Summary of findings from the NWQICSS Justice Program Evaluation

Overview of the project
The Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health (MICRRH) was commissioned at the beginning of 2013 by North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services (NWQICSS) to undertake an evaluation of their justice program. The justice program received funding during January 2012 – June 2013 from the Australian Government Attorney General’s Department and seeks to address Indigenous offending in Mount Isa by providing a diversionary rehabilitative bail program operating through the Indigenous Sentencing List (formerly the Murri Court). The program incorporates case management, Murri Men’s and Women’s Groups, referral to other community services and Bush Healing. NWQICSS also indicated that they have adopted a narrative therapy approach to counselling their clients.

Methodology
MICRRH undertook the evaluation using a broad appreciative inquiry approach and employing a yarning methodology for Indigenous clients of the program and semi-structured interviews for staff, stakeholders and NWQICSS management. The evaluation focused on four broad evaluation questions:

1. What is working well with the program?
2. What are the challenges in implementing this program?
3. What is the impact of this program on clients’ lives?
4. What improvements could be made to the program?

It is important to note that MICRRH was invited to conduct the evaluation as the funding period neared its conclusion and therefore were not involved in setting up any baseline data which the program outputs and outcomes could be assessed against. Consequently, the evaluation was restricted to a process evaluation and self-reported outcomes, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the results. However, the self-reported outcomes provide a unique insight to changes that clients have made during their journey through the justice program.
Results

NWQICSS assisted a total of 107 clients (90 men and 17 women) from various communities during the funding period January 2012 – June 2013. Clients typically had multiple contacts with the justice system prior to the program and had multiple current offences. The offences tended to be related to domestic violence (DV) breaches, breach of bail conditions and driving related offences. The majority of sentencing outcomes for male clients as part of this process were community based orders.¹

During this evaluation participants were asked about their perspectives of offending by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Mount Isa. Participants identified three key themes in relation to offending including; life events, behavioural issues and social determinants. Life events related to tragic or traumatic events and lack of family stability. Interviews with staff indicated that often these life issues had not been addressed which resulted in behaviours that could contribute to offending. Participants identified behavioural issues which can lead to offending including; boredom, undertaking activities for the thrill, normalised behaviour, mimicking others and substance abuse. A majority of participants highlighted the perceived relationship between alcohol and interpersonal conflict and offending in Mount Isa. Issues at a systemic level were labelled as social determinant factors that can lead to offending and included lack of support, loss of culture, social disintegration, lack of education, unemployment and housing issues (e.g. overcrowding and homelessness).

The results of the evaluation highlight that the NWQICSS program is highly respected and valued among clients and stakeholders. There were high levels of congruence between the elements of success, challenges and improvements reported by staff, stakeholders and clients. Participants reported a number of elements that were considered successful in the implementation of the program namely its cultural focus, the Men’s and Women’s Groups, the provision of practical support, the staff and the level of stakeholder engagement and collaboration. The evaluation highlighted some challenges in implementing the program related to capacity, client and community influences and managing program boundaries. However, these challenges have been reported among other Indigenous community based justice programs and were also identified as issues for other organisations in Mount Isa. Participants indicated a number of program improvements that could be made to the program relating to; operational issues, program reach, program delivery and program direction.

¹ The same level of data was not available for female clients.
There were a number of positive gains reported in terms of improving the lives of clients and addressing the underlying factors which may contribute to offending among the client base. Clients that were interviewed reported sharing health and service information that they had learnt at the Men’s and Women’s Groups with their families and in social settings with their friends. Various client transformations were reported including changes in their emotional status, physical appearance, skills and behaviour. A number of compliance and justice process impacts were reported including the recognition by clients that the program served as a second chance to address their offending behaviour rather than going to jail. Stakeholders and staff reported that compliance with Court based conditions had improved, some clients have stayed offence-free and there was an observed lessening in the frequency and severity of offending from some clients. A number of client achievements were reported in terms of completing educational courses, obtaining accommodation and securing employment.

**Recommendations**

The evaluation resulted in three levels of recommendations including *foundation* (recommendations that are essential for the program to continue); *focus* (areas to improve existing program delivery) and *future* (areas that may be considered to strengthen the program in the future).

**A - Foundation:**

1. **Funding provision** – *it is recommended that funding bodies adopt a justice reinvestment approach to fund community based justice programs.* This will allow a portion of funds typically spent on imprisonment to be diverted to community initiatives that seek to address the underlying causes of crime in the community.

2. **Securing funding** - *it is recommended that funding of at least three years be obtained from a relevant Federal or State funding source.* This will provide program sustainability and organisational stability which will allow the recruitment of staff and allow the organisation to implement a planned and structured approach.
3. **Staff** – it is advised that at least two additional male justice workers and a female justice worker be hired to meet the demands of the program and provide sustainability within the program (resulting in a total of four male workers and one female worker).

Attracting new staff may be achieved through advertising the position through existing networks (e.g. Townsville Catholic Diocese; community contacts) or considering alternative employment options (e.g. community service traineeships). It is acknowledged that it may be difficult to attract staff given the award wage for community service roles and the high cost of living in Mount Isa.

**B - Focus**

It is recommended that NWQICSS consider:

1. **Structure** – review the structure of both the justice team and Men’s Group in order to meet the growing demand for the service. Team structure may include adopting a case load approach or restructuring the positions within the team (e.g. creating two types of positions justice engagement workers and justice case workers). To ensure the Men’s Group continues to be effective the group should be divided into smaller groups.

2. **Staff training** – complete a staff audit and develop training plans. An audit of NWQICSS staff should be undertaken to identify existing skills and training completed by staff in the organisation. A training audit could be conducted using a survey or through reviewing staff human resource files to identify the skills, qualifications and training that each staff member has acquired. After completing the audit a training plan for staff to identify skill areas and training that staff require should be undertaken.

3. **Case management** – implement case management processes, monitor client progress and measure client outcomes. NWQICSS have made progress in implementing case management practices which could be strengthened by implementing the new case management templates that have been designed; training new and existing staff on how to use the templates; developing policies and procedures for program activities; as well as developing, implementing and monitoring appropriate client impact/satisfaction measures.
4. **Women’s Group** – *place a greater emphasis on the women’s program to support the positive gains from the men’s program.* This could be achieved by supporting and mentoring a new female justice worker; focusing on data collection; utilising other NWQICSS programs to promote the Women’s Group; hosting family days at the Child and Family Centre for Men’s Group participants to promote the Women’s Group to partners; ensuring the female participants have the opportunity to participate in Bush Healing activities.

### C - Future

1. **Bush Healing** – *focus efforts on strengthening the Bush Healing program so that it is a regular activity that supports the clients of the justice program.* This can be achieved by:
   - employing a designated Bush Healing coordinator;
   - seeking funding from alternative sources for this program;
   - mentoring past participants to assist with facilitating the program;
   - integrating activities with NWQICSS Child and Family Centre;
   - generating income from the program outputs for participants or NWQICSS (e.g. exhibiting or selling paintings).

2. **Holistic approach** – *fostering a holistic approach which focuses on the family to address justice issues,* through promoting the Women’s Group; engaging stakeholders in activities; hosting family events and integrating service delivery with the Child and Family Centre.

3. **Young people** – *working with existing/new stakeholders to create a justice program suitable for at risk young people (under the age of 17).* This will require stakeholder collaboration to identify service opportunities, gaps and obtaining additional funding. NWQICSS could also host youth or family activities in the Child and Family Centre and provide a youth Bush Healing program.
4. Employment and education – continue to focus and explore new opportunities for employment and education activities for clients of the justice program. This may include:

- linking with educational providers/employment services to deliver skills based courses (e.g. numeracy and literacy);
- engaging additional stakeholders to present at the Men’s and Women’s Group;
- linking education and employment opportunities with the Child and Family Centre;
- consider utilising registered training organisations within the community or within Townsville Catholic Diocese to deliver short courses for clients;
- train and mentor clients to become peer mentors or community engagement workers to provide employment opportunities and to assist with the implementation of the justice program.

Conclusion

The NWQICSS justice program appears to incorporate many of the suggested elements outlined in the literature involved in implementing a successful Indigenous justice program. The current evaluation has shown this program has real potential to positively impact the lives of Indigenous offenders in relation to addressing their offending behaviour. NWQICSS have been faced with similar challenges in implementing this program that were reported in the literature by other organisations implementing community based justice programs. One of the key issues facing these organisations is the difficulty to obtain long-term funding which affects the ability of the organisation to create a solid foundation for the program, often relying on a core group of community members to ensure the consistency in service delivery. Securing this funding is fundamental for NWQICSS to continue their operations and thus address the recommendations outlined above. Funding bodies are urged to consider a justice reinvestment approach and to provide at least three year funding to build on the success of this program.