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| West news  Connecting and partnering with Aboriginal communities  Issue 6 – COVID-19 edition 2021  (Accessible version) |

Department of Health

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# Welcome to *West news*

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays its respect to the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal peoples.

Last year, we were about to press ‘print’ on a new edition of *West news* when COVID-19 made its dramatic entrance into Australia. The pandemic has had such an incredible impact on all of our lives that we have created this special edition to take a peek at just some of the ways West Division has coped with this insidious virus.

We hear from Jason Kanoa, CEO Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation, about how his organisation has kept his community safe, and from an impressive 25-year-old Gunditj Mirring man, Aden Hitchins, about how he has remained optimistic in the darkest of times.

Whilst there can be no doubt the pandemic continues to leave a trail of heartache in its wake, it has also prompted many to rethink the way they live their lives or go about their business. Our story on the 2020 Victorian Seniors Festival is an example of one of the pandemic’s silver linings – whilst the annual festival’s usual program of live events was unable to take place due to social distancing measures, the organisers took the ‘reimagined’ event online. Several Aboriginal artists from the West participated in the reimagined festival, exposing their talent to a new and appreciative audience. You can read how the impact of this success is being expanded upon this year.

Importantly, you can also find information on the vaccination rollout. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 16 and over have been identified as a priority group and Elders, such as our Uncle Mookeye Bell who is on the cover of this edition, are leading the way in having the jab. We urge you to read the article from the vaccination team at the Mallee District Aboriginal Services and take action to keep yourself and your community safe.

We trust you enjoy this edition of *West news.*

# Testing times for money

Don’t let money worries stand in the way of being tested for COVID-19.

The Victorian Government has a range of financial help available if you can’t work because you are awaiting test results or if you need to quarantine or self-isolate. This includes a $450 COVID-19 Test Isolation Payment and $1,500 Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment.

For information on the range of financial supports available, visit the [Victorian governments Coronavirus website](https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/financial-and-other-support-coronavirus-covid-19) <https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/financial-and-other-support-coronavirus-covid-19>

# Shane Cumming Message

Kaya (Noongar greeting) everyone,

COVID-19 had only just begun hitting the headlines in Australia in March 2020 when I first took on the role of Acting Manager for West Division’s Aboriginal Engagement Unit (AEU), whilst Marcus Clarke was seconded to the Eastern Marr Aboriginal Corporation.

It’s hard to believe how much Victorians in general, and our Aboriginal community in particular, have had to deal with since then. Personally, it has been both a challenging and rewarding time to be involved with the AEU’s support of our West Division colleagues via the Local COVID-19 Response Networks and a range of other community and intra-government forums.

I have been humbled by the commitment of our Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and Aboriginal people across West Division who have been there for communities and families throughout the rollercoaster that has been the COVID-19 pandemic, the recovery efforts and the vaccine rollout.

This includes the impressive community engagement generated by Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative, which led to strong participation in COVID-19 testing during the Colac outbreaks in August last year.

In addition to the pandemic-related work, I have also been leading the AEU’s strategic planning with a focus on an evidence-based approach to our main role of supporting and advocating on behalf of Aboriginal communities across West Division to improve health, wellbeing and safety outcomes. This has included our ongoing collaboration with West Division staff and our central office colleagues on the rollout of the Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework.

I understand the importance of this work, as a proud Aboriginal man from Western Australia whose family on both sides are Traditional Owners of the Country to which I belong; my mother’s family are the *Wardandi Noongar* people and my father’s family are the *Ngadju Wongatha.*

While it may still be some time before we can meet face-to-face, I am looking forward to visiting communities and ACCOs to see for myself the great outcomes being achieved within our Aboriginal communities and stakeholder organisations under both *Korin Korin Balit-Djak* and the *Aboriginal Governance and Accountability Framework.*

In the meantime, I urge all of you to book in to have your COVID-19 vaccination as soon as possible. History tells us how vulnerable our community can be. We all have a responsibility to keep our mob safe.

**Shane Cumming  
Acting Manager  
Aboriginal Engagement Unit  
West Division**

# Deputy Secretary’s message

Dear readers,

Greetings from Dja Dja Wurrung Country. I am delighted to be able to share this special COVID-19 edition of West news with you all.

Since our last newsletter in 2019, the West has gone through a period of significant change as we battle the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to navigate a new ‘COVID-normal’. During this journey, the Victorian Government recognised the need for a more focussed approach to the delivery of essential health and community services to deal with the significant and ongoing impact of the pandemic.

As a result, the Department of Health and Human Services has been restructured to create two new departments – the Department of Health (DoH) and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), which is where West Division now sits.

This change allows us to concentrate our efforts on delivering significant investment and reform in community services whilst ensuring we continue to provide a forum for Aboriginal voice in decision making.

COVID-19 has posed a significant challenge for our Aboriginal community and I recognise the incredible leadership of our Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and community leaders in the West who have worked tirelessly with the government to shape the pandemic response. This response has helped ensure that our Aboriginal community, through education, support and now recovery assistance, has been kept safe.

Over the past year, we have also taken the time to strengthen our governance arrangements. We have established new governance agreements with ACCOs, Community Service Organisations and forums to support practice improvement to ensure that Aboriginal voice is at the heart of our work.

The Wungurilwil Gapgapduir Governance Group was established in October 2020 as a forum to consider the objectives of the *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement,* which outlines a strategic direction to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in out‑of-home care by building their connection to culture, Country and community. The group will drive the agreement’s action plan and support outcomes from Aboriginal Children’s Forums. We have held three meetings to date.

This group also gave rise to West Division Aboriginal Family Led Decision‑making (AFLDM) forums by identifying the need to provide more opportunities for learning and information sharing between our Child Protection and ACCO workforces. We held the first AFLDM forum in November 2020 and the latest in June 2021. The forums have been incredibly well received by our Child Protection Practitioners.

We established the West Division Koori Caucus in 2020 to inform the West Division Aboriginal Governance Committee and provide a platform for ACCOs to raise key issues. The caucus held its first meeting on October 5.

Thank you to everyone involved in establishing and participating in these forums. They play an important role in driving our work.

I hope you enjoy this edition of West news and I look forward to providing you with further updates later in the year.

**Paul Smith   
Deputy Secretary  
West Division**

# The pandemic’s ups and lockdowns

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the daily lives of Victorians has been significant and ongoing, since the first lockdown in March 2020 through to the latest in August this year. West news spoke with the CEO of an Aboriginal Corporation and a young Aboriginal man about how they have coped with the lockdowns and the changes the virus has wrought.

## Jason Kanoa, CEO Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation

Jason Kanoa had only been CEO of Winda-Mara, in Victoria’s South West, for a few months when COVID hit but he says his organisation was well prepared.

‘We already had risk plans and business continuity plans developed, with a pandemic as one of the identified risks, so we just adopted that process,’ Jason says.

More frequent and regular senior leadership meetings were held, and staff were supported to work from home and do more outreach work rather than have community members come to the centre.

Winda-Mara health clinic has continued to operate throughout the lockdowns, using the Victorian Health Department’s COVID safe plan and protocols.

‘We shifted the way we did things, but the community got used to wearing masks and signing in and getting their temperature checked and all those other things.’

Victorian Government funds were used to help keep Elders engaged with the community and loved ones from their homes through technology, including iPads.

‘We had to do a little bit of education through that process to teach them how to use (iPads) but a lot of them were pretty good at it and were putting their apps on there,’ Jason says.

‘We also did a lot of phone calls to check in with our Elders, and they love a yarn so that was easy,’ he laughs.

The community only had one near miss, when a contractor who was a close contact with an individual who was COVID positive attended Winda-Mara for a 15-minute window, but luckily, the contractor was not infected.

‘We’re not out of the woods, obviously, but we’ve had really good outcomes in the Aboriginal community-controlled sector. We know we’re vulnerable in most health areas and I think when things like this scenario comes along, we think about all the past diseases that have ravaged our communities and that has conditioned us to really manage and be alert to all those types of things.’

Whilst no one would have asked for a global pandemic, Jason says there have been some positives to come out of the situation.

‘It was a really good opportunity to actually pivot the way we work and get out of the office and actually do that mobile response. That was a good outcome.’

Facilitating working from home arrangements and becoming comfortable with online meetings has been another plus, with some staff liking it so much they were reluctant to return to the office.

‘For me, it has been really good because it’s normally a four-to-five-hour trip in a car to Melbourne for a meeting for two hours, so I’ve been able to get to a lot more (online) meetings than I would have been able to because of the travel.’

Whilst Jason is concerned about the potential impact of another extended lockdown on his staff and community, he remains positive.

‘We will remain strong and resilient to whatever’s in front of us. We’ve been through this. We know what we need to do.’

## Aden Hitchins, DFFH trainee

Aden Hitchins was on the COVID-19 frontline last year, living in Broadmeadows and working the early shift at Coles, just as the fear of running out of toilet paper saw supermarkets swamped by Victorians desperate to stock up.

‘I’d start at two or three o’clock in the morning and, by the time six o’clock hit, we had 200 people flocking in. It was crazy,’ Aden says.

Whilst 2020 was a tough year for everyone, the 25-year-old Gunditj Mirring man says he got through it by focusing on being optimistic.

‘I was trying to stay as positive as I could, given all changes and lock downs, and I was trying not to let the negativity come flowing in.

‘It was pretty much a time for the world to slow down and for you to reevaluate your life or what you could fix up and strive for, and put things in place.’

In January this year, one of the things Aden put in place was starting a traineeship with the Office of the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

‘I wanted a change,’ Aden says. ‘The traineeship was a perfect opportunity to get trained up and check out my options and see where I could see myself headed with a career.’

Having had a tough start to life himself, Aden hopes to eventually work with Aboriginal youth who have experienced a traumatic upbringing, and help them choose the right path rather than repeating the cycle of disadvantage.

‘I’ve had to battle for myself since I was 16, when mum passed away. My dad lives back home on country, but he’s a dad who is not a father. I lived in hostels around the state and was couch surfing until I found something stable and it all fell into place,’ Aden says.

‘I could coach kids to fix up their way of thinking and give them that drive to really succeed.’

Aden is also pursuing his passion for stand-up comedy.

‘I was always a class clown.’

He performs at Blak stage, which is a First Peoples’ open microphone session at the Retreat Hotel in Brunswick on Tuesday nights, and he has performed with Aboriginal comic Shiralee Hood at the Melbourne Comedy Festival.

‘I’m still trying to get well established, but I’m slowly getting there.’

You can follow [Aden on his Instagram page @adenhitchins](https://www.instagram.com/adenhitchins/) <https://www.instagram.com/adenhitchins/>

# Aboriginal voices drive COVID response

Soon after Coronavirus claimed its first life in Australia on February 27, 2020, the-then Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (now the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing) established a working group to support the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts in Aboriginal communities.

West Division, including the Aboriginal Engagement Unit, was heavily involved in the department’s Community Services Operations Division’s *Support for Aboriginal Communities Working Group,* which aimed to provide coordinated statewide responses for Aboriginal communities and organisations during the pandemic.

West Division’s Acting Manager Aboriginal Engagement Unit Shane Cumming says the group worked with Aboriginal communities to assist them with their priorities.

‘We wanted to support communities to deliver self-determined solutions to keeping people safe and minimising the impact of lockdowns and restrictions on their lives and livelihoods,’ Shane says.

The group engaged Aboriginal organisations in emergency responses to ensure they were delivered in a culturally safe way, and supported Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations to continue their operations throughout the pandemic (see Jason Kanoa’s story on page 4 to learn how Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation pivoted its services during the year).

‘We have been extremely fortunate that only about 74 out of around 58,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria are known to have been infected by COVID-19,’ Shane says.

‘This is a great result and a credit to Aboriginal organisations and communities in West Division and beyond who have been vigilant and proactive in preventing COVID-19 taking hold and in looking after those most at risk during this turbulent time.’

The working group has continued to meet in 2021 to assist with the rapidly changing challenges posed to Aboriginal communities by COVID-19, assisting with reforms and initiatives that are driven by local needs and support self-determination.

# Aboriginal artists make enduring mark on reimagined seniors festival

The overwhelmingly positive response to performances by Aboriginal artists and community leaders at the 2020 Victorian Seniors Festival reimagined has prompted organisers to include a video and radio series curated by a First Nations creative director as part of the 2021 festival program.

The seniors’ festival has been a staple of the performing arts calendar for almost four decades, with Victorians able to enjoy a range of live events held throughout the state during October.

COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 saw the event ‘reimagined’ as a six-month-long festival of online performances, accompanied by written profiles of the artists.

Cultural leader and song man Kutcha Edwards opened and closed the festival, which featured other Aboriginal artists with strong links to the West, including Uncle Jack Charles, Deborah Cheetham AO and Uncle Murray Harrison.

More than 164,200 Victorians visited the festival website, with many senior Victorians contacting the organisers to report how much they’d appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the Aboriginal artists’ stories, including:

## Uncle Murray Harrison

A treasured Aboriginal Elder and noted singer/song-writer, Uncle Murray has shared his story with numerous schools and colleges over the years, wanting to pass on his message that, ‘It doesn’t matter where you come from, where you start, it’s where you finish. Look at me.’

Writing and singing songs about his experiences helped the proud Wotjobaluk man share with others his story of being taken from his family to a youth prison at age 10, before being moved to an orphanage.

‘People were really able to relate to what happened,’ he says. ‘They would get emotional hearing about a ten-year-old boy being put into a dark cell, thrown on the floor like he’s nothing and who, for 60 years, couldn’t sleep in a dark room. I’d wake in the middle of the night, screaming about the rotten door being locked.

‘Music helped me function and understand that life is about what you make it. You can sit around and think and sook…but once I got into music, that certainly helped a lot more than alcohol did.’

## Uncle Jack Charles

It was the realisation that others considered him to be an Elder that prompted Uncle Jack Charles to turn his life around.

The activist, actor, author, and former cat burglar and drug addict was unwittingly born into a life of crime simply by being Aboriginal. Under the government’s policy of the day, he was taken from his parents when only four-months old and put into a boys’ home.

‘When you were taken in those days, during the 40s and 50s, you immediately got a criminal record. Your first offence was, “Aboriginal child Jack Charles. The offence – child in need of care and attention”,’ he says.

Uncle Jack began acting at age 19 but, like many other members of the Stolen Generations, he battled drug addiction and homelessness and spent periods in jail for offences including theft.

‘I was a serial pest … being one of Melbourne’s notable cat burglars, stealing only from the wealthy areas,’ he says.

It was when doing his last stint in jail he realised that younger Aboriginal prisoners were looking up to him as an Elder.

‘I said to myself, “Well if people are so respectful of me, calling me Uncle even in prison, I should take on that role. I should pull up and be the leading black light for others.’

Uncle Jack is now heavily involved in the Archie Roach Foundation, with a mission that includes mentoring young Aboriginal inmates. He is also agitating to make Aboriginal history mandatory in schools.

## Professor Deborah Cheetham AO

Professor Deborah Cheetham AO has been at the heart of Australian opera for more than 25 years. A proud Yorta Yorta woman, Deborah has entertained audiences with her own, powerful soprano voice and been a pioneer for the art form, creating an invaluable legacy of Aboriginal performers.

Deborah describes herself as, ‘a 21st century urban woman who is Yorta Yorta by birth, stolen generation by policy, soprano by diligence, composer by necessity and lesbian by practice’. However, that pithy summary doesn’t begin to scratch the surface of her contribution to inspiring generations of performing artists, musicians, students, academics and communities.

Deborah founded Short Black Opera, Australia’s national not-for-profit opera company devoted to the development of Aboriginal singers, and Dhungala Children’s Choir, the peak choral performance group for Aboriginal children. She also established Ensemble Dutala, which develops and nurtures Aboriginal orchestral musicians.

## Kutcha Edwards

For Kutcha Edwards, singing is more than entertainment or a means to pay the bills; it’s a way for him to share his culture.

‘It’s like that old grandfather or grandmother who paints their culture on a canvas. I’m singing of that Country. I’m writing of that Country...I’m doing the same as what my forefathers have done since time began.’

A proud Mutti Mutti man, Kutcha and five of his siblings were forcibly removed from his family when he was only 18-months old.

‘My role in the whole scheme of things is to sing on behalf of my family and what has transpired for my family,’ Kutcha says.

A singer, storyteller, activist and community leader, Kutcha was hopeful the sharing of his story, and that of other Stolen Generations survivors during the festival would be ‘like dropping pebbles of knowledge’ to create greater ripples of understanding of Australia’s unsavoury past and its ongoing impact.

‘I look at the injustice that’s handed out to my people. I look at my own journey and, you know, I didn’t burgle a house, I didn’t steal a car, I didn’t rob an old lady for a purse. I was born in a country where, prior to 1778, the only colour of the people on this continent was black and to be torn from my mother and father’s hands because of the colour of my skin, where’s the justice in that?’

Kutcha has ‘dropped pebbles’ at several Seniors Festivals over the years and he hopes to be involved in many more.

To view all the Aboriginal performances at the [Seniors Festival reimagined website](https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/reimagined/first-nation-features), go to <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/reimagined/first-nation-features>

# COVID yarn without the hype

Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) is encouraging people who are worried about the COVID-19 vaccine to come to the clinic and have a cup of tea and a yarn about it without fearing they will be pressured into having the jab.

MDAS’s Acting Clinical Coordinator, Alex McWilliam says, ‘Sometimes it helps to knock those extra questions on the head.

‘I think everyone’s worried if they set foot in the clinic and mention anything about the vaccine, they will get a jab in the arm before they know it, so it’s just giving them that confidence that they can come in and just have a chat to us first and they can walk out if it’s not something they’re interested in. It’s always a voluntary decision, it’s their body, their choice, their right.’

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the age of 16 are eligible and encouraged to get a COVID 19 vaccine with over 60s to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine and those under 60 to have Pfizer. Whilst concerns about the safety of AstraZeneca have been heavily reported upon, if Aboriginal people over 60 are adamant they don’t want the AstraZeneca vaccine, they are welcome to discuss their options with their GP, Alex says.

Fortunately, a lot of Elders have already been vaccinated.

‘Which is really important because it helps show others in the community the vaccination is important and safe.’

Contact your local Aboriginal Health Service or call 1800 675 398 to find a vaccination centre near you.

# Contact details

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