

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDIES

Strategies for working and surviving in isolated rural and mining communities, a seminar paper

by Amanda Nickson

In isolated communities, in particular those to which only a limited visiting service is provided, most people consider us, the authorities, as "outsiders", definitely not to be trusted. An attitude which is alarming and often present in these small communities, is that many people may know that a particular family is incestuous, or mistreats their children, but this is considered as OK or normal – "It's just the Jones family – they've always been like that." How to break down the conspiracy of silence in these communities to reach and protect these children, presents problems. To survive professionally and personally, some tactics have to be adopted.

Some strategies are:

1. Identify the key people in each community;
2. Meet all of the key people individually;
3. Visit them regularly;
4. Have a meeting with all the key people;
5. Have a public meeting;
6. Continue regular meetings with key people and the general public.

A mistake often made by new officers visiting a small rural community or mining town is to make such comments as "What on earth do you do in a town like this?" "What a God-forsaken place this is!" "Why would people ever want to live here?", and other less polite comments, which immediately get them offside with the locals. Professionals often come from the "outside", with little understanding of the lifestyle or existing relationships. Professional training is usually city-based.

It could be that a Social Worker does find the place unbearably isolated and hot, but rather than make some phoney comment about it being a nice place, it is better to say nothing at all.

Once I have met all the key people in town, I make a point of dropping in on them and asking how things are going **every** time I am in town. Even if the schedule is tight, this is well worth the effort and proves to be very valuable rapport-building.

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After several visits, the next step in the strategy is to hold a meeting to which all the key personnel in town are invited, plus some others (such as teachers and nurses). At this meeting, again I clarify my role in the statutory agency and usually present material on child abuse (often with accompanying video material), answer questions, and highlight myths.

The next step, depending on the awareness and keenness of the group of key personnel, is to either plan further education nights for this group, or hold a public meeting in the town covering the same sorts of issues.

Continuing further education of this core group of key people, even if only once every two months, is not only worthwhile, but crucial to maintaining visibility and credibility. Ongoing public meetings on topics continually raising the community's awareness of child abuse and related issues is good practice. These strategies are the basis of community education and a part of community work.

Gaining credibility from community education and good case-work practice is part of the key to surviving in these towns. Unless we have that commitment to the town and its community problems, our credibility will not amount to much.

Another key is visibility. Apart from publicising when I will be in a town, and how to contact me to make appointments, putting regular contributions into the local newspaper is a good strategy. Another is to do an interview and/or talk-back programme on the local radio station. I have found that radio stations are most willing to oblige.

Personal survival is a critical factor, not only in terms of credibility, but also for one's own well-being. If the worker is burnt-out and over-fatigued, he/she is unlikely to be able to perform good work.

Another stressor is professional isolation. I was the only (practising) Social Worker in a particular town for over three years. I found two things helpful in combating professional isolation. Firstly, contacting other Social Workers in neighbouring towns within the region by phone regularly for support. Whilst our pride tends to make us never want to admit that we need support or feel isolated, the truth is that we do. I have found professional colleagues do not mind being leant upon from time to time, particularly when a reciprocal arrangement exists. The second strategy is forming a support relationship with another professional in a town, for example with a teacher or Doctor.

Stress management is part of survival in the bush as much as anywhere else. Taking time out to relax was very important unless you wanted to live and breathe work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Looking after yourself, actually taking lunch hours, going for walks or other recreational activities (survival tactics) are all important. The value of these are not to be underestimated if one wants to minimise vulnerability to burnout.