THE EVOLUTION OF A CONSULTATIVE APPROACH TO CORRECTIONS ON ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Angela Musumeci

A PROJECT BEGAN IN QUEENSLAND ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO TO ESTABLISH a Corrective Services presence on remote Aboriginal communities. During the course of the two years that the project has been in progress non-Aboriginal Commission officers who have worked on the project have learnt much more about these communities and the way in which they need to interact, thanks to the patience and trust of the communities and the hard work of Aboriginal staff members.

Background

Before December 1988, Queensland had two distinctive services dealing with Corrections. These were the Prison Service under the Prison's Department and the Office of the Chief Probation and Parole Officer under the Justice Department. Interaction between the two departments occurred, but was relatively minimal. The proportion of Aboriginal people in prison was about 20-25 per cent. Given that Aboriginal people form 2.3 per cent of the total population, this figure was enormously over-representative. The situation was much the same for the Probation and Parole Service.

Demographically, the proportion of Aboriginal people in the Queensland population increases further north, with prison and non or post prison orders reflecting this. At that stage, all prisoners from North Queensland were imprisoned in Townsville. The opening of Lotus Glen in Mareeba in May 1989 has meant that most Peninsular prisoners are imprisoned in Mareeba, with Aboriginal prisoners being taken some considerable distance from their homes to serve their sentences. With their release on parole or for those on probation, community service or fine option orders, the situation was no better. North Queensland had three area offices: Cairns, Townsville and Mount Isa. Visits to communities such as Thursday Island, Bamaga, Aurukun, Lockhart River, Hopevale, Kowanyama, Edward River (now called
Pompuraaw), Weipa, Wujul Wujul and Yarrabah were being undertaken on a visiting basis from Cairns; Palm Island and Charters Towers from Townsville and Doomagee; Burketown and Mornington Island from Mount Isa. Usually visits to these communities were made during the Court Circuit to the area every one or two months. The Probation Officer would fly into the community with the magistrate, see as many people as possible before, during and after court, induct those placed on new orders and try to provide some form of counselling service before the plane flew out again that afternoon. This process bore very little relevance whatsoever to the day-to-day life experiences of residents of the community. At one point budget restrictions forced even that level of service for about three or four months. In spite of this, a good rapport was established between the Probation and Parole Service and members of those communities.

The Kennedy Review 1988

The 1988 Kennedy Review into Corrections in Queensland resulted in the combination of the two services into the Queensland Corrective Services Commission which began on the 15th December 1988. It had an impact on Aboriginal people in various ways. A major part of the Kennedy Review reflected upon the problems of Aboriginal inmates and the Queensland prison system. The report recognised that Aboriginal people were disproportionately represented in Queensland prisons and that the differences between the various groupings were not only geographical, but also related to the extent to which they retain and maintain their cultural identity.

It acknowledged that Aboriginal people have for decades suffered the effects of institutionalisation, unemployment, low educational and legal status and over-representation in the criminal justice system, and it also acknowledged the extent to which the presence of alcoholism, interpersonal violence and other problematic behaviours in contemporary Aboriginal communities contributed to this over-representation. Recommendations 75 and 76 of the Kennedy Review gave the following clear directions to the Queensland Corrective Services Commission:

- that the Commission develop a comprehensive database relating to Aboriginal people in custody;
- that the Commission appoint an Aboriginal policy liaison officer;
- that the Commission carry out a series of workshops and seminars:
  - that closely involve the Aboriginal community;
  - address the problems facing Aborigines in prisons; and
  - address the problems of Aboriginal communities in their interaction with Corrective Services in this State;
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that the Commission empower correctional centres to develop areas or sections which can become centres for the Aboriginal culture and community with accommodation in these areas totally voluntary; and

that as an alternative to the seven person board recommended in the interim report, consideration be given to the creation of a larger board with one position to be filled by an Aboriginal or Islander.

The Queensland Corrective Services Commission responded to these recommendations by involving the Aboriginal community to assist in providing a range of services for Aboriginal and Islander offenders that contribute towards decreasing the number of offenders represented within the system and to improve the overall quality of treatment during imprisonment.

The major thrust has been:

- representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups in an official capacity within the Commission;

- development of a recruitment policy aimed at increasing the composition of Commission staff to 10 per cent representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders across all operating levels of the Commission;

- establishment of specific positions within the Commission to address Aboriginal and Islander needs;

- establishment of formal services and programs within correctional centres to cater to the needs of Aboriginal and Islander offenders;

- improved access for the Aboriginal and Islander community to offenders in correctional centres; and

- the creation of community based programs that provide alternatives to imprisonment and support for community bodies that address Aboriginal and Islander needs.

The creation of a community based program, to provide alternatives to imprisonment, support for community bodies and to address Aboriginal and Islander needs formed the basis for this project. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody had begun when the project was initiated, although no reports had been tabled at that stage.

The Project

The project has evolved over the period of its existence. Initially it was planned to open an all purpose facility to deal with the non-custodial orders, house some minimal risk low/open classified inmates, and initiate some community development in attempts to prevent offending. It was envisaged that some communities could run these centres under contract to the
Commission or alternatively be employed to do so. The thing that was different about this idea, was that the Commission planned to go to each Community Council and ask them which option they preferred. After interviews with only a few communities some fundamental elements were factored in to this project:

- what the Commission thought was consultation was not viewed that way by the community. The Commission's concepts of who were community leaders reflected a very narrow perspective;

- it was recognised that each community was different: they have different problems and different relationships with their neighbouring communities; and most importantly,

- the Commission realised that these communities develop and change constantly.

All this has evolved into a three-step model. Whilst the model is the same for every community, actual implementation is specific to each individual community. The aim is to rebuild the authority and discipline within the community—it seeks to empower those in traditional authority to implement the model.

**The Model**

**Step 1: Form Community Corrections Committee**

There needs to be a process which identifies key Aboriginal leaders who would be willing to form the core of a community task group designed to overcome the problem of discipline. This group would work to strengthen the norms which already exist and which give authority to members of the Aboriginal community. Such a task group works to ensure that persons responsible for the behaviour of undisciplined people are made aware of their duties and supported when they act responsibly. It will work to strengthen the structures of social control in the community by breaking the present divisions between institutions and providing a community wide network of support.

**Step 2: Appoint Community Corrections Development Officer**

Queensland Corrective Services Commission would appoint an officer in consultation with the community to be not only responsible for supervision in the statutory sense—but more importantly to be a resource person to the task group. This officer would bring the authority of the government to support the task group and to empower them. The officer would work constantly with the task group to plan what is to be done reflecting on the success or failure of the plan. This officer would not be the focus of responsibility. By
working side by side with the people of the community to plan their response to each situation the responsibility lies with the community.

**Step 3: Networking Consensus and Community Development**

Together with the officer as facilitator, the group will plan the involvement of other community institutions in the resolution of behavioural problems in that community. They will involve the police, council, church, school, companies and bodies involved in enterprise in creating a new consensus for acceptable behaviour in the community.

The model has four objectives:

- to motivate the total community—Aboriginal and others from outside;
- to identify, motivate and support those persons who have been traditionally responsible for leadership and discipline;
- to identify existing functional groups still involved in trying to maintain social control in their part of the community's life; and
- to coordinate the resources of the community as a whole to confront their own dysfunction, that is, to bring together those with traditional authority, statutory, normal religious authority and financial power to work towards a new pattern of expectation and the establishment of Aboriginal authority.

The model has now been developed and will be initiated subject to the appointment of staff to those communities who *in consultation* with Queensland Corrective Services Commission, feel they are ready to develop the process and who are working towards providing community programs that provide alternatives to imprisonment. Interviews for Palm Island have already occurred, with Kowanyama to be completed by the end of next month. It is believed that this type of process will allow self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal people, and it will ensure that Aboriginal people are involved in setting the goals and objectives and in administering the programs that concern them. Aboriginal people will determine their own priorities, develop initiatives and take responsibility for their decisions. Already two communities, Hopevale and Aurukun have established out-stations to supervise prisoners at the end of their sentences which they manage under Contract with the Queensland Corrective Services Commission. Pompuraaw is keen to establish an out-station also.

**Conclusion**

Like all government and public agencies, at this time, finance is a major problem. But there is the fundamental element of this model which has occurred independently of budgetary restraints. It is an attitude change on behalf of the Commission, a willingness to be flexible, to meet each community individually and adapt its practices to adjust to the community.
References