

Social and emotional wellbeing for survivors and workforces

By LEONIE WILLIAMSON, NICOLE KILBY and TEGAN SCHEFE

The Stolen Generations were children when they were forcibly removed from the mid-1800s until the 1980s, under assimilation policies aimed at eliminating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They were separated from their families, communities, Country, culture and language, placed in institutions, missions, training farms and schools, and adopted by non-Indigenous families or fostered. Many were abused, neglected, or both.

Now the Stolen Generations survivors are middle-aged or older, and grappling in their later years with the legacy of their experiences. The recommendations of the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report, produced by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission following a national Inquiry, have been incompletely implemented, leaving many people feeling angry and abandoned.

The Stolen Generations are also witnessing the intergenerational effects of the trauma they experienced in their own families, and many dread the prospect of needing aged care, which can trigger painful memories of the institutions of their youth.

In this context, the role of Stolen Generations Organisations (SGOs) is more critical than ever. SGOs are survivor-led, community-controlled organisations, ranging from small volunteer-run organisations to large state-based services.

They provide services and programs, including collective healing, redress support and assistance, for people to seek reunification with their families and communities of origin. Social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) workers, counsellors and people working at SGOs have reported increasing distress among Stolen Generations clients and their families, leading in turn to distress and burnout among workers – who are often members of the same communities.

The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATISIP) partnered with The Healing Foundation to deliver a workshop on March 3 on Noongar Boodjar in Walyalup (Fremantle, WA), in conjunction with Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Gathering 6. Its aims were to discuss the SEWB support needs of the Stolen Generations survivors as they get older, explore strategies for sustainable and culturally safe SEWB support practices in SGOs, and consider the training options for people working at SGOs.

The yarns were constructive, collaborative and sometimes painful as attendees – from



Stolen Generations Organisation workshop participants at the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Gathering 6 in Walyalup (Fremantle).



Leonie Williamson (Gubbi Gubbi/Butchulla) is the deputy CEO of The Healing Foundation. Pictures this page: supplied.



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projects which connect people to culture, photography and kinship projects connect people to family and community, and crisis counselling can connect people to their experience of their body, behaviour, mind and emotions.

A strong focus on training in the discussions led to some positive ways forward. Attendees agreed that trauma-informed training and development focused on SEWB would be highly valued by SGO workforces, helping them to promote holistic healing, growth and autonomy in their clients and supporting their own wellbeing. The SGO workforce also need professional and cultural supervision, accessible peer support and opportunities for sector-wide networking, to reduce burnout, vicarious trauma and staff turnover.

The CBPATISIP and The Healing Foundation will now collaborate further to look at how a two-day entry-level training unit, being developed by the CBPATISIP, could be adapted to the SGO workforce.

The needs of the Stolen Generations survivors are critically important. This workshop identified some valuable new ideas and made a commitment to following them through, so people who have already been through so much can be supported as they deserve.

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 CBPATISIP, which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide-prevention approaches for First Nations people and communities.

those working in reception and administration, should be trained in trauma-informed responses.

The attendees said SGO staff needed a good understanding of current policy and practice in other domains that intersected in the lives of Stolen Generations survivors, including eligibility and application processes for redress schemes, the National Disability Insurance Scheme and aged care. Survivors and their descendants sometimes had pressing practical needs, such as food, housing, utilities and identification to allow them to apply for government payments, which needed to take immediate priority.

The group agreed the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) model provides an important foundation for supporting Stolen Generations survivors and the SGO workforce. The explicit recognition of historical, social and political determinants within the SEWB model aligns strongly with survivors' lived experience and the realities of lifelong healing.

The group discussed how the existing work of SGOs could be understood within the SEWB model – for example, oral history



SEWB diagram adapted from Gee et al. (2014).

SGOs and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) across Australia – shared their experiences of supporting Stolen Generations survivors through their trauma.

Attendees celebrated key strengths within the SGO sector, including its powerful values and

commitment, and strong connections to local communities and Stolen Generations descendants. They emphasised that – because of the sensitivities of the Stolen Generations – it was essential for support workers to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and all staff, including