

Introducing the National Indigenous Critical Response Service (NICRS)

Welcome to this information bulletin on behalf of the National Indigenous Critical Response Service (NICRS). This is the first of a series of regular communications from us, designed to keep you informed about the work we are undertaking.

The loss of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people(s) to suicide is nothing less than a national tragedy. The rate of suicide among our people is, on average, four times that for other Australians.

We know that a range of factors contribute to suicide including mental health issues, misuse of alcohol and drugs and the results of dispossession and structural inequality. We also know that those bereaved by suicide are themselves at risk of suicidal ideation or attempt and are likely to need support. That's where we come in.

A program of Thirrili Ltd, the NICRS provides emotional and practical support to bereaved families and individuals impacted by a suicide or other traumatic loss. We are currently operating in Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, Victoria and Queensland. In 2019, the service will extend to New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, and Tasmania. Funding for the program is provided by the Commonwealth Government of Australia through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy and we welcome that partnership. However, while our work is critical in supporting families and communities and by doing so helping reducing suicide and distress in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities after traumatic events, this work doesn't address fully the systemic and long standing causal issues for which solutions have eluded us for too long. We stand ready to partner with governments, academia and the broader service system to tackle these issues.

Adele Cox

Founding Director and Chief Executive of Thirrili Ltd and Project Director NICRS



Our approach

We provide culturally responsive and holistic emotional and practical support and throughcare. As required, we advocate on behalf of clients and link families to the range of health and community support services to meet their needs.

The NICRS also works with communities where there have been high levels of suicide, to strengthen community capacity and resilience in responding to and preventing suicide.

How we work with families and communities

When we are notified, we contact the family to explain how we can assist, liaise with local services to explore their capacity to respond and ensure a coordinated response is provided to best meet the families' needs. If required and invited by the family, we can travel to support the family.

When we meet with families we gather information about their immediate needs and work with local services to ensure that holistic and culturally responsive psychosocial and postvention supportⁱ is available. Postvention aims to reduce stressors for the bereaved and may include practical supports, such

as assisting with assisting with relevant government agencies, referrals on to other appropriate services, or aspects of daily living after a death. The following example as told by a service user demonstrates the way we work:

When my sister died, her four children needed someone to care for them. Their dad wasn't around when it first happened, so it was sort of up to me. The children were all under 10 and the youngest was unwell. They lived a long way from any major town and there wasn't much there in the way of services or people to help. I wanted to take them in, but I lived a couple of hours away and didn't have any room in my place.

When 'Sis' first passed, I couldn't just move into their house and take care of the children because of sorry business- the family had to move out until some-time later. My priority was to try and find somewhere they could all stay together, preferably with me there looking after them, but there was so much else to do.

There was the bank, Centrelink and the government all to deal with and I was overwhelmed. And there was the funeral to organise and I was too upset to even think about it.

That's where the advocate from the NICRS really helped. She was friendly, she wasn't pushy, and she explained she was there just to help us get through this. She also told us that she wouldn't be involved without our permission. Because of the way she approached me, the kids and other family members, we trusted her.

The Advocate helped us organise the funeral and deal with other things that were needed straight away, so I could just focus on the kids. She brought people from different services to come and meet with us and got me in touch with the housing service. She helped me with the paperwork to get a house and it was only because of her help that we got a house for us all to stay in. It meant that after the funeral, the kids could enrol in school and start to get back to normal, at least as normal as it could be without their mum.

In the months after the funeral, the Advocate was in touch regularly to make sure we were getting the help we needed and were ok. On the outside the kids seemed to be coping well but I knew they were still hurting. The advocate put us in touch with a counsellor who worked with the kids to help with their grief. We still hear from our Advocate every so often and I can't thank her enough for her help.

The kids and I still miss their mum, but we're doing ok. The help from the Advocate has been a big part of that.

Eligibility

We can support any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individual or family affected by a suicide or other traumatic incidents where families may require additional support e.g. multiple car crash fatalities or the accidental death of a child. Our priority is providing postvention support and we assess on an individual case by case basis whether it is appropriate to respond to other fatal or non-fatal traumatic events.

The following principles assist in determining whether support is offered:

- concerns family members may be at heightened risk of suicide, e.g. they have lost family to suicide previously or suffer from mental illness
- the event involves the accidental or sudden death of a child under the age of 18
- there is a lack of services in the community able to provide support to individuals or family
- there is a high risk of vicarious trauma given the suicide or event occurred in a public place.

If you are not sure whether to report an incident, contact the NICRS and we will assess if we can assist.

Getting help

We can be contacted 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Our free **1800 805 801** number is staffed by experienced Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Advocates.*

We are happy to talk with family members whilst service providers are with them to facilitate the referral process.

Our people

Our Critical Response Support Advocates (CRSAs) are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with extensive experience working within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and with a demonstrated capacity for strong advocacy.



Pictured from left to right are Gerry Georgatos, National Coordinator NICRS; Chenoa Dowling, CRSA Brisbane; Racheal Schmerl, CRSA South Australia; Adele Cox, Thirrili CEO and NICRS Project Director; Clare Dawson, NICRS Project Officer (front); Angela Threlfall, CRSA Cairns (rear); Megan Krakouer, CRSA Western Australia (front); Kevin Cox, Senior Cultural Advisor, Western Australia (rear); Jane Blunden CRSA Northern Territory.

Further information

For further information, please visit our website at <https://thirrili.com.au/nicrs> Please bookmark the URL and visit regularly for more news, including our new and improved website (coming soon!)

¹ For a definition of postvention, see World Health Organisation (2004) Preventing suicide: A global imperative, World Health Organisation, Geneva.