

West news

Connecting and partnering
with Aboriginal communities

Issue 9 – Winter 2022



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Welcome to West news

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays its respects to the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal peoples.

In this edition of *West news*, Uncle Murray Harrison talks about his hopes that the Victorian Government's Reparation Package will improve the lives of other members of the Stolen Generations.

The newest Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in Melbourne's West is in the running for a Reconciliation Australia award. We hear how the ACCO successfully pushed for a development of a culturally safe gathering place for local Aboriginal people. The result is the architecturally-designed Wungurrwil Dhurrung Centre in Wyndham Vale, which has already become the heart of the community.

A West Division initiative to increase the cultural awareness of Child Protection workers has

led to development of a new role of Aboriginal Cultural Support and Awareness Advisor that has been rolled out throughout Victoria.

We meet three of West Division's new recruits.

Yorta Yorta/Gunditjmara singer and winner of the 2016 X-Factor competition, Isaiah Firebrace was one of the inspirational figures who spoke to Aboriginal secondary school students at the Koorie Student Aspirations Day in April. The Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, which organises the annual event, explains how it hopes to ensure Aboriginal kids know they can access support to achieve their dreams.

We trust you enjoy this edition of the *West news*.

Front page: The Wungurrwil Dhurrung Centre in Wyndham Vale has already become the heart of the local Aboriginal Community. Image by Aaron Walker.

Shane Cumming message

Kaya (Noongar greeting) everyone,

The Aboriginal Engagement Unit (AEU) is excited to be involved in a project that will assist Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in West Division determine the strengths of their current service provision, as well as find gaps and opportunities for improvement, and ultimately deliver greater outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

An initiative of West Division Koorie Caucus, the ACCO Mapping Project will see AEU team members, myself included, spending a day with every ACCO in West Division to talk to them about their services, their aspirations for future services, and the successes and challenges they face in service provision.

A scoping workshop has already been held at the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative with caucus members to determine what information should be



gathered, as well as the process, methodology, and sovereignty of information collected.

Whilst my team will facilitate the project by gathering the information, the project has self-determination at its heart and the data will belong to the caucus and its ACCO membership.

Once we've presented the findings to the caucus in August, it will be up to the ACCOs to determine the pillars, or priorities, that will be the focus of their work and funding over the next two to five years – informing the next West Division Koorie Caucus Action Plan.

It's exciting times. We'll keep you updated on the developments in the *West news*.

**Shane Cumming,
Manager, Aboriginal
Engagement Unit,
West Division**

Deputy Secretary's message

Greetings from Dja Dja Wurrung Country.

In our last edition of *West news*, I was pleased to advise that we were recruiting to Aboriginal Cultural Safety and Awareness Advisors roles across the division. We have since welcomed Donna Cameron, Anthony Lovett, Jo Malkiewicz and Samara Hanley who, with mentoring from Aunty Elsie Coates (featured page 6), now play an important role in building our relationships

between Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and our Child Protection staff, ensuring cultural support plans build Aboriginal children's connection to culture, Country and community. I am thrilled to finally have all our advisers on board in these key roles.

The Wungurrwil Gagapduir Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement and the department's Aboriginal Workforce Strategy continue to drive our work in the

West. As Shane Cumming mentioned in his message, our Aboriginal Engagement Unit is currently working closely with our Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation colleagues on a project to guide our collective work over the coming months and improve the way we deliver services to Aboriginal children and families. I am pleased that we are undertaking this important work and will provide further updates in coming editions.



We continue to build our cultural knowledge and awareness across the division to ensure we are providing a culturally safe environment for everyone. National Sorry Day, Mabo Day and Reconciliation Week are reminders of the

Reparations for Stolen Generations

At age 84, treasured Aboriginal Elder and singer/song-writer Uncle Murray Harrison says he hopes the Victorian Government's Stolen Generations reparation payments will help improve the lives of other members of the Stolen Generations.

The Stolen Generations Reparations Package has been designed in recognition of the trauma and suffering caused to Aboriginal people who, as result of various government policies, were forcibly removed from their families, community, culture, identity and language from 1919 to the 1970s.

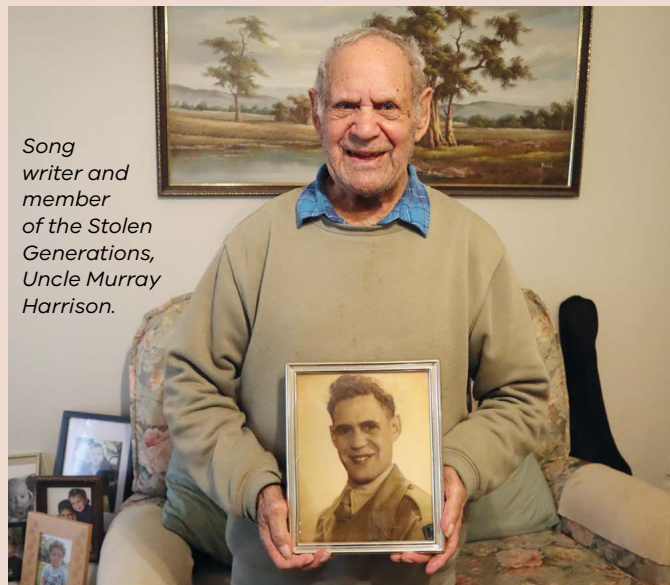
Aboriginal people who were first removed from their families in Victoria can apply for a range of supports through the package, including a payment of \$100,000, trauma-informed counselling and access to the records held by the State about their removal.

Applicants can also choose to participate in healing programs, such as family reunions, reconnection to Country and language programs, and to record and share their experience.

A proud Wotjobaluk man, Uncle Murray and two of his sisters were removed from his extended family by welfare workers in 1948, when he was only ten years old.

The children were driven to Bruthen Courthouse and then onto Melbourne, where Uncle Murray was separated from his siblings and thrown into a dark cell at Royal Park Depot in Parkville (later known as Turana). He was incarcerated with young offenders for months before being reunited with his sisters at Ballarat Orphanage.

Like many members of the Stolen Generations, Uncle Murray sought solace in alcohol, and he believes he would have drunk himself to death if it weren't the love of his life, his wife Norma, and his God, Bunjil.



Song writer and member of the Stolen Generations, Uncle Murray Harrison.

Not that the scars are fully healed – it only took a recent Archie Roach performance to bring it all back.

'When I heard him sing *Take the Children Away*, I remembered my sister being dragged by her hair into the car,' Uncle Murray says.

Uncle Murray says the 2008 Apology, when then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generations in Parliament, and then sought Uncle Murray out from the crowd to give him a heartfelt personal apology, had a significant impact on him.

'(Kevin Rudd) was with some important people

and he saw me and told them to wait a minute, then he came over to me and said, "Sorry";' Uncle Murray says. 'That meant something.'

Under the reparations package, applicants can also request a personal apology from the Victorian Government, including from the Premier.

Applications will begin to be assessed in June, with priority given to the elderly, or those who are in poor health, and advance payments available for those who are terminally or critically ill.

For details, go to <<https://www.vic.gov.au/stolen-generations-reparations-package>>

importance of cultural safety and we embraced this year's reconciliation theme – *Be Brave, Make Change*. We strive to learn more about our shared history and strengthen our relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve reconciliation. Recently, Shane and his team facilitated sessions across the division to increase the cultural awareness of our housing staff, and all department staff were invited to participate in forums on the Yoorook Justice

Commission. It's critical that we understand the commission's purpose and the principles, key objectives, and scope of work across the entire department, including what it means for the department and the role we have in the Truth and Treaty process.

I hope you enjoy this edition of *West news* and I look forward to providing you with further updates later in the year.

**Paul Smith
Deputy Secretary,
West Division**

Reparations package eligibility criteria

- be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person
- have been removed by a government or non-government agency before 31 December 1976, while under the age of 18 years
- have been first removed in Victoria
- have been separated from your family for a period of time that resulted in the loss of family, community, Culture, identity, and language
- have lodged a valid application with all necessary supporting identification documents.

An Aboriginal Place in Aboriginal Hands

The newest Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in Melbourne's West, Kolling-wada-ngal Aboriginal Corporation, has been nominated for a Reconciliation Australia award for its work in developing the \$13.2 million Wunggurrwil Dhurrung Centre.

Manager Rebecca Monahan says the Wyndham Vale centre, which opened in December 2019, aims to provide a culturally safe space for Aboriginal community to gather and connect with each other, and promote Aboriginal community development and self-determination through equal and respectful relationships.

Wunggurrwil Dhurrung means 'strong heart' in Wadawurrung and the centre's unique design includes artwork by local artist Aunty Vicki Couzens that looks and vibrates like a heartbeat, to reinforce its mission of being the heart of the local Aboriginal community.

Community do not need a reason to visit the centre – the foyer is set up as a welcoming place to just sit and have a yarn.

'People can go there and be proud of their identity.

It's a place to learn about your Aboriginality and connection,' Rebecca says.

'We've got a lot of Aboriginal people who live in the western area of Melbourne who don't know their connection,' Rebecca says. 'We wanted to create a space where you can come in and have these yarns with us and have

the kids and potentially change that care arrangement to kin rather than foster care, because kin is always better.'

Organisations running Aboriginal-specific programs, services and activities that had only been accessible in Melbourne's northern suburbs are now

Integrated Family Centre with kinder and childcare. It caters to children from all backgrounds, but has a focus is on fostering Aboriginal culture.

'We are developing a space where non-Aboriginal children will grow up to be allies for the Aboriginal community because they will have that really beautiful understanding of Aboriginal culture and history,' Rebecca says.

'As an example, our kinder kids do an Acknowledgement to Country every day and they understand what it is and why they do it. So, we've had kinder kids go off into primary school and hold their primary school teacher accountable for not doing the Acknowledgement of Country before they go to play, so that really opens up an option for the primary school to bring that cultural overlay into their classroom, which is fantastic.'

The Wunggurrwil Dhurrung Centre was years in the making; the Kolling-wada-ngal Committee began working on building the required partnerships to create the centre back in 2013.

The committee was able

The Wunggurrwil Dhurrung Centre was named in consultation with Wadawurrung Traditional Owners. It was designed ... to be in harmony with the natural environment.

these conversations, so we can potentially point you in directions where you can find your family and find a connection and find your history.'

In line with that sentiment, non-Aboriginal people who are raising Aboriginal children are also encouraged to spend time at Wunggurrwil Dhurrung.

'Foster carers can bring Aboriginal kids to connect with their cultural practises and get to know aunts and uncles and community members that are local to them. That's also potentially a way that we can find family for

utilising the centre, including the Aboriginal Wellness Foundation. The foundation runs programs for boys and girls at different ages to teach them about cultural practises and keep them connected and engaged in school.

'Young people move up in stages through the foundation and they eventually come out as really strong Aboriginal men and women,' Rebecca says.

Youth are a focus, given Wyndham's growing and young population, and the centre includes an





to garner strong support from Wyndham City Council and the Victorian Government and, along the way, developed the capacity of its members and processes to form a Board. In July last year, it took the next and final step of registering as an Aboriginal corporation, becoming the newest Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) in Melbourne's west.

It's been a huge journey for the community, and the committee, which has undertaken extensive work on creating cultural protocols outlining expected behaviours and responsibilities of all people who use the Wunggurrwil Dhurrung Centre. Reconciliation Australia shortlisted Koling-wada ngal as a finalist in its 2022 Indigenous Governance Awards, citing

its 'culturally informed ways of working, driving positive and long-lasting change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities'. The winner of the award will be announced in June but, no matter the result, Rebecca says the community is proud of Koling-wada ngal's work and of knowing it now has its own ACCO. 'We feel that this space will allow us to be able to develop a community that's strong and united and has a voice like the community in Melbourne's north, because we've been forgotten about for a very long time. By providing these spaces and by having a voice and sitting at those mainstream, non-Aboriginal organisational tables, we know that the Aboriginal issues and voices will be heard.'

Photos of the Wunggurrwil Dhurrung Centre by Aaron Walker.

In harmony with the environment

The Wunggurrwil Dhurrung Centre was named in consultation with Wadawurrung Traditional Owners. It was designed by architects Gresley Abas, in consultation with Gregory Burgess Architects, to be in harmony with the natural environment. The building can open to the outside, depending on weather conditions and the needs of the users, and has an extensive bank of solar panels that generate 56.5kw of renewable energy; helping ensure it is not only beautiful, user-friendly and flexible, but also environmentally sound. The building has achieved a five-star, carbon neutral rating.



West workers lead the way on cultural safety

A West Division initiative to increase the cultural awareness of Child Protection workers has been embraced by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, with 21 new roles being created throughout Victoria.

West Division developed the new role of Aboriginal Cultural Support and Awareness Advisors with the aim of recruiting four workers to assist Child Protection workers in the Central Highlands, Brimbank Melton, Western Melbourne, and Wimmera South West areas. The other divisions have followed suit, with an additional 17 Cultural Safety Advisors recruited to Child Protection units throughout Victoria.

The workers' role will be to advise Child Protection practitioners working with Aboriginal children, and engage with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community services organisations to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

They will also be able to provide cultural expertise and guidance around the development of cultural plans and compliance that is required to enable Aboriginal children to build their resilience, and support them to remain with family, or closely connected to their family, and to be connected

to community.

West Division's Aboriginal Engagement Unit Manager Shane Cumming says Aunty Elsie Coates work within Child Protection in the Barwon Area was the inspiration for the new roles.

'We were getting much more successful outcomes in terms of the quality and provision of care for the children and their cultural support plans and the relationship with the ACCO with Aunty Elsie being involved with it, because they had an Aboriginal person to help guide them and give them advice, and then share that decision making and share that responsibility.

'The other areas that didn't have that support, they really did struggle.'

In addition to her ongoing role as an advisor, Aunty Elsie has been appointed as a mentor to the four new recruits in the West; facilitating weekly meetings and providing support to them as needed.

'Having an Elder in the position will give the new staff a sounding board and guidance.'

Shane says he's also hoping that, in addition to improving outcomes for Aboriginal families who come into contact with Child Protection, the new roles will also make Child Protection a more culturally safe and attractive career path for Aboriginal people.

'There's high turnover in Child Protection and it's basically all non-Aboriginal people making these decisions because there's no Aboriginal staff in there — or very few.'



Aunty Elsie Coates
Mentor and Barwon Area Advisor

Aunty Elsie has been involved with Child Protection for decades, first as a worker for Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative and now with the department.

'I have to say things have changed so much with Child Protection over the years...my first

experiences were horrendous. I was spoken to very rudely and, it was like a "Who are you?" type of attitude!'

Whilst there is still more to be done, Aunty Elsie says non-Aboriginal workers now reach out to her to assist them in their work.

'Before all of this started, I'd had calls from other Child Protection Officers across the state asking about my position and what I do. Everyone wanted somebody like my role in their office.

'I just try to make it as easy as possible for the case managers and management to actually work with Aboriginal people. Having a lot of knowledge and a huge network, it makes all the difference and I know that the new starters have got such good networks and they're all well known in their areas, so that is going to make a huge difference.

'We've got a lot of work to do, but I'm so excited about having other people doing this role and having other people I can speak to and share ideas with.' - Aunty Elsie Coates



Donna Cameron
Brimbank Melton Area Advisor

Donna Cameron is a Nukuna woman from South Australia who has been working with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations for decades, having spent the past five years as a program manager for Lakidjeka – an Aboriginal service run

by the Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency that provides Child Protection with advice on the best interests of Aboriginal children and young people.

'I am passionate about having better outcomes for our mob.' – Donna Cameron

'I am also passionate about passing on my knowledge to Child Protection staff, so we can all make informed decisions for our kids, and hopefully reduce the number of Aboriginal children coming into the system.

'We are also hoping to change the negative impression our mob have of Child Protection and build positive relationships and work together with Aboriginal parents to understand their trauma and different services that may support the family. I also believe the biggest impact we are going to have, is to connect our kids with culture and our Elders.'



Anthony Lovett
Central Highlands
Area Advisor

Anthony is a proud Gunditjmara man who has lived and worked with community in the Ballarat area for a long time, most recently at the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association. Anthony has worked within Child Protection's orbit over the

years through his involvement in various organisations and as a member of the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee, which sparked his interest in ensuring Aboriginal children maintain or develop strong links with their culture.

'We have to make sure that Child Protection workers understand that culture is at the centre of everything we do – that it's not an added extra or a tick a box.' – Anthony Lovett

Anthony is also keen to assist non-Aboriginal workers to become more confident in their skills in developing appropriate and impactful cultural plans, and in working with Aboriginal children, particularly if they have been derided for their efforts in the past.

'I want to encourage them. Even if it's not right, it's a start, and we can work on improving it from there.'

We will feature the Advisors for the Western Melbourne and Wimmera South West Areas, Jo Malkiewicz and Samara Hanley, in the next edition of West news.

Interested in a job in Child Protection?

Go to <<https://childprotectionjobs.dffh.vic.gov.au/why-child-protection>> for details.



Event encourages kids to follow their dreams

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary school students from the greater Geelong and Colac region were encouraged to follow their dreams at a Koorie Student Aspirations Day, held on Wadawurrung country in April.

The two-day event was organised by the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (LAECG), with the support of the Polly Farmer Foundation, to instil pride in First Nations youth and to provide them with options for their future.

Students from Years 7 to 12 heard from inspirational young Indigenous role models who have achieved success in their chosen field. The program also presented a number of opportunities for students to learn about post-school career and education pathways and opportunities.

Each day included a Welcome to Country from Wadawurrung Traditional Owner Corrina Eccles, followed by a 'speed dating' session where students visited a number of stalls to learn more about the opportunities

available to them after leaving school, in a number of different fields and industries.

Students were able to interact with educational institutions, such as universities and TAFE, building and construction organisations, unions, employment agencies, and local organisations with Indigenous traineeships and pathways.

'We want to make sure our kids know they can do anything, and there are people all around who can help them get to wherever they want to go.'

Staff and alumni from the Polly Farmer Foundation also ran a goal setting session, where students were encouraged to start small but dream big, and work their way through developing SMART goals to achieve whatever they want to do in life.

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(Above) Proud Gunditjmara and Yorta Yorta singer Isaiah Firebrace shares his story with students at Koorie Aspirations Day.

Event encourages kids to follow their dreams



• From Page 7

Yorta Yorta/Gunditjmara man Isaiah Firebrace, winner of the 2016 X-Factor talent competition and Australia's Eurovision representative in 2017, was one of the guest speakers. Isaiah shared his story of growing up in Echuca

and his first experience of singing in front of a crowd at school in Year 8. He also spoke about his failures and how he worked through them before winning the X-Factor at just 16 years of age.

The afternoon sessions included hip-hop

The Indigenous Outreach Project dancers pose with a group of students after the hip hop workshop.

dancing, art and painting, Indigenous games, the AIME Leadership program and Clothing The Gaps Foundation's 'Shades of Deadly' campaign.

LAECG co-Chair Aunty May Owen shared how wonderful it was to see this annual event happen again after two years of COVID postponements: 'We want to make sure our kids know they can do anything, and there are people all around who can help them get to wherever they want to go.'

'One of the best things about these days is seeing all the kids come together and connect with each other, with their culture and to meet new people and know they have support in whatever they want to do now, and in the future.'

Story contributed by Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative

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