



# A Framework and Guide for the Child and Family Services Workforce in ACCOs

*Building and supporting a strong Aboriginal-led child and family services workforce*



Victorian Aboriginal Children  
& Young People's Alliance

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**Victorian Aboriginal  
Children & Young  
People's Alliance**

# Contents

Acknowledgements	3	Professional Development	33
The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance	4	<i>Workplace Training</i>	33
Executive Summary	5	<i>Incidental Professional Development</i>	35
Introduction to the Framework	6	<i>Formal Qualifications</i>	36
A Framework for the Support and Development of the Child and Family Services Workforce in ACCOs	7	Leadership	38
Recruitment	7	<i>Recruiting Managers and Team Leaders</i>	38
Workforce Health and Wellbeing	7	<i>Lines of Management</i>	39
Professional Development	8	<i>Workplace Culture</i>	39
Leadership	9	<i>Debriefing and Support</i>	41
Workforce Structure	9	Workforce Structure	41
Implementation Guide	10	<i>Caseloads</i>	42
Recruitment	10	<i>Co-location</i>	42
<i>Process</i>	11	<i>Teams</i>	42
<i>Assessing Cultural Competency</i>	14	Celebrating the ACCO Child and Family Services Workforce	43
<i>Pathways into the Workforce</i>	16	Definitions	44
<i>Qualifications and Requirements</i>	21	Acronyms	45
<i>Onboarding</i>	23	Endnotes	46
Workforce Health and Wellbeing	25		
<i>Flexible Working Arrangements</i>	26		
<i>Imbedding Culture in Every Day Practice</i>	28		
<i>Cultural Load</i>	29		
<i>Supervision Approaches</i>	30		

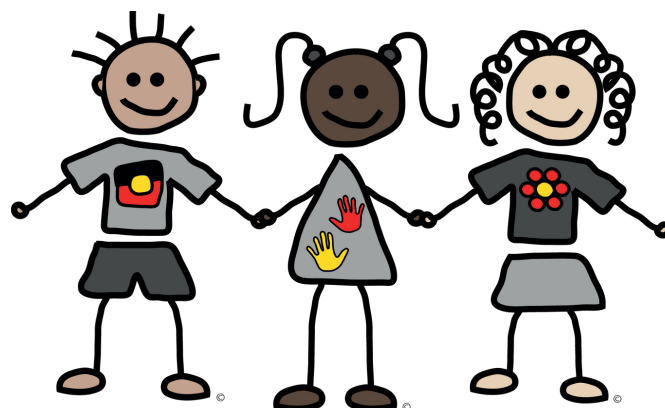
# Acknowledgements

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) wishes to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Australia, and pay respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

The Alliance wishes to acknowledge that Aboriginal people in Australia are the oldest continuing culture in the world and for more than 60,000 years they have flourished in strong families and communities. At the core of Aboriginal cultures is a holistic understanding and way of life that saw our people live in harmony with each other and the land. This wisdom has been passed down from our ancestors and through their continued, enduring resilience. It is our hope that Aboriginal knowledge systems and ways of being continue to be recovered, reaffirmed, and celebrated in the wider Australian society.

The Alliance also wishes to acknowledge and pay tribute to the tireless work of our Aboriginal Elders, leaders and community who continue to advocate for self-determination and the health and wellbeing of our communities. They have carried hope and advocated for change, against adversity and systemic racism, to bring us to where we are now. It is on their shoulders that the Alliance Members and Aboriginal communities continue to improve outcomes for our children and young people.

Lastly, the Alliance would like to acknowledge the information and stories shared by our member organisations which have shaped and guided this framework. We would like to thank the CEOs, child and family service managers, team leaders, team members and HR staff who have contributed their time, knowledge and expertise. We would like to acknowledge and celebrate their passion and commitment to their community, which shines through in the strength of their work.

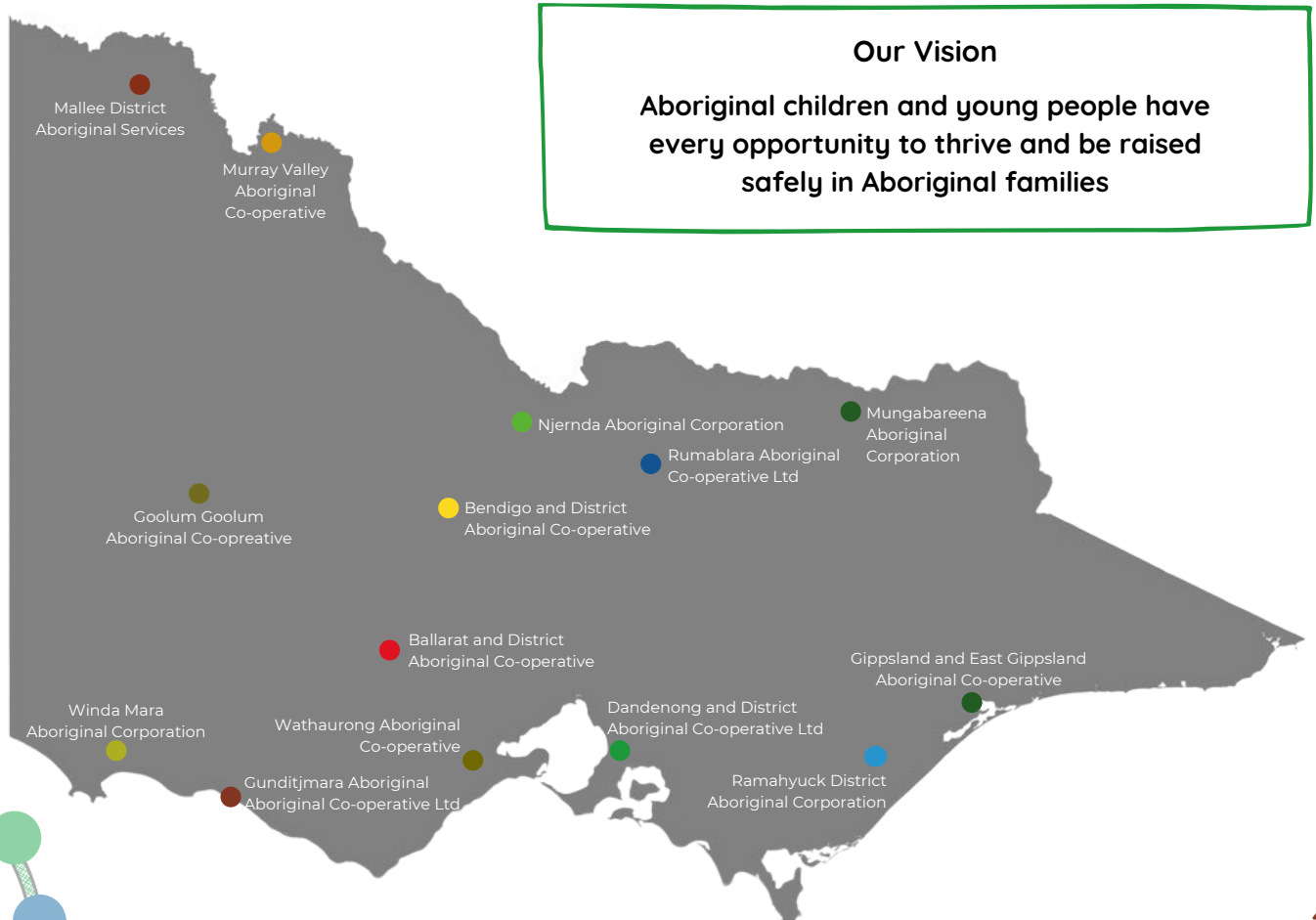


# The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) is an alliance of 14 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) registered to deliver child and family services through the Human Services Standards under the Child, Youth and Families Act (2005).

In 2014, we formed the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance, with the belief that together we are stronger and with one unified voice we can positively influence the future for Aboriginal children and young people living in Victoria.

Together with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), we will be responsible for overseeing the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in Out of Home Care (OOHC) through their care and case management. By 2021, all Aboriginal children and young people will be in the care of ACCOs. The Alliance has a crucial role in driving change to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.



# Executive Summary

Child and family services are an area of rapid growth within the community sector and ACCOs are at the forefront. ACCOs are positioned as leaders, innovators, cultural hubs and providers of high-quality service delivery. The professionalism, resilience, strength, diversity and passion of the workforce are the driving force behind the success of these services. They are a unique workforce who are highly attuned to the needs of their community and enable the provision of culturally appropriate, trauma informed and person-centered support[1].

ACCOs have recently assumed legal guardianship of Aboriginal children under Section 18 of the Child, Youth and Families Act (2005). In addition, the gradual transition of the care and case management of Aboriginal children involved with Child Protection to ACCOs. Through self-determination, ACCO child and family services are vital in strengthening Aboriginal families and building resilient communities[2].

The ACCO approach to child and family service delivery has proven to positively impact on the lives of their community. The workforce is a major component and contributing factor to this success. It is a workforce grounded in culture and family values, providing holistic care with empathy, compassion, expertise and strength.

Mirroring the ways their workers are attuned to the needs of Community, ACCOs are attuned to the needs of the workers. At an organisational level, there are several strategies and approaches to build, support and guide the workforce. These approaches are often unique to ACCO child and family services and are imbedded with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. This framework aims to capture the diverse and localised ways that ACCOs support the health, development and wellbeing of one of their most vital assets- the workforce.

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## An Introduction to the Framework

This framework has been developed using information provided by 14 Alliance member ACCOs who deliver child and family services. It identifies the areas that contribute to building and supporting the workforce and captures the practice standards required to do so. It is accompanied by an Implementation Guide, which provides additional information, ideas and examples.

For the purpose of this framework the definitions for minimum requirement and best practice have been drawn from the experiences of the 14 ACCOs.

**Minimum Requirement:** The standard of workforce practices in their most basic form.

**Best Practice:** The optimal standard of practice in ACCO child and family services.

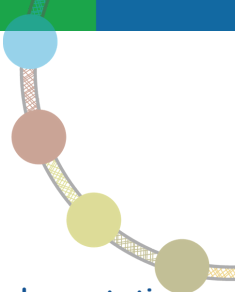
It is important to acknowledge the expertise of the 14 ACCOs and their contribution to this body of work. Each ACCO is unique and will be varied in the way this document is interpreted and implemented.



# A Framework for the Support and Development of the Child and Family Services Workforce in ACCOs

Topic	Minimum Requirement	Best Practice	Implementation Guide
<b>Recruitment</b>			
Recruitment Processes	<p>Clear communication and understanding between HR staff and program managers</p> <p>Clearly communicating the expectations of the role and organisation to the applicants</p>	Using a variety of approaches, tailored to meet the specific needs of the program, team and Community. This may include purpose-based, active and staggered recruitment	<p>Page 10 - 13</p> <p>Tips for culturally safe recruiting on page 15</p>
Assessing the cultural competency of applicants	Integrating recruitment practices that value the expertise of Aboriginal staff and seek to assess the cultural competency of applicants. This includes having at least one Aboriginal person on each interview panel	Asking applicants specifically designed questions in their interview to ascertain cultural knowledge, competency and capacity to learn	Page 14
Pathways into the Workforce	Enabling various points of entry into the workforce to attract a diverse team of staff	Implementing targeted approaches to attract and recruit Community members to child and family services	Page 16 - 20
Onboarding	Having clear and consistent processes for onboarding new employees	Holding teams and managers accountable to ensure thorough and robust onboarding	Page 23
Qualifications and Requirements	All teams have a combination of staff who are qualified and who have the skills and personal qualities to build meaningful relationships with Community	<p>Each staff member has a minimum certificate-level qualification or is working towards one</p> <p>Each staff member genuinely understands the needs of Community and the values and dynamics of Aboriginal families</p>	Page 21 - 22
<b>Workforce Health and Wellbeing</b>			
Flexible Working Arrangements	There are minimum guidelines organisations must meet under the Fair Work Act 2009 when offering flexible working arrangements to their employees.	Making available a variety of flexible working arrangements to meet the individual needs of each staff member. This includes working individually with staff to find the best arrangements for them	Page 25-27





Topic	Minimum Requirement	Best Practice	Implementation Guide
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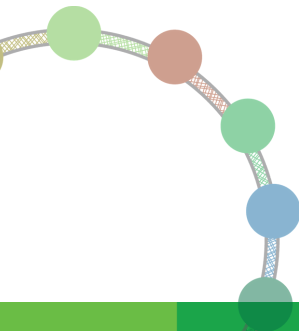
Imbedding Culture in Everyday Practice	<p>Providing all staff with the opportunities and knowledge to imbed Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing within their practice</p> <p>Implementing measures to ensure cultural safety in all areas of the workplace and workforce</p>	<p>Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing should be imbedded in every aspect of the organisation, and held accountable by constant reflection and feedback from staff, clients, Community and management.</p> <p>Intentionally incorporating culture into the workplace will lead to these values and ways of working becoming imbedded in practice</p>	<p>Page 28</p> <p>Cultural Load information on page 29</p>
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Supervision	<p>Monthly one-on-one line-manager supervision for every staff member (informal debriefing may occur more frequently)</p> <p>Regular opportunities for cultural supervision</p>	<p>The Australian Association of Social Workers Supervision Standards recommends supervision occur fortnightly for new employees and those who have been in the field 2 years or less.</p> <p>The opportunity for external supervision for staff and managers upon request.</p> <p>Other supervision practices such as peer-led or reflective practice made available as required</p>	Page 30 – 32
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**Professional Development**

Workplace training	Supporting and encouraging all staff to attend training that is relevant and applicable to their work	Actively seeking, arranging and financing relevant training as per the needs of the staff and programs	Page 33-34
Incidental Professional Development	Ensuring there are frequent opportunities for learning and development throughout day-to-day work	Encouraging staff to participate in meetings and activities beyond their usual workload to encourage learning and development	Page 35

Qualifications	<p>Most ACCOs require child and family services staff to have a minimum certificate level qualification or working towards one.</p> <p>ACAC staff require a Social Work degree or a Diploma of Community Services (excludes Case Support Administration workers)</p>	Staff qualifications must meet the Australian Community Services Worker Association (ACWA) accreditation requirements and be relevant to the local context and workplace	Page 36 - 37
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Topic Minimum Requirement

Best Practice

**Leadership**

Recruiting Managers and Team Leaders

Advertising management positions internally to identify existing staff who have knowledge of the services and Community, as well as the capacity to lead a team

Recruiting internally or externally for staff with management experience as well as knowledge of the services and Community

Page 38 - 39

Workplace Culture

Encouraging open communication and information sharing, starting with leadership and permeating the whole team.

Workplace culture should align with the organisational values set by the Board and have a clear delineation of where organisational culture is present in strategic, operational and work planning

Page 39 - 40

Continued reflection and evaluation of the team environment and the factors contributing to team culture is important

Debriefing and Support

Providing regular and responsive support to meet the complex needs of managers.

Prioritising the debriefing, supervision and support provided to managers.

Page 41

Ensuring managers have the skills and training to support the wellbeing needs of their staff

Providing various health and wellbeing pathways, with external and peer supervision often the preferred means.

**Workforce Structure**

Caseloads

ACCO child and family services caseloads are generally capped at 12 basic cases

Enabling the flexibility to reduce the number of cases if there are complex and time-consuming cases

Page 42

Co-location

Facilitating opportunities and pathways for certain staff to share a physical location with external service providers on a routine basis

Ensuring organisational policies and procedures are in place to support the co-location.

Page 42

Staff are co-located in a culturally safe and positive working environment, where they have access to support and learning opportunities

Teams

Providing each employee, the opportunity to sit physically and structurally within a team

Team structures have shared workload capabilities, a positive culture and clear lines of management

Page 42



# Implementation Guide

This section will include best practice examples from ACCOs and outline the reasons these factors have contributed to success. The information provided in this section is a combination of the expertise and experience of our members and academic research. We acknowledge the implementation and adaptation of these practices is unique and varied across local contexts and recognise that not all ACCOs have the capacity or need to take each of these factors on board.

## Recruitment

Recruitment is one of the most crucial aspects of any organisation. It is equally one of the biggest challenges facing regional ACCOs. The success of programs within the Aboriginal child and family sector rely heavily on the personnel delivering the service. It is a workforce requiring a specific set of values, skills and personal qualities, with a connection and relationship with the local Aboriginal community. As the sector grows and the demands and responsibilities placed on ACCOs increases, so too does the need for qualified and trained employees.

To build a workforce of this caliber takes time, money and resources. It requires clear and pragmatic processes, multiple points of entry to the workforce, clearly communicated position requirements and comprehensive induction and onboarding. It is impeded by the rural location of most ACCOs, where the recruitment pool is reduced and candidates with qualifications, a connection with community and values that sync with the organisation are hard to come by.

Despite these challenges, investing in recruiting a local workforce, balanced with field expertise is vital in building the capacity of child and family services to continue to expand and support Aboriginal families. Recruitment provides economic and educational opportunities to Community, enhances community relationships, promotes active self-determination and consolidates sustainable growth. Managers and team leaders play a pivotal role in recruitment, despite their expertise often being in service delivery. Therefore, understanding the HR terms, ideas and processes discussed below may be of value.



## Process

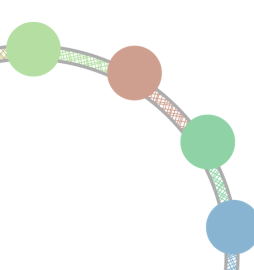
A robust recruitment process that includes measures to attract Aboriginal candidates is critical to effective ACCO child and family service delivery. These processes vary among ACCOs and are impacted by factors such as capacity, funding and local community needs. Some ACCOs have found utilising HR personnel for advertising and shortlisting to be a useful means of streamlining the process, maximising the available expertise and minimising the workload of managers.

For this process to be effective clear communication and a mutual understanding between HR and program staff is crucial. Successful recruitment process options include:

### Purpose-based recruiting

A relationship-oriented model focused on recruiting purpose-driven people who have the right skill set and are genuinely passionate about the organisation and its mission[3]. It is about finding candidates who “have the skills to do the job-but more importantly their heart (is) in the right place[4].”

In the Aboriginal child and family sector, each position requires a unique skill set, combining life experience and formal qualifications; occasionally favoring one over the other and over-arched by the capacity to build and maintain relationships with Community. With such a broad spectrum of skills required, it is important ACCOs have an emphasis on purpose-based recruiting, focusing on finding the candidate who is genuinely passionate about the role and the best fit for the team, not simply the one who looks best on paper. It is vital that the HR team can work closely with program staff to discerningly articulate these qualities, translate them to the specific program requirements and communicate them clearly on position descriptions. Managers and program staff must be clear about the traits and qualities that will suit their team and clients, so that applicants with hidden potential are not lost in the shortlisting stage. This may include people who are not formally qualified but are purpose-driven and whole-heartedly committed to the work. This has been an effective recruiting approach for the Mutjang bupuwingarrak mukman (ACAC) program at Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative. It shows in the commitment and determination of staff to achieve the best outcomes for Aboriginal families.



# Ideas for Effective Advertising Pathways

Word of Mouth

Local Career Expos

Social Media

Seek

Koori Mail

Community Notice Boards

Career Trackers

Local Newspapers

Indigenous Employment Australia

Ethical Jobs

National Indigenous Radio Service

Facebook Groups

“

Purpose-driven people working in roles they are passionate about is like adding accelerator to a flame<sup>5</sup>

”

## Active Recruitment

Active recruitment has been identified as one of the most effective ways of recruiting Aboriginal staff[6]. It means utilising existing relationships among Community for recommendations of potential candidates and actively seeking them out and encouraging them to apply. This can be time consuming, yet effective and is reliant on having a strong pre-existing relationship and good reputation with Community. Involving Community in the recruitment process assists in identifying the barriers and stigmas that often prevent them from applying for ACCO positions, such as the assumption a qualification or experience is required, or reluctance to work with child protection.

Active recruitment generates Community involvement in the decision-making processes of the organisation, allowing input and feedback to refine cultural practices. This encourages a sense of ownership, empowerment and shows the organisation is actively responsive to the needs and ideas of Community. It is also important that ACCOs encourage community members who have been unsuccessful in their application for a certain position to apply for other vacant positions. This can be operationalised by maintaining a database of their details and applications, so that they can be actively encouraged to apply when a new position becomes available.

## Staggered Recruitment

is careful timing of recruitment in stages, avoiding the need to fill all positions at once. Often when funding is released for a whole team, bulk recruitment is perceived to be the quicker and easier option. Advertising and recruiting for a whole team at once mean only one pool of candidates, thus reducing the number and quality of applicants. Staggering this process means multiple pools of potential candidates and a greater capacity to pursue active and purpose-based recruiting strategies. It is common that the team leader or senior position is recruited first, then involved in the process of recruiting and onboarding their team. This eases the pressures of onboarding with staff being able to train each other. A staggered recruitment process is preferred by many ACCOs over a bulk recruitment drive.

## Clear expectations

Child and family services is a challenging space to work in and is not suited to everyone, it is therefore important all applicants have a clear understanding of the role and the work involved. It is especially important to ensure Aboriginal candidates clearly understand the pressures associated with working among their Community and have the capacity to handle the complexities of this situation.

## Assessing cultural competency

This is an essential step in an ACCO recruitment process. It means integrating recruitment practices that value the expertise of Aboriginal staff and seek to assess the cultural competency of applicants. It can include having an interview panel, containing at least one Aboriginal staff member and asking applicants specifically designed questions to ascertain cultural knowledge, competency and capacity to learn.



## Ensuring Cultural Capability at Ramahyuck

### Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation

Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation, like many ACCOs, have numerous measures in place to ensure they are recruiting culturally safe and competent employees. The Child and Family services team have implemented an innovative and effective approach, adapting a cultural coaching model to assess the cultural capability of job applicants. In this process the applicant is required to attend two job interviews. The first, is a cultural interview with an Aboriginal staff member, which aims to gauge the applicant's cultural awareness and ascertain whether they're safe to work with Aboriginal children and families. The interviewer asks a series of questions relevant to child and family services work, including the local Gunai Kurnai people and history, as well as intergenerational trauma and its impacts on Aboriginal families today.

This process is intended to assess cultural competency and build awareness, ensuring each applicant leaves the interview better informed. As well as asking questions, the interviewer will share and discuss the answers with the applicant and provide them with an information pack at the conclusion of the interview. Following this, the applicant will attend a second position-specific interview with a different team member. The cultural interviewer provides an overview to the second interviewer with feedback and advice to help inform their decision making.

Ramahyuck has found this to be a highly effective tool to ensure new employees have the skills and awareness to safely work with Aboriginal Communities. It helps gauge the applicant's level of understanding, how they respond to not knowing the answers and helps to identify any gaps in knowledge before they commence employment. Additionally, this process ensures culture is at the forefront of every aspect of service delivery and helps maintain the positive workplace culture of continual learning, knowledge sharing and cultural safety.

# Tips for Culturally Safe Recruiting

A culturally safe recruitment process is key to organisations maintaining a reputation as an Aboriginal employer of choice. Each step of the process from advertising to interviews should be conducted with Aboriginal candidates in mind. Some steps included in the Aboriginal Cultural Capability Toolkit to ensuring culturally safe recruitment processes include:

Position Description includes a clear description of the role

Position Descriptions and ads show leave entitlements including cultural leave, hours of work and potential for flexible working arrangements

The statement “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are encouraged to apply for this job”

Ensure the interview space is welcoming and culturally safe

Provide interview questions prior to the interview to reduce anxiety and ensure interviewees have the opportunity to present their best case

Engage existing Aboriginal employees in promoting the benefits of a career in your organisation. For example, attending Aboriginal job fairs or speaking in a promotional video

Provide recruitment information to Aboriginal Community organisations, networks, employment and careers expos and community events

Include an Aboriginal person on the selection panel. Include an Aboriginal male on the selection panel for Aboriginal male candidates and an Aboriginal female on the panel for Aboriginal female candidates whenever possible

Ensure panel members have completed cultural capability training, unconscious bias training and merit-based selection training

Provide support to applicants before the interview, e.g. provide clear instructions about access to the building, the selection process and interview format and panel members

Be aware that there could be differences in communication styles, e.g. silences might be longer for some Aboriginal people as they provide an opportunity for deeper thought and it may not be polite for some Aboriginal people to make lots of eye contact

Be aware that, for some Aboriginal people, self-advocating or “talking yourself up” may not come naturally due to social and cultural norms. Some Aboriginal applicants may be inclined to speak more in terms of team or group outcomes rather than personal achievements

The information captured in Tips for Culturally Safe Recruiting is a reflection of information gathered from our members and backed up by the Victorian Public Sector Commission’s Aboriginal Cultural Capability Toolkit Recruiting and Inducting Aboriginal Staff. 2020



# Pathways into the workforce

Generating alternative pathways into the workforce, can potentially assist ACCOs in overcoming recruitment challenges. Fundamental to the success of these alternative pathways is:

- Work-based training
- Education and mentoring opportunities
- Opportunities for varied role and program experiences
- The ACCO having a good reputation and trusted by Community
- Transparent communication about future employment opportunities
- Encouraging the forming of interpersonal relationships with clients, colleagues and stakeholders
- Detailed onboarding processes
- A positive team culture and working environment

Potential pathways into the ACCO workforce include:

## Entry level positions

For Aboriginal people without any qualifications or experience, entry level positions provide a paid employment opportunity, a 'foot in the door' and access to opportunities they may not otherwise have. These positions are often in Support Worker or Administrative Assistant positions, which provide a gradual and guided introduction to the social services sector. This reduces the risk of overwhelming staff and setting them up to fail. This can be an empowering process, providing staff with opportunities to attain a qualification and transition to other positions within the organisation.

Utilising active recruitment and purpose-based recruitment strategies for these positions will assist in finding the applicants who are the right fit for the organisation. Acquiring entry level staff and supporting their transition to other roles can boost retention, sustainably build workforce capacity and expertise, while maintaining the corporate knowledge of the ACCO.

## Shadowing senior staff

Recruiting a trainee to work alongside a senior employee, supporting them with administrative tasks, while gaining on-the-job training and experience. Providing trainees, the opportunity to move among departments and programs is important.



## Partnerships

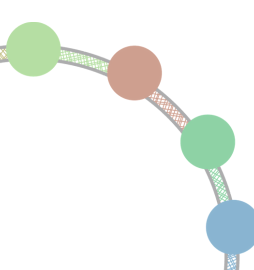
Working with external stakeholders to train and upskill staff in areas that may be new or unfamiliar to an ACCO. This can be a cost effective and collaborative way of upskilling staff in a complex or specialised program, enhancing the capacity of the organisation while consolidating effective partnerships. In practice - a trainee would work for a period within an organisation already delivering the specialist service. The trainee will then return to the ACCO once they are ready to begin delivering the service, bringing with them their newly acquired skills and knowledge, to be shared and absorbed by the rest of the workforce. This approach would require strong external relationships, a Memorandum of Understanding and mutual aspirations to upskill the ACCO workforce in order to better service Aboriginal families.

## Reception

Another approach is that the trainee begins working at reception, building their skills and capacity to multi-task, time manage and handle the different situations they may face with Community. Once they feel confident and competent in this area, they can transfer to other roles within the organisation, such as youth or family services.

## Traineeships

An effective strategy for introducing Community members into the ACCO workforce is through traineeships. Traineeships are a formal training arrangement, combining paid work with study for a qualification<sup>[7]</sup>. This is a cost-effective entry point, providing Community with education and employment opportunities and to sustainably build the capacity of the workforce. Trainees provide ACCOs with an opportunity to continue meeting their service demands, while developing expertise and upskilling their workforce. Traineeships are commonly an Aboriginal identified position, contracted for a period of 12 months and accompanied by accredited training and education. Trainees are generally paid at the level 2 or 3 SCHADS award rate, with consideration to their experience, skills and position. There is widespread success with these programs, with the trainee often remaining within the ACCO and transitioning to permanent paid position. It is important that ACCOs provide transparent communication on the availability of paid positions at the conclusion of the 12-month period.





## The GEGAC Academy

Gippsland and East Gippsland  
Aboriginal Co-operative

The GEGAC Academy ('The Academy') offers a 12-month paid traineeship for young Aboriginal Community members comprised of an in-depth induction to the ACCO, job shadowing and accredited training. The Academy provides participants with a unique traineeship experience that is strong in culture and supportive of personal and professional growth.

The first stages of the model focus on transitioning participants into the workplace through an in-depth induction process. This involves introducing each program area and ensuring participants learn the importance of delegation, organisational structures, reporting and the impact of this on processes and service delivery. The participants have their own Academy room (office space), providing a safe space for them and ensuring their introduction to the workforce is not overwhelming.

Following their detailed induction, the participants meet with and learns about the various program areas, helping them to narrow down the areas they are interested in, before a period of job-shadowing. The narrowing and shadowing process continue until participants have one program area they'd like to focus on. The participants then begin accredited training aligned with their chosen program area. Having the freedom to explore their options helps the participants and organisation make an informed decision of where they'd be best placed.

Academy staff provide resources and guidance to ensure GEGAC staff are ready to host a trainee and provide them with support and structure. Throughout the traineeship, GEGAC works with participants in getting to know themselves and supporting them through the challenges of working within their own Community. Cultural ways are imbedded in the Academy model with the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning framework guiding the Academy's design, development and content delivery. In addition, GEGAC ensure there is capacity for learning and growth throughout each aspect of the model, through reflective practice with participants and ongoing reflection and review of the model.



*Image 2: 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning. The Traditional Owners of Western NSW and NSW Department of Education*

## Student Placements

Student placements have also been identified as a worthwhile investment of time and resources, particularly for ACCOs using local tertiary education institutes such as university or TAFE. Student placements provide ACCOs with a direct link to qualified candidates. Student placements are generally unpaid positions, however, provide a win-win experience for both student and employer.

It allows students the opportunity for hands-on experience, helping them decide if it is the right sector and role for them, while providing a direct entry pathway into the workforce. For employees, placements increase the likelihood of students transitioning to paid positions. This is founded on the relationships students form with clients, community as well as feeling included, valued and welcomed into the organisation.



**BDAC**  
BENDIGO & DISTRICT  
ABORIGINAL CO-OPERATIVE

## Student Placement

Bendigo and District  
Aboriginal Co-operative

Students studying the Diploma of Community Services are required to complete four weeks of full-time placement as a part of their studies. Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative offers placement in all service areas including Family Services and Out of Home Care. On average BDAC has 15 students from Bendigo TAFE, another 5-10 from other education providers and five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students per year.

In the last three years BDAC has formally employed roughly 10 staff that started in student placement. Investing in placements has been worthwhile for the organisation, with majority of students wanting to remain at the ACCO. It provides authentic and meaningful cultural awareness training for students and hands on practical experience working with Aboriginal families. For the ACCO, it is a chance to see how the students work, how they fit into the team and align with the values of the organisation before offering employment.

### Entry level positions

For Aboriginal people without any qualifications or experience, entry level positions provide a paid employment opportunity, a 'foot in the door' and access to opportunities they may not otherwise have. These positions are often in Support Worker or Administrative Assistant positions, which provide a gradual and guided introduction to the social services sector. This reduces the risk of overwhelming staff and setting them up to fail. This can be an empowering process, providing staff with opportunities to attain a qualification and transition to other positions within the organisation.

Utilising active recruitment and purpose-based recruitment strategies for these positions will assist in finding the applicants who are the right fit for the organisation. Acquiring entry level staff and supporting their transition to other roles can boost retention, sustainably build workforce capacity and expertise, while maintaining the corporate knowledge of the ACCO.

## Qualifications and requirements

There is an increasing shift in the sector towards mandatory qualifications for program staff, however the rates at which this is implemented varies. The value placed on education, community knowledge, skills and experience vary greatly among ACCOs and among program areas. For some ACCOs there is an overarching preference to recruit based on cultural competency and core values. For other ACCOs qualifications are mandatory for all staff, with majority of their programs requiring a minimum certificate IV in Community Services (or related field). For a majority of ACCOs a combination of both within the workforce is critical.

### "Certificate in Community"

A vast majority of the work conducted in child and family services is relational and reliant on the ability of staff to build rapport and trust with their clients, families and Community. These skills are difficult to teach and are subjective to each individual and their personal circumstances. As an ACCO manager described an understanding and knowledge of Community, also coined a "Certificate in Community", should carry as much weight and value as an accredited certificate or qualification.

These skills are arguably more critical to the work and achieving positive outcomes for families. Staff with an understanding of Aboriginal families, culture and Community has shown to lead to "more effective and accountable case work practice"<sup>[8]</sup>. In a sector where the impacts of colonisation are omnipresent and practices are bound by western welfare norms, it is essential that ACCO program staff understand the unique and localised Aboriginal family dynamics and child rearing practices<sup>[9]</sup>.

Aboriginal families and community have unique cultural values and norms that differ to mainstream and having an in-depth understanding and knowledge of this is essential to providing targeted and empathetic support<sup>[10]</sup>. A "Certificate in Community" values lived experience, familial ties, cultural expertise and community connections - the essential skills that are often omitted from mainstream learning. Recruiting staff with these skills, often through alternative pathways (see above), is critical to the ACCO model of service delivery, and an important component of the unique and varied specialisations of the ACCO workforce. As a sector and workforce, it is important to recognise and celebrate the essential and valued input that a "Certificate in Community" can provide.

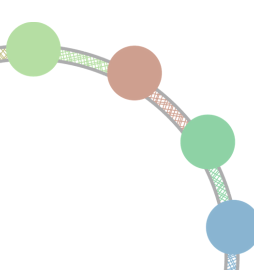


## Qualified Staff

The value and importance of accredited training varies among programs and ACCOs. Some require a minimum qualification at certificate level, while others require diploma level and others have no mandatory requirements at all.

Programs such as ACAC require staff to have qualifications equivalent to those of Child Protection Practitioners. With CEO approval, these qualifications can be completed whilst the staff member is working. Formal qualifications are essential within the workforce, providing staff with theoretical knowledge and a clinical skill set enabling high quality service delivery to Aboriginal families. Courses such as the certificate in Community Services empower staff with skills and knowledge in conflict resolution, co-existing needs, mental health, domestic violence, drugs and alcohol and community development. These are essential starting points for anyone engaging with vulnerable communities. For some ACCOs there are barriers preventing staff from accessing accredited training, such as a lack of education and training opportunities in their region, the costs of such training and the limited capacity to send staff to training courses.

To maintain balance within the team, many ACCOs ensure there is at least one qualified staff member in each team, so others who may not have studied have access to secondary consultation, informal learning and guidance. ACCOs moving towards mandatory qualifications have expressed the benefit of AWDI funding in upskilling the workforce, as well as utilising subsidised TAFE courses.







# Onboarding New Employees

Onboarding is critical to the support and development of the child and family services workforce. Investing time and effort into this process will go a long way in ensuring newcomers feel welcome, supported and included in the team [1].

Some of the things to consider when onboarding new employees:

- Ensuring there are clear processes in place, and these are communicated to the new employee
- An onboarding checklist to be completed by the manager and new employee
- Enabling a process to handover clients, including meeting with them
- A tour of the workplace and introductions to each staff member
- Providing new employees with a handbook or manual of the program and workplace
- Police Checks, Working with Children's Checks and any other workplace checks
- Setting up meetings for the new employee
- Scheduling regular catch ups and informal check ins with new employees
- Introduction to the office systems such as filing, IT, case management
- Cultural safety training, which is especially critical for non-Aboriginal staff who may not have worked in an ACCO before
- Ensuring new employees understand the importance of supervision and know who they can contact for debriefing
- A buddy system where new employees are paired with a staff member who provides information and support
- Ensuring the workspace and computer are set up and ready before the new employee begins
- Providing an ergonomic assessment



# Ideas for Improving Retention

Retention starts with recruiting:

Clear and transparent recruitment process, communicating a clear expectation of the role requirements

Recruiting the right people for the role, team and organisation

Providing access to consistent and regular individualised professional health and wellbeing activities (e.g. internal, external, peer and cultural supervision)

Culturally safe, open, positive and supportive workplace culture

Regular team building activities and exercises

Long lasting, community-minded managers who are in tune with service delivery

Competitive salary

Imbedding culture in everyday practices

Access to professional development, career advancement and ongoing learning opportunities

Exit interviews with outgoing staff for organisational feedback

Flexible working arrangements

Initiatives to ensure staff feel valued and recognised (e.g. celebration of achievements, sharing wins and good news stories, positive feedback)

## Workforce Health and Wellbeing

This framework highlights the essential role of the ACCO workforce in the delivery of effective child and family services. Critical to this is the maintenance of employee's health and wellbeing, encompassing physical, emotional, spiritual and social health in both their professional and personal lives. Just as ACCOs provide a holistic model of care to their Community, a holistic approach to staff wellbeing is just as important. Balit Marrup developed in partnership with the Victorian Government and Aboriginal communities, outlined a model for Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing [12].

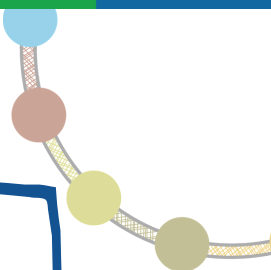


*Image 3: Model for Social and Emotional Wellbeing from Department of Health and Human Services, 2017, Balit Murrup: Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing framework 2017–2027, Victorian Government*

*“According to Worksafe Victoria, mental injury is the second highest source of compensable claims in Victoria” [13].*

It is a challenge facing numerous jurisdictions, sectors and workforces. Child and family services staff within ACCOs are exposed to a higher risk of mental injury, working at the coalface of intergenerational trauma with the added complexity of doing so within their own Communities and family groups. There are a multitude of factors that impact on the mental health and wellbeing of ACCO staff, such as lived experience, cultural safety, workloads, work/life balance and cultural load.

These contributing factors can have a heightened impact on Aboriginal staff and as a result, cultural ways of healing and debriefing are critical to mitigating the risk they pose. ACCOs are implementing a variety of innovative and localised wellness strategies and cultural practices to support the health and wellbeing of their workforce. These are often delivered in conjunction with mainstream care practices such as internal and external supervision. It is a critical factor in retention and the successful delivery of services. As an ACCO staff member described “healthier staff directly relates to better supports for our children.” With no additional funding to do this, ACCOs are highly resourceful and creative in ensuring these practices are imbedded into their service delivery.



**“ Studies such as Beyondblue’s 2014 report ‘Creating a mentally healthy workplace: Return on investment analysis’ indicate that a mentally healthy workplace, on average, may deliver benefits worth more than double the original investment.<sup>14</sup> ”**

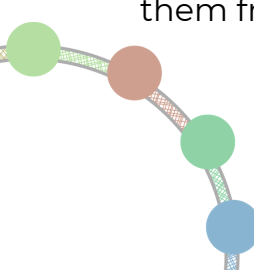
## Flexible Working Arrangements

A report into understanding employee demand for flexibility defines eight types of flexible work arrangements<sup>[15]</sup>:

1. Compressed shifts/work week, e.g. working full time hours over four days
2. Opportunity for sabbaticals or career breaks (e.g. extended time off)
3. Unlimited paid time off
4. Caregiving leave
5. Flexible arrival and departure times
6. Full-time work from home/ location independence
7. Choice and control in work shifts
8. Part-time work from home

When considering flexible working arrangements, it is critical these are based on the needs and desires of individual staff. By adopting this approach ACCOs may see a decrease in sick leave and personal days as staff are able to maintain a good work life balance. The National Working Families Report found 62 percent of Australian working parents were struggling to care for their physical and mental health due to the tension between work responsibilities and caring/parental responsibilities<sup>[16]</sup>. One in four of these workers were considering quitting their job because of this, which demonstrates flexible working arrangements can be extremely beneficial.

Having flexibility on the location where staff are able to work can help when staff are required to travel for cultural leave including Sorry Business, attending cultural events and any other type of event/family obligation. This can reduce the amount of personal leave/annual leave they are required to take and can prevent them from becoming behind in their work.



There are minimum guidelines organisations must meet under the Fair Work Act 2009 when offering flexible working arrangements to their employees<sup>[17]</sup>. The guidelines state if an employee has been with the company longer than 12 months on a full-time or part-time basis and meet the following criteria, they are eligible to request flexible working arrangements:

- the employee is a parent, or has responsibility for the care of a child who is of school age or younger
- the employee is a carer (within the meaning of the Carer Recognition Act 2010)
- the employee has a disability
- the employee is 55 years or older
- the employee is experiencing violence from a member of the employee's family or;
- the employee provides care or support to a member of their immediate family or household who requires care or support because they are experiencing violence from the member's family.



## Time in Lieu

### Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation

Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation have put measures in place to ensure their staff have access to a flexible working environment. Staff are offered the choice of working an extra half an hour each day, either 8:30am – 5:00pm or 9:00am – 5:30pm. They can then accumulate this extra half an hour as time in lieu and take one day off per month, which does not affect their annual leave.

Many staff take up this opportunity and use it as self care time. Some staff prefer to schedule beauty appointments for this time, get some quiet me time, or do the errands and jobs they would not normally be able to do. Working in child and family services can be demanding, emotionally draining and complex. Winda Mara are using this initiative to ensure staff can access meaningful opportunities for self care that meet their specific needs.

# Imbedding Culture in Everyday Practice

Highlighted throughout this framework is the need for culture to be imbedded in all aspects of the organisation, as it is critical to successful service delivery and the provision of a cultural model of care. ACCO child and family services continue to prove the benefit of culturally strong responses and practice when working with Aboriginal families. This model of care is holistic, responsive, safe and effective in engaging and empowering Aboriginal communities.

This way of working is not isolated to the delivery of services, it permeates the entire organisation and is critical in supporting the health, development and wellbeing of staff; in particular the child and family services workforce. The process of ensuring Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing are at the forefront of all aspects of child and family services work is a continuous and ongoing process. It requires constant input and feedback from staff, clients, community and management. Intentionally incorporating culture into the workplace will lead to these practices, values and ways of working becoming imbedded.

## Intentional Ways of Immersing Culture in the Workplace

Team Meetings

Opportunities for staff feedback and input on imbedding culture

Reflective Practices

Yarning Groups

Leadership team reflection and planning

Spending time on Country through work

Regular Smoking Ceremonies

Engaging Elders (can be through staff debriefing, program planning, operation and evaluation)

Cultural Supervision (individual and team)

Creating opportunities for sharing knowledge and stories

Participating in cultural activities

Cultural events - for community & staff e.g. NAIDOC week & cultural days

Providing opportunities for learning and understanding

## Cultural Load

Cultural load can be defined as the accumulation of stressors commonly experienced by Aboriginal staff including grief, loss, trauma (including intergenerational), racism and discrimination. The concept recognises the high frequency at which these events can occur and contribute to the cultural load. This is often carried into the workplace, especially when staff are working with their own community[18]. Although these challenges are not new to Aboriginal people, it is a relatively new concept, and an area lacking in research, awareness, funding and discussion.

Workers are constantly faced with the challenge of working within a community, in which they have a deep connection through friends and family. As a result, it is “often excruciatingly difficult to separate personal life and professional life” and there are many layers of additional pressures and complexities[19]. This can result in a burden that increases the workforce’s susceptibility to burn out, vicarious trauma, lateral violence, low retention, stress and fatigue. Despite this ‘textbook’ definition, it can be very difficult for staff to put into words the complexity and vast impact of their cultural load - defining and quantifying its effect is subjective and varied.

Cultural load has a major impact on the ACCO workforce, it impacts on recruitment, service delivery, retention and the health and wellbeing of the staff. It can manifest when cultural beliefs are compromised, staff are culturally unsafe, there is a conflict of interest, competing expectations and staff struggle to maintain a work/life balance. It can present as vicarious trauma, burnout, lateral violence and fatigue. It is near impossible to eradicate cultural load altogether without compromising the cultural strength and community-led practice driving the workforce. ACCOs are leading the way in thinking about potential impacts of cultural load on their Aboriginal workforce and devising various strategies to support this load and minimise the impact. A culturally strong and safe working environment is critical in supporting staff enduring cultural load, as well as varied opportunities for supervision and debriefing. Some suggestions and ideas on supervision approaches are listed on the next few pages.

## Supervision Approaches

Supervision is an essential tool to support the health and wellbeing of the workforce, enhance their skills and capabilities and improve employee retention. Each employee has unique needs and preferences when it comes to supervision. Therefore, having a variety of options available will ensure the varied needs of the workforce are met. The Australian Association of Social Workers Supervision Standards identifies three key functions of supervision: “education, support and accountability” [20]. They also recommend supervision occur fortnightly for new employees and those who have been in the field 2 years or less and monthly for those with more experience. [21] Supervision can come in many forms, listed below are some that will be useful for ACCOs.

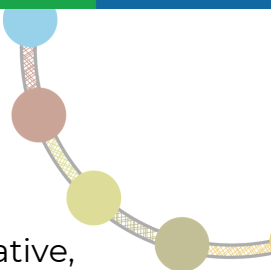
### Line Manager Supervision

This supervision occurs between a manager and employee and can be an informal catch up or debrief as the need arises. Alternatively, it can be formalised, following an organisational template. These sessions provide a two-way learning opportunity, helping managers to build their teams capacity and ensuring staff feel supported, appreciated and heard. For the supervisor, supervision is an opportunity to provide feedback, encouragement and advice, gain awareness of the staff’s workload and provide any consultation on cases. Supervision can also help the manager recognise and align the team culture and understand the work/life constraints for staff. For staff, supervision is an opportunity for debriefing, professional development, career planning and support. Line manager supervision is an avenue for communication and relationship building between a supervisor and their team.

### External Supervision

External supervision occurs when staff engage with an experienced and qualified supervisor from outside the organisation [22]. It is another technique widely used by ACCOs and allows staff to openly reflect and debrief without the fear of judgement by their manager [23]. While Employee Assistance Programs are always available, it is a one size-fits-all model that does not work for everyone and is not always culturally safe or in tune with the local or regional context. Across the state ACCO staff, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal acknowledge the benefits of debriefing, reflecting and consulting with an external Aboriginal supervisor, who has relevant experience in the field. Similarly, ACCOs have remarked how challenging it is to find an appropriate external supervisor, let alone the money in the budget to engage with them.





Funding for these activities is scarce and ACCOs are resourceful and creative, often sourcing the money from various program budgets across the organisations. This, however, is not sustainable and not an option for some ACCOs, who cannot spare any money from program budgets, let alone sacrifice the staff, resources and capacity to undertake such activities.

## Cultural Supervision

A literature review into the factors supporting the retention of Aboriginal staff *“highlighted that it was important for organisations to have culturally specific pathways available for Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing staff to receive emotional support, opportunities to reflect, debrief, and strengthen coping mechanisms[24].”*

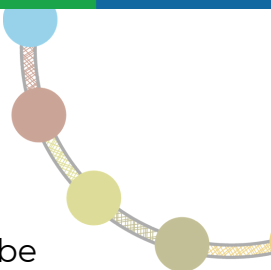
Cultural supervision should remain an informal, fluid and flexible option for staff to access debriefing and support, which is best suited to them. This will look different for every organisation, community and family group however will be guided by the overarching goal of ensuring staff feel culturally safe and supported. It is important staff speak with someone they identify with, for example women speak with women and men with men. Organisations should allow for staff to identify the person they would like to have cultural supervision with and support for this to occur. Some ideas for cultural supervision in the workplace include:

- Wayapa Wurrk. These sessions use the concepts of ‘ancient earth mindfulness’ to shift the way staff think about wellness and enhance their relationship with Country
- Dadirri (deep listening)
- Allowing staff, the time and space to meet with Elders or family members for debriefing and support
- Facilitating opportunities for staff to meet with Elders or community members, especially for staff who may not be from the area and have the connections to reach out to Elders themselves
- Providing staff with opportunities to spend time on Country

## Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is the process of using reflection to build capacity and develop a professional’s practice[25]. It is a practice used across many sectors, which aims to stimulate critical thinking, self-reflection and insight.





There are numerous pathways to reflective practice, many of which can be imbedded into pre-existing workplace structures and practices. There are opportunities for reflective practice on an individual level (with a line-manager or external supervision) and as a team or leadership group.

Reflective practice can be used to debrief an event, incident or case, as well as general overall practice. It requires the role of a facilitator to ask critical reflection questions based on a specific piece of practice staff may want to reflect on, such as power dynamics, colonisation, prejudices, drugs and alcohol [26]. It is important to acknowledge not all staff are interested in or have the capacity for reflective practice and taking a supervisee-led approach is important, providing opportunities for flexibility, staff input and feedback.

Some question to guide a reflective practice may include:\*

- What were my assumptions and beliefs?
- How did I influence the situation?
- How did my presence make a difference?
- How has my thinking changed and what might I do differently?
- Do I need to change my ideas about myself or the situations I work in?

## Peer Supervision

Peer supervision provides an opportunity for debriefing, learning and support between staff members of equal standing [27]. In this context the staff members move between the roles of supervisor and supervisee without the power dynamic associated with line-manager supervision. Providing opportunities and encouraging staff to engage in peer supervision can have numerous benefits to the organisation and staff. It can provide a platform for learning, information exchange, sharing experiences and challenges, understanding different perspectives and ways of working and building relationships across the team, organisation and sector. Peer supervision is not limited to the program or organisation and staff can be encouraged to seek these opportunities from a broader group of peers. To ensure staff can get the most out of these experiences, ACCOs can provide a peer supervision template to help guide the conversations and reflections.



\*Reflective practice questions from J. Fook 2015. Reflective Practice and Critical Reflection. Handbook for Practice Learning in Social Work and Social Care. P. 447

# Professional Development

A workplace that supports and enables staff to develop professionally is going to have higher rates of job satisfaction and retention. There are multiple ways in which organisations can promote professional development, the most obvious being through training and workshops.

## Workplace Training

Workplace training is essential for successful service delivery, staff retention and maintaining a positive workplace culture. Providing opportunities for staff to access training that is relevant and applicable to their current role is an effective way of ensuring clients have access to accurate, consistent, evidence-based and reliable support [28]. Staff should be able to relate directly to the content of the training and be able to apply what they have learned to their day-to-day work. In addition, workplace training can be an avenue for team bonding and the sharing of ideas, knowledge and resources. It can ensure the entire team has a unified and consistent approach to practice, processes, policies and procedures. Research shows, staff who have access to training and constantly learning are more engaged and satisfied with their job [29].

## Beneficial Training for ACCO Child and Family Services Staff

- First aid
- Conflict resolution
- De-escalation
- Domestic Violence
- Computer literacy
- Self care
- Supervision
- Trauma-informed care
- Suicide Prevention
- Resilience
- Strength-based care
- Cultural Safety
- Child Safety
- Mandatory Reporting
- Motivational Interviewing



**MDAS**  
MALLEE DISTRICT ABORIGINAL SERVICES

## Building Best Practice Foundations Training

Mallee District Aboriginal Services

The child and family services team at Mallee District Aboriginal Services have worked alongside an independent educator to create a customised training package for their staff. The Building Best Practice Foundations training was delivered over a four-month period to over 80 staff members. Each workshop ran for a couple of hours and was made up of small groups of staff. The team at MDAS played an important role in designing the content to suit their Community, clients, practice and workforce needs.

It covered topics such as:

- Trauma-informed care
- Risk assessment
- Supervision
- Reflective practice
- Self-care
- Motivational interviewing
- Working with complex clients
- Therapeutic case management

It was praised as highly beneficial, with staff hoping for it to run again. In addition, MDAS facilitate internal cultural awareness training, which is localised and relevant to their Community and geographical area and includes visits to cultural sites.



## Incidental Professional Development

There are several ways ACCOs can creatively implement incidental learning, growth and development in their day-to-day operations. Purposefully utilising these opportunities to promote development and reflection can instill a culture of collaboration, sharing and thirst for knowledge. Simple routine tasks such as team meetings can provide opportunities for reflection and peer-based learning. So too can case conferencing, where staff can pick up strategies, ideas and advice from other professionals. This can be especially useful when external stakeholders are involved and staff are exposed to alternative perspectives and ways of working, while being empowered to share their own knowledge, practices and expertise. Encouraging all staff, including support workers, administrative assistants, trainees and students to attend and access these meetings and opportunities will go a long way in sustainably building the capacity of the workforce.

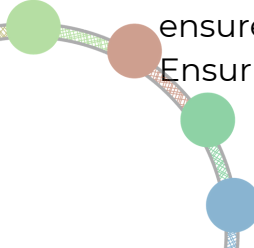
## Mentors

Another cost-effective way ACCOs can promote professional development is through mentors. A mentor can provide advice, encouragement, feedback and expertise and do not always have to be a manager. It is equally important for managers to find someone that can act as a mentor, especially for younger staff and those that are new to their role.

## Secondment

Secondment can be defined as the temporary transfer of an employee to another organisation or position. Seconding ACCO workers to other programs and organisations is an effective way of building their capacity, expanding their knowledge and broadening their experience. ACCO staff have reported the increase in skills, knowledge and experience they have gained through secondment to external agencies, especially government departments. Acknowledging it provides an insight into the inner workings of bureaucracy and, crucial knowledge around funding and grant applications, which has supported them to better support their Community.

For ACCOs receiving a seconded employee from an external program or agency, they can build the capacity of the workforce and fill any gaps in knowledge or expertise. Often in specialised programs such as kinship care, seconding an experienced kinship worker from an external agency can enhance the skills and knowledge of the ACCO team, provide access to secondary consultation and ensure the systems and process of the organisation are safe and efficient. Ensuring the cultural safety of the seconded and seconding employees is crucial.



## Formal Qualifications

Supporting staff to attain formal qualifications can be a challenging yet worthwhile investment for an ACCO. Strengthening the knowledge and skill set of the workforce through formal qualifications improves the service expertise, clinical and theoretical knowledge, crisis responses, future planning and strategic development. Providing staff with access to these opportunities is useful to actively promote capacity building and contribute to staff retention. ACCOs are in a unique position where they have access to funding to support staff to complete formal qualification while working through the Aboriginal Workforce Development Initiative (AWDI) funding. To ensure service delivery can be continued while staff attend the course, several ACCOs have developed a rotation system for their staff. The staff are broken into groups and attend the course on alternating weeks so their positions can be backfilled, and their workload is covered. When undertaking these studies, staff can conduct their placement at the ACCO, with some ACCOs extending this to provide staff the option of doing their placement in a different program at the ACCO. To ensure positions are backfilled, the organisations arrange a straight swap of staff between programs.

The most common formal education pathways for child and family services staff includes:

Diplomas and certificates in Community Services

Diplomas and certificates in Youth Work

Diploma and certificates in Youth Justice

Diploma in Leadership and Management

Post graduate certificate in Family Therapy

Graduate certificate in Social Science

Certificate in Government Investigation



## Community Services Courses

Gippsland and East Gippsland  
Aboriginal Co-operative

Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative (GEGAC) have partnered with TAFE Gippsland to deliver the Certificate IV and Diploma in Community Services on-site to their child and family services staff. The course is culturally appropriate and tailored to meet Community and workplace contexts, as well as the Australian Community Services Worker Association (ACWA) accreditation requirements.

Staff are assessed before the course commences to ensure they are undertaking the level of learning that is appropriate for them. The course then runs one day per fortnight. Staff have been allocated into two separate groups in order to minimise impact on service delivery. Staff have the flexibility to switch between the two groups as required to help manage their work and personal demands.

The placement component is also completed in-house, with staff given the option of doing their placement in other GEGAC program areas. To support staff through their studies, GEGAC has employed a Learning Support Officer, funded through the AWDI. This position works closely alongside the TAFE and ACCO to ensure all participants are supported. The on-site delivery of accredited training has provided an opportunity for staff to meet and interact with colleagues from different work sites and program areas, which has been highly beneficial in building positive workplace culture; increasing knowledge of programs across the organisation; strengthening cultural understanding; and facilitating communication.

## Leadership

Investing in quality leaders in child and family services and putting measures in place to support their retention is critical. Managers and team leaders are responsible for overseeing the delivery of services, setting a benchmark for workplace culture, supporting their staff and leading by example. Managers are required to have intense resilience and a variety of stress management and self care strategies, as there are often limited opportunities for debriefing and supervision. Listed below are the many ways in which organisations can support their child and family service leaders.

### Recruiting Managers and Team Leaders

Recruiting into these roles is an ongoing challenge facing our members; it is time consuming and costly and often takes multiple rounds of recruitment to find the right person. Often the best avenue to recruit into these positions is to advertise internally and encourage existing staff members to apply. This strategy saves time and money, retains corporate knowledge and provides opportunity for career progression and promotion. Given the difficulty and excessive costs associated with recruiting managers, encouraging their growth and retention through ongoing support is critical.

Through discussions with our members, we have identified the following traits of effective ACCO managers in child and family service:

- Involved and proactive in-service delivery
- Connected to Community
- Share the organisations core values
- Understand Aboriginal family dynamics and child rearing practices
- Resilient
- Ability to manage stress and self-care
- Role model positive workplace culture
- Creating a safe space for staff
- Open to criticism and feedback
- Empathetic and genuine

These qualities are unique to an ACCO and have added importance in ensuring the cultural safety of the workforce, clients and organisations, while supporting staff bearing a cultural load. They also ensure staff feel welcome, safe, heard and able to voice their own opinions. These attributes accompany the standard mainstream requirements of time management, communication, reporting skills and work ethic, etc.



## Lines of Management

As the numbers of case managers and support staff increases in ACCO child and family services, so too must the number of team leaders and managers. Shorter reporting lines and additional layers of management is an effective way of dividing the workload, promoting financial security, enabling multiple avenues of support and pathways to promotion and career progression. Multiple layers of management ensure greater oversight of reporting and compliance targets and allows space for creative thinking, collective decision making, better crisis response and increased collaboration and consultation.

Some ACCOs have reduced capacity for multiple reporting lines, due to lack of funding for team leaders and smaller teams with, at times, only one staff member per program. As the sector grows ACCOs are restructuring to create more team leader and management positions, easing the workload and responsibility on current managers. This in turn enhances the support a manager can provide to staff. It provides more opportunity for staff promotion, professional growth and succession planning within the organisation and contributes to the retention of staff and their corporate knowledge. Multiple layers of management, and a team of leaders means each staff member can access consistent debriefing and support.

## Workplace Culture

Workplace culture is a major factor impacting the successful delivery of services to Aboriginal families and is often a reflection of those in leadership<sup>[30]</sup>. It is a major influence on the workforce's job satisfaction, collaborative practice, sharing of resources, productivity and overall health and wellbeing. Consequently, these factors impact on retention rates, organisational reputation, community engagement and potentially client outcomes.

Leadership plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining a positive workplace culture. Studies show "*where a lack of leadership was perceived there was also talk of increased internal conflict, thus pointing to an inter-relationship between leadership and staff attitudes and engagement*<sup>[31]</sup>". Leaders also play an important role in ensuring the cultural safety of the team and workplace, which has a ripple effect on the workplace culture. Workplace culture should align with the organisational values set by the Board and have a clear delineation of where organisational culture is present in strategic, operational and work planning. Continued reflection and evaluation of the team environment and the factors contributing to team culture is a way ACCOs can maintain a positive atmosphere on a limited budget. Here are some questions to guide your team's reflection.





# Questions to consider for Fostering a Positive Culture in the Workplace

How do you create a safe and welcoming space?

What opportunities does the team have for sharing and collaboration?

What are the ways gossiping is addressed?

How are newcomers made to feel welcomed and included?

How often does your team meet?

Are there opportunities for informal and non-work-related conversations?

How is your team made to feel appreciated and thanked for their work?

Is there a focus on the positives and strengths of the workplace?

What are the ways staff can have input into fostering the workplace culture?

Are there open lines of communication?

Are staff determined to have each other's back?





## Debriefing and Support

The pressure and responsibility placed on managers and team leaders is growing, mirroring the rapid expansion of the Aboriginal child and family services sector. It is therefore increasingly important to acknowledge the complex needs of child and family service managers who often face enormous workloads, fulfill multiple roles, lack supervision and support and face growing demands. Managers are juggling reporting requirements, funding insecurity, client needs, staff needs as well as strategic planning. They face the vicarious trauma of clients and staff, chronic stress and the pressure of fulfilling reporting requirements and contractual responsibilities. With these workloads it can be challenging for managers to find the time and space for their own debriefing and supervision.

Across the board child and family service managers prioritise the support and supervision they provide to their teams, usually going above and beyond to ensure each person is managing their work, health and wellbeing. This means managers often receive intermittent support themselves, which can impinge on their ability to adequately support their staff with supervision and debriefing. It is essential that managers have access to wellbeing strategies and practices, perhaps more so than anyone else. Effective service delivery relies on the capacity and capability of managers and team leaders to recognise and respond to the wellbeing needs of their staff. Investing in training and development opportunities to support this is critical<sup>[32]</sup>. Of equal importance, is the provision of opportunities for various health and wellbeing pathways, with external and peer supervision often the preferred means.

## Workforce Structure

ACCOs are creative and resourceful in the ways they respond to limited funding, growing demand and unique local contexts. One of the many ways in which they do this is through the structure of their workforce. Listed below are some of the ways ACCOs adapt to meet the needs of their workforce and local Community.

## Caseloads

This framework has highlighted the effectiveness of wrap-around service provision when working with Aboriginal families. The case management approach used by ACCOs focuses heavily on relationships and trust, with case managers becoming like members of extended family for their clients. ACCO staff often go above and beyond the scope of their core business for their Community, providing support to clients culturally, socially, after hours and in crisis. To enable this highly effective approach ACCO case managers need smaller caseloads, so they can focus on providing holistic and wrap around support, which can be time consuming. To further enable strong worker-client relationships, some ACCOs transfer clients between programs yet retain the same case manager through the service user journey. This flexible and adaptive approach is effective in providing meaningful and ongoing support to families. It can, however, create additional reporting and back-of-house requirements and is only possible through certain programs such as Family Services.

## Co-location

Co-location is the shared physical location between two or more organisations on a routine basis. This is common practice among ACCOs and their local partners such as Child Protection and CSOs, enabling a clear pathway to partnership, collaboration and the sharing of resources. Additional sharing and collaborative practice organically arise when co-locating, creating an avenue for two-way learning and contributing to an enhanced standard of service delivery. Research shows when services and care teams work closely together there are better outcomes for clients [33]. When this organic sharing and collaboration occurs in a positive working environment, there is increased cross-cultural learning and an enhanced cultural understanding between organisations. A culturally safe and mutually beneficial co-location arrangement can benefit the ACCO, workforce and Community.

## Teams

This structure ensures each staff member is part of a team, even if they are the only case manager for a specific program. This addresses any skills shortages, gives staff opportunities to debrief, consult and two-way learning from one another, whilst harvesting organisational culture. ACCOs who suffer from skills shortages have found this to be an effective means to mitigate its impact. Operating within a team where staff can share the responsibility and delegate the workload is another effective means of supporting the retention of managers.



## Celebrating the ACCO Child and Family Services Workforce

Child and family services are an area of rapid growth within the community sector, of which ACCOs are at the forefront. The professionalism, resilience, strength, diversity and passion of the workers are the driving force behind the well documented success of these services. ACCOs are providing a unique cultural model of holistic care delivered by teams of place-based staff and community members. It is a highly diverse, incredibly knowledgeable and unique workforce, with a wide range of skills, strengths and knowledge sets.

The work undertaken by ACCO child and family service teams goes to the heart of trauma experienced in Aboriginal communities. Western social systems do not adequately understand or adequately address this trauma- and consequently many Aboriginal families fall through the gaps. However, the ACCO workforce does understand, they see the whole person and the cultural, social and historic impact of this trauma on their lives. They understand it because often they are part of the Community and are connected to the people in which they support. This cultural knowledge and understanding is invaluable. A workforce of this strength and calibre ought to be recognised and celebrated for the positive contribution they make to Aboriginal families in their communities and the sector as a whole.

# Definitions

## Aboriginal

The term 'Aboriginal' in this framework is inclusive of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## Care Services

The terminology now used to describe any child who is being cared for out of the home and no longer living with their parents. This is also known as out-of-home care.

## Community

The terms 'Communities' and 'Community' in this document refer to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Communities across Australia, representing a wide diversity of cultures, traditions and experiences.

## Cultural Awareness

Focuses on raising individuals knowledge about cultural experiences different from their own.

## Cultural Load

The accumulation of stressors commonly experienced by Aboriginal people, including grief, loss, caring responsibilities, trauma (including intergenerational), racism, lateral violence, and living and working off Country. The concept recognises the high frequency at which these events can occur and contribute to the 'load'.

## Cultural Safety

Cultural Safety is being acceptable to difference, having the ability to analyse power imbalances, institutional discrimination, colonisation and relationships with settlers. Cultural safety is about providing quality care that fits with the familiar cultural values and norms of the person accessing the service, that may differ from your own and/or the dominant culture.

## Home-based care

Incorporates kinship and foster care, however not residential care.

## Men's Business / Women's Business

Is not discriminatory or sexist separation and is not to the detriment of either party. Instead it is focuses on particular roles, ceremonies and Lore that is specific and sacred to men and women individually

## Self-determination

In the Victorian Aboriginal Community, self-determination is defined through government commitments and enablers established in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework to system and structural transformation through:

1. Prioritise culture
2. Address trauma and support healing
3. Address racism and promote cultural safety
4. Transfer power and resources to Communities

## Social and emotional wellbeing

The concept of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing has been developed by Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart and Kelly, 2013. The conception of self is grounded within a collectivist perspective that views the self as inseparable from, and embedded within, family and community.

## Acronyms

### **ACAC**

Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care

### **ACCO**

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation

### **ACSASS**

Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice Support Service

### **AFLDM**

Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making

### **AWDI**

Aboriginal Workforce Development Initiative

### **CSO**

Community Service Organisation

### **DET**

Department of Education and Training Victoria

### **DHHS**

Department of Health and Human Services Victoria

### **EFT**

Employed Full Time

### **HIPPY**

Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters

### **HR**

Human Resources

### **KPSA**

Koori Preschool Assistant

### **SCHADS**

Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Service Industry Award

### **TAFE**

Technical and Further Education

### **TAC**

Transitioning Aboriginal Children to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

### **TCP**

Targeted Care Package

# Endnotes

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