



## YOUTH ISSUE – BRIEFING

**TO:** CHIEF MINISTER

**DATE:** 1 December 2014

**FROM:** ERIN KEELEY

**TOPIC:** INCREASING MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS AND SERVICES IN EAST ARNHEM LAND

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Northern Territory (NT) Government:

1. establish a headspace office in Nhulunbuy to increase mental health awareness and outcomes;
2. improve awareness and accessibility to mental health services in East Arnhem Land; and
3. include a more comprehensive mental health education component within middle and high school health topics.

### BACKGROUND

Remote communities have a significantly higher rate of suicide than populated towns around Australia, LIFE Communications believe that this could be from various contributing factors ranging from reduced access to support services to social isolation (LIFE Communications, 2012). Nhulunbuy alone has witnessed the sad and sudden suicides of far too many individuals of various ages and from all different cultural backgrounds. Aside from the high suicide rates in Nhulunbuy, a substantial number of community members have passed away over the last 24 months, which has caused many individuals to be diagnosed with various mental illnesses in the town with a lack of services for people to manage their distress and grief.

Mental health illnesses are not confined to a specific age, race or gender and this is why I strongly believe that the services in remote communities across the NT need to be expanded and made more accessible.

The topic I chose to research further into was expanding mental health awareness and investigating the effect of the reduced quantity of accessible services in remote and rural



towns. A mental illness is defined by the Government of Western Australia, Mental Health Commission as *'a health problem that significantly affects how an individual thinks, behaves and interacts with other individuals'* (Government of Western Australia, 2010). My main focus for this research was to find new, creative ways to expand and make mental health services more accessible in remote and rural towns in the NT. By raising awareness for these hidden illnesses the quality of life for many Territorians can be improved. Also, if more information on certain diseases can be accessed and with further research into mental health diseases, the depth of understanding can be broadened and from this and the possibility for cures are more likely.

The initial idea I had for my Round Table project changed over the course of the year. I started off the process of event preparing to hold a community event that would involve all members in the hope to raise awareness for mental health and express the importance of seeking help when it is needed. However, as the year progressed, I changed my focus on to finding out how beneficial it would be to community members to have a headspace office set up in Nhulunbuy, which would allow for their services could be more widely distributed across East Arnhem Land.

For my research, I decided on a very broad target audience, as mental illness can affect anybody, regardless of age, gender or religious background. Though my target audience was broad, there was a particular interest to focus on young people in the community between the ages of 15-25. These younger generations are the future and predominately; we need to shape our future in the best way possible, to ensure increased health and wellbeing.

I chose to research the effects of the lack of mental health services in remote communities, particularly in Nhulunbuy. The initial reason I decided on this topic was because I had watched many family members and friends grieve over the sudden loss of a loved one without the chance to talk to a professional in the field, as there are limited services that were also difficult to access or locate. Not only was it watching loved ones grieve, but also watching my loved ones be diagnosed with several mental illnesses. For example, one of my closest friends was diagnosed with depression and anxiety the middle of last year. As an outsider looking in, I watched her struggle with simple daily tasks and watched her moods dramatically change. As her friend, I tried to find the right words to comfort her, however I



knew she was not getting the professional help she required and I found it difficult to try and help her feel better.

Not only was my best friend diagnosed with depression, my mother was also diagnosed with this horrible disorder just three years ago. This was something that truly opened my eyes to the dark and dreadful disorders that are going unnoticed by so many people because there are no physical symptoms. My mother suddenly and unexpectedly passed away due to an unrelated illness at the beginning of this year. I was already a part of the Round Table at the time that this happened, however, after experiencing this first hand, and being diagnosed myself with depression, this is when I truly felt a need for a change in the quantity and availability of mental health services in remote communities, especially in Nhulunbuy and across East Arnhem Land.

Over the course of the year, my perspective changed on how I wanted to achieve my goal, however, my main focus never changed and that was to establish a higher understanding of the effects of mental illness.

Initially, I wanted to do this by hosting a community event, which I intended to name "Nhulunbuy's Run & Rave". This event was to involve all community members on a 4 kilometer run around town as participants threw coloured corn flour and paint over one another with the slogan being "running for a brighter future". Once the run had taken place, I hoped for a concert to be held at Surf Club with various businesses holding stalls on the importance of mental health awareness and with different information booklets, and a space for people to openly discuss the issue of mental health and share how they worked or were working through things and to let others know that there is help out there.

However, as the year progressed and I talked more with people, with various Government and non-government stakeholders and I found an alternative way to reach my desired goal. This was to be done by collecting statistics from people in Nhulunbuy aged between 15-25 on their thoughts around the available services in Nhulunbuy and how they think these could be improved.

My overall objective was to give community members the ability to gain knowledge and a higher understanding on what can happen if mental illnesses are left untreated and

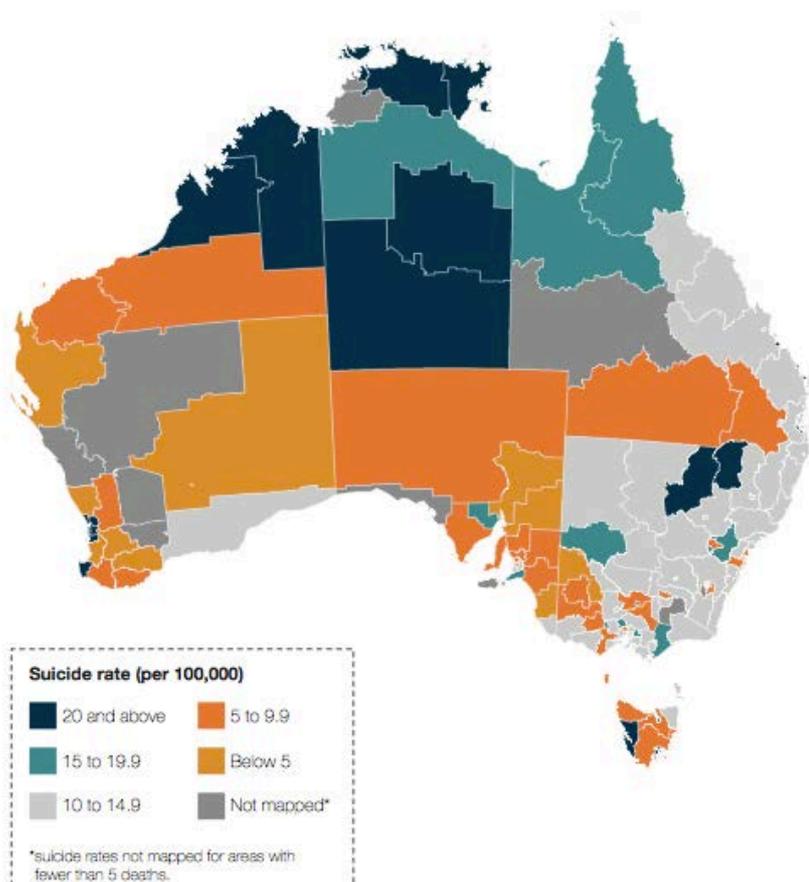


unacknowledged. Another goal I had for my research was to ensure that there is easier access to mental health services especially for those individuals in remote locations.

Local businesses in Nhulunbuy were extremely helpful when I was trying to plan my event. A major stakeholder that assisted with my research and helped to find accurate information and contacts from headspace was AnglicareNT. Without their help, my ability to contact headspace in Darwin and find out the likelihood of establishing a headspace situated in Nhulunbuy would have been limited. Individuals from remote communities would benefit significantly from face-to-face assistance with mental illnesses.

## DISCUSSION

A mental illness is defined as, *'a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning'* (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2014). It is believed that 20% of adults are diagnosed with some sort of mental illness annually and though the illness itself is not life threatening, approximately 15% of people diagnosed are seriously affected and take their own lives (SANE Australia, 2014).



The facts and statistics that surround mental illness are quiet extreme, for example research shows that almost half of the Australian population will experience a mental illness at some stage of their life (SANE Australia, 2014). Most people can recover from a mental illness; however there is no immunity to such illnesses, which is why it is so important to have various, targeted services available. The rate of mental illness is high across the Territory, particularly so in remote communities where there are the highest suicides rates are in Australia.



Once I decided this was the topic I wanted to base my research on, I started looking on websites such as beyondblue, headspace and Kids Helpline to find statistics and information that would assist in my research and help prove that a lack of mental health services in remote communities can have quite a significant impact on a person's wellbeing (Living is for everyone, 2007).

The health organisation 'Living is for Everyone' clearly states that suicide rates in rural and remote regions of Australia have dramatically risen over the past three decades, particularly in men (Living is for Everyone, 2007). The diagram from Living is for Everyone shows East and West Arnhem Land as including two of the eight regions in Australia where the suicide rate is 20 and above (per 100,000).

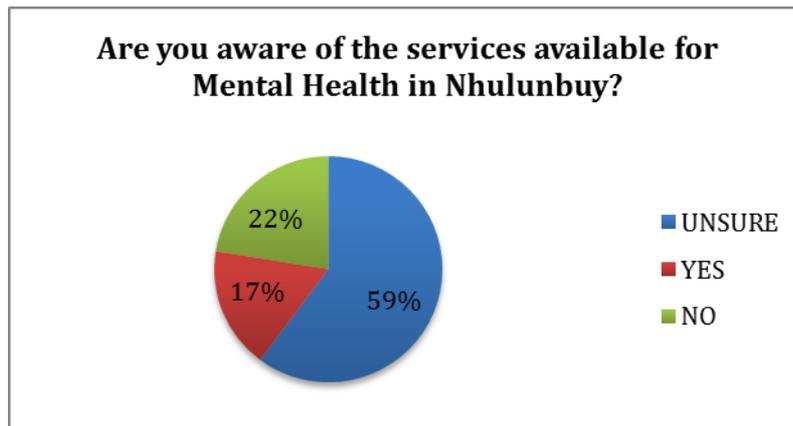
Many Universities and organisations have conducted investigations into why the suicide rates are extremely higher in remote towns and believe that social isolation in these communities can lead to loneliness and depression. The fact that there is a reduced access to support services in remote towns, some communities do not have an access to community services and some may not have access to the internet, making it extremely hard to receive the help they need. A contributing reason that researchers believe that suicide is more common in remote towns is the simple fact that people in rural and regional areas often enjoy hunting and fishing, which can potentially involve the use of firearms and with this there is sometimes an easier means of access to suicide if they wished, this joined with the vast landscape, reduced support services and isolation are some of the main reason that remote and rural towns have the highest suicide rate in Australia (Living is for Everyone, 2007). This strongly contributes to the reason why I believe that support services in the NT need to be plentiful, and by establishing a headspace office in the township of Nhulunbuy could play a vitally important role in the future of many lives.

As part of researching my topic I sent out a total of 100 surveys, of these 67 were returned. I distributed surveys throughout Nhulunbuy High School; by doing this I was able to get a broader perspective on other people's thoughts and emotions on the issue of mental health and the services available in our region. To find information from those out of school (aged between 19-25) I was able to give the survey to different people I knew in the community that fit this age bracket. Though the sample size was relatively small I was able to reach conclusions from this research as there were nearly 70 surveys returned with responses from



a broad range of young people aged 15-25 years. The data collected was extremely helpful to my research on expanding the mental health services in remote towns.

#### Question 4.



The surveys returned were strongly dominated by females, 67% of results were obtained from females and 32% of results were from male participants. Alongside this gender bias was a high number of participants in the age bracket of 15-18 years.

Question 4, as shown in the graph above asked participants if they were fully aware of the available services that are offered in the township of Nhulunbuy. Once analysed the results demonstrated that 59% were unsure if they had full knowledge of these services, 17% said they were certain they understood where to find adequate help and interestingly, a large percentage of participants who said they were fully aware came from the 19-25 age category. I believe that this shows younger people (between the ages of 15-19) are not getting the help they need if it is required, however, when asked where they could seek help, many people in this age group answered with the school counselor, who could connect them with more highly qualified psychologists if need be.

One of the main stakeholders I engaged with when conducting research was Anglicare NT. This organisation understands the issues affecting the East Arnhem Region and were extremely helpful meeting and emailing me regularly to ensure that I was always heading in the right direction with my research and had regular contact with the staff at the headspace office in Darwin.



With the combined help from all mentors and members of the 2014 Round Table, staff in the Office of Youth Affairs and Anglicare NT I was able to gather data from surveys and confidently research the required information for my project.

In the survey I sent out to community members aged between 15-25, I asked whether anyone had ever suffered from any type of mental illness. Surprisingly, the responses for Question 5 were almost equal with 46% of participants saying no, and 53% saying that at one point in their life they have suffered from some type of mental illness, further, a large majority of these were either depression or anxiety. I believe this is a very interesting statistic as the people from the organisation 'Response Ability' also found depression to be the most common mental illness in remote communities (Response Ability, 2008).

#### Question 5

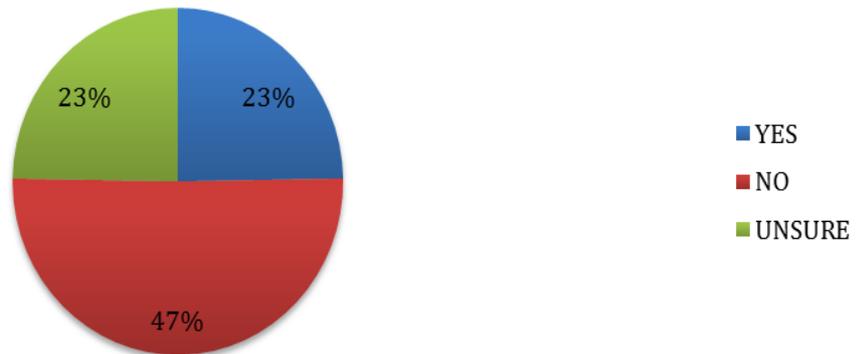


Question 6 and Question 7 graphs show participants responses to two of the questions asked on the survey. Once these results were analysed it was very interesting to note that the responses for these two questions were all very equal in the terms of the age of participant answering.



### Question 6

**Do you believe that there are enough mental illness/health resources and organisations in Nhulunbuy?**



### Question 7

**Do you believe that young people use these mental health services effectively? (e.g. can access them)**



Question 7 graph clearly confirms the belief that young people do not effectively use the services that are already established in Nhulunbuy. With this knowledge, it will be hard to express the need for an expansion of the existing services that are provided. Instead further assistance is required to educate the community on what is available and how to readily access it. Ultimately the statistics that are given by numerous organisations surrounding



mental health obviously outline there is a strong need for young people to be taught at school the possible places they can seek help when and if it is required in their life. Unexpectedly, when asked on the survey which method of assistance they would prefer if it were required the vast majority of participants said they would prefer face-to-face consultations because they are not talking to a machine about their troubles and felt contentment when speaking about their emotions to a person who genuinely cares. This finding adds significant value toward the need to establish a space for young people to receive this face-to-face contact and assistance through an organisation such as headspace in Nhulunbuy.

By conducting this survey I was given a very deep insight into the minds of many people, this taught me many things when reading the survey results, one of these being that a vast majority of people that were surveyed preferred face-to-face counseling when, and if it was required. This was interesting, as I hypothesised for either internet or phone counseling to be the most preferred method, as it does not involve a personal and physical confrontation with another person. I do believe that face-to-face meetings would be much more helpful to the person receiving the help as they are not talking to an automatic machine during the times they desperately need the company of other people. Not only is this why I believe face-to-face meetings should be the most commonly adopted method of counseling, I also believe that everything and anything can be interpreted differently over the use of technology, symptoms could be described falsely, therefore the support given may not assist the person.

Though the survey respondents indicate that the NT Government is doing a remarkable job at ensuring a plentiful amount of resources and organisations to receive required help, but many people, including myself, believe that mental health awareness should be more talked about in schools. I know from my own experience, I was taught a small amount about such illnesses in Year 8 health, and then again for three weeks in Stage 2 Psychology. The NT Education System needs to include adequate mental health awareness education to ensure that students have a deep and broad understanding of where they can obtain relevant information. I believe in schools is where the communication is being let down, to ensure people that are living with mental illness can receive appropriate help, they must be taught from a young age where they can access this help.



## **NT GOVERNMENT POLICIES**

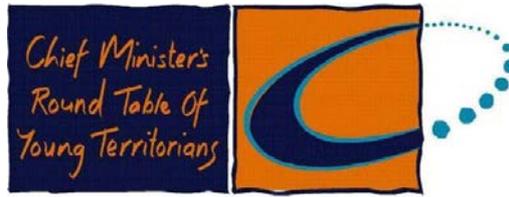
This briefing paper aligns with the two of the four goals under Framing the Future, a Strong Society and Confident Culture.

In particular however, this project links with the wellbeing component of the NT Youth Participation Framework 2014-17, where young Territorians lead safe, healthy and happy lives by making positive lifestyle choices.

Wellbeing is determined by genetics, upbringing, personal circumstances, individual choices and the social conditions in which we live, all stated factors contribute greatly to the mental health of an individual. As indicated previously, an individual's mental health can be altered quickly during different events during their lifetime, which is why it is crucial to ensure there is an unlimited amount of support available.

There is a strong focus on the emphasis in the NT towards improving the nutrition and physical activity that young Territorians engage in. By doing this, endorphins are released throughout the brain leaving the person in a more positive and optimistic mood, this could have an incredible overall result in lowering the statistic of suicide and mental health illnesses in throughout the Territory. In Nhulunbuy alone, there is a wide range of sporting opportunities for people of all ages, this includes; all ages netball, soccer, touch football, AFL rugby league, BMX and so many more. The NT Government also plays a major role in these sporting activities as twice a year they have a sporting grant that is given out to every student enrolled in a Territory school, this encourages more children and teenagers to get involved in sport, resulting in a healthier, happier lifestyle.

I believe the wellbeing goal under the Youth Participation Framework will be extremely helpful to the lives of many young Territorians as there are actions and goals in place to encourage positive and healthy lifestyles amongst all Territorians. This ensures there is education in schools about maintaining a healthy lifestyle, education on safe sex, developing a Suicide Prevention Action Plan and the support of the implementation of core Youth Health programs across the Territory, which are all contributing factors to having a healthy mind and learning to deal better with stress and hurtles in life that can lead to the development of a mental illness.



## **CONCLUSION/SUMMARY**

After much trial and error, decision making and a year-long of research and data collection, I am so pleased in the information I have found and gathered myself as I believe it all has the potential to kick start a change now and for the Territory's future.

Through this process, I have learnt so many interesting facts and statistics in regards to mental health and illnesses across the NT, some of which are extremely alarming, most of all however, finding out and seeing the statistics for the suicide rates in remote and rural communities was awfully hard. I think this information really got to me as I have lived in a remote community for almost 10 years and it is hard to believe towns with less than 3000 people have more suicides than built up cities with hundreds of thousands of people.

I am happy with the effort and determination I have put into my research and project to ensure that the NT Government gets a deeper insight into the astounding statistics that surround mental illnesses in the Territory. If I am able to broaden other's knowledge on the importance of mental health in young Territorians or help make a difference once the 2014 Round Table is over, I believe I would have achieved what I hoped for all year long.

From the research and surveys conducted for this report it is recommended that the Northern Territory (NT) Government:

1. establish a headspace office in Nhulunbuy to increase mental health awareness and outcomes;
2. improve awareness and accessibility to mental health services in East Arnhem Land; and
3. include a more comprehensive mental health education component within middle and high school health topics.

I believe this is a highly achievable goal with the help of Territorians to improve the future of the NT.

**ERIN KEELEY**





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All queries should be directed to the Office of Youth Affairs on 8999 3890.

*Please send completed surveys to:*

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OR

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