

# Aboriginal Mental Health Initiatives

## Approach

Improving the health of Aboriginal Western Australians is a critical concern for WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA). Each year, WAPHA invests more than \$14million into the delivery of health services for Aboriginal people.

WAPHA's approach is informed by state and national policy and programs including the Cultural Respect Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Health 2016-2026<sup>1</sup>, National Aboriginal Health Plan 2013-2023<sup>2</sup>, Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project Report<sup>3</sup> and the WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030<sup>4</sup>.

WAPHA is committed to the principles of the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration<sup>5</sup>, which aims to improve the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by supporting their leadership in those parts of the mental health system that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. A further aim is to promote an appropriate balance of clinical and culturally-informed mental health system responses, including by providing access to cultural healing, to mental health problems in Aboriginal and Torres Strait persons.

WAPHA strives to foster engagement and partnership with Aboriginal people and communities that are built on respect and trust. We are committed to understanding the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people across Western Australia, and to working collaboratively with organisations that support Aboriginal people.

Our aim is to pay our respect to cultures, to enhance relationships and reduce health disparity and mortality among Aboriginal Western Australians. We are committed to *Closing the Gap*<sup>6</sup> by improving health outcomes and access to services across the State.

## Statistics

- WA is home to over 69,000 Aboriginal people, 58 per cent of whom live in regional and remote areas<sup>7</sup>.
- The gap in mental health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is well documented:
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are nearly three times more likely to be psychologically distressed than non-

- 1 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Standing Committee of the Australian Health Minister's Advisory Council. *Cultural Respect Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Health 2016-2026*. 2016.
- 2 Australian Government. *National Aboriginal Health Plan 2013-2023*. 2013.
- 3 Dudgeon P, Milroy J, Calma T, Luxford Y, Ring I, Walker W, Cox A, Georgatos G and Hollan, C. *Solutions that work: What the evidence and our people tell us - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project Report*. University of Western Australia. 2016.
- 4 Government of Western Australia Department of Health. *WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030*. 2015
- 5 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Mental Health. *Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration*. 2015 Accessed at: [https://natsilmh.org.au/sites/default/files/gayaa\\_dhuwi\\_declaration\\_A4.pdf](https://natsilmh.org.au/sites/default/files/gayaa_dhuwi_declaration_A4.pdf) Accessed on 15 July 2020.
- 6 Australian Government National Indigenous Australians Agency. *Closing the Gap – Draft Targets 2018*. Accessible at <https://closingthegap.niaa.gov.au/draft-targets-for-discussion>. Accessed 9 July 2020.
- 7 Commonwealth of Australia (2018) *Australian Demographic Statistics*. Australian Bureau of Statistics. March 2018 Quarter update. 2018

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>8</sup>.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are hospitalised for mental and behavioural disorders at almost twice the rate of non-Indigenous people<sup>9</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are nearly twice as likely to die by suicide<sup>10</sup>.
- In 2014–15, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with mental health conditions were more likely to have experienced problems accessing health services (23 per cent) than were people with other long-term health conditions (13 per cent) or no long-term health condition (10 per cent)<sup>11</sup>.

## Aboriginal mental health services

WAPHA commissions culturally appropriate mental health services for Aboriginal people across Western Australia. Services aim to improve access to counselling and to medical and non-medical professional services for individuals who experience mental health issues and problematic alcohol and other drug use.

In planning and commissioning, WAPHA seeks to ensure services are:

- developed in partnership with Health Service Providers and Aboriginal communities, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
- integrated with drug and alcohol services, suicide prevention and social and emotional wellbeing services as well as mainstream mental health services.

Visit the [WAPHA website](#) for information on WAPHA's funded Aboriginal health and mental health services.

## The Kimberley Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Trial

There is a significant over-representation of suicide in Aboriginal communities such as the Kimberley, where the age-adjusted rate of suicide is more than six times the national average.

The Kimberley Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Trial Site is one of 12 sites nationally identified by the Australian Government as priority areas for suicide prevention due to their high-risk populations. The Trial aims to identify the best approaches to doing this, which will inform a wider national approach.

The Trial is guided by the recommendations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) and is focused on people living in Broome, Bidyadanga, Dampier Peninsula, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Kununurra, Wyndham and Balgo.

The four-year trial comprises a planning and implementation phase and its findings and outcomes will be evaluated by the Australian Government, as part of a national evaluation.

The Kimberley Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Trial is helping to develop a model of suicide prevention that meets the unique and culturally sensitive needs of the region's Aboriginal communities.

The Empowered Young Leaders project is a vital component of the Kimberley Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Trial.

It aims to change the story for young Aboriginal people in the region and increase their uptake of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing services.

Two Empowered Young Leaders Forums were held in Broome and Kununurra in 2019 to build the skills, responsibility, confidence and capacity in young people.

## Partnerships

WAPHA has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA), based on a shared commitment to the delivery of culturally appropriate, comprehensive primary healthcare to WA's Aboriginal communities.

WAPHA works closely and collaboratively with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, and our commissioned service providers, resulting in initiatives such as the [Integrated Team Care: Country to City Report](#), which identified 14 recommendations to improve the experience of, and health outcomes, for Aboriginal people when travelling for treatment.

## Other WAPHA initiatives

WAPHA commitment to improving the mental health of Aboriginal Western Australians is also reflected in the following initiatives:

- WAPHA commissioned an Aboriginal health organisation to deliver mainstream headspace services in the Kimberley.
- WAPHA partnered with AHCWA to commission the development and delivery of GP training to improve mental health and alcohol and other drugs support services in primary healthcare.
- WAPHA supports several Aboriginal health groups in WA's regional and remote locations with capacity building programs, including funding for mental health nurses.
- WAPHA funded more than 20 Aboriginal community members to complete the Aboriginal Mental Health First Aid instructor's course.

8 2.47270.55.001 - Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey: First Results, Australia, 2012-13. 2013. Table 1.3

9 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 2015*. Canberra: AIHW, 2015.

10 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019). *Causes of Death, Australia, 2018: Intentional self-harm in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. Catalogue No. 3303. Retrieved 26 September 2019

11 ABS Source(s): 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2015

- WAPHA commissioned the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project \(ATSISPEP\)](#) in conjunction with the University of Western Australia. WAPHA delivered [National Empowerment Programs](#) in urban locations.
- WAPHA partnered with Black Rainbow, Living Well for the delivery of Aboriginal lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTIQ+) suicide prevention training.
- WAPHA has an established Aboriginal health team, with Aboriginal staff.
- WAPHA has developed a [Reconciliation Action Plan](#) that guides our work to deliver better health outcomes for Aboriginal Western Australians.



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This is one of a series of factsheets regarding mental health and primary health care, developed by WAPHA. Further factsheets and other resources can be found at [www.wapha.org.au/mental-health-framework](http://www.wapha.org.au/mental-health-framework). The information in this factsheet was accurate at December 2020.