

## Djooraminda

Djooraminda is an Aboriginal residential child care agency. Currently it has five cottages, one in Northam and four in the metropolitan region. Each cottage, a normal house, can accommodate up to six children at once. Each cottage has a direct care worker who is employed to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The carers in the cottage are all Aboriginal and two workers in the office are Aboriginal. The children are referred to the agency basically because they cannot be cared for at home, for a variety of reasons. Some children have been apprehended, while other children's parents may be sick or homeless. The length of time the children stay varies, from one or two days to several months, even a year.

The agency employs five direct care workers, five relief workers, some domestic workers, an administration officer, welfare and education officer, senior social worker, and a director, who also has a social work degree. These are generally the same positions that have been in the agency since it was opened. The only difference being that the welfare and education are now consolidated into one position, which was previously two separate positions.

in 1978 Father Barry Hickey (now Archbishop Hickey), a qualified social worker, was commissioned by the Archbishop of the Catholic Church to set up the church's welfare agencies. Previously Father Hickey had been involved in a review of institutional care for children. One of the recommendations from the review was for children to be cared for in 'scatter cottages' instead of buildings which housed large groups of children in dormitories. These cottages were to represent a more 'normal' family environment.

Around 1978 the Wandering Mission was in the process of closing down. Discussions occurred between the manager of the Mission and Father Hickey and it was arranged that Centrecare Children's Cottages would be established to take in the children who were at the Mission. Father Hickey agreed with the concept of 'scatter cottage' as an appropriate form of child care and decided to develop Centrecare Children's Cottages as 'scatter cottages'. So in 1979-80 Centrecare Children's Cottages acquired houses in Beverley, Brookton and Northam. By 1982-83 all the cottage parents were Aboriginal and some of the office staff were Aboriginal.

Over time there was a change in the children who were placed at the cottages. When the cottages first opened (1980-81) the children were of a young age, ranging from 0 - 5 years. Around 1985 the age of children had increased to range between 10-17 years. This change in the age was accompanied by a change in the children's needs. It became necessary for an education officer to be employed as the social worker and the welfare officer were not able to address all the issues surrounding education. Some staff in the schools had the attitude that social workers had no knowledge of educational issues, which emphasised the need for an education officer.

Around 1987-88 most of the children in the cottages were offenders, and some displaying difficult behaviours. Some of these children had not attended a lot of school and found it difficult to fit in with the normal educational stream. A 'youth house' was organised and the children living there participated in an alternative programme to school. This involved arranging different work experience and programmes to develop their skills for the work force.

Around 1989 there was a change in the policy of child protection. The belief was that it was best to keep the children at home as much as possible. This meant that by the time the children were placed in the cottages they had usually been through several placements and were very damaged.

There were difficulties in being situated in small country towns. There was usually some racism which was accentuated by the children's difficult behaviour. The children were subject to being labelled as 'in care' and people tended to stereotype them. It was made more difficult for some of the children to fit in as they were from the city and were not used to living in a country town. The decision to close the cottage in Brookton was due to the negative attitudes of the people in the town. There was a strong push from town members to close the cottage in Beverley as well, which eventually was closed down. There was a tendency for the cottage children to get the blame every time there was some trouble in the town.

As well as the reluctance of the town members to accept the children, there was also a lack of resources to help the children. Many of the children were quite damaged when they arrived at the cottages and there was not any adequate facilities to deal with them in the country towns. To get help for the children required going to Perth.

*The word Djooraminda comes from the Buddemia language from the Paynes Find/Yalgoo area and is made up of two words, 'Djoora' meaning children and 'Minda' meaning place.*

The agency changed its name to Djooraminda in July 1992 to more accurately reflect the nature of the agency's services for Aboriginal children and their families. The word Djooraminda comes from the Buddemia language from the Paynes Find/Yalgoo area and is made up of two words, 'Djoora' meaning children and 'Minda' meaning place.

The age of the children in the cottages has gradually returned to a younger age, with the average age being around 5 years. This shift has resulted in the Education Officer position being made redundant as there was no longer any issues around education.

The social work role involved a variety of tasks. Time was spent organising for children to visit their parents and transporting them there and back, liaising with the referring agency, working with the cottage parents to help them understand the children's behaviour and how to discipline the children. The goal of working with the children was for them to return home, or live independently, or live with another family/relative. The issues that arose in working with the children included Aboriginal, family, offending and abuse issues. Some of the children in the cottages required more time and attention than the social worker was able to give.

The social work role is still comparable to earlier impressions, the only difference being that there is no longer multiple issues around the children offending. As the children are younger the goal is not for independent living, but aimed at supporting them while they are in the cottages and working towards them returning home or to a foster family. Many of the children are referred through Family & Children's Services so there is not always a lot of contact between the workers at Djooraminda and the children's family.

Over time it has been possible to identify significant changes in the policies surrounding children in care. The changes that had the most effect on the agency were:

- There was a lot of emphasis on Aboriginalisation and placing children with Aboriginal families. Out of this developed the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles, in 1985 by the (then) Department for Community Services.
- The Ministry of Justice developed a separate division for juvenile justice from the welfare departments and this had an influence on the type of children placed at the cottages.
- Policies about child abuse and protection.

With regards to the agency's role in social work student education, I am the first student to have a placement at Djooraminda. However, the agency has decided that they may take on other students in the future.

*This paper was written by social work student, Petrina Butcher. She would like to acknowledge the time and contributions made by Kath Callow, Don MacAllister, Angela Parsons, and Gabrielle Garrett.*