

Statement from the hosts of the Walgett Youth Justice Forum
Dharriwaa Elders Group-UNSW Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership
Walgett 14th-15th March

'Yuwaya Ngarra-li', which means 'Vision' in the Yuwaalaraay/Gamilaraay language, is a unique community-led partnership between the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney to work towards the DEG's positive vision for change in Walgett, by growing and building on community strengths and assets.

The Dharriwaa Elders Group deeply values working with and supporting young people in their community and has great concerns about the risk of them ending up in the justice system rather than in education and employment and thriving in their community.

Virginia Robinson, Secretary of the Dharriwaa Elders Group:

'We love our young people. We cry out for compassion, we cry out for change. We don't want our young people to go to gaol; there's no love in gaol... They come out of custody with a myriad of problems, some of them irreparable. We want you all to work with us for positive, lasting change for our young people, our futures.'

With this as a key priority for the Dharriwaa Elders Group and the Walgett community, the partnership hosted a forum to discuss concerns for children and young people in Walgett and to develop a youth justice action plan together with young people, parents, Walgett Aboriginal community organisations including the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service and other members of the Walgett Gamilaraay Aboriginal Community Working Party, Gilbert + Tobin Lawyers, and service providers and government agencies including NSW Police, Juvenile Justice, Justice NSW, Aboriginal Legal Service, Legal Aid NSW, the Walgett Community College, Walgett Shire Council and Thiyamali Family Violence Service.

The forum was held in the Community Hub at Walgett Community College and attended by around 70 people. There were panels on:

- The youth justice context in Walgett which included a youth worker, the vice captain of the high school, the CEO of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, the Police Darling River District Command Superintendent, and the Chair and Secretary of the Dharriwaa Elders Group.
- Out of home care and youth justice which included the remote school attendance officer employed by Murdi Paaki Regional Enterprise Corporation and the President of the NSW Children's Court,
- Young people and policing which included a parent of two young people who have been in contact with police, a law academic who has researched the NSW Police Suspect Targeting Management Program (STMP) and a Law Enforcement Conduct Commissioner, and
- Youth justice history, law and policy which included an ALS field officer and a Professor of Criminology.



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Forum participants contributed family, community and Elders' perspectives on all these areas as did some service providers. Participants engaged with energy and vibrancy, raising key concerns and calling for positive action.

The forum heard from young woman, Delma Trindall:

'Growing up Aboriginal means it is pretty much inevitable that you will come under police scrutiny at some time in your life, whether you are actually in trouble, assisting them with an inquiry or seeking support yourself... There are a monumental amount of barriers facing our youth today upon entering the cycle of the justice system and a lot them are attached to stigma and stereotypes associated with Aboriginal people.'

'I don't have solutions to these problems but I do believe that building rapport by forging and strengthening community relationships is a great place to start, especially where young people are concerned.'

The new Walgett Local Area Commander for Walgett, Superintendent Greg Moore, also addressed the forum:

'It's obvious that we've got many kind hearted, hard working people in this community. We're all here in the spirit of doing better for our young people. This isn't a talkfest, this is a stepping stone to getting some action into the future for our kids.'

Key concerns and suggested solutions discussed by participants were:

Concern: the lack of facilities for children and young people in Walgett. **Solutions:** Community run, holistic children's and young people's spaces that provide alternatives to involvement in the justice system and engage all relevant agencies and services, providing access to activities, amenities and cultural knowledges that are appropriate for different ages;

Concern: criminalisation of young people in Walgett. **Solutions:** regular formal and informal meetings between police and community members; regular provision of data by police to the community; local diversionary options drawing on successful evidence based options such as children's Koori Court and the Merit program;

Concern: failure of mainstream and existing services to meet the needs of Aboriginal young people in Walgett. **Solutions:** on-country culturally-led youth and Elder programs; Aboriginal youth council to guide service development; specialist health and therapeutic early intervention for babies, children and young people; WAMS presence integrated into local schools.

The Dharriwaa Elders Group, UNSW participants, police and community members met again on Thursday morning to build these ideas into short, medium and long term goals in the Walgett Youth Justice Action Plan. They enthusiastically committed to working together to achieve those goals.

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