

Media Release 14.05.2021

Indigenous experts ask NSW to learn from First Nations communities' successful COVID response and prepare the sector to address new looming epidemics.

MPs, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous supporters of reconciliation came together on Wednesday night at NSW Parliament to take part in a Q+A panel discussing the resilience of First Nations People in NSW with Members of Parliament.

In its 12th year, Reconciliation in Parliament is a program of events hosted by Reconciliation NSW to continue the bi-partisan commitment of the NSW Parliament to Reconciliation. This year's theme, 'A case of resilience for the First Nations People of NSW' highlighted Aboriginal communities' successful responses to COVID-19 global pandemic.

Panellists praised the actions of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) in communicating clear information about the global pandemic very early to Aboriginal communities to keep them safe. "ACCHOs were prepared earlier than much of mainstream Australia, and because of the need to protect culture, understood the risk and took steps to mitigate any risk by closing off communities."

"Communities worked together embracing covid measures – not complaining or resisting the limitations of the COVID Guidelines promoted by ACCHO...and provided practical help to each other, networking and sharing what was working," said Dr Peter Malouf.

Dr. Summer Finlay explained the success in dealing with the pandemic: "One of the key strengths is our culture of connectivity which served us during the pandemic as we were all communicating/connected/informed."

Robert Cooley, whose team of park rangers turned to fishing and coordinating food hampers for vulnerable elders in the La Perouse community during lockdown said, "Communities find ways to care for each other on the land on which they live and are connected to. It was a privilege for me, and the other rangers, to be able to look after our community during this great time of need. I think the younger rangers really felt empowered and that they made a difference."

The panel also warned of new health epidemics looming – even higher trends of intergenerational trauma, overrepresentation of kids in out of home care and juvenile justice.

Megan Williams said “The highly effective community protective factors that worked outside of correctional facilities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were a massive failure internally, with ACCHOs locked out due to the battles in state/federal funding.”

Those incarcerated or otherwise separated from communities during the pandemic have been left even further isolated from community, services, family, health care access etc.

“What is needed is a working co-designed health response and support systems for our communities, based on our learnings during the pandemic...and jointly funded (State and Federal) Aboriginal led programs that support the health of Aboriginal people particularly for,” said Dr Peter Malouf.

Watch the recording on the Reconciliation NSW YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USG4YVOInhY>

Panellists:

- Dr. Summer May Finlay (Yorta Yorta), Postdoctoral Fellow with University of Canberra and lecturer at the University of Wollongong
- Dr. Peter Malouf (Wakka Wakka and Wuli Wuli), Executive Director of Operations, Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council for NSW
- Associate professor Megan Williams (Wiradjuri) - Assistant Director and Research Lead, National Centre for Cultural Competence, Sydney University
- Robert Cooley (La Perouse and NSW South Coast communities), Senior Ranger, Gamay Botany Bay Rangers

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