Strengthening social and emotional wellbeing through our knowledges



TEGAN SCHEFE



Participants of the Broome pilot from Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services. ***Pictures: supplied.***

Last month, we completed the final pilot for the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Workforce Development Training — a significant milestone that has been a long time in the making. I feel an enormous sense of pride in what we have collectively created and more importantly, in what this work represents for the future of SEWB workforce development. But this is only the beginning.

SEWB is fundamental to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, our families and communities. It is grounded in our connections to culture, Country, family, community and identity. These connections are not new concepts or approaches to health and wellbeing. They are deeply embedded in our ways of knowing, being and doing and have sustained our people for thousands of years.

When we talk about strengthening SEWB, we must recognise that we are not starting from a place of deficit. Our communities hold a wealth of knowledge, wisdom and lived experience. To strengthen SEWB, we must recognise and build on these.

Investing in our Social and Emotional Wellbeing workforce is not just an investment in our communities it is also an investment into the future of our people. We know that SEWB workers are often the ones walking alongside individuals and families through some of their most challenging experiences. Through this, they are building relationships, creating safe spaces, navigating complex circumstances and supporting people to reconnect with the things that strengthen their wellbeing. As one of the attendees of the SEWB Training states, "having good support and supervision, I think that's a key to keeping our Mob safe in the workplace."

For the SEWB workforce to thrive, we need to invest in building their knowledge, confidence, practical skills and professional development with training that reflects the realities of their work and strengthens their ability to deliver holistic and responsive care.

This training has been designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, informed through consultation and developed in partnership with the SEWB workforce. It has been piloted in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and organisations such as Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service and Danila Dilba Health Service and Langford Aboriginal Association, ensuring the content is shaped by the people and services it is intended to support.



Participants of the Boorloo (Perth) pilot from Langford Aboriginal Association and the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia.

This is not simply about delivering another training program. It is about creating a learning space where our SEWB workforce can come together share knowledge and experiences, reflect on practice and strengthen the way we work alongside our people.

The development of the SEWB Workforce Training has been a collaborative journey. Led by Professor Pat Dudgeon, the project brought together SEWB leaders, practitioners, and our research team in May 2025 to consider what is needed to strengthen the workforce and build a more consistent foundation for SEWB practice. From our first pilot in Broome, the second in Darwin and our final in Boorloo (Perth), we have continued to work directly with those delivering SEWB support in their communities.

We have listened to what is working, where the gaps are and what additional support is needed. The feedback, experiences and reflections shared by participants have informed the ongoing development of the program. Each stage has provided an opportunity to learn, adapt and strengthen the training. The contributions of everyone involved have been invaluable. This program would not be what it is without the voices of the people who have generously shared their knowledge and experiences with us. Their involvement has helped ensure the training is meaningful and practical.

This month, we took the opportunity to present the training Program at the World Indigenous Suicide Prevention Conference (WISPC), held at Tuurangawaewae Marae, Ngaaruawaahia in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand.

It was an important opportunity to showcase a new approach to strengthening suicide prevention and mental-health support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Our presentation highlighted the importance of investing in the SEWB workforce and the value of developing training that is informed by our own knowledges, cultural understandings and the ways of working in our communities. We shared the journey of the program, including its development, consultation, piloting and the importance of having the workforce actively involved in shaping the training.

There is enormous value in sharing these approaches internationally, particularly as Indigenous peoples continue to advocate for self-determined community led responses to suicide prevention. We know strengthening SEWB requires more than individual interventions or crisis responses. It requires a holistic and connected approach that recognises the importance of the domains and principles in the SEWB framework. It also requires a workforce that is equipped, supported and confident in delivering this approach.

The completion of our pilots marks the beginning of the next phase of work.

Next, we begin to move into the evaluation phase, bringing together the feedback, learnings and experiences from the pilots to further refine the program and finalise its delivery model. This is an important stage as we want to ensure the training is not only meaningful for the workforce today, but can continue to evolve, respond to community needs and contribute to strengthening SEWB practice into the future.

The team and I am excited about the possibilities and potential this program holds.

A massive thank you to everyone who has contributed to the development, consultation, piloting and ongoing evolution of this program. Your knowledge, generosity and commitment have helped shape something that belongs to all of us.

This is what investing in our people looks like. And this is only the beginning.

Tegan Schefe is a Bidjara and Kamilaroi woman with a strong background in primary health care, suicide prevention and social and emotional wellbeing. Tegan's work is grounded in community driven, Indigenous-led approaches that strengthen the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Tegan currently works as a Research Fellow with the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention, University of Western Australia.

This article is part of a series of columns to appear in the *Koori Mail* about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention, contributed by authors from the Boorn Centre (previously the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention), which was established in 2017 to develop and share evidence about effective suicide-prevention approaches for First Nations people and communities.

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