



## Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (Aboriginal Corporation)

16<sup>th</sup> June 2014

Dear National Children's Commissioner Mrs Megan Mitchell,

**Re: National Inquiry into intentional self-harm & suicidal behaviour in children and young people**

NPY Women's Council would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to make a submission into this inquiry. As you know NPY Women's Council was formed 34 years ago and has long since lobbied and advocated for improvements of quality of life for Indigenous peoples of the NPY region. It is our hope that by providing you with this submission, it will stimulate discussion and debate about the urgent need for support for Indigenous youth in the Central Australian region and all other Indigenous youth in Australia.

This is the third submission that NPY Women's Council have made in relation to the issues of youth suicide and hopefully there will be no need for any more. As you are aware, we have had to negotiate for this submission to be submitted past the due date. It is important to reflect the reasons for this being the distressing nature of processing such information and the impact this has had on the writer/s of the report. At the time of finalising this report, there was a report of yet another suicide in our region. This and the accumulated effect of dealing with such matters have affected staff and resulted in experiences of vicarious trauma. Please accept our apologies for this being late.

We look to the findings of your inquiry and also to see you in Alice Springs in September 2014 for the Alice Springs round table forum on this matter where NPY Women's Council Youth Program will present to you.

Regards,

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Patron: Professor Marcia Langton AM

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09:18 07/7/14 FINANCE



**Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara  
Women's Council (Aboriginal Corporation)**

SUBMISSION OF THE

NGAANYATJARRA PITJANTJATJARA  
YANKUNYTJATJARA WOMEN'S COUNCIL  
(ABORIGINAL CORPORATION)

TO THE

NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO INTENTIONAL  
SELF HARM & SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR IN  
CHILDREN

June 2014



## **Kulintja Palyaringkuny tjaku Tjurkurpa by Janet Inyika**

*Anangu nyangatja ngaltutjara paluru kutju ninanyi munu putu kuliningi  
'Yaaltjingara ngayulu pukulpa nyinaku?' Munu paluru kulini 'ngayalu wantinyi  
kura nyangatja'.*

*Nganmanpa ngayulu walytja wiyangka nyinanyi, tjuta wiya. Palu tjinguru  
ngayalu walytja tjutanka tjungu nyinaku ngura wirungka pukulpa. Alatjitu  
ngayulu kulintja palyaringu.*

One poor person is sitting by himself and thinking 'What am I going to do to be happy?' And then he thinks 'I might leave these bad things away from me'.

Before, I was sitting alone, long way from my family. From now on, I want to stay with all my family happy together at home in a good place.

This way, I am feeling better.

# The NPY Women's Council

## History and overview

The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (NPYWC) began in 1980 and was separately incorporated some years later, in 1994. NPYWC now comes under the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 (Cth.)*

The push for a separate women's forum came about during the South Australian Pitjantjatjara Land Rights struggle of the late 1970s. During consultations over land rights, many women felt that their views were ignored, so they established their own organisation. Its region covers 350,000 square kilometres of the remote tri-State cross-border area of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory (see map on page 5). Anangu and Yarnangu (Aboriginal people) living on the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands (Western Desert language region) share strong cultural and family affiliations. What began as an advocacy organisation is now also a major provider of human services in the region, in essence working to address the needs that clinical health services cannot, and that government agencies do not directly provide in this remote area. NPYWC has taken this direction because of the glaring needs that exist in member communities.

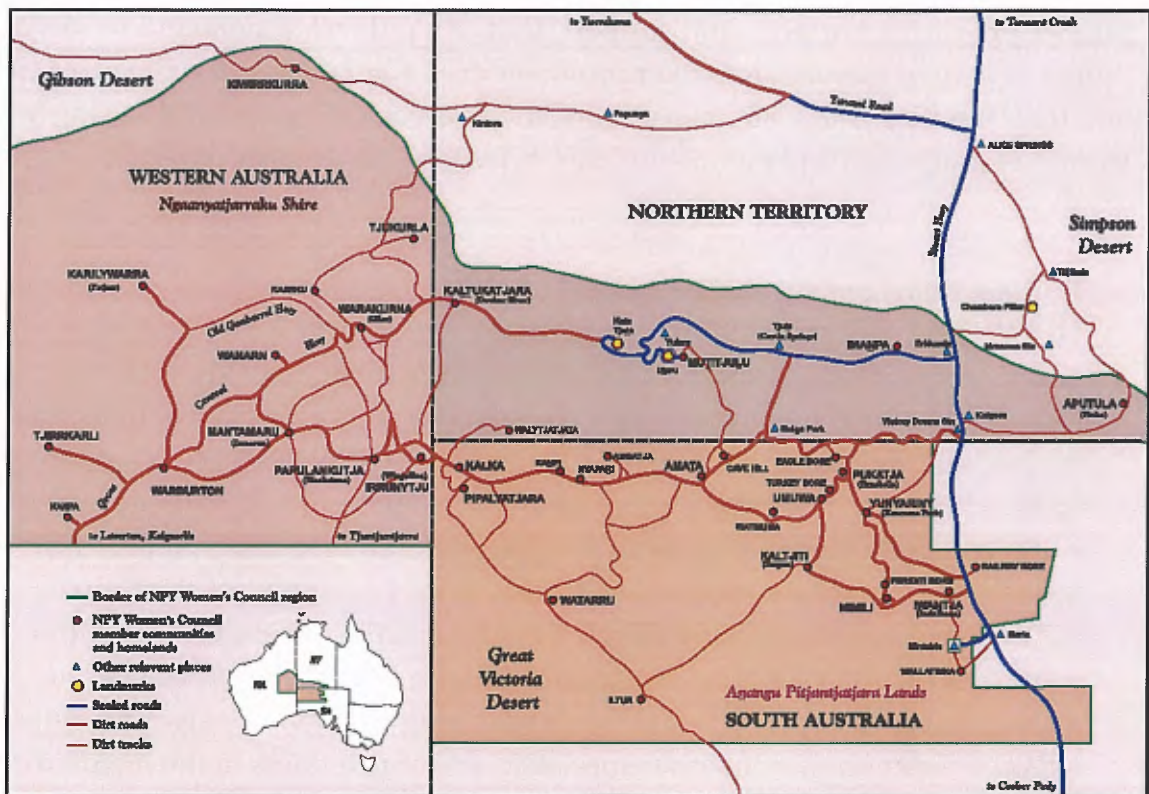
NPYWC represents women in the region, which has an over-all population of around 6000, half of which are 24 years of age and under. The members' determination to improve the quality of life for families in the region drives the organisation. Its existence gives members an avenue for participation in the decision-making processes that affect them and their families. It is a permanent forum where they are able to raise issues and make their opinions and decisions known. It also provides opportunities for Anangu to learn, share knowledge and keep informed about relevant issues. NPYWC's success is largely due to its capacity to provide a decision-making process steered by the members. One of the major advantages of its existence is the development over time of members' ability to consider and analyse policy issues, deal with government agencies and advocate on their own behalf.

## NPYWC's Constitutional objectives

The central objective of the corporation is to relieve the poverty, sickness, destitution, distress, suffering, misfortune or helplessness among the Aboriginals of the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara communities and, for the purpose of advancing this central object, to:

- a) provide a forum for Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara women to discuss their concerns;
- b) assist and encourage the representation and participation of women from the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara region on local, regional and other relevant bodies;
- c) help individual women and girls to achieve further training, education and employment;
- d) establish, provide and or promote services to improve the health and safety, education and general well-being of people in the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara region;
- e) establish, provide and promote the artistic and cultural interests of Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara women;
- f) promote and support the achievements and authority of Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara women;
- g) gather and provide information about issues of importance to Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara women and to the broader community;
- h) promote and encourage the law and culture of Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara women;
- i) support and encourage other women and organisations who work towards similar aims.

NPYWC has its administrative office in the main regional town of Alice Springs. Regional offices are located at Umuwa in SA, Finke, Imanpa, Docker River and Mutitjulu in the NT and Wingellina, Warakurna, Warburton and Kiwirrkurra in WA.



**NGAANYATJARRA PITJANTJATJARA YANKUNYTJATJARA WOMEN'S COUNCIL**

**NPYWC Services**

NPYWC have a holistic approach to service delivery and combine funds from various agencies to provide services that address the needs identified by their members whilst meeting funding guidelines. Currently, the NPY Women’s Council delivers services in 6 main streams; Domestic and Family Violence Service (including sexual assault), Child and Family Wellbeing Program, Youth Program, Aged and Disability Advocacy Program (Tjungu team), Ngangkari (traditional healers) and the Tjanpi Desert Weavers Enterprise Program.

**NPYWC Youth Program**

The NPYWC Youth Program which was established in the late 1990’s in response to the devastating impact of petrol sniffing amongst young people in the region and the subsequent incidence of morbidity and youth suicide. NPYWC Directors have long been concerned about young people’s mental health and the alarming rates of suicide and attempts. Today, the Youth Program works to encourage and support all young people in the NPY region, especially those who are deemed at risk, facing problems or looking to make changes in their lives.

The NPYWC Youth Program runs healthy, active diversionary programs for young people, provides case work and support, leadership development and works closely with a variety of stakeholders to improve services and facilities for all young people and their families. The team takes an holistic approach to youth work, using a variety of integrated and complementary activities – as described below.

1. Case management and support:

NPYWC Youth workers provide case management and individual support to young people facing issues of substance misuse, mental health, violence, homelessness and juvenile justice issues, amongst other concerns. Over a 12 month period between January and December 2013 the NPYWC Youth Program received 98 referrals into the program. The program provided case management support to 184 clients throughout the year. Referrals are taken from family, friends, other service providers or directly from young people themselves. NPYWC believes that young people's need must be considered within the context of their family, thus, we adopt a family- oriented approach to case management. In addition, Youth team staff work collaboratively with other NPYWC Teams and with other specialist service providers in the region to ensure optimum support and care.

2. Recreation and diversion:

After school, weekend and school holiday programs and targeted diversion programs for young people at risk provide opportunities for young people to keep busy, stay out of trouble, try new things, learn new skills and feel good about themselves. With an emphasis on culturally based activities, we blend modern 'youth' activities with 'traditional' practices and culture that help connect young people to their language, land and culture. We value young people's interests and ideas and promote intergenerational learning between young and old. We also work in close partnership with schools and other government and non-government organizations in planning and delivering youth activities.

3. Education and leadership:

Educating young people with the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions and build resilience is an essential aspect of the NPYWC Youth Program's sustainable, community development approach. We run regular camps and workshops focusing on education around issues such as sexual health, mental health and alcohol and other drugs. We support individuals to access education and employment opportunities – and support a large number of boarding school applications each year. We run leadership activities including the 'Kungka Career Conference' – to support the education, employment and



resilience of young women from the NPY region. We also publish 'Never Give Up News' Magazine, an annual publication that promotes positive stories from young people in the NPY region and promotes Aboriginal role models. This magazine is also an educational tool to raise awareness of mental health, cyber bullying, drug use, domestic and family violence and many other major issues affecting young people.

#### 4. Advocacy and collaboration:

NPY Women's Council has a proud history of working with Anangu and Yarnangu people to achieve real change in mental health, substance abuse prevention, treatment and youth services in the central region. Strong governance and active representation of NPYWC Directors in our program design, delivery and evaluation gives the organisation strong cultural authority to speak up on issues affecting young people and their families in the region. As a result, the NPYWC Youth Program can provide a strong voice in advocating for the elimination of gaps in services, policy and legislation and work with other stake holders through forums and meetings to address these issues.

As a direct result of lobbying by NPY Women's Council members, NPYWC have effected change by working towards the restriction of takeaway alcohol sales at remote roadhouses and continue to be vocal on the issue of alcohol restrictions. NPY Women's Council was an instrumental member of the 'Opal Alliance' which brought the introduction of non-sniffable Opal fuel into central Australia in 2005, and as a result were awarded the Prime Ministers Award for Excellence at the 2007 National Drug and Alcohol Awards.

In 2011 NPY Women's Council fought strongly for mental health support in the community of Kiwirrkurra when there was a suicide / murder of 2 young people. As a result of this advocacy the community was provided with mental health support every 6 weeks by a visiting psychologist. In recent years we have made presentations at the 2012 and 2014 NIDAC Conference and at the 2013 Australian Youth Affairs Conference, and made submissions to coronial inquests, parliamentary inquiries, reviews and evaluations.



*Kalintja Palyarinhungytjaka tjakarpa by Janet Ingika.*

## **TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-HARM**

NPYWC members and staff have been very saddened in 2011 by news that some young people have hurt themselves. We send our condolences to anyone who has lost a dear friend or family member to suicide.

When someone is feeling sad or angry or has other bad feelings, that person might have a mental health problem. When you have a mental health problem it is like being sick. You need to get help to make you better. Sometimes mental health problems are so bad that the person wants to hurt themselves by attempting suicide. Some people don't ask for help, so it is up to everyone to try to help that person.

If you or someone you know is thinking or talking about hurting themselves, get some help. You can talk to family members you trust, the clinic, or an NPYWC Youth Worker. We will do all we can to help. When a person has a mental health problem we can help them get back to being happy and safe again and also help them to talk to mental health services. Youth Workers can also support families at this time.

NPYWC is worried that there is not enough support for young people with mental health problems. We are talking to government to try to get more help for communities. We have contributed to an inquiry into youth suicide in the Northern Territory. We are writing letters to government to get more mental health workers to visit the Ngaanyaljarra Lands. We will continue working hard in 2012 to make sure young people with mental health problems get the help they need.

**Nyurampa yangupala kungkawara tjuta wicura atunymara, pukulpa nyinanyijaku,  
panya waltjangku kura palyantjaku tawara**

## **NPYWC Publications**

*"Traditional Healers of Central Australia: Ngangkari"*. Commissioned by NPY Women's Council and published by Magabala Books 2013;

*"Tjanpi Desert Weavers"* Compiled by Penny Watson for Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council", Commissioned by NPY Women's Council, 2012;

*"Speak Up Against Child Sexual Abuse"* campaign television and radio ads., 2008;

*"Mai Wiru Mirrka Walykumunu: The Best Start to Life,"* Nutrition Manual for Mothers and Children, 2006;

*"Framework for the Protection of Aboriginal Children in the Cross-border Region,"* Dr. Pauline Meemaduma, commissioned by NPY and Ngaanyatjarra Health Service, launched December 2005;

*"Maiku Kulintjaku: Food for Thought"* Parts 1-4 Child Nutrition DVD: NPYWC and Ngaanyatjarra Health, 2003;

*"Ngangkari Work – Anangu Way: traditional healers of Central Australia,"* NPYWC publication documenting the work and life stories of various ngangkari (traditional healers), 2003;

*"I Want to be Free"* Domestic Violence music video, NPYWC DV Service with young women from the Ngaanyatjarra lands, WA, 2002;

*"Minymaku Way"* SBS Film Production documenting the work of NPY, 2001;

*"Tjungu Nyinapai/Being Together: Our work with the frail aged and disabled people and their families."* NPY Women's Council video, internal production, 2000;

*"Nganana Rawangka Alatji Warkaripai; We Have Been Doing This Work for a Long Time,"* Women's Centres Book, NPYWC, 1999;

*"They Might Have to Drag Me Like a Bullock,"* on the care needs of the aged, NPYWC, 1995;

*"Looking After Children Grandmothers' Way,"* NPYWC, 1991;

*"NPY Women's Council 10-Year Book, NPYWC,"* 1990.

## **Awards**

NPYWC Ngangkari program winner of the 2013 Deadly Award for 'Published Book of the Year';

NPYWC winner of the 2012 Indigenous Governance Awards presented by Reconciliation Australia and BHP Billiton;

Tjanpi Desert Weavers – Winner of a Deadly Award for Outstanding Achievement in Cultural Advancement, September 2012;

*"No Safe Amount – The effects of alcohol in pregnancy"* Winner of a Deadly Award in the category for Outstanding Achievement in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health, NPYWC Child Nutrition Program, September 2011;

International Sigmund Freud Prize from the City of Vienna awarded to the Ngangkari (traditional healers) program, 2011;

*"No Safe Amount – The effects of alcohol in pregnancy"* campaign Finalist in the 2011 Australian Film and Animation Festival, NPYWC Child Nutrition Program and Halo Productions;

“No Safe Amount – The effects of alcohol in pregnancy” campaign Highly Commended at the National Drug and Alcohol Awards, NPYWC Child Nutrition Program July 2011;

Finalist Excellence in Indigenous Health Awards; Outstanding Delivery in Child and Maternal Health, NPYWC Child Nutrition Program, April 2010;

Mark Sheldon Prize from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry (RANZCP) awarded to the Ngangkari (traditional healers) Program, 2009;

Dr Margaret Tobin Award for excellence in the provision of mental health services to those most in need, Ngangkari Program, 2009;

“National Drug and Alcohol Award for Excellence in Prevention” from the National Council on Drugs to the ‘Opal Alliance’: NPY Women’s Council, General Property Trust (GPT) and Central Australian Youth Link Up Service (CAYLUS) for successful lobbying to have Opal ‘unsniffable’ low octane fuel subsidised by the Australian Government in commercial retail outlets in the Central region; June 2007;

The Australian Council for Children and Parenting (ACCAP) National Award for the Prevention of Child Abuse in Regional and Remote Areas, Melbourne, Nov. 2001, jointly to NPY Domestic Violence Service and Child Nutrition Project; “Women in Community Policing” Award, Australasian Policewomen’s conference, Darwin, August 2005;

Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, Tjanpi Aboriginal Baskets weavers for the *Tjanpi (grass) Toyota*, Darwin, August 2005;

Special Mention for “Ngangkari Work – Anangu Way: traditional healers of Central Australia,” Centre for Australian Cultural Studies, Canberra, 2004 Awards; February 2005;

Special Mention for the Women’s Centres Book – “Nganana Rawangka Alatji Warkaripai; We Have Been Doing This Work for a Long Time”, 2000. Awarded by the Centre for Australian Cultural Studies Canberra;

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Award to NPY Women’s Council in the Community Sector, 2000;

“An Outstanding Contribution to Australian Culture” for the Kungka Career Conference, 1999. Awarded by the Centre for Australian Cultural Studies Canberra;

“Best Practice Award” for the Child Nutrition Project, 1997. Awarded by OATSIH;

“Excellence in Health Promotion” for the Child Nutrition Project, 1997. Awarded by Living Health SA;

“National Violence Prevention Award”, NPYWC Domestic Violence Service 1994 & 1995.

# NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO INTENTIONAL SELF HARM & SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN

It is the intention of this submission to provide an overview of the issues that affect Aboriginal people within the Central Australian region as well as to highlight key areas that relate specifically to the experience of young people and their families from a remote Aboriginal community perspective. The organisation has acquired a unique understanding on this subject matter and is well placed to provide feedback.

Whilst the inquiry asks for feedback about children and young people aged up to 18 years, it is important that the context of the region is understood in order to truly be informed about the factors and issues that contribute to children and young people self-harming and/or committing suicide. It is also essential that there is a clear focus on the solutions and to identify the types of support that young people themselves see as suitable options. Young people need a voice.

NPY Women's Council has previously submitted 2 submissions into suicide inquiries (1) Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee – Inquiry into suicide in Australia March 2010 & (2) Submission to the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT November 2011. This will be the 3rd submission provided by NPY Women's Council on the subject.

In this submission – information will be provided under the following subheadings:

1. Data: Facts and figures collated over 3 years from June 2011 – June 2014 pertaining to successful suicides, suicide attempts and threats of suicide in Central Australia.
2. Why children and young people engage in intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour?
3. Barriers which prevent children and young people from seeking help.
4. The types of programs and practices that effectively target and support children and young people – examples from NPYWC.
5. Recommendations

**1. Data: Facts and figures pertaining to suicide in Central Australia, (June 2011 – 2013)**

In June 2011 NPY Women's Council established a unique database to map the extent of the issues surrounding suicide and suicidal behaviour in the NPY region. Since then, the organisation has documented information relating to successful suicides, suicide attempts and threats of suicide from June 2011 – June 2014 spanning 3 completed years.

The organisation acknowledges that this database does not capture all the information relating to suicidal behaviour from the region, and that there are many challenges and issues with the method of data collection. Our database only collects information that NPYWC staff are aware of. Further information about suicidal behaviour may not always be shared with our staff due family shame around reporting the incident when seeking help, coronial inquiries that cannot determine suicide as the primary cause, and English being a second or third language for many people.

Notwithstanding, we are confident that the database captures a significant amount of information, and is useful in informing us about the known age, location and background of people confronting suicidal behaviour across the Central Australian region. It does confirm what service providers and community members already know and gives invaluable evidence of the issues surrounding suicide for the purpose of making recommendations.

Overall, the data collected from the past 3 years in the NPY region of Central Australia can be summarised as follows:

**Summary of suicide data collected from NPY region, June 2011 – June 2014**

- 1. There has been on average more than 1 suicide attempt per month, every month, for the past 3 years.**
- 2. 54% of all successful suicides over the past 3 years have been young people under the age of 18 years. The youngest was a young person only 10 years old. A significant proportion of suicides also occurred in the 18 – 24 year old age bracket.**
- 3. Domestic and family violence is the most significant factor that is contributing to these incidents, along with prior exposure to suicide in close family members.**

## Data summary

- There have been a total of 19 suicides reported in the Central Australian region – 13 of these have been in the NPY region.
- 7 of these 13 suicides (54%) have been of young people aged 18 years or younger between June 2011 – June 2013, the youngest being 10 years of age.
- 10 of these 13 suicides (77%) have been of young people aged 24 years or younger between June 2011 – June 2013.
- In 2013 alone, 5 people suicided in the NPY region, 3 of whom were aged 10 – 24 years; 2 were under the age of 18.
- 41 attempts to commit suicide have been recorded over the 3 year period, with 35 of these being in the NPY region. Of these attempts, 19 cases were aged 24 years and below with the majority of these being between 18 and 24 years of age.
- 11 threats of suicide have been reported in the 3 years period<sup>1</sup>. These threats were all in people aged 26 years and under with the exception of one person who had an intellectual disability aged 33.
- Out of the 54 suicides and attempts recorded across Central Australia over the past 3 years, 76% (41) of these were confirmed to be by means of hanging.
- Overall, this adds up to more than 1 suicide or attempted suicide per month (ie: 4 attempts/1 suicide every 3 months) over the past 3 years that we have been collecting data in the NPY region.
- Of the 19 suicides;
  - 12 of these were by hanging
  - 1 of these was by burning
  - 6 unconfirmed

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<sup>1</sup> We believe that the incidence of suicide threat is extremely under-reported, and that in reality this figure should be much higher.

## **2. Why children and young people engage in intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour?**

There were 3 common causes, or triggers that were noted amongst victims recorded in the NPYWC database of suicidal behaviour over the past three years. The following contributing factors were noted as being significant in victims prior to the suicide or attempt:

- **Domestic and family violence.** Relationship breakdown, jealousy and subsequent conflict and violence was common amongst all suicide threats and attempts throughout the period. 47% (9 cases) of the recorded suicides were directly linked to domestic and / or family violence and conflict. In 43 % (23 cases) of the reported suicides or attempted suicides, a reported history of and/or a recent incident of domestic and/or family violence was noted.
- **Family members who had suicided.** In 32% (6 cases) of the recorded suicides, a close family member or friend had also suicided in recent history. This was noted as a significant contributing factor in that person attempting or committing suicide. It is worth noting that this figure only relates to proximity to an immediate family member. Given the close family/kinship ties and intimate community relations in remote communities, in reality, most (if not all) people have an extended relationship with someone who has suicided. Everyone is affected.
- **Alcohol and Drug consumption prior to suicide.** 26% (5 cases) of suicide involved alcohol and / or marijuana consumption just prior to the suicide.

This data above highlights that underlying the occurrence of suicidal behaviour in the NPY Lands is a deep layer of unresolved grief, trauma and hopelessness. It is noteworthy to mention that in NPYWC's 2011 submission on Youth Suicide in the NT, Directors and community members also cited the same triggers - family and domestic violence, unresolved grief and trauma (from exposure to family members who have suicided) and substance abuse as the main factors contributing to suicidal behaviour in the region. These triggers have not changed since that time.



Domestic and family violence is noted as a significant trigger for suicidal behaviour in both victims and perpetrators, male and female. It is not a contributing factor in victims alone. Since January 2010, 8 young men have committed suicide following domestic violence incidents. Partner conflicts, relationship breakdown due to gossip and jealousy, culturally related relationship conflicts such as 'wrong-way' or wrong skin relationships invoking intense family and community disapproval and fear of payback for culturally inappropriate relationships are all factors contributing to threats of suicide amongst Aboriginal people in the NPY region.

The correlation between exposure to suicide from close family members, and a person then going on to display suicidal behaviour is also significant. Community members describe the intense grief and loss due to a family member having suicided. There is also much anger at family or desire for them to suffer loss or be punished after a suicide. The direct trauma that people are experiencing – as a result of the high exposure to suicidal behaviours is further compounded by the lack of counselling and support services during times of crisis.

Young people (in particular) are often unable to express themselves or have suitable outlets for their emotions during these difficult times. Poor emotional 'literacy' is noted in remote communities in the NPY region – whereby young people are unable to process and express their feelings of grief – due to the combination of poor counselling services, English as a second language and lack of family members/role models capable of providing adequate support. The issue of emotional literacy is explored further in the section below.

In addition, alcohol and other drug use are compounding factors for suicidal behaviour. Addiction, psychosis, violence and abuse fuelled through alcohol and cannabis are all cited as correlating factors. Arguments over the lack of cannabis; lack of money and arguments over money for drug use are not uncommon.

Self-medication through substance abuse is further related to nothing to do in community; no jobs, no money, nothing to look forward to, no future. Young people talk of feeling bored, having nothing to do and having hopeless prospects. There is a significant lack of role models in central Australian communities, cultural disintegration (caught between two cultures) and few opportunities for leisure or success. Hopelessness and despair as well as known use of volatile substances add to the recipe for why children and young people engage in suicidal behaviour in the region.

### 3. Barriers which prevent children and young people from seeking help.

There are a number of issues and barriers that make it difficult for children and young people to access support and help the NPY region of Central Australia. These include:

- Lack of access to (culturally appropriate) supports and services in times of crisis.

*"We want to see early intervention for people with mental health problems, if that person gets kata kura, starting to be sick, they should put that person in that place so they get better quick. We need to look after them because then they.... Something happen they straight away get rope and run. So that's why we are really sad and we want something to happen".*

Mary Pan – Amata, NPYWC AGM 2011

This statement was in the 2011 NPYWC Submission – Select Committee into NT Youth Suicides. Mrs Pan's statement reflects the urgency around needing appropriate services and support for people who are at risk of hurting themselves.

Whilst there are some services and support available to children and young people in the Alice Springs region, for remote Aboriginal youth in the NPY region there is extremely limited support – if any – available.

In the remote communities covered by NPYWC in the Northern Territory and Western Australia's Ngaanyatjarra Lands, there is no specific youth mental health service that provides support to remote Aboriginal youth. In South Australia's APY Lands, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) operates – and is noteworthy as the only specific youth mental health service available in the region. Whilst this service provides much needed support, their capacity to assist with the continuum of care required is limited. Workers are not all resident in the communities, thus operate on a fly-in, fly-out basis which is less than ideal for relationship building and responsiveness in times of crisis.

It is worth noting that the Standby Response Program – a post suicide support service for families and communities in Central Australia - has been well received. This has significantly improved the co-ordination and cooperation of services following a suicide; however as an Alice Springs based service there is still issues of response time and coverage.

On-line or phone counselling also proves to be limited in access and availability in the region. Whilst according to the 2013 Mission Australia survey, 72.8% of young people surveyed said their main source of information was from the internet, it also stated that while "friend/s, parent/s and relatives/family friends were found to be the main sources of advice and support, almost two thirds (64.1%) of young people were not comfortable using a telephone hotline, 59.7% were not comfortable using an online counselling website and 49.2% were not comfortable contacting a community agency". (pg. 3).

For remote Aboriginal youth who are isolated and have minimal access to the internet and no mobile phone coverage, these opportunities for access to support are minimal or not available at all. Remote Aboriginal youth are even more disadvantaged when this is viewed in context with low attendance rates at school and English being a second language.

If young people in this region are to be supported and diverted away from suicide as a solution, then services must have a solid understanding and framework that is consistent with Anangu language and culture. Those limited services that do exist are not all culturally sensitive and/or equipped to assess Aboriginal youth in their own language, often completing assessments in English from a clinical perspective rather than using a framework that considers cultural, familial and community factors. The capacity of the individual, the community and the service provider to respond appropriately is vital and we must demand that the quality of this support is of a high standard, reflecting the values, norms and practices of the culture within which these young people are immersed.

*"Delivery of effective health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires service providers to orient their responses toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of health, investing in mutual partnerships and to work from a strengths based foundation. Without effective personalised communication, social and health inequities remain."*

(Understanding Clearly – "Utira Kulintjaku"; Byers et al; Lime Journal, June 2014)

➤ Lack of emotional literacy to express emotions and ask for help

Young people (in particular) are often unable to express themselves or have suitable outlets for their emotions during these difficult times. On a very practical level, language barriers are a major obstacle preventing young people from seeking help. Anangu with English as a second (or third) language often lack the vocabulary to talk with youth workers, clinic staff, phone or internet counselling services about their feelings. Parents and grandparents with little or no English face significant barriers in asking for help for their children when there is no Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara or Yankunytjatjara terms to describe contemporary issues and ailments. Finding the language to describe one's suicidal thoughts and feelings is challenging for all – and particularly so when cultural and language barriers exist.

Poor emotional 'literacy' also exists at another level– whereby young people are unable to process and express their feelings of grief – due to the combination of lacking counselling services, unavailable supports in local languages and lack of family members/role models capable of providing culturally appropriate support. A poor sense of self awareness, reflective opportunities, confidence to speak up and qualified or supportive mentors adds to this. It is regularly noted how common it is to hear young people resort to suicidal threats as the only known recourse for action in times of anger, conflict and crisis.

Examples of this noted in the past 12 months include young people threatening parents with language such as – “ If you don't give me more money I'm going to kill myself”, or to girlfriends/boyfriends “ If you don't sleep with me I'm going to hang myself”.

Threats of self harm and suicide are increasingly common as the only recourse for action amongst desperate, depressed or addicted youth who lack the knowledge, skills or abilities for finding alternative means of dealing with their problems. This is caused from, and reinforced by young people's over-exposure to suicidal behaviour amongst other family members – increasing people's threshold for normalisation of suicidal behaviour. In other words - suicide reinforces and escalates more suicidal behaviour when it is the only known behavioural response. Threats of suicidal behaviour are thus self-perpetuating, and can even escalate the crisis when there is such a vacuum of alternatives or solutions upon which young people can learn from.

- Lack of preventative and educational programs that build young people's resilience, confidence and coping strategies.

Whilst there are youth programs that offer young people diversion, there are very few in Central Australia – with the exception of NPYWC - that offer assistance with case management and targeted diversion towards education around mental health, sexual health and substance misuse.

Early intervention, education and prevention programs are essential to the individual and community's capacity to identify someone at risk and to act accordingly to assist them to receive help. Services then need to be responsive. It is also vital that a range of activities / supports are provided to promote the emotional and social well-being of people, as well as learning and understanding about coping strategies for time of crisis.

There also needs to be great emphasis on promoting positive Aboriginal role models. Young people often complain of a feeling of hopelessness – with few opportunities to achieve success, strive for goals and experience positive, meaningful activities that can build their self worth and confidence. Leadership opportunities must be incorporated into targeted youth programs that enable young people to build their communication, confidence and goal setting skills.

NPYWC members and Directors also cite a distinct lack of cultural connection as a contributing factor in young people's suicidal behaviour – through a poor sense of cultural identity, connection to family, and opportunities for intergenerational learning from senior role models. Connection to land and culture is proven to have a positive, grounding effect on young people in crisis and such opportunities must be an integral focus of youth programs in the region. Programs that offer support to young people need to assist in strengthening young people's support networks, their identity and their resilience such as law and culture camps, leadership development, emotional literacy, behaviour management and strategies to assist with self-regulation.

- Other issues of poverty and neglect

Anecdotally it is also known by those who work closely with children and young people in Central Australia that there are other contributing factors that are not discussed publicly which play a significant role. These include: child sexual and physical abuse and young people disengaged from the education system with no sense of what their future holds. There is also the ongoing exposure to trauma such as violence, abuse and neglect, food insecurity, crime and substance misuse.

#### **4. The types of programs and practices that effectively target and support children and young people – examples from NPYWC.**

*“Women’s Council is always thinking about young people and their futures. We worry about kids getting a good education and having things to do so they don’t get bored... The NPY Youth Team works very hard to support young people in our communities.”*

Margaret Smith, NPYWC Chairwoman.

NPY Women’s Council offers a range of activities and programs to young Aboriginal people aged 10 – 25 years in remote communities of the NPY region.

The Youth Team works to encourage and support all young people, especially those who are at risk, facing problems or looking to make changes in their lives. We are especially concerned with death and disability in young people caused by petrol sniffing and other substance misuse. The Youth Program runs healthy, active diversionary programs for young people, provides case support, and works closely with a variety of stakeholders to improve services and facilities for all young people and their families in communities.

Below is a description of 4 programs/activities that directly aim to prevent and respond to self harm and suicidal behaviour in young people in the region.

##### ➤ ‘Uti Kulintjaku’ (UK) project

‘Uti Kulintjaku’ (UK) means to think and understand clearly in Pitjantjatjara. The UK project has been running for the past year within the the Ngangkari Program of NPYWC. Ngangkari are traditional healers, and this Program aims to:

- Promote the work and skills of ngangkari, as a means of ensuring their work is highly valued and respected within the broader mainstream mental health and public health system;
- Educate health and mental health workers about the role and work of ngangkari;
- Provide direction for the development of culturally appropriate mental health services in the region; and
- Provide Anangu from the NPY region with ngangkari traditional healing.

The ngangkari believe that collaboration and mutual respect between western health and human services and ngangkari lead to the best outcomes for Anangu. They say western and Anangu practitioners have different but equally valuable skills and knowledge and both are needed to address the significant problems Anangu face. The ngangkari of the NPYWC project have worked hard in the past 10 years to have

the importance and value of their work recognised by mainstream health systems, and have successfully established strong relationships with local health and mental health services. The effectiveness of their work in indigenous mental health was acknowledged in 2009 with a prestigious award from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, and also with the Dr Margaret Tobin Award for excellence in mental health service delivery.

The Uti Kulintjaku project commenced in 2012 and aims to work towards clear thinking and understanding around mental health through a shared understanding of language and meaning. Understanding each other is the key. Senior Anangu, including ngangkari (traditional healers), from the NPY lands meet regularly to explore word meanings and concepts specific to health and wellbeing in English and Anangu languages.

A graphic story poster, featuring emotions and disturbed states of mind and behaviour has been developed with a shared compendium of words and phrases. The 'words for feelings map' helps people – community members and service providers alike, to find the right words to express different feelings.

*"We believe that if people can find the words to express their feelings, then they are better equipped to ask for the help they need. We recognise that words have different meanings in different contexts and that there are different ways to express the same feeling."*

Emma Trenorden, UK Project Officer

There is also discussion about a phone App providing a dictionary of words and phrases, both written and spoken. Using an App would provide a means to engage young people, as contributions can be accepted from anyone, in both spoken and written form.

The Utira Kulintjaku project was instigated by Anangu people who wanted a clearer, shared understanding of health. It has resulted in the development of resources that can be used by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This work continues in the area of child development and the impact of trauma.

#### ➤ 'Kulintja Palyaringkunyntjaku' (KP) Project

NPYWC Youth Program has been delivering the Kulintja Palyaringkunyntjaku (KP) Project for the past 7 years across the NPY region. The KP program helps young people in remote communities 'to get better thinking' about drugs and alcohol and mental health, and provides a best practice example of culturally appropriate

prevention and targeted early intervention strategies for tackling these issues. KP is a capacity building program funded through the Department of Health.

It offers education and support to NPYWC staff, community members and young people to respond to drug and alcohol and mental health issues on the ground.

The key aspects of the program include:

- Education and learning for young people and communities;
- Training and development for staff;
- Networking and advocacy on issues identified; and
- Reporting drug and alcohol issues.

The cornerstone of the KP project is workshops and bush camps which bring elders and young people together with qualified youth workers to discuss the physical, mental, cultural and spiritual harms of cannabis, sniffing and alcohol. KP camps use a unique blend of modern and traditional knowledge, presented hand-in-hand by youth workers and senior elders, to educate and inform camp participants using culturally relevant and appropriate methods.

Bush camps are seen as the most effective way of providing educational workshops in which to talk about sensitive topics as they provide respite from community, involve therapeutic elements and incorporate traditional activities such as looking for bush tucker, song/dance and storytelling - learning about land, law and culture.

The program has developed clear guidelines around the role of senior community members in the planning, delivery and evaluation of all KP workshops. We work with senior community members who have cultural authority and respect as role models and undertake extensive pre-workshop planning and preparation for all KP camps. In this way, senior community members help to decide -

- What are the important issues in that specific community to be discussed?
- How to talk about sensitive topics – in language – using culturally appropriate ways? Who is the best person to talk about these things?
- What culturally appropriate supporting materials and stories can we use?
- Who to invite on camps? Targeting young people at risk; Considering age and relationship conflicts of participants; Other influential community members to involve? Other service providers to involve?
- Where to have the camp? Sites of local significance.
- Opportunity for cultural activities.
- Feedback and follow up after the camp? Reinforcing the message after the camp; Providing support and responding to issues in the future.





Sniffing workshop, Kiwirrkurra 2013



Community safety mapping in Kiwirrkurra, 2014

- Targeted diversion with an emphasis on culturally based activities that connect young people to intergenerational learning, land and culture.

NPYWC Youth workers target at-risk young people in communities across the region for diversion and recreation activities with the specific aim of removing them from vulnerable situations and keeping them engaged during periods of high risk (ie: following critical incidents; during school holidays). Targeted diversion activities often involve bush trips and activities that can include an additional educational focus – workshops on drugs and alcohol, formal or informal talks about mental health, support networks, community safety, or discussions around respectful relationships, sexual health and the law.

Targeted diversion programs for young people following suicides in remote communities are extremely important – providing a safe space for friends and family of the victim to have some respite from community, feel supported to talk openly about their feelings and engage in positive, healthy uplifting activities.

At the request of NPYWC members and Directors, we also emphasize traditional or culture-based activities. These include intergenerational learning between old and young and opportunities for young people to develop traditional concepts of law and leadership.

- Leadership programs – opportunities to celebrate success, learn from role models aspire to goals.

We believe that today's youth are tomorrow's leaders and we aim to ensure that young people in the NPY region are informed and supported to realise their goals, achieve their dreams and overcome their challenges. As well as guidance and support through individual casework, we also support young people's leadership development – providing supported opportunities to set goals, look to the future and learn from others.

Youth Councils and the Kungka Career Conference are 2 such forums where young people are given explicit leadership training. Law and Culture camps for young people is a growing area of our work – whereby young women are guided by senior women in traditional knowledge, stories, dance and duties. We provide extensive support in the area of education and boarding school applications to young people in the region, and where possible, help with employment and training opportunities. All of these activities help young people to have positive experiences of success and a structured supported means of realising goals. Such experiences help to build resilience and coping strategies – improving the overall mental health of young people, and their community.

Why these programs are successful:

- They were developed by Anangu for Anangu;
- They are sensitive to the cultural values, norms and practices;
- There is a strong component of sustainability as they provide education and capacity building for everyone involved in the project ensuring that the knowledge and learning's are passed on to other people;
- The material is either developed by Anangu and/or is specific to work with Anangu i.e. the resources used for the KP Project have Aboriginal images in them and are tailored to their visual learning styles. The UK Project 'words for feelings' map is in both English and Pitjantjatjara/Ngaanyatjarra and has been developed in consultation with Senior Anangu including Ngangkari and with the mental health professionals from Alice Springs;
- Underlining these programs is a consistent practice within NPY Women's Council referred to as the 'Malparara Way', whereby non- Aboriginal staff are partnered with Anangu/Yarnangu (local Aboriginal) staff, working together as 'Malpas' (companions) to assist each other in the role. Both members of the partnership bring different but equally valued skills. Anangu/Yarnangu provide cultural knowledge, language and knowledge of the region while non-Aboriginal personnel typically offer formal qualifications, higher levels of literacy and administrative skills;
- The organisation also has strong governance and leadership from senior women on the lands which provide direction and guidance for staff to determine how to approach their work. Members also have opportunities to feed into the priorities of the organisation and therefore staff are accountable to them.

Programs that are developed and delivered by Aboriginal organisations or at least in partnership with Aboriginal organisations are far more suitable to the client demographic and therefore will inevitably have a higher level of engagement. All too often non-Aboriginal organisations have good intentions however are not well equipped with an understanding of the culture, language and the specific needs of the group they are working with.

## 5. Recommendations

- Resource Aboriginal-run, community-based youth mental health organisations to provide counselling and support for young people in central Australia – specifically the NT and WA communities of the NPY region.
- Resource Aboriginal run programs to provide early intervention, prevention and education initiatives; strengthen youth agencies capacity to broaden their programs beyond just recreation and diversion to deliver programs to include prevention, education and targeted diversion around suicide and self-harm issues.
- Improve emotional literacy – give young people ways and means by which to deal with and express their emotions in ways other than suicide threats.
- Resourcing activities that promote the social, emotional and healthy well-being of children and young people; greater initiatives to celebrate Aboriginal role models, strengthen youth leadership, provide opportunities for success and create positive opportunities for young people to strive and achieve.
- Resourcing for specific activities that promote intergenerational learning and facilitate young people's continued connection to their land, language and culture – ie: Law and Culture camps and regular bush trips to sacred sites.
- Strengthen capacity of families and communities to support young people to manage their behaviour, observe early warning sign, respond to requests for help and provide peer counselling and support.
- Development of a key forum that brings the communities and youth services together to discuss their programs, concerns, solutions and ways of working together to address issues and strengthen work being done. This should sit with the non-government sector outside of mental health to ensure that the facilitation is non-bias and driven by the sector.