

# Sharing and celebrating First Nations-led wellbeing programs



**Prof Pat Dudgeon**

One of the most worthwhile things we do in our work is to share examples of excellent community-led practice from all over Australia that promotes social and emotional wellbeing and approaches to preventing suicide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Through the initiatives featured in the CBPATSISP Clearing House for Best Practice Programs and Services, we show-case strength, resilience and innovation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These activities clearly demonstrate that First Nations people have the knowledge, ideas and capacity to lead positive projects of all kinds and at all scales for the benefit of our people and communities.

They include well-resourced national programs like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health First Aid, which teaches participants – both First Nations and non-Indigenous – how to provide strengths-based initial support to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander adult experiencing a crisis, and encourage the person to seek further cultural or professional supports.

They also include local activities that respond to local needs, led by Elders with few or no financial resources. The Women's Yarning Circle on Butchulla Country in Queensland, is one example. It began with a group of four women who came to the Wide Bay Women's Health Centre for a rock-painting workshop that introduced cultural symbols, facilitated by a local Butchulla artist. It continues with a strong emphasis on local Butchulla culture, arts, and crafts, and on inclusive reciprocal sharing of culture and friendship with local women of all ages, backgrounds and nationalities.

The Clearing House shares programs based on established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander methodologies for promoting social and emotional wellbeing, like walking on Country camps that reconnect First Nations people – especially youth – to their land and culture. The Karika Nyiyaparli Aboriginal Corporation (KNAC), which represents the Nyiyaparli people in the East Pilbara region in



Participants in the Yawardani Jan-ga Equine Assisted Learning program in the Kimberley, which supports social and emotional wellbeing through interaction with horses. Picture: Yawardani Jan-ga

Western Australia, is one of many examples. It hosts Kids On Country Junior Rangers Camp, strengthening cultural learning and wellbeing, and inspiring future careers in conservation and land management through activities like fish surveying, monitoring invasive species and collecting bush plants.

We also include programs based on newer and more experimental thinking, like Yawardani Jan-ga, which means Horses Helping in Yawuru language. Based in the Kimberley region in Western Australia it supports Aboriginal young people aged 6 to 26 through equine-assisted learning, which takes a strengths-based, person-centred approach to enhancing social and emotional wellbeing through involvement in activities such as grooming, leading, haltering and safe and structured interactions with horses. Yawardani Jan-ga is developing a strong body of evidence for the effectiveness of the program so it can be replicated in other communities.

One of the most novel programs in the Clearing House is Deadly Hair Dude in the Northern Territory, which trains First Nations people from remote and regional areas how to cut, colour and style hair – focusing on trainees as individuals and community members and guiding them in the early stages of a trade that can be a source of self-respect, pride and identity.

We have well-defined best practice criteria for inclusion in the Clearing House, based on principles identified through the 2016 Aboriginal and Torres Strait



Nyiyaparli school students from the East Pilbara region learn about culture and management of Country through the Kids On Country Junior Rangers Camp. Picture: Karika Nyiyaparli Aboriginal Corporation (KNAC).

Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP):

- **First Nations Ownership:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were involved in the development, implementation and governance of the program or service, and led the operations and delivery of the program.

- **Evidenced by an First Nations-led steering committee or advisory group.**

- **Community Leadership:** The program or service is working within or with the local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, and/or has relationships or integrates with other First Nations community organisations, programs or services.

- **Evidenced by formal partnerships or collaborations.**

- **Community Consultation and Co-design:** An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community reference group was established for the program or

service and included key stakeholders or members of the target group (e.g. youth, Elders, consumers, carers, LGBTQI+, lived experience) and meetings were held regularly.

- **Evidenced by notes/minutes of meetings.**

- **Evaluation:** Ongoing program or service evaluation is in place to ensure continuous quality improvement, including feedback from participants or community, during delivery or after completion of the program or service.

- **Evidenced by internal review** documenting any resulting action plan, including timeline and status update when actioned.

- **Cultural Responsiveness:** Non-First Nations staff has undertaken cultural responsiveness and safety training.

- **Evidenced by documentation of completion of training.**

- **Capacity Building:** The program builds First Nations community capacity through the training, mentoring and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to lead and deliver future similar programs or services.

- **Evidenced by plans for training and other capacity building activities.**

Not all programs can comply with each of these points, and because we want to share valuable ideas and approaches across our whole community, we recognise that many initiatives have particular strengths in one or more but not all categories. We offer the criteria as reference for what constitutes best practice and for how communities and organisations can aspire to further develop their programs and services.

As our centre's staff visit communities and attend meetings and conferences we are always learning of new initiatives that in diverse ways empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to enhance their own social and emotional wellbeing and support those around them. We have added consistently to the Clearing House since it began five years ago and we now feature more than 180 programs and services! These initiatives model best practice and provide encouragement and inspiration, demonstrating the formidable knowledge and skill in communities. It is important to acknowledge and celebrate the capacity and innovation that is part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

At the start of 2025 we encourage all *Koori Mail* readers to tell us about what you are doing in your communities to improve social and emotional wellbeing and prevent suicide. We would love to include you in the Clearing House. You can read here about how to Share Your Program, or you are always welcome to give us a call. Wishing a Happy New Year to everyone.

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**This article is part of a series of Koori Mail columns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention contributed by authors from the CBPATSISP, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide prevention approaches for First Nations people and communities.**