

Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland

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Elder abuse in the Normanton Community as experienced and witnessed by
the Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group volunteers and Board

Cultural misunderstanding and complacency,
conspiring with costs and access, administered
by a process that will not address harm

Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group
31 Matilda St Normanton, QLD 4890
Po Box 469, Normanton QLD 4890
Ph: (07) [REDACTED] Mob: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]



-Acknowledgement-

The Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group wish to begin by acknowledging the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples, Traditional Custodians of the land on which we will learn from each other today and pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here.

Dear Committee Members,

The Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group of Normanton thanks you for the opportunity to provide the Queensland Parliament with a submission regarding the Elder abuse issues that affect our community.

Joyce Downes

President

Doug Thomas

Secretary

Andrew Dawes

Coordinator



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Introduction

The Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group has been a voice in the Normanton Community for over 25 years; attempting to support the local community and address the dislocation and hurt caused by successive State and Federal Governments who have taken so much from Indigenous Australians.

It is against this backdrop of successive Government policies, that the current *LNP*¹ State Government has sought public submissions regarding the incidence and type of Elder abuse² being experienced in Queensland.

The Gulf of Carpentaria is a remote Queensland Shire situated in the dry savannah region of the State, subject to period of extended isolation by the summer Monsoon.

62% of the population identify as Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander³ out of a total population of 4921⁴.

Of these, 60-year-olds and older, make up approximately 14.7 % of the entire population of the Carpentaria Shire⁵, Indigenous or non-indigenous - so roughly one in five.

There has been little research conducted into Elder abuse or mistreatment in Australia generally, but more specifically in a remote or culturally diverse community such as Normanton.

We shall seek to articulate our community's view regarding the abuse and ways forward for the elderly in helping address this insidious issue.

¹ *LNP* Liberal National Party

² Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland <<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Work-of-Committees/Committees/Committee-Details?cid=269&id=4455>> accessed on the 15 February 2025

³ 2021 Carpentaria, Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics <<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/315021404>> accessed on the 15 February 2025

⁴ Ibid. <<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/315021404>> accessed on the 15 February 2025

⁵ Ibid, above @ 3 <<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/315021404>> accessed on the 15 February 2025



The Justice Group believes that it is difficult to know the extent of the problem if you cannot measure it, and we are grateful to have the ability to put a submission to assist the State Government's understanding of the issues that face our community.



Summary

In our opinion, Elderly Indigenous persons are vulnerable because;

- In our community, the problem is exacerbated by the erosion of Indigenous culture along with their community.
- There is a lack of and access to critical services in a remote setting.
- A failure of successive governments to construct Indigenous supported services and their delivery.
- There is ongoing failure to prioritise Indigenous experiences and solutions within those services.
- The answers to address this vulnerability and abuse, is through systems many elderly Indigenous people do not trust and has sought to subjugate them over their lifetime.
- Of institutionalist racism towards care and dealing with Indigenous Australians.
- *Nothing about us, without us*, making decisions in faraway places about Indigenous people, with little input from them, which is perfunctorily discarded.



History

The Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group believes it is impossible and reductionist to merely view the issues that surround Indigenous Elder abuse within the Normanton community without understanding and accepting the journey that has brought us to this point.

Like all forms of abuse and dislocation if it occurs in mainstream Australia, it will be exacerbated and more widespread, damaging and corrosive in marginalised communities, than in the predominate one.

It is against the backdrop of colonisation, that did its best to undermine traditions, family and cultural systems, that Elderly Indigenous people find themselves caught between young Indigenous people who no longer respect them, as their culture used to demand, and a non-indigenous culture that saw Indigenous people as human chattels.

The Justice Group believes this is reflected in the Australian Federal and State governments recognising Indigenous Australians are “Elderly” at the age of 50 as opposed to 65⁶, thus acknowledging the substantially shorter life expectancy of Indigenous Australians, compared to the rest of the Australian population.

The Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group firmly believe that the reason why closing the gap continues to fail so spectacularly and consistently⁷ is due in no small measure to the way government seeks to address and engage with Indigenous communities in a broader sense.

Consultation is seen as a box ticking exercise and is “consultation” in name only.

The “system”⁸ has never served the needs, desires, dreams or wants of Indigenous peoples.

⁶ *Older Australians*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, online <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/summary> accessed 14 March 2025

⁷ *Productivity Commission calls for accountability with only four Closing the Gap targets on track*, Brooke Fryer, Kirstie Wellauer and Stephanie Boltje, ABC online <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-12/closing-the-gap-target-progress-for-state-and-territories/105038492>> accessed > accessed 9 April 2025

⁸ *Dismantling systemic racism – perspectives from First Nations peoples*, Australian Human Right Commission, online <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/media-releases/dismantling-systemic-racism-perspectives-first-nations-peoples> accessed 14 March 2025



Be it health, schooling, legal, legislative - these institutions have never sought to protect Indigenous Queenslanders, in fact, those institutions were actively used to commit violations of their Human Rights and to justify assimilation and genocide.

Then the *State*⁹ wonders why Indigenous Australians of all descriptions do not believe that this *State*? has their wellbeing at the forefront of their interactions. You ask Indigenous people to believe in a system that they have never seen concern itself with their wellbeing.

In fact, it has been exactly the opposite for the better part of 200 years.

Vulnerabilities

As described, The Justice Group believes that many Indigenous Australians find themselves at a confluence - caught between two worlds and supported by neither with a stunted version of their culture in some cases and exposed to corrosive communities overrepresented in certain statistics for all the wrong reasons.

The abuse that Elderly Indigenous people are subject to could be categorised as *horizontal violence*¹⁰, perpetrated by some marginalised people on others within the same marginalised group.

This type of violence inflicted on elderly persons is probably a factor in a lot of communities but as discussed, amplified in remote Indigenous communities.

⁹ *The body politic*, The Cambridge Dictionary, online <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/state> accessed 16 March 2025

¹⁰ "...Similarly, when people are chronically and insidiously marginalized and feel that they lack the power to change the restrictive situation, there is a tendency to strike out at those of equal or less power (for example, women and children) through horizontal violence..." Historical Oppression, Resilience, and Transcendence: Can a Holistic Framework Help Explain Violence Experienced by Indigenous People? Catherine Elizabeth Burnett & Charles R Figley, online <https://academic.oup.com/sw/article/62/1/37/2447839?login=false> accessed on 15 March 2025



Health

Elderly Indigenous Australians are recognised as people with special needs¹¹ and aged care in Australia is said to be determined by need rather than age¹² and target this support to the most vulnerable¹³.

Normanton has a primary Indigenous Health agency (*Gidgee Healing*¹⁴) along with North & West Remote Health¹⁵, allied health and the North West Hospital and Health Service¹⁶

It is our experience, from supporting people making complaints regarding their treatment¹⁷ that health services for the Indigenous elderly within Normanton is a huge problem.

The high turnover of staff, the lack of regular specialists, the time taken to receive treatment, the vagaries and cost of travel from remote Queensland to the Eastern seaboard, the poor baseline health of the patients, are all issues that combine to ensure worse outcomes for all Indigenous persons. This is compounded in the elderly.

Until recently, the Normanton community had no community NDIS service providers along with no home care services.

This has now changed, with a selection of assistance organisations working within our community¹⁸.

Some have merely broadened the scope of their practice recently via a change in management after years of restrictive and fractured community support, whilst others are relatively new to our community.

We shall see, as it evolves, how these organisations assist our Indigenous elderly - but it is a welcome change from so close to no support that it makes no difference.

Of course, community support is only one facet of the health service. Ongoing chronic health care and disease detection and treatment are others.

¹¹ Online <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/population-groups-of-interest/indigenous-australians#Aged%20care> accessed 16 March 2025

¹² *Aged Care Act 1997* (Cth) - Sect 2.1, online https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/aca199757/ accessed on 16 March 2025

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Gidgee Healing, online <https://www.gidgeehealing.com/> accessed 16 March 2025

¹⁵ North & West Remote Health, online <https://www.nwrh.com.au/> accessed 16 March 2025

¹⁶ Online <https://www.northwest.health.qld.gov.au/our-facilities/normanton/> accessed 16 March 2025

¹⁷ Office of the Health Ombudsman, online <https://www.oho.qld.gov.au/> accessed 16 March 2025

¹⁸ Online <https://adadisabilityservices.com/> accessed 16 March 2025



In remote communities this is a major failing of the Queensland Health system¹⁹.

These health conditions are compounded by poverty, food insecurity, living conditions, systemic and individual racism, educational outcomes, employment rates, child protection and criminal justice system stressors, along with weight, alcohol consumption and tobacco usage.

These conditions are all compounded over time.

Family

Against a background of broken culture and community, Indigenous elders within our community struggle with the differing and numerous demands made on their lives as Elders and leaders.

These demands can lead to abuses of their time, money, houses, cars or food.

Family members' precarious living within the community means they are constantly asking for "price"²⁰ for food, petrol, children's school needs - in fact anything they can be asked to share or gift.

This is indicative of communal living in poverty, where generations of the same or extended family share housing.

The emotional manipulation combined with a perceived or actual physical threats is a constant thread within their lives.

It is often the case that grandparents are raising their grandchildren with fleeting or little support from their biological parents, due to a variety of reasons.

Effectively, stealing their old age, just as the Queensland State and others stole their youth.

¹⁹ *Failing health system in Torres Strait prompts call to return to old model*, Christopher Testa and Brendan Mounter, online <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-27/torres-health-system-failure-preventable-disease-deaths/104384190> accessed 16 March 2025; *Investigation into Torres and Cape Hospital and Health Service* online <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/research-reports/reports/review-investigation/investigation-into-torres-and-cape-hospital-and-health-service> accessed 16 March 2025; *Disturbing Closing the Gap report shows there's been little political will to address inequality in the wake of the failed Voice referendum*, Isabella Higgins, online <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-13/closing-the-gap-report-data-fail-address-indigenous-inequality/105046662> accessed 16 March 2025; *Claim 'hundreds' of Indigenous people denied proper medical care amid Queensland hospital deaths probe*, Giovanni Tore, online <https://nit.com.au/25-07-2022/3503/claim-hundreds-of-indigenous-people-denied-proper-medical-care-amid-queensland-hospital-deaths-probe> accessed 16 March 2025

²⁰ Term for money for a purchase.



Remember, this is against a backdrop of the children of these elderly Indigenous people being taken from them for no other reason than it was the law.

Arbitrary and senseless.

The Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group has no doubt that these children of our elderly leaders, who were taken from them are visiting on their parents, the violence and trauma they were subjected to whilst they were in the State's care.

These family members, the Justice Group believes in many cases, are trying to cope with a life that has had the deck stacked against them from the beginning.

Now Elders, they are left to pick up the pieces of the history that colonisation has wrought on their families.

We Wash Our Hands

If the figures are anything to go by, if elder abuse is occurring in the general Australian population you can guarantee that the damage will be more widespread and severe in a community that has none of the services that other communities take for granted.

The Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group is sceptical of the Queensland government's commitment to addressing Elder abuse in remote Indigenous communities because, like the housing crisis currently occurring in this nation, if non-Indigenous people can't afford a house then it's a problem, as opposed to Indigenous housing which has been in crisis for over 50 years²¹ and it has never been addressed as such.

The Queensland State government, along with most past and current Australian governments, seeks to manage the Indigenous question/problem rather than listen to Indigenous people and help them address these ongoing issues.

The Queensland government asks that our community have faith in some utopian system they assure us exists, but one that we have never seen or experienced.

We do not wish to seem dismissive, but as a community much has been promised but very little has been delivered.

²¹ *First Nations Housing Crisis: major study reveals huge gap for affordable rental housing*, Megan Moskos Vivienne Milligan Richard Benedict Daphne Habibis Linda Isherwood Ryan van den Nouwelant, online <<https://www.ahuri.edu.au/analysis/news/first-nations-housing-crisis-major-study-reveals-huge-gap-affordable-rental-housing>> accessed on 8 April 2025; *Climate, housing, energy and Indigenous health: a call to action*, Norman Frank Jupurrula, Ross S Bailie, Russell L Gruen, online <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.5694/mja2.51610>> accessed on 8 April 2025



Will this solution, devised in Brisbane, be delivered by fly-in fly-out workers who may or may not have a flight to get on; who have no stake in our community; who have no experience of the challenges faced by elderly Indigenous Australians in a remote community which has been subjected to the ongoing racist and corrosive service delivery by private and public agencies?

We welcome the opportunity to inform the committee regarding the issues facing Elders in our community, but we fear the outcome will be similar to all the other submissions we have put forward, none of which altered the already pre-determined path of the government. Consultation in name only.

Our Present, Your Past

From a people who once revered and cherished its Elders, lawmen and women, steeped in the culture of one of the oldest unbroken societies on earth, are now subject to the vices and deprivations visited on them by their colonisation and cultural genocide.

You²² ask, how bad are the issue in communities? We say, worse than in your communities. You ask, why is it worse? We say, because that's the outcome of what your laws did to us. You ask, how can we support you? We say, let us decide on the best way forward. You say, no, it's not economical/isn't culturally appropriate/doesn't meet funding guidelines/is difficult politically. The list is endless, when it could be, okay, let's talk about it.

Every day we live with Elder abuse exacerbated by the consequences of colonisation in our community. This is only a small part of the much broader issues that face us, every day.

Effectively you cannot separate one abuse from another [alcohol, drugs, violence]. All contribute to Elder abuse, so addressing one in isolation will have limited effect. It requires a community-based approach to a community-wide problem.

If the Education, Arts and Communities Committee can foster an inclusive and collaboratory engagement strategy that genuinely involves our Elders and community we would welcome that change in consultation with open arms.

²² You We mean the State of Queensland, in this instance.



SUMMATION

As always, the Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group is ever hopeful of change within the communities we service and for the betterment of the Indigenous people we support.

We would welcome the genuine engagement of the government to address the underlying issues that surround Elder abuse in our community and see it as a start in supporting a people and community you²³ have taken so much from.

The Elder abuse that occurs in our community isn't naturally occurring, as much as it is manufactured and aggravated by the destruction of Indigenous culture.

The only way to overcome this is through consultative engagement with us.

If the Lamberr Wungarch Justice Group can be of any assistance please contact us. The Board would like to take this opportunity to again thank the Education, Arts and Communities Committee for the chance to comment.

On behalf of the Board and community,

Andrew Dawes
Coordinator

²³ Ibid.