



IAHA MEDIA RELEASE

Skills we need and can't afford to ignore or neglect – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workforce

22 May 2020

Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA), the national organisation for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health workforce, stand with our colleagues the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA) and Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia in their call for Government commitments to be backed by action.

On 15 May, National Cabinet endorsed *the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan*. The Commonwealth designated \$48.1M for the Plan, adding to around \$500M already committed for mental health and suicide prevention since January.

The need for appropriately resourced and targeted mental health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was stark before the COVID crisis. The evidence of the impact of longstanding economic and social disadvantage and trauma on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is overwhelming and continually noted.

This is the situation COVID19 has amplified. It didn't come on us suddenly. Nor has the evidence of this need been hidden.

On 18 May, AIPA and the Centre for Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP) called for *an Indigenous phone help-line, operated under Indigenous leadership and with Indigenous counsellors and mental health practitioners available 24/7*. AIPA has been advocating for such a service since 2016.

An Indigenous specific phone help-line must be a priority and should not need to be continually argued when the evidence is clear. Nor should we have to call again for urgent, sustained investment to build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and social and emotional wellbeing workforce. So many reports and plans have already identified the need to do so, with little to no implementation or investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led solutions developed by the experts themselves.

"The Indigenous help-line is a necessary and obvious investment. We have a strong, skilled and qualified existing workforce in mental health and social and emotional wellbeing, and IAHA is working hard in continuing to grow the next generation of the mental health workforce". said Donna Murray, IAHA CEO.



Tom Brideson, CEO of Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia, noted *“We have a group of university trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health specialists who’ve graduated and already have deep experience in this vital area. There are around 280 of these Australian graduates who can’t get their qualifications recognised to practice, yet their skills are needed now more than ever”*.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have ways of knowing, being and doing that keep us connected, and stronger together. It’s a different perspective to health and wellbeing, a more strengths-based and holistic approach, not a patchwork of illnesses or disease to be treated in isolation of each other. The standard approach doesn’t work and won’t work” added Donna.

The Plan includes \$3.5M to work with local communities to bolster existing services as restrictions are lifted. That funding needs to be used very effectively given the acute and high levels of unmet need in many communities. Yet this is not directly going to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander services or communities. It is not clear why this is so.

The Prime Minister’s *Closing the Gap Report 2020* was released just over three months ago. In it he committed Governments *“to work together in genuine partnership, demonstrating a strong commitment to Indigenous Australians having a real say”*. He wrote, *“we must do things differently. Without a true partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we will hamper our own progress.”*

Professor Pat Dudgeon, National Director, CBPATSISP, commented *“Funding will always be welcome in a crisis, but how it is decided on and distributed, whether it goes to what’s really needed now and longer term will make a big difference in impact on the ground. True partnerships mean genuine listening and hearing. We need to be heard”*.

END MESSAGE

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