

REMOTE ABORIGINAL SWIMMING POOL PROGRAM



Government of Western Australia
Department of Housing



Royal Life Saving
THE ROYAL LIFE SAVING SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

100
YEARS
WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Background

The Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Program (RASPP) is managed by the Royal Life Saving Society and is funded primarily through the Department of Housing and Works with additional contributions made through BHP Billiton Iron Ore and the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. It focuses on providing the remote communities of Burringurrah, Jigalong, Yandeyarra, Bidyadanga and Warmun with recreational and educational swimming programs, to encourage safe aquatic participation.

The program aims to work in consultation with communities to run safe, efficient and effective aquatic facilities and to meet the needs and expectations of the communities.

To achieve this aim we work towards the following objectives:

- To encourage safe participation within the aquatic facility
- To provide a safe pool environment within each community
- To promote community support and patronage of the swimming pool
- Deliver aquatic based water safety programs in remote Aboriginal communities

The Royal Life Saving Society was contracted by the State Government Department of Housing and Works in 2000 to manage newly installed swimming pools in the three remote Aboriginal communities of Yandeyarra, Burringurrah and Jigalong – and to deliver swimming and lifesaving programs to the community.

Royal Life Saving Society pool managers live in each community for nine months of the year, maintaining the pools and delivering community programs which include swimming lessons, swimming and lifesaving carnivals, birthday parties, after-school and holiday swimming, lap swimming, lifesaving training and other activities at the request of the community.

The pool managers are responsible for:

- Facilitating and encouraging safe participation in aquatic activity within a specified aquatic centre
- Ensuring the efficient maintenance and operation of the centre
- Ensuring the centre is well presented at all times
- Consulting with and working towards meeting the needs and expectations of the community where the centre is located.

In the employment of pool managers, successful applicants displayed cultural sensitivity, excellent communication skills, flexibility, adaptability and an open approach to the position. As part of the employment induction process, all pool managers undertake cross-cultural awareness training. This awareness has continued to grow through their daily activities within the communities.

Perhaps the greatest success story to date is the employment of the first Aboriginal pool manager.

Victor Belotti grew up in Carnarvon, a 'neighbouring' town to Burringurrah and enjoyed many a childhood adventure at Burringurrah. Since his employment, Victor has proved himself to be an efficient operator and a sensational role model for the local children. Of significant benefit to the program is Victor's heritage. As an Aboriginal Australian, Victor has an in depth understanding and appreciation for the cultural values and traditions of the local people and is able to provide a delicate balance between the rules and regulations of the facility and the beliefs and activities of the community.

Victor has already made his mark on the community with the local children respecting him not only as a pool manager but as an uncle – a term used in respect for a male member of the community. He has conducted interim swimming lessons for the children at the community school and is already a member of the local basketball team. Victor is a strong asset to the program and is a strong mentor for young Aboriginals seeking a career in sport and recreation.

Establishing strong working relationships with the local communities is essential in managing an efficient and successful facility. The communities are individually consulted at the start of each swimming season to establish what programs and activities are required for the upcoming season. In addition, The Royal Life Saving Society consults with the community on a regular basis regarding program participation and facility utilisation rates. The Society also encourages the community to report back on the operations of the facilities from a community perspective, which occurs regularly during the season.

Community Outcomes

The program has delivered significant positive outcomes for the community including health and social benefits and education/training opportunities.

The success of the program was highlighted in a report presented by the Education and Health Standing Committee to the Legislative Assembly in Western Australia, in June 2006. The Chairman, the Hon TG Stephens said the 'the overall work done by the Department of Housing and Works and the Royal Life Saving Society...has been an extraordinary success.'

Health Benefits

RASPP is premised on the basis that providing well-maintained, well-supervised aquatic facilities and swimming programs can potentially improve the overall health status of Aboriginal communities, particularly Aboriginal children.

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research has been monitoring the health of RASPP participants since the project's inception and this research evidences significant health and social benefits.

...what we have found from our door-to-door interviews was that people in these communities are very supportive of these pools. They can see the difference. We have interviewed them before and after the pool was built. They have told us that they can see that their children are healthier.'

Mary Tennant, Research Assistant, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

The research shows that the children appear healthier since the pools have opened, and the incidence of skin sores and ear infections has decreased. At Burringurrah, ear problems have decreased from 90% to 54% and severe skin sores have decreased from 28% to 3%. Similar results were recorded in Jigalong.

Swimming proficiency has reduced mortality rates from drowning, a key issue in these communities, which are located close to rivers that flood during the wet season

Social benefits

Each community has embraced the 'No School, No Pool' policy and school principals have reported a marked increase in school attendance and an overall improvement in the children's behaviour. For example the Jigalong community school has increased school retention rates from approximately 20% to 80%.

'...certainly...the school attendance has definitely improved. In fact, at Jigalong we were told that they had to increase the number of teachers because so many kids were going to school...'

Mary Tennant, Research Assistant, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

Further benefits include an increase in physical activity levels in the host communities, enhanced community cohesion and reported decrease in vandalism.

'It is quite interesting that the policeman said that in the summer months the crime rate among adolescent children went to zero. In the winter months when the pool was closed, it went up...it is definitely helping with crime.'

Mary Tennant, Research Assistant, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

The children participate in a number of activities at the pool including swimming lessons, work experience and holiday programs. They have painted brightly coloured murals on the buildings, displaying their creative and artistic talents.

Social programs at the aquatic facility are popular, with birthday parties, pool-fishing events, barbeques and movie nights proving to be regular features on the community calendar. Swimming and lifesaving carnivals are also a social highlight.

Training and Employment Benefits

Mentoring and training is being provided for community members with a view to management responsibility and ownership passing back to the community in the longer term.

In association with the management training, the Royal Life Saving Society also runs a pool lifeguard training course and approximately 45 Aboriginal trainees have progressed to pool lifeguard standard. Part of the training is completed at the community pool, with the remainder undertaken at the nearest regional centre. The partnership covers all accommodation and travel costs incurred by the trainees.

'Swimming pool management training courses are an ideal employment pathway allowing an individual within a remote community to obtain portable work skills and qualifications that can be used in mainstream society.'
Education and Health Standing Committee, Swimming Pool Program in Remote Communities, Report No. 2 in the 37th Parliament, 2006

The course is a modified version, designed to be more accessible for the Indigenous learner.

'We have found that a more hands-on training approach works well and as a result of the changes most Indigenous students who commence training achieve a successful outcome and meet the standards required by industry for employment.'

Greg Tate, Manager Community Relation, Royal Life Saving Society Australia – WA Branch

The Royal Life Saving Society is continuing to work closely with the remote communities to develop new and innovative programs to ensure we are adequately servicing the communities needs.



The Future

The Royal Life Saving Society has engaged with the numerous program stakeholders to look at how and when the program can be expanded to benefit more remote aboriginal communities. The next stage will see the construction of a new aquatic facility at Fitzroy Crossing. This is expected to be completed in December 2009. The facility will be managed under the existing successful Department of Housing and Royal Life Saving model.

Other remote communities that have shown interest in adopting this successful program include Warburton, Warakurna, Blackstone and Balgo. The first three communities mentioned above already have existing facilities. These are in urgent need of refurbishment. The Balgo community requires the construction of a new facility. We are advocating that the refurbishment and construction of these new facilities be funded by the Federal government and the ongoing maintenance and management be funded by the State government.

The existing swimming pools have become social hubs within the remote communities that they are located. This provides a unique opportunity for the development of other infrastructure and programs in and around the pool that will potentially be accessed by a large percentage of the local community.

One such program that the Royal Life Saving Society is investigating is the provision of fresh fruit and vegetables directly to the community. These would be grown and harvested within the pool area and provided directly to community members free of charge.

Discussions with stakeholders at the Jigalong community have indicated that fruit and vegetables are not subsidised in Jigalong. Coke and chips are cheaper to purchase than fruit and vegetables which is not an incentive for the Martu people to eat healthily.

Water to nurture a garden could be supplied from the backwash water produced through the existing sanitising process of a pool. Currently this water is not utilised and pumped directly into the existing septic system. Modification to a pools plant would be required for this water to be of a standard to be used on the garden.

The introduction of water reuse techniques has been trialled and developed in selected aquatic centres throughout Western Australia. The Royal Life Saving Society and Leisure Institute of Western Australia have researched the effectiveness of these techniques. The knowledge gained will assist in the implementation of water reuse techniques in remote swimming pools. This will provide an ongoing and sustainable water source for the garden.



The extensive experience gained by the Royal Life Saving Society in developing the RASPP may also be applied to the establishment of innovative training programs for indigenous people living in major regional towns in the North West. This could be achieved through the development of regional training academies. These academies would provide vocational training for Indigenous people. This would provide them with skills that would assist them to gain employment.

What has become evident during our involvement with the remote communities is that strategies are required to address the inherent barriers that confront Indigenous people taking up employment.

Generally the barriers include:

- Education level is lacking
- Don't want too much responsibility
- Shame, being seen as wanting to be better than the rest of the community
- Community territory can sometimes result in exclusion of other families in a community
- The value of money is different to ours
- Difficulties in respect to self image and self motivation that exist.
- Lack of ownership and responsibility in relation to their own future employment and lifestyle concerns.

The answers to these problems are not simple, nor are they easily overcome, but Royal Life Saving believes it can go along way towards dealing with them in a positive pro-active manner.

The unique aspect of traditional training programs that we propose to change is the focus from the creation of employment opportunities based on our perception of what job functions a Indigenous person should perform – (eg become a pool manager, a pool lifeguard), to the development of a structure that allows individuals to build a role based on their priorities, areas of interest.

By turning our focus onto the individual rather than the organisational needs we believe we build on personal priorities and motivations and direct these energies toward a successful role in a selected workforce area.

In an effort to overcome the identified barriers, RLSS proposes to undertake as a core to this initiative - to the point that it becomes thematic - a physical activity component. Such development of the self is of paramount importance in establishing a concrete foundation from which the hard skills of employment can be tackled

Training programs would include the following core components

- Introduction to personal development principles.
- Health and Fitness
- Ongoing career education
- Base training covering general skill and background preparation for employment.
- Specific vocational training
- Continued counselling service assistance
- Hands on employer based experience Follow-up
- Assistance with employment placement
- Continuous assessment



For further information, please contact:



The Royal Life Saving Society Australia – WA Branch
McGillivray Road, Mt Claremont WA 6010
PO Box 28, Floreat Forum WA 6014
Phone: (08) 9383 8200
Facsimile: (08) 9383 9922
Email: info@rlsswa.com.au
Website: www.lifesavingwa.com.au