent) was the outcome Ongoing Intervention. Importantly, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children subject to Ongoing Intervention within 12 months of being presented at HALT was 13.7 per cent. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children subject to Ongoing Intervention that were not presented at HALT was 21.4 per cent. That is, for children subject to an I&A and not presented to HALT there is slightly higher than 1 in 5 likelihood the outcome will be Ongoing Intervention. For children subject to an I&A and presented to HALT the likelihood is reduced to almost 1 in 8.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See [HALT Collective: A Promising Practice Case Study - QATSICPP](#) for a detailed description of the work and impact of the HALT Collective.

<sup>2</sup> information analysed by Abt Associates and data provided by the Queensland Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> See [HALT Collective: A Promising Practice Case Study - QATSICPP](#) for a detailed description of the work and impact of the HALT Collective.

## 5. Upholding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Placement Principle

This is a case study of promising practice, rather than best practice. It has been developed to assist other agencies working in the child protection space in other jurisdictions. Specifically, it aims to assist those who might want to understand how a more culturally safe practice, aligned with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (Child Placement Principle hereafter) and its core elements, can be developed but adapting some of the successes and challenges to their own contexts.

As much as Elders knowledge and wisdom is at the core of everything Kurbingui does, so to is honoring the Child Placement Principle. There is a fundamental belief that to honor the Child Placement Principle, you have to build networks, establish relationships built on trust and respect (with people, families and organisations), advocate and collaborate with others on behalf of families and communities, and ensure everyone in the organisation is committed to the five core elements of the Child Placement Principle.

This includes the way Kurbingui recruits and trains its people, with a policy of not less than 85 per cent of staff identifying as Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander. Currently of the 60+ staff employed at Kurbingui, over 90 percent are of Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander background. While cultural knowledge, community knowledge, experience, and skills to advocate for families and communities are key recruitment criteria, an ability to learn, work across as well as within teams, and upholding the Child Placement Principle are equally important when recruiting new staff.

### Prevention

From the very beginning, the wellbeing of children and young people has been at the core of Kurbingui's work. *A primary aim for the organisation is to reduce the number of children and young people in statutory care, and while participation in the HALT Collective comes at a tangible cost to resources in the organisation, the prevention of cases going to notification makes participation worthwhile.*

### Placement

Working with the community, knowing the communities in which they operate and understanding kinship networks mean, alongside other services, children can be placed with their families.

### Participation

Everyone is working together at Kurbingui. The participation of Elders and families means self-determination is fully activated and there is no single knowledge holder or program/service expert. Knowledge comes from and belongs to the communities Kurbingui serves.

### Partnership

Kurbingui acknowledges the organisation cannot work in isolation and as a service provider to communities it has to work with multiple stakeholders in relationships characterised by trust and mutual respect. For example, being a member of the HALT Collective ensures decisions are made with all the relevant information and that Aboriginal organisations, and therefore the families they represent are empowered in the decision-making process with regard to their children and their wellbeing.

## Connection

As Kurbingui advocates and supports families, and because the organisation is so embedded in the communities it services, the families that receive support immediately feel more connected to their communities, culture and country. The physical and spiritual presence of the Elders in the organisation and even the services provided increases this sense of connection to culture.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in practice

*"We have a Mum who is expecting ... we know her, and her circumstances and we know what she is capable of at this time in her life. She has a number of children in care, but this was an opportunity to mother her newborn. It was a bit of a challenge for the Department to work out how to do it so they came to us.*

*We got five Indigenous stakeholders together to talk about the case and to advocate for the Mum. We developed a plan to provide a wrap around 24/7 service to her. If the Department was willing to fund it Kurbingui could provide the support with FWB and SEWB workers working round the clock shifts so Mum always had someone with her in these first weeks. There was power in the collaboration and advocacy and the Department could not say no.*

*The plan was developed before baby was born so that's prevention, baby got to stay with mum so that's placement, that required collaboration and partnership between multiple stakeholders with everyone working together – participation, and Mum feels part of a community that acts in her interest – connection. That's how it works with the Child Placement Principle at our core.*

## 6. Lessons Learned

Over the 21 years Kurbingui has been working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities the organisation has learned that to best support young people and ensure families:

- Perseverance and never giving up on a single individual or family must characterise programs and services
- The voice of Elders must be at the core of everything the organisation does to keep the organisation, the services it provides, and staff culturally safe
- Everyone in the organisation must be committed to working alongside communities in the knowledge that the solutions and capabilities lie within those communities
- Strong leaders listen to their staff and communities and at Kurbingui and stable leadership strengthens organisational outcomes
- There is a strong commitment to self-care for staff who are working under challenging circumstances often on distressing issues. For many they are working with their own community/family members
- Let the Elders hold the community focus while the Board focuses on governance.

## 7. Key Messages

The prioritising of local Elders is critical. They ensure everything is brought back to culture and ensures there is a cultural lens on everything the organisation does. The involvement of Elders keeps the organisation strong and healthy, which in turns keeps Elders themselves strong and healthy.

*“Respect, honor and celebrate your Elders. It is a fundamental part of being a successful Aboriginal community-controlled organisation. They stop the appropriation of your services and mission by mainstream, they keep the organisation safe, and keep the staff safe, and their involvement and the respect given to them keep them connected and reduces isolation as they get older”.*

Finally, as an organisational culture that prioritises cultural safety and self-care, Kurbingui is able to provide cultural safe services that empowers families and is responsive to their social and emotional wellbeing and supports self-determination for families and communities.



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