

Transfer the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm (NBHF) to community control

The idea for the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm came from Ngunnawal elders, Aunty Roslyn Brown, Uncle Fred Monaghan and the late Aunty Agnes Shea, who advocated for a residential facility where Aboriginal cultural beliefs, customs and values would be embedded in healthcare delivery.

The three of them established the United Ngunnawal Elders Council (UNEC) and hosted Ngunnawal Reconciliation Camps, developing their vision for the Bush Healing Farm.

In 2002 the United Ngunnawal Elders Council (UNEC) asked the ACT Government to work with them to develop the Bush Healing Farm and in August 2008, the ACT Government bought the property 'Miowera' on Paddy's River Road to establish it.

It is now 22 years since the Ngunnawal Elders asked the ACT government to help them develop the Bush Healing Farm. Their vision has still not been realised.

What we want:

The NBHF should be transitioned to community control within 12 months of the ACT 2024 election, well resourced, and able to offer comprehensive, residential and wrap around programs that best meet ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community needs.

A bit of history...

According to a February 2012 newsletter from the Healing Farm's Advisory Board:

"Once established, it will be a holistic service, implementing culturally appropriate alcohol and other drug prevention and education programs. The service model is that of a therapeutic community, in which people voluntarily choose to enter an abstinence based residential community for personal growth and rehabilitation. The service will be founded on reconnecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to land and culture. Agriculture, horticulture and land management will be used to provide education, training and rehabilitation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients."

During subsequent years, ACT Health held a number of meetings to design it, and it was built as an 8-bed residential facility with a view to expanding to 16 beds in the future. Material provided by ACT Health at that stage said that the objectives for the Residential Participants included:

- "1. Rehabilitate and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander young people and their families who are 'at risk';
2. Foster Self Determination amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially, by linking them with work, education, training, health and well-being programs;
3. Sustain Ngunnawal Identity, spirituality and culture, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people."

The tendering process to find an organisation to manage and operate the facility closed in December 2015 with the idea that the NBHF would be fully operational from September 2016. Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service was approached to propose a model of care for the facility in 2016, but pulled out in 2017, when it emerged that land-zoning rules prohibited all clinical services at the farm, including counselling. There were no preferred tenderers and a long period of further consultation ensued to seek a service delivery model and a provider. The facility was finally opened, run by ACT Health, in August 2017 by which time around \$12 million had been spent to establish the Healing Farm.

The Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm since 2017

Since that time, day programs have continued, with staff using a bus to collect participants from across Canberra in the mornings and returning them at the end of the day, leaving participants only a few hours at the Bush Healing Farm each day. Only 14 ten-week day programs had been held there between 2017 and July 2023, just over two per year. 154 people had participated in these day programs at a cost of \$1.7 million per year. The excellent residential facilities are still lying idle.

In 2019, the Healing Farm was reviewed by the late Russ Taylor¹, a senior Aboriginal person, who recommended, among other things, the revival of the Advisory Board, which, though established in 2009, had not been meeting recently, and the development of a Healing Framework. He also recommended a suitable co-governance model. It is understood that the Healing Framework has since been agreed.

While Covid 19 may have delayed the implementation of some of Taylor's recommendations, the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm is still being run by ACT Health. The Aboriginal Advisory Board was stood down in early 2023 as the Minister argued it was hindering progress. There is no reference yet to a replacement Board on ACT Health's website.

In an Appendix to their 2020 Parliamentary and Governing Agreement the ACT Government committed to:

“Return Yarramundi, Boomanulla and the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm to community control” (point 9.5).

Of these facilities, neither Boomanulla Oval nor the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm have been returned to community control in the last four years. The need for community healing still remains, and many socio-economic outcomes will not change until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT who need healing are able to get it.

The ACT Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Elected Body's Report on their August 2023 Hearings² notes that there has been a recent review of the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm, but states that priority is the transfer of management of Boomanulla Oval and Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm to the community.

Further Reading

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-30/act-ngunnawal-bush-healing-farm-for-indigenous-canberrans/102574658>

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/5993161/residential-program-at-ngunnawal-bush-healing-farm-on-hold/>

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8277244/bush-healing-farm-board-suspended-act-health-assumes-control/>

To contact ANTA ACT: <https://antaract.org.au/contact-us/>

Authorised by Janet Hunt on behalf of ANTA ACT.

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¹ The review was not public but ANTA ACT was briefed about it by ACT Health.

² [ATSIEB Report on Hearings 14–16 August 2023](#)