

Promoting Aboriginal health through the arts

Overview of supported projects

Promoting Aboriginal health and wellbeing



(Left to right) VicHealth supported partners: Koorie Heritage Trust, Short Black Opera Company and ILBIJERRI Theatre Company.

Introduction

Engagement with the arts can have powerful impacts on health, wellbeing and the strengthening of communities. For more than two decades VicHealth has been supporting the arts because of the great health promotion opportunities it provides. We know that access to the arts helps people connect socially and participate in their community's cultural life. The role of the arts in exploring and communicating social concerns, giving voice to hidden issues and allowing self-expression is also a major contributor to health.

Since 1987 VicHealth has forged many significant and enduring partnerships with art organisations. We continue to invest in programs and research that build social connections and celebrate cultural diversity. Over the past 20 years we have also developed effective partnerships with Aboriginal organisations working to enhance the health, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal* Victorians.

VicHealth supports Aboriginal communities to strengthen and present their arts and culture. The arts provide an opportunity to celebrate Aboriginal identity, share stories and highlight race-based discrimination and intercultural relations to a wide audience.

* The term 'Aboriginal' is used in this resource to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. 'Indigenous' is retained when it is part of the title of a report, program or quotation.

Why is promoting Aboriginal health important?

While the overall health of Australians is improving, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people experience vastly different health outcomes. Aboriginal people experience higher levels of disease and disability, and die between 10 and 17 years younger than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.^{2, 1}

This difference in health outcomes in Australia is largely the result of unequal access to the resources and opportunities necessary for good health. These include income, quality housing, education, freedom from discrimination and participation in community activities.¹²

As a result, Aboriginal people have an increased risk of anxiety, depression, psychological distress, unhealthy coping behaviours and chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.¹²

Importantly, much of this disadvantage and ill health can be prevented or reduced. VicHealth recognises that action in the following areas can have positive impacts on mental and physical health:

- increasing social connection, social inclusion and strong family and community relationships
- promoting strong and diverse Aboriginal cultures and identities
- reducing race-based discrimination by promoting intercultural contact and dialogue to build respect for Aboriginal culture and identities
- providing opportunities for education, employment, housing, skills development and participation in community activities.¹³

The role of arts in Aboriginal culture and health

Participation in creative activity is integral to Aboriginal culture and heritage. Music, dance, drawing and storytelling are used by Aboriginal people for celebrations and personal expression, to pass on knowledge and to record history. Involvement in the arts can also build and enforce cultural identity, connection to country and community pride.^{13, 4}

Today, the arts bridges traditional and contemporary forms, including numerous combinations of visual and performing arts; writing; storytelling; music; filmmaking; and digital mediums.

'Aboriginal health' means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their community. It is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life.⁷

How do the arts improve health?

We know that being involved in arts activities can improve people's mental and physical health and help build healthier communities.^{10, 14} In particular, involvement in the arts has been shown to increase people's:

- self-esteem, pride and cultural identity^{8, 10}
- sense of self-determination, control and belonging⁹
- academic outcomes, skill development and employment pathways.^{3, 6}

These factors are linked with improvements in both mental and physical health. At the community level, involvement in the arts can:

- increase social cohesion and connections¹⁰
- build a sense of community pride³
- create a vibrant, creative and innovative community¹⁰
- promote economic development¹⁰
- decrease rates of crime, discrimination and violence and reduce drug and alcohol consumption.^{3, 10}

For Aboriginal people the arts can develop community connections and positive cultural identity, providing a source of resilience against difficult life circumstances while improving physical and mental wellbeing. The arts have also demonstrated positive impacts on educational and employment outcomes.⁸

Involvement in the arts can also facilitate social cohesion. When Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities are brought together, it provides opportunities for people to reflect on their individual and shared experiences. This can reduce isolation by helping people make friends and strengthen ties between the Aboriginal community and other cultural and social groups.⁵



Angels' Voices Extravaganza Concert, Emerge Cultural Hubs project, Multicultural Arts Victoria.

“The voice of the artist not only records, but shapes attitudes, plants seeds and facilitates change. The voice of the artist facilitates the voice of others.” *Richard Frankland, Aboriginal singer/songwriter, author and filmmaker*

VicHealth's role

Since VicHealth's inception, the arts have been a key setting for our work to promote health and wellbeing for all Victorians. Using arts activity as a health promotion tool is now an accepted part of the Victorian health landscape.

VicHealth has developed a range of arts programs to improve people's health by giving them opportunities to get creative, active and involved in their local community through art.

VicHealth arts and culture initiatives include:

- **Arts About Us** projects deliver arts based programs across Victoria which celebrate our cultural diversity and help people understand the impacts of race-based discrimination.
- **MOTION projects** work with local communities to provide free, vibrant, and unique ways to get people physically active through arts activities.
- **LEAP (Localities Enhancing Arts Participation)** was a three-year partnership with local governments using arts and cultural activities to increase participation and decrease social isolation.

VicHealth and Aboriginal health through arts

VicHealth also delivers arts projects that improve Aboriginal Victorians' health and contribute to the overall wellbeing of our wider community. Our approach is guided by the Victorian Aboriginal Health Promotion Framework (see page 10) and *Life is health is life: taking action to close the gap*.

Organisations supported by VicHealth to strengthen Aboriginal arts activity include:

The Black Arm Band is an ensemble of musicians drawn from Aboriginal communities across Australia. It aims to empower Aboriginal people by using music to promote positive messaging and cultural engagement. Their Community Engagement program involves a series of music and professional exchanges that provide a forum for positive intercultural experiences, development of strong Aboriginal role models and effective leadership.

ILBIJERRI Theatre Company is Australia's longest running Aboriginal theatre company. ILBIJERRI initiate and develop performances in collaboration with the community and artists. Their Community program focuses on developing Aboriginal theatre practitioners, increasing Aboriginal audience access and strengthening connections between artists, audiences and the broader community.

Malthouse Theatre uses contemporary theatre to create a conversation between the artists, audience and public. The Blak Cabaret program is a celebration of some of Victoria's best Aboriginal performers, musicians, stand-up comics and DJs. It develops community pride and addresses misconceptions of Aboriginal people and issues, highlighting the common threads of all Victorian lives through comedy, music and dance.



(Left to right) Arts and cultural initiatives supported by VicHealth to celebrate cultural diversity and promote wellbeing: Arts About Us, The Torch Project and MOTION.

The Torch Project is a cross-cultural arts organisation committed to using creative and collaborative arts based approaches to ignite movements of positive social change expressed within the grassroots of Victorian communities. Torch programs support emerging Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists and community leaders with mentoring and practical skill development within locally relevant, self-determined community and contemporary art initiatives.

Songlines Aboriginal Music Corporation is Victoria's peak Aboriginal music body. It aims to give voice to Aboriginal people, celebrate and preserve the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and promote reconciliation by bringing together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Songlines provides young people with opportunities and pathways to participate in music making as well as cultural exchange with the broader community.

The Coranderrk Minutes of Evidence project was developed in partnership with 10 organisations and includes leading Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, community members, researchers and education experts. It involves a verbatim-theatre performance of *Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country*, development of an adapted version for schools, a regional tour, a website and a comprehensive evaluation.

Koorie Heritage Trust is an Aboriginal community organisation that runs exhibitions, education programs, training and arts projects. VicHealth supports the Blaktraks program, which includes workshops designed to re-engage young people with community and encourage them to express their own stories as young urban Aboriginal people in ways that are meaningful to them via digital media.

The Fitzroy/Collingwood Parkies DVD History project collated interviews with nine community elders, film footage and historical resources about the Aboriginal people known as the Fitzroy/Collingwood Parkies group into a documentary. This public and private history will be made available at a community event, then to the general public. Educational resources for school students to accompany the documentary will be produced to capture the significance of social connection, place and storytelling between generations.

Short Black Opera Company brings together an Aboriginal cast to perform *Pecan Summer*, Australia's first Aboriginal opera. *Pecan Summer* is a vehicle for Aboriginal singers and audiences to engage with the power of storytelling through opera and encourages the development of Aboriginal opera singers. The Melbourne Spring Intensive program for Aboriginal singers provides the cast for performances, held in Melbourne and around Victoria.

Swan Hill Aboriginal Service is a community-controlled service that focuses on promoting Aboriginal health and wellbeing, social and economic participation, self-empowerment and cross-cultural respect. The Marruk Project engages Aboriginal and emerging refugee communities, using theatre, dance, music and puppetry to convey stories of the local area.

The way forward

VicHealth is committed to maintaining our support for activity that reduces inequities and promotes Aboriginal health and wellbeing. Our work in the arts is an important component of a suite of health promotion approaches.

More information on VicHealth's work to improve Aboriginal health and participation in the arts can be found at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au



Case study ILBIJERRI Theatre Company: Community Programs capacity building

ILBIJERRI is Australia's leading and longest running Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Company. They create challenging and inspiring theatre creatively controlled by Aboriginal artists. Since 1990, they have commissioned 30 new Aboriginal works and performed for more than 150,000 people in regional, remote and metropolitan venues nationally and internationally.

ILBIJERRI aspire to be a spearhead for the Australian Aboriginal community by telling stories of what it means to be Aboriginal in Australia today. Their work possesses the power to reach out and remind audiences of every person's need for family, history and heritage.

Their collaborative relationships with communities and artists are at the heart of their creative process.

"ILBIJERRI's work means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists can give voice to their cultures and tell their story through theatre," says Rachael Maza, ILBIJERRI's Artistic Director. "They're heard by audiences across urban, regional and remote Australia, as well as internationally."

ILBIJERRI's work provides insight for non-Aboriginal people and builds understanding and cross-cultural respect. It celebrates the cultural diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their experiences.

ILBIJERRI is dedicated to the development, training and mentorship of the next generation of Aboriginal artists as they establish themselves. They deliver a broad program of Artist Development that creates opportunities for skills training, networking and new professional pathways.

VicHealth has supported ILBIJERRI's work for more than a decade, which has included helping build pathways for emerging artists, developing leadership and engaging and educating the community. In 2012–14 VicHealth is helping to build ILBIJERRI's community programs.

Black Writers Lab

The Black Writers Lab is a vocational training program for Aboriginal artists wanting to develop their creative writing skills. The program helps new writers develop their work into complete, industry-standard performance scripts in a bid to expand their career prospects.



ILBIJERRI Theatre Company actors take centre stage.

Community nights

Community nights support the engagement of the Aboriginal community in ILBIJERRI's main stage performances and creative development processes, by working with community members and organisations to facilitate participation and attendance.

Victorian Indigenous Performing Arts (VIPA) Awards

The VIPA Awards bring together the performing arts communities to celebrate Aboriginal artists and their contribution to the arts in Victoria. It is an opportunity to promote and show appreciation of Victoria's diverse Aboriginal culture before a mainstream audience. For Aboriginal people (particularly young people), this promotes pride in their cultural identity, and models leadership and participation in the arts and related sectors.

"Through Aboriginal performing arts we exercise our sovereign right to safeguard and practise our culture. It honours the traditional stories of our ancestors and also the contemporary stories of Aboriginal people today." *Aunt Carolyn Briggs, Boonwurrung Elder*

Case study The Black Arm Band: Community Engagement program

The Black Arm Band is an ensemble of musicians drawn from Aboriginal communities across Australia. It aims to empower Aboriginal people by using music to promote positive messaging and cultural engagement, thereby enhancing self-esteem and promoting community health and social wellbeing. The Black Arm Band showcases, celebrates and shares the contribution of Aboriginal cultural and political life.

The Black Arm Band's work includes representation of strong Aboriginal individuals in significant roles within the organisation, and in performances with mainstream audiences. This promotes mutual respect and valuing of diverse cultures, including strong, distinctive and interconnected Aboriginal identities.

"We continually explore new modes of expression and engagement, and seek opportunities to inspire, educate and entertain Victoria's diverse communities", says Lou Bennett, The Black Arm Band's Artistic Director. "The long-term vision is for The Black Arm Band to be an ongoing presence – a national resource hub for the development and performance of Aboriginal music in all its forms."

The 2012–14 partnership with VicHealth enables The Black Arm Band to increase its presence in Victoria through further active engagement with local communities during workshop and performance development activities.

The Bush and Found Orchestra

The Bush and Found Orchestra aims to build young Aboriginal people's sense of cultural and community development, as well as develop their skills. It involves a collection of musical instruments made from both natural and found materials from in and around remote Aboriginal communities. These instruments are developed and made with craftspeople and professional musicians working with young people from Aboriginal communities across Victoria.



Black Arm Band perform at Footscray Community Arts Centre.

Mentoring and professional development program

A core objective of The Black Arm Band is to mentor emerging artists and people in the arts industry by providing opportunities in various roles within the organisation. This aim helps facilitate career pathways and enhance access to professional opportunities for individuals working in the arts. Mentoring and professional development practices are embedded in the organisation's practices for existing staff and band members within all its operations.

"The Black Arm Band reminds me of the long struggle and the long journey we've been on. Thirty years ago we were marching for justice down the city streets, but now we're telling our stories in the concert halls." Archie Roach, Aboriginal singer/songwriter

Case study Koorie Heritage Trust: Blaktraks

The Koorie Heritage Trust is an Aboriginal community organisation that runs exhibitions, education programs, training and arts projects. The Trust aims to protect, preserve and promote the living culture of Aboriginal people of south-eastern Australia and, in doing so, bridge the cultural gap between Aboriginal people and the wider community.

“We endeavour to be leaders in keeping our culture and heritage strong and vibrant,” explains Tom Mosby, CEO of the Koorie Heritage Trust. “That way we can make sure the richness, diversity and integrity of our culture and heritage is safeguarded for present and future generations.”

The Trust’s Blaktraks program brings together Aboriginal young people (aged 16 to 24 years) and their community Elders from across urban Victoria. The young people learn to design, produce and launch their own autobiographical short films that reflect their view of self, family, community, culture and society. These stories are based on urban space and place, and represent the changing face and history of Aboriginal identities in Victoria.

The Trust collaborates with Storyscape, a collective of artists from across Victoria who help participants create their stories by drawing on a range of mediums, such as film, voice, music soundtracks, hip-hop and images including video, photos and stencil art. Young people are able to develop high-quality and diverse short films, gain skills in photography and video production, and build community pride, social connection and cross-cultural understanding.

“Growing up was hard for me because I never had a father. I have been in an out of care since I was seven years old. I’m glad to be doing Blaktraks because I know I’m making my dad proud even though I know he is not here with me now. I know that he is looking down on me. He’s the main reason why I am still holding on and haven’t let go,” said Blaktraks participant Angel.

The program also aims to create connections between participants and local Elders. In this way, it strengthens community linkages and assists in preserving, protecting and promoting the cultural heritage of the Aboriginal peoples of south-eastern Australia.



Cultural presentations at the Koorie Heritage Trust Launch.

Blaktraks participants take part in a community performance and screening of the collection at the Trust. Their films are also screened at conferences and disseminated using social media and via mobile phones using QR (quick response) codes at sites across Melbourne and regional centres. Creative workshops and the development and planning of events are integrated into a Certificate III in Arts Administration.

The films and the program have received several accolades. One of the 2011 participants, Kira Bunker, was a finalist in ABC’s Heywire competition with her film *Back on Track*. This and other past participants’ films can be seen at: www.youtube.com/user/blaktraks

“The Blaktraks program is about broadening understanding of identity, cultural heritage and Aboriginal history, as well as strengthening connection with community, resulting in spectacular ideas, highlighting the strength, not only of participants’ history, but their take on contemporary Koorie culture.” *David Winslade, Koorie Heritage Trust*

Case study Short Black Opera: *Pecan Summer*

The Short Black Opera Company is an opera company directed by internationally acclaimed Yorta Yorta Aboriginal soprano, Deborah Cheetham. Deborah made history in 2010 when she brought together an Aboriginal cast to perform *Pecan Summer*, Australia's first Aboriginal opera.

Pecan Summer, written and composed by Deborah, shines the spotlight on an important but largely unknown piece of Australian history: the 1939 walk off Cumeragunja Mission, where 200 Aboriginal men, women and children crossed the Dhungala (Murray River) in defiance of their persecutors. This is interwoven with the heartbreaking story of Alice, a young girl who is taken from her family and grows up to have her own daughter taken from her.

The opera shares a captivating slice of history and insight into the devastation experienced by many Aboriginal families. It is a vehicle for Aboriginal singers and audiences to engage with the power of storytelling through opera. Through the themes it raises, it encourages dialogue about the harmful aspects of race-based discrimination and the benefits of cultural diversity.

Yorta Yorta bass baritone and cast member of *Pecan Summer* Tiriki Onus said being part of the production was a life changing experience:

"Having the chance to pursue a dream of being an Opera singer has been the most profoundly empowering experience of my life to date, not only as a Yorta Yorta man who's getting to tell his people's story, but as a member of a company where Aboriginal people from across this country are being given the opportunity to excel and shine."

Pecan Summer also encourages the professional development of Aboriginal opera singers, identifying and nurturing talent and providing opportunities for artists to perform at a high level before a diverse audience, as well as further their musical and professional careers.

"I think the idea of [*Pecan Summer*] is so...unbelievable. Not just the fact that we get to sing in our first opera, but we get to do something for countrymen," says cast member Jub Clerc. "It's so massive. I kept on telling my Yorta Yorta mates, 'You guys are gonna come to this and you're gonna hear your language. You're gonna hear it sung in opera and you're gonna hear your Dreamtime story in the first Aboriginal opera in the world.'"



Aboriginal cast members perform in *Pecan Summer*.

VicHealth supported the Short Black Opera Company to produce an annual Melbourne Spring Intensive program for Aboriginal singers from 2011 to 2013 at the Victorian College of Arts. Each Spring Intensive provides the cast for the performance of *Pecan Summer* in 2012 and 2013 in regional Victoria.

The arts provide a powerful platform for celebrating diversity and strengthening cultural understanding," says VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter. "Deborah's opera adds an amazing story, unique performance and wonderful talent to our arts program."

"Opera is a powerful and engaging way of telling stories. Aboriginal Australians have been telling their stories through song for 1000 generations. Pecan Summer is a continuation of that tradition."

Deborah Cheetham, soprano, writer and composer of Pecan Summer

Life is health is life: Taking action to close the gap



Victorian Aboriginal health promotion framework

Key determinants of Aboriginal health in Victoria and themes for action

History of colonisation				
Educational attainment	Family and community connections	Access to economic and material resources	Freedom from race-based discrimination	Connection to country
Socially inclusive, supportive and aspirational educational environments	<p>Supportive personal relationships</p> <p>Supportive community connections navigating in 'two worlds'</p> <p>Strong culture and identity</p> <p>Aboriginal people systematically included in policy processes</p>	<p>Economic participation</p> <p>Employment</p> <p>Adequate housing for health</p>	<p>Security and respect at all levels of society</p> <p>Equality of opportunity</p> <p>Valuing diversity</p>	<p>Recognition and access to homelands</p> <p>Strong culture and identity</p>

Key contributing factors and themes for action

Tobacco	Physical activity	Nutrition and access to food	Alcohol	Access and treatment in the health system
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Health promotion principles and actions

Principles: good practice Aboriginal health promotion action	Health promotion actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive of historical, social and cultural context • 'Community-centred practice' – community owned and driven, builds on strengths to address community-identified priorities • Flexible, allowing for innovation, and accountable • Comprehensive with multiple strategies to address all the determinants • Sustainable in terms of funding, program and governance • Evidence-based with built-in monitoring and evaluation systems • Builds and sustains the social, human and economic capital from a strengths-based perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build healthy public policy • Create supportive environments • Strengthen community actions and increase community capacity to empower the individual • Develop personal skills • Reorient health services towards comprehensive primary health care • Secure an infrastructure for health promotion • Advocate and communicate • Consolidate and expand partnerships for health

Priority settings for action

Early childhood	Health	Education	Housing	Local community (families/clan groups)	
Local government	Corporate	Sport and recreation	Arts	Media	Workplace

Intermediate outcomes

Individual	Organisational	Community	Societal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong family and community relationships • Access to socially inclusive and supportive educational opportunities • Access to employment • Reduced experiences of discrimination • Access to appropriate health care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies, practices and procedures that model good practice in Aboriginal health promotion • Systematic inclusion of Aboriginal people in policy processes • Committed to sustaining change • Appropriately sized, well trained and supported Aboriginal workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe, supportive and inclusive environment • Mutual respect and valuing of diversity • Improved cohesion • Committed to sustaining change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive, non-discriminatory education, employment, housing and other social policies, programs and legislative platforms that support Aboriginal health • Strong leadership • Social norms and practices that support Aboriginal health • Appropriate resource allocation • Responsive and inclusive governance structures

Long-term benefits

Individual	Organisational	Community	Societal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong cultural identity • Self-esteem, pride and leadership • Alleviation of poverty and socioeconomic inequalities • Improved health and wellbeing • Control/mastery over determinants of own health • Increased sense of belonging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom from discrimination • Effective programs that are contributing to closing the gap 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong cultural identity • Improved productivity • Freedom from discrimination • Reconciliation • Self-determination • Less violence and crime • Equality of health outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fairer society with equality of access to opportunities and resources that support health • Freedom from discrimination • Equality of life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

The summary information provided here is adapted from the full resource *Life is health is life: Taking action to close the gap. Victorian Aboriginal evidence-based health promotion resource*. Available at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/lifeishealthislife

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