



THE NATIONAL  
EMPOWERMENT  
PROJECT

**A Journey of  
Empowerment  
and Healing**



The National Empowerment Project Cultural, Social and Emotional Wellbeing Program is an innovative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led initiative working directly with communities to address their cultural, social and emotional wellbeing.

A story about strengthening cultural, social and emotional wellbeing is best told by the people who have begun their own journey of healing and are seeing real changes in their lives and in their communities.

Kuranda in the northwest of Cairns, and Cherbourg, in the South Burnett district of south-east Queensland, are the real measures of success for the National Empowerment Project (NEP) Cultural, Social and Emotional Wellbeing Program (CSEWB) and it is borne out in an evaluation report on the pilot phase. That report includes direct comments from community members who participated in the project, they said:

*[It] gave me the strength to move forward.*

*[It] reminded me about life skills needed in society; helped me think about my priorities; helped regain custody of my children.*

At a community level, the evaluation report found that the NEP CSEWB Program is contributing to healing among families, improving role modelling to future generations and reaffirming cultural identity in Kuranda and Cherbourg.

While the success of the program is being played out on a daily basis in these two communities, formal evaluation of the pilot was an important milestone for the Queensland Mental Health Commission (QMHC) and its consideration of future support for the program.

Over the life of the NEP CSEWB Program, the QMHC has invested around \$625,000 for support services, community worker training and a healing program in each community. The initiative results from a partnership between the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia, the Ngoonbi Community Services Indigenous Corporation and the Queensland Mental Health Commission.

The NEP CSEWB Program Queensland Coordinator, Glenis Grogan (Ngoonbi Community Services Indigenous Corporation), believes the key to the NEP's success is that it comes from Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people and, more often than not, is delivered by Aboriginal people.

*It's an empowering program that gives people the tools and the skills to be able to address situations.*

*When you really know who you are, you are able to become stronger in yourself. You can be a proud Aboriginal person.*

*It's not us doing it to them. It's about their own self-realisation – their responsibility, their family and community – and what they can do to change it* (Glenis Grogan, Ngoonbi Community Services Indigenous Corporation).

Bronwyn Murray is the NEP CSEWB Program Coordinator at Cherbourg and has been closely involved with development of the CSEWB Program.

*What makes this one different is that it comes from grass roots. It's not top heavy; it wasn't put together by an organisation.*

Bronwyn said that in Cherbourg, better communication – having 'hard yarns' – has made a positive difference to individuals and families.

So far, more than 150 people have completed the CSEWB Program in Cherbourg and Kuranda, and eight community healing events have been held.

Perhaps a stark measure of the program's success highlighted in the evaluation report was a community altercation in Cherbourg in 2015 which involved up to 200 individuals – none of whom were participants in the NEP.

An important indicator of the CSEWB Program is evidence of reduced stress levels among participants by providing training to identify the stressors in their life and giving them tools and strategies to cope. Measures of individuals' pre and post stress levels found that, with the exception of a few individuals, stress decreased for program participants in both Cherbourg and Kuranda.

Increasing resilience, reducing psychological and community distress and strengthening cultural, social and emotional wellbeing are known to reduce suicide risk in communities.

Leadership training is now being delivered in the two communities, which will allow more people to be actively involved in delivering the CSEWB Program. In the past, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have had to move away from their community to larger urban areas to do this type of training.

Following the formal evaluation, the QMHC has now extended its commitment to a five year strategy in the two communities and possibly to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Queensland.

And while the funding support is an important part of the journey, the real story lies in the difference it is making to the lives of Indigenous people who have taken part in the program.

*[It] helped me understand my anger, stress and what triggers my emotions. [It helped with] understanding I need to get help in stressful times.*

*[I learnt that I] need to be honest with myself regarding behaviour and anxiety. [I] learnt strategies to overcome depression [and] anxiety. [I] know that I can make changes.*

Queensland Mental Health Commissioner, Dr Lesley van Schoubroeck, said:

*We're really pleased to support the NEP and it's great to see changes in places like Cherbourg and Kuranda. We see people's lives are starting to change. We hear stories of people who are getting their children back; becoming more involved in their community. If we can support programs by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that are bringing about real change then they are the sorts of programs that the Commission is happy to support.*



