The first step in seeking community support is generally to contact the CEO of the relevant Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHOs). The CEO will be able to advise whether the research is supported by the community. Support from the CEO of the ACCHOs involved will be required by the Western Australia Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (WAAHEC) before ethics approval is granted. ACCHOs CEOs are busy and often travelling and it may take longer than you anticipate to receive a response. Having local contacts, particularly within the ACCHOs, and visiting in person during the consultation phase is likely to make this process easier.

Ethics approval can take longer than some researchers anticipate. It is also recommended that you allow at least three months for community consultation. Consider that local organisations are very busy and have many competing demands. This may limit the available time that staff have to meet and talk with you. There can be a high staff turnover due to member services locations, which may affect your consultation. You may need to consult with multiple people and obtain additional letters of support if key staff change. The letters of support you will require for depends on which ethics committee you are submitting your project.
Employing local Aboriginal people in research projects – as investigators, researchers, translators, community liaison or mentor roles – will benefit your project and the communities involved. The value of local knowledge should not be underestimated in both preventing and managing barriers that may affect your project. For researchers with limited local contacts, community members can provide the necessary liaison and advice about cultural issues and the appropriate processes to follow. It is important also to ensure benefits for the communities involved, which may include providing training and/or qualifications to community members employed on your project.

The nature of conducting research is that strict timelines are unlikely to be the most effective way to carry out projects. It is important to allow extra time to account for potential issues such as adverse weather (road closures are common during the wet) or participants being away from the community. Cultural reasons, such as sorry business, may also limit access to communities at certain times. A helpful guide is to allow for double the amount of time you think you will need for data collection, including interviews. While planning is important to research, it is likely that your plans will need to be revised during your study to take in to account unexpected obstacles and unforeseen circumstances.

The communities have the right to be informed of the results of any research in which they were involved. Face to face visits are generally the most effective way to communicate feedback about research results, however liaising with the community will assist you to determine the most appropriate dissemination strategy. It is important to consider community feedback when preparing budgets and timelines.

If you have any questions about these processes, the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee can assist.

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