



## OUTLINE OF EXPECTED EVIDENCE OF ALAN AND COREE THORPE (DARDI MUNWURRO)

### DECEMBER HEARINGS 2022 (CRIMINAL JUSTICE)

13 DECEMBER 2022

#### I BACKGROUND

1. Alan Thorpe is a Gunai man with over 25 years of experience working with the Aboriginal Community in Victoria, and is the founder of Dardi Munwurro. Since 2004, he has received government funding to deliver leadership programs to vulnerable Aboriginal men. He is currently the Director and a Facilitator at Dardi Munwurro. He has a Graduate Diploma in Social Science (Men's Behaviour Programs), a Diplomat in Community Development and Certificate IV in Alcohol and Other Drugs.
2. Coree Thorpe is a Yorta Yorta, Gunditjmara, Gunai and Wurundjeri man. He has worked at Dardi Munwurro for 6 years and is currently Deputy CEO, responsible for overseeing the programs administered and participating in conversations with government and community. Coree has always wanted to work with community, having grown up with family talking extensively about the importance of community programs. He worked as a plumber for 10 years, and has worked with community through Aboriginal Housing Victoria, Access Services for Koories and First Peoples' Health.

#### II ABOUT DARDI MUNWURRO

##### Creation and Evolution of Dardi Munwurro

3. Dardi Munwurro was established in 2000. It provides a range of men's healing programs, behaviour change programs and services to the Victorian Aboriginal community. It aims to break intergenerational trauma and disrupt the patterns of behaviour that can cause domestic violence. Dardi Munwarro's programs support Aboriginal men to recognise their emotions, strengths and responsibilities using traditional Aboriginal healing practices – holistic solutions where culture is key. We have seven offices in Victoria, and three in Melbourne. Our office in Melbourne has a core group of about 20-30 who come in every week.
4. The first 10 years of Dardi Munwurro started with doing behavioural work and healing workshops with men in prisons, before starting to work with men outside of prisons. It has since evolved to connect with community on all fronts, not just men.

5. It is important to understand the importance of healing in Dardi's work. While mainstream programs focus on behaviour, we are trying to address both healing and behaviour. We believe that men must heal trauma in their lives before they can stop being violent.<sup>1</sup>
6. Dardi Munwurro sits in a unique space in Aboriginal-led community programs. It is government funded, but occupies many spaces. Importantly, we hardly ever turn people away and are always trying to create programs to fill gaps based on what we see is happening for our community. We prefer to adopt the approach of "let's just do it, and we can work out the issues as we go".
7. The Aboriginal-led space is a different space. Aboriginal people carry a big weight, issues like racism, colonisation and the Stolen Generations. We are trying to address all of those issues as well as changing the cycle of violence. It is only once we address these traumas that we can move onto accountability and responsibility.<sup>2</sup>
8. We create the programs to meet those needs and fill those gaps, and to facilitate a path forward. For example, during COVID we recognised the limitations in connecting with people, and that households would be in a space they might never have been before with both parents at home all the time, kids at home doing school. Everyone would be in each other's space, but in a space where everyone needs a voice. We created the Brother-to-Brother crisis line, which is a free call to Aboriginal elders to talk about any issues – and it is open 24/7. We even had some international calls and we're getting 200-300 calls per month (and had 600-800 calls a month in its peak through COVID). We created this with no funding and it's still ongoing.

#### Programs at Dardi Munwurro

9. Mainstream services aren't yet equipped to address cultural losses in a safe environment.<sup>3</sup> We don't build things for the sake of building them, but we have conversations that are community-led. There needs to be a level of investment from community that we really value, which is where a few of our programs have been born from.
10. Our primary focus has always been on supporting men in the criminal justice space, but we have evolved to now cover programs including:
  - a. men's healing, gathering & camps;
  - b. Ngarra Jarranounith place residential program;
  - c. youth programs;
  - d. women's healing;
  - e. brother to brother crisis line;
  - f. training & development program;
  - g. alcohol and drug support; and
  - h. creative arts and media project and Dardi media team (producing media).

<sup>1</sup> Attachment 1: *Bringing out the best in Aboriginal men, for stronger communities*; available at: <https://ntv.org.au/dardi-munwurro-bringing-out-the-best-in-aboriginal-men-for-stronger-communities/>.

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11. We also provide transitional housing, a 'rent-to-buy' program to help families create generational wealth, and offer spaces for hire for functions, events and gatherings (e.g. Aunty Alma Thorpe's Gathering Place). There is also an arm of Dardi building a construction company – looking to be 100% Aboriginal owned and run – both front and back of house.

#### Key Values at Dardi Munwurro

12. The crux of Dardi is that it has to be cultural – focusing on identity and a cultural connection. There has to be connection and it needs to be about accountability, responsibility and ownership. We always talk to our men and families about these things, so that they understand that they always have a part to play. In dealing with trauma, we talk with men, but also with aunties and grandmothers, about how to resolve these traumas.
13. We move away from any form of "welfare-mentality", or asking someone else to take responsibility. It can be hard to break this mentality when it's connected to the trauma that we see. We are under no illusions – we don't "fix" anyone at Dardi, they do all the work. All we do is provide a safe space and a path forward for them to understand what they've done in the past.
14. I have had multiple conversations with Mark Kulkens – one of the psychologists that we use at Dardi who is really effective – about what we need to push forward and putting more weight into things that do work to break the institutionalisation, the welfare-mentality. That is the work that's tangible, that can help support the trauma and healing work that we do. It's always about how we can develop something that supports the treatment work that we do.

#### Impact of Dardi Munwurro

15. In November 2021, Deloitte produced a cost-benefit analysis report on our men's healing programs on behalf of the Healing Foundation. The report found that Dardi participant data showed that our programs were leading to positive outcomes for participants across a range of social domains, including:
  - a. greater connection to culture and a stronger sense of identity as a result of their involvement;
  - b. increased feelings of improved relationships, taking responsibility for behaviour, and connections to community;
  - c. a decrease of participants reporting misuse of alcohol and other drugs from 80% during the program to 34% at the conclusion of the program;
  - d. the number of people experiencing homelessness reduced by 100% across the programs;
  - e. increase in the number of clients who gained employment between commencing and completing the program; and
  - f. an 80% reduction of incidents of domestic or family violence that required police involvement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Attachment 2: *Strengthening Spirit and Culture – a cost-benefit analysis of Dardi Munwurro's men's healing programs*, pp vi to vii; available at: <https://www.dardimunwurro.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/HF-Strengthening-Spirit-and-Culture-Dardi-Munwurro-Report-Oct2021-V5.pdf>.

16. Further, the report found that each dollar invested into Dardi is estimated to provide a return on investment of 50% to 190%, thus concluding that the benefits outweighed the costs of delivering the program.<sup>5</sup>
17. The largest stream of benefits delivered by Dardi programs are through the reduced rates of incarceration. The rate of incarceration decreased from 13% pre-program to 4% post-program and each avoided case of incarceration represents a saving to government of more than \$90,000 per annum.<sup>6</sup>
18. This report shows the reality of self-determination and a First Nations-led programs. We know spiritually and culturally that we're making these outcomes, but the report helps people, and the mainstream, understand. They want to see the evidence and the report demonstrates that we're reducing incarceration, we're reducing housing issues, we're reducing substance abuse, we're healing, we're addressing family violence.<sup>7</sup>

### III ISSUES WITH PRISON SYSTEM

#### Punitive Nature of System

19. The justice system is very punitive – it focuses on what you did wrong. We've had multiple conversations with the judiciary about what needs to happen for our men. Prevention is key, which is why we built the youth program.
20. Our youth program is a free arts program that teaches young people song-writing, beat-making, reading and writing, t-shirt printing, making artefacts, learning how to do murals. So these young people would rather do this than crime. If they come in everyday to access the resources to do art, that means they're here, not out there. That's crime prevention.
21. The prison system doesn't work because it isn't reflective of a cultural process. In our culture and lore, you do something wrong, you do the lore, you're back in communities and you've paid your dues. In the prison system, they tell you you're no good, you go away for 4 years, and to think about what you've done every day that you're there. It doesn't fit our culture.

#### Aboriginal Staff in Prisons

22. The criminal justice system still tokenises our mob. Aboriginal people are overrepresented in prisons, and the system expects that one Aboriginal person can 'tick the box' of Aboriginal representation. They don't appreciate that one person can't carry multiple communities, from different nations. There are over 380 nations in Aboriginal cultures, so how is one person expected to represent that? We need teams of people, and if you look into other spaces, they mobilise teams for this stuff. The burnout of carrying that burden is real. You see really high turnover in the hospital and prison systems. In some prisons, they don't even have an Aboriginal

<sup>5</sup> Attachment 2: *Strengthening Spirit and Culture – a cost-benefit analysis of Dardi Munwurro's men's healing programs*, p vii; available at: <https://www.dardimunwurro.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/HF-Strengthening-Spirit-and-Culture-Dardi-Munwurro-Report-Oct2021-V5.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Attachment 2: *Strengthening Spirit and Culture – a cost-benefit analysis of Dardi Munwurro's men's healing programs*, p viii; available at: <https://www.dardimunwurro.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/HF-Strengthening-Spirit-and-Culture-Dardi-Munwurro-Report-Oct2021-V5.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Attachment 3: *Dardi Munwurro healing spirit and changing lives*, available at: <https://nit.com.au/18-11-2021/2545/dardi-munwurro-healing-spirit-and-changing-lives>.



person, but they employ white people to be an Aboriginal liaison. It's confronting because they're doing stuff with our men and women.

23. We like that we do a lot of work on the ground and in supporting our workers. They don't get to take that hat off. Work is connected to family, or it triggers as trauma that comes into our families.
24. Ultimately, there is a lack of investment. There is a lot of talk in government spaces about having an Aboriginal Wellbeing Officer, but it's just a token person in the room. There needs to be more Aboriginal-led conversations in this space.

#### IV CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE EXITING PRISON SYSTEM

##### Lack of Job-Readiness and Prospects of Thriving

25. There are *ad hoc* programs that are run in prisons. We aren't saying that they don't work, but they don't reflect how to support a person with the right skills to go back into the community and thrive. Prison programs need to focus on questions like: 'Where will you go when you are released?' 'Do you have opportunities for jobs?' 'What is your skill set?' 'How can we set you up so you're set up to go back into the community?' This isn't the focus currently.
26. We know mob have a difficult time when they come out of jail. They live on couches, they might have IVOs against them, and recidivism is very high. We recognised there was a 'gap' in available support, so we do job readiness. We need to get Aboriginal people in prisons ready for work and to understand their accountabilities for that.
27. We have actually talked about Dardi owning a prison – which would be a cultural process. We have conversations about it all the time because we see men go on the merry-go-round where they come out and do really well, but then couch surging gets old, not having a job gets old.
28. As an example, we saw a case of a young fella who was a dealer. He was about to go for a job interview after getting out of prison, to make \$1,200 per week. As he was getting ready for that interview, he got a phone call and made \$1,200 out of one deal. We want to break this cycle.

##### Systematic Barriers

29. The system also has barriers that prevent people from making change. To help illustrate this, there are two case studies that make this point:
  - a. *Case study 1:* One of the guys who works for Dardi now was in and out of jail, using and dealing. He committed family violence and got his kids taken away from him. He came into our Ngarra Jarranounith program for 16 weeks of counselling work, doing art and making coffees. After 16 weeks he asked to stay for another 3 weeks. He and his partner reunited, and he got his kids back. He has now started the first Aboriginal Narcotics Anonymous, which is run out of Dardi. The other week there were 27 people going.

However, it wasn't all a smooth process for him. One of the barriers was that, because child protection had been involved, he wasn't able to get a Working with Children's Check and couldn't work in the community. Even when he was doing all the right things. We applied to get him an exemption, and when he found out he was getting one, he started crying. That's why we work with him, because he knew he needed to work with mob.

- b. *Case study 2:* We have also been supporting another Aboriginal man to get a job with us. He has been trying with us for two years, but he can't get an exemption and the process is very frustrating for us.
- 30. No one wants to take accountability for why these exemptions won't be granted. Funders will say it's up to the Working with Children check – and they'll say it's up to funders. It's really frustrating – we even say that we'll take on that risk. It doesn't allow the opportunity for a lot of people to change. Some men work on a building site and go to jail, then they come out and all they know is working on a building site. It actually might be better for them to be working in community, but they can't get an exemption to do that. So they go back to the building sites – and can't break their cycle.
- 31. Another issue is a lot of men coming out of jail can't get housing because they don't have a rental history. Again – this was another gap we identified, so we have four houses that we use for transitional housing to try and create that rental history for them. One guy makes \$4,000 per week and just cannot get housing.

## V FUNDING ISSUES

- 32. Funding is a massive issue as it's only a treatment, only a band aid. It is never enough to actually invest in community. We see how that trickles down. Community knows it is only a short-term program which is the wrong message to be sending them – “we care about you for 16 weeks”. These programs and their timelines tell our young people that we only invest in you for that set amount of time. We need to build long-term programs with ongoing support.
- 33. Part of the conditions on funding are very report heavy and you have to ask, are these requirements for change or for budget? It is really frustrating.
- 34. We make the funding work for us. We've turned away funding in the past because it wouldn't work for us. It isn't always about the money for us when there are too many guidelines. If they are trying to tell us how to deliver it, where to deliver it. For example, if you can't take people on because they live one street over (outside the 'zone' for the program). These guidelines don't allow for creativity. We are a product of our environment, and if our environment and scope is limited to a box that doesn't have growth in it then our people start to only work for that. That's the welfare-mentality people fall into.
- 35. We've never had federal funding. There was \$500,000 available for a program and Alan was in the meeting and they were trying to tell him how to run it. He said “Nope, thanks for your time”. He said it wouldn't work for our community. People come to Dardi because they believe in what we're trying to do.
- 36. My job is to think about how we create the programs to actually become self-funding once we get the funding to start something. That's what I've been thinking about with the creative art program that we've been running for the young people. The money we got was from crime prevention, so we said 'what does crime prevention mean?'. To us, it means young people not doing crime. So giving them all the resources to engage in art projects instead creates a space of self-empowerment, social enterprise, value for who they are. The next part of that program is how do

we monetise it to keep it ongoing for the community so we don't have to chase funding for it. This is the sort of stuff we try to do with our funding.

## VI IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE AND IDENTITY

### Identity Building at Dardi

37. People come to Dardi because there's an opportunity to create your identity without judgement, and to connect with people in community without a timeline or end-date. There shouldn't be a timeline on trauma.
38. These are the conversations we try to have with young people, which is why we have elders in our space. Our elders are our most important people. We are losing our elders and their job now is to teach the young people.
39. People come to Dardi because we work different, by creating spaces of respect for mob again.

### Challenges for Aboriginal-led Organisations and Communities

40. Dardi is all about being inclusive. We don't try to step out of our warehouse space, but we will work with different providers if needed. It takes multiple organisations to support our community, like a village raises a child. We are under no illusions – we understand that when you change things, other things arise that need changing, but you can't always complain about stuff. We don't do food stamps and that for community because we see that as a welfare-mentality that we want to break. There's an ownership that we have been denied because of this handout mentality.
41. It's a very government mentality to put the bucket of money in the middle of these Aboriginal-led organisations we work with and then say: 'You're all fighting for the same bucket of money'. Then there's this illusion that we're all fighting each other for it. They make this process to disconnect our people.
42. Aboriginal people tend to undersell ourselves to fit into the room so we're more palatable for a job. That's a deep-seated thin in our community, 'If you want to come into this space, this workplace, bar, you need to dress and look like us.' This is the assimilation factors that we see.
43. We need to empower ourselves by loving ourselves again. There's a lot of lost connection there. There's a lot of people who struggle to be loud and black. That's deep-seated and we still adhere to that. That we need to be palatable.
44. We're also held to a higher account in a lot of spaces which is unfair. When I was an apprentice, I had this mentality of 'I'll prove them wrong'. My dad had to tell me 'Beat them because you're better, not just because you're black'. We see that all the time.

### Challenges for Young People

45. The new generations are facing different pressures because of social networks.
46. There is also another issue of the scholarships to affluent schools. When my dad when to Trinity Grammar, it was actually called an Assimilation Scholarship. While these scholarships look good, again in these spaces we are fighting each other for those spots because they're allowing us to be in those spaces that we were never allowed to be in. And they are only picking the black kids who

are the most manageable, not the most aspirational. They'll take the family that's less dark and more compliant.

47. There is a power imbalance. It's not 'we want to work with blackfellas'. It's 'we want to work with blackfellas who obey'.

#### **List of attachments**

**Attachment 1:** *'Bringing out the best in Aboriginal men, for stronger communities'*; available at: <https://ntv.org.au/dardi-munwurro-bringing-out-the-best-in-aboriginal-men-for-stronger-communities/>.

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