



On the Road is a comprehensive driver education program that targets Aboriginal people living in the Far North Coast of NSW. Administered by Lismore Adult Community Education and funded in partnership by the NSW Attorney General's Department, the Roads & Traffic Authority and the Motor Accident Authority, On the Road provides outreach services for Aboriginal community members gain or regain their license, including driver training, computerized knowledge test and fine negotiation.

The overall goal of the Program is to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal people living in the Far North Coast of NSW in the criminal justice system, as was identified by the Lismore Local Court Aboriginal Client Service Specialist in instigating the program, and supported by research conducted by the Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council ([link to AJAC Driver Licensing Report](#)).

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On the Road was established in response to the high levels driving offences and road crashes, experienced by Aboriginal communities in the Far North Coast. The Program was developed by Lismore Adult Community Education (ACE) in collaboration with a number of key partners including Lismore Local Court, the RTA, MAA and the Attorney General's Department of NSW.

The Program has developed and implemented a number of strategies including:

Removing the barriers to gaining a license through:

- ⇒ Assistance with fine negotiations with the State Debt Recovery Office.
- ⇒ Assistance with obtaining a birth certificate.
- ⇒ Improving Aboriginal access to the RTA Driver Knowledge Test through the Installation of a modified computer programs in more than 30 communities organisations.
- ⇒ Assistance with literacy and computer skills for Aboriginal people attempting to gain or regain their driver's license.
- ⇒ Limited provision of driving lessons.
- ⇒ A Driver Mentor Program (Rally for Reconciliation).
- ⇒ Facilitating employment through driving skills and community networking.
- ⇒ Increasing the number of Aboriginal Justices of the Peace.

The Program targets Aboriginal communities across five Local Government Areas within the North Coast of NSW: Lismore, Kyogle, Richmond Valley, Byron and Ballina. An important feature of the program is the fostering of close ties with Aboriginal elders and community organisations and those providing services to the Aboriginal community throughout the Far North Coast.

## **Evaluation Aims**

The aim of the evaluation was to assess its effectiveness in terms of six key objectives.

1. To assess whether the program has:
  - a) Reduced the number of Aboriginal people who come into contact with the criminal justice system in relation to driving offences: and
  - b) Reduced the number of road traffic crashes in the Far North Coast Region
2. To assess the viability of the program as a court diversion program.
3. To identify the impact of the Program in terms of:
  - a) The increased number of people who access the computer based driver knowledge test in the local Aboriginal organization
  - b) The increased number of people gaining/re-gaining and/or attempting to gain/regain a Class C license.
  - c) Improved literacy, self-esteem and employment opportunities of participants in the program
  - d) The number of Aboriginal people participating in a driver mentor program.
4. To document how the program is implemented by describing its methods for increasing licensed drivers.
5. To assess the effectiveness of the management of the program by identifying:
  - a) The processes that guide the operation of the program:
  - b) How the program is managed by the aspiring body
  - c) The influence of the local community on the management of the program
  - d) How the management relates to the funding body.
6. To ascertain any additional objectives of the program identified by community and service providers and to evaluate the:
  - a) Potential impact of the objectives identified on the management of the
  - b) program, and
  - c) The feasibility of achieving the stated outcome of the objective.

## **Methods**

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods were employed for the evaluation. Key stakeholders were identified and four site visits conducted between March and September 2005. The following types of data were collected and analysed:

Current literature including:

- ⇒ Published academic and 'grey' (scientific and technical reports, conference papers) literature
- ⇒ On the Road Program documentation

Quantitative data including:

- ⇒ Relevant statistics from the ACE enrolment database
- ⇒ Data on selected driving offences from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) database

Qualitative data comprising:

- ⇒ Eighteen face-to-face interviews
- ⇒ Five phone interviews
- ⇒ Five focus groups with fifty-five participants were conducted in four communities

## **Main Findings**

The process evaluation reveals that the Program has been highly successful in accessing North Coast Aboriginal communities across a very broad geographical area, including remote locations with very limited public transport and few licensed drivers.

The Program has accessed its audience using a variety of media such as print media, radio, targeting organizations for pamphlet drops, use of community networks, word of mouth, community visits and its website. Interview and focus group data indicate that the program has a high visibility amongst service providers, has strong support from community elders and others, and is well known within most local Aboriginal communities.

An estimated 520 participants, comprising 224 males and 296 females, enrolled in the Driver Education Program between 2000 and 2005 representing a steady growth in the number of Aboriginal people participating in the Program, and a steep increase in participation in the Program between 2003 and 2004, particularly by females. For the period over which the program has received funding (2002-2005), there were 381 participants (167 males and 214 females) suggesting a very wide reach of the program to just over 22% of the eligible Aboriginal population.

It is important to note that the figure of 520 represents participants with varying degrees of involvement in the Program and with a range of different objectives. The high number of unrecorded enrolments and problems with computer systems indicates the need for a better mechanism for the collection of ACE Program participation data. The introduction of a new computerized database system should assist ACE in providing data that are more reliable in the future.

Participation is spread evenly across regional centers and more remote locations. However data indicates that being in a larger town and having access to a community based centre increases the chance of individuals accessing the Program. Interviews with community organizations indicate that there is a great demand for this type of Program throughout the whole region.

The high level of female participation in the Program is an important finding, particularly as Aboriginal women make up a significant number of those with driving offences. The Program has had limited but highly successful outcomes in some of the local high schools. Some participants have recommended further expansion of this work. This could involve targeting high school students in school at years 11 and 12 possibly as part of a vocational education focus, which would facilitate their entry to the workforce.

The administration of the Program through ACE provides a stable adult learning environment, which facilitates participants being able to progress to other literacy programs of vocational education or to employment. Much of the administrative work associated with the Program, however, is not covered by current funding arrangements.

The network of local level partnerships and collaborations, which has been carefully fostered by the Program, is impressive. This has enhanced the Program's standing within

the Aboriginal community and facilitated important outcomes in terms of employment and transition to further study.

The strategies developed by On the Road Program staff to assist Aboriginal people overcome some of the barriers to gaining or re-gaining a license have been highly successful. Through their work at Lismore ACE and their outreach work with remote communities, they assist participants with form filling, repayment of debts, obtaining birth certificates and facilitate their accumulating 50 hours driving experience to attain a license. The underlying philosophy of empowerment and responsiveness to the Aboriginal community needs has demanded a flexible approach to Program implementation, which fits well with the needs of Aboriginal communities.

On the Road has developed a systematic approach to assisting people to obtain a birth certificate and repaying debts to the State Debt Recovery Office (SDRO) as the first steps in the process of becoming a licensed driver. In addition to raising the self esteem of participants, the 'hands on' approach of the ACE staff assists them identify participants with limited literacy and numeracy skills. The result is that people are more confident and this is just the first step towards greater achievement.

Using these strategies, the Program has made some significant achievements in terms of participant outcomes. Since its implementation in 2000, the program has provided access to the DKT computer program in at least thirty community organisations throughout the North Coast.

- ⇒ Fifty-nine people have obtained their learner's license
- ⇒ Twenty-five people have obtained their "P" plate license
- ⇒ Six people have obtained a 'Light Rigid' vehicle license
- ⇒ Eighty-nine people have received assistance with fine negotiation through the State Debt Recovery Office.
- ⇒ Sixteen people were able to find employment directly as a result of having completed the Program.
- ⇒ A number of Aboriginal people in the region have been assisted to become JPs

Limited resources has resulted in the Lismore and Casino regions receiving more face to face contact with On the Road staff than other areas and interviews with community organizations in more remote areas indicate that a greater presence in these areas would be welcome given the strong demand for the services offered by the Program.

One of the areas in which On the Road has had great success is the Reconciliation Rallies. This aspect of the program is clearly transferable as a standalone program or as part of a more comprehensive package. The development of valuable tools and processes by ACE would facilitate its being offered in many Aboriginal communities within the State.

The outcomes evaluation of community-based programs poses a number of challenges. Firstly, in the absence of previously established controls and an experimental or quasi-experimental design, it is not possible to establish a causal relationship between this intervention and the stated outcomes. Secondly, the period in which the Program has been operational is relatively short. A much longer period is usually necessary for the emergence of outcomes of community-based programs.

With respect to the assessment of the program outcomes in terms of reductions in relevant driving offences, data from the BOCSAR database revealed that there has been a recent decline in the offence of driving without a license for both Aboriginal populations of the North

Coast and for the NSW Aboriginal population. The decline in the number of offences for the North Coast Aboriginal population, is, however, was greater than for the rest of NSW.

The third challenge for the outcomes evaluation is availability of routinely collected data. The lack of identification of Aboriginality in RTA road crash or licensing data makes it impossible to measure whether the program has contributed to reducing the number of road traffic crashes in the Far North Coast Region. In the absence of RTA statistics, qualitative data indicate that safety education and promotion are an aspect of the current program; however, this aspect of the Program could be greatly enhanced.

One of the evaluation aims was to assess the viability of the Program as a court diversion program. This would present options for court sentencing by offering alternate sanctions, which may avoid imprisonment and lead to outcomes that are more positive for the offender. Such a plan would be consistent with Recommendation 8.13 of the NSW Country Road Safety Summit 2004: The Government establishes standard and statewide sentencing and diversion options for Aboriginal people charged with driving offences. (RTA 2004a)

Data from stakeholder interviews indicates a high level of support for the further development of a court diversion program based on the existing program and running in parallel with the existing generalist program, which would continue to cater for Aboriginal people who have not had the opportunity to gain a license. Both types of program would benefit from being delivered within the existing adult education framework offered by ACE Lismore.

A pilot court diversion program offered out of Lismore would be able to build on the valuable experience already gained by the Program staff. It would also benefit from the considerable goodwill, which On the Road has built up within the Aboriginal community, including the support of local elders who must play a crucial role in efforts to reduce overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the results of the evaluation reveal that On the Road has been a highly effective Program, which assists a large number of Aboriginal people in the Far North Coast Region to gain or regain their license.

In summary, the benefits of the On the Road program are as follows:

1. On the Road has led to an increase in the number of Aboriginal men and women in the Far North Coast region who:
  - a) Have gained a drivers license for the first time
  - b) Are free of debt
  - c) Have re-gained a drivers license
  - d) Possess accepted forms of identification including a birth certificate
  - e) Have a job or traineeship
  - f) Are a Justice of the Peace
  - g) Have accessed an adult education program

2. On the Road has led to:

- a) Improved self-esteem for many participants
- b) Improved literacy for many participants

3. In addition to the objectives in (2) On the Road has contributed to improved race relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people living in the Far North Coast through its:

- a) Rallies for Reconciliation
- b) Dissemination of information on cultural sites and protocols
- c) Promotion of respect for Aboriginal culture and local elders

The outcomes in terms of reductions in road crashes and contact with the criminal justice system are not easily demonstrated. There are many gaps and limitations on the evidence available to assess the outcomes. Available evidence does not allow us to draw a causal link between the increased number of licensed drivers and either decreased contact with the criminal justice system or decreased road trauma. However, it is highly likely that the upstream effect of having more legal drivers within the Aboriginal community will contribute to improvements in rates of incarceration and improved road safety. It is likely that longer timeframes for evaluation and improved data will reveal whether the Program has made a significant impact on these problems.

It is important to note, however, that the Program conforms to many of the elements of best practice in Aboriginal community interventions. Strategies have been innovative and flexible. Aboriginal elders, community members, service providers and government agencies support them. The impact of the Program on improved literacy, self-esteem, increased Aboriginal employment and further study is unquestionable.

The additional work in implementing rallies for reconciliation, improving cultural recognition and respect for Aboriginal communities, increasing the number of Aboriginal Justices of the Peace, and fostering positive community relationships are aspects of the Program that deserve greater recognition and should be built into the ongoing evaluation of the program.

To facilitate the further evaluation of Program outcomes, it is recommended that participants in the program be asked to participate in the evaluation. This would involve signing a consent form to allow their licensing and offence records to be monitored in the years following their participation in the program to help determine the effectiveness of the program in achieving the required aims for the program participants.

To assess other aspects of the Program, particularly the less tangible aspects such as empowerment, capacity building and reconciliation, On the Road staff should be encouraged to develop their own evaluation strategies in collaboration with their community partners and Program participants. In doing so, they could develop meaningful and appropriate performance indicators, which could be developed where direct measurement is not possible. The indicators should reflect the broad range of Indigenous needs and involve the collection of useful data that could be fed back to Participants, for example through community workshops and invite further participation of community members in becoming part of the solution. This approach would involve On the Road further contributing to community development and capacity building.

## **Implications**

The ongoing evaluation of On the Road will be an important factor in the long-term success of the Program. Evaluation is ideally part of program planning from the outset and should include Aboriginal involvement and assessment of both the intervention and their intended outcome. In relation to evaluation of outcomes, a recommendation has been made for further evaluation using a more rigorous approach from the outset. In addition to this, to assess other aspects of the Program, particularly the less tangible aspects such as empowerment, capacity building and reconciliation, On the Road staff should be encouraged to develop their own evaluation strategies in collaboration with their community partners and Program participants.

The Program offers a useful model that could be transferred to other locations in NSW and Australia, particularly those known to have high rates of Aboriginal driving offences. The following aspects of the Program are just some of the elements that suggest its successful transferability to other areas:

The process of community engagement provides a model for work in other areas, this includes the close connection with Aboriginal community elders and organizations and the outreach work with Aboriginal community members

The process and operation of partnerships and networks, in which there is cooperation and mutual benefit, also provides a model of how to be successful with community based projects

The connections between adult education, licensing, and employment are quite unique to this Program but demonstrate the strength of a holistic and flexible approach

Considerable work that has gone into producing learning materials, for example the DKT, flowcharts, availability of forms

The website is an invaluable tool, which could serve as an immediate resource for communities wishing to begin work in this area

The Rallies for Reconciliation have well established processes and procedures, which could be duplicated in other areas as a stand-alone project or as part of a more comprehensive Driver Education program. There is very good documentation to support this happening in other areas that could greatly benefit from the reconciliation aspects of the event.

The work within schools is limited but using the On the Road approach has great potential for expansion both within the North Coast and in other regions xv