



BLANK PAGE SUMMIT ON SUICIDE COMMUNIQUÉ

Billard Aboriginal Community 27-31 July 2009

In July 2009 in the remote North West Kimberley Aboriginal community of Billard, 147 people with the will and capacity to effect fundamental and immediate change gathered on country to stop the epidemic of suicide by Indigenous people.

Called "The Blank Page Summit", the gathering was devised by community leaders, Stephen Victor Snr and his family including his daughter Mary Victor O'Reeri. Mr Victor Snr lost two of his sons to the preventable tragedy of suicide.

The blank page strategy for the Summit engaged the relevant experts in suicide to devise a new set of solutions to prevent any more unnecessary loss of life.

The result of the Summit was a call to action to all Australians to fundamentally restructure the way we address suicide prevention through the family, our communities, and with all of us working together.

The 147 participants were invited to join the Summit in their capacity as key contributors capable of effecting outcomes vital to stopping this epidemic in Australia. They came from communities across the country and from fields as diverse as child protection, land management, justice, mental health, sport and recreation, counselling, education, vocational training, children and youth services, disability, academia, government, Catholic Church and a range of community-led initiatives.

Specific communities currently experiencing horrific youth suicide rates such as Balgo in East Kimberley were central drivers of the call to action which guided the Summit.

Informing the work of the Summit over its four days and nights were the Hon Jenny Macklin, MP, Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, the WA Deputy Premier Kim Hames, the WA Chief Justice Wayne Martin, and the WA State Coroner Alistair Hope.

All participants worked together to create the environment where a breakthrough strategy free of 'old thinking' could be achieved.

Call for action

Stephen Victor Snr, Mary Victor O'Reeri and members of the Billard Aboriginal Community now invite others to join them in the call for action arising from the powerful work of the Summit.

This call for action is both specific to the Kimberley and of critical relevance to the rest of Australia.

The key messages are to:

- create suicide-proof communities
- train families to be families
- encourage self-care through staged support

The details of the key messages are as follows:

Creating suicide-proof communities

Zero tolerance of those things that are killing people, either by 'slow suicide' or self-destruction on the spot.

1. Create communities in the Kimberley according to the following self-imposed conditions:
 - no grog
 - no illegal drugs
 - no child neglect and abuse
 - no pornography
 - adherence to a Community Code of Conduct
 - use of a formal dispute resolution process
2. Build communities that are based on:
 - effective internal problem solving
 - strong sense of civic virtue
 - shared recreational and cultural activities open to all

The critical distinction drawn in this message is 'self-imposed'. This is not a call for legislative prohibition - it is concerned with individuals deciding in a collective setting to act in a lifesaving manner rather than in an habitually self-destructive way. Dispute resolution is included because of the impact of feuding in triggering suicide, as recounted by Coroner Alistair Hope at the Summit.

In this context, adequate housing is of particular relevance as a suicide prevention measure. The opportunity for government is to resolve how communities willing to self-impose and benchmark protective behaviours including internal dispute resolution processes are figured within the roll-out of new housing to create better residential and environmental conditions in the longer term. What emerged from the Summit is that is untenable to sustain arrangements which are 'stuck' either due to cross-governmental red tape, poor governance or mismanaged processes of any kind, as this in itself is life threatening in the vein of 'slow suicide'.

Training families to be families

1. Train families to be families that can save the lives of people at risk right now.
2. Train families to be functional and safe families.
3. Train families to nurture individual growth within the family.

This is a message about 'first principles' - start with a blueprint for a family. What is a family? What does it uniquely do? What are its characteristics? How is a family created (i.e. not just by birth)? What does it mean to be a member of a family? How do families plan their lives, their futures, their housing, their schooling, their leisure time and their retirement? How do families interact with each other to make communities?

Healing and self-care

We must have a means of saving the lives of the most distressed and acutely troubled individuals in our communities. When we know people are suicidal, we must have the capacity to act.

We need to develop self-care based on staged support.

1. The means to intervene to ensure the safety of a person in the Kimberley who is at risk of self-harm.
2. The tools to engage families in their own self-care and well-being.

'Healing' is viewed as a formal set of interventions from early counseling responses through to therapeutic treatment, where necessary.

This includes provision for own healing processes based on Aboriginal spirituality.

How were these messages created?

The Summit was designed to unearth what isn't readily talked about that is at the heart of the renewal and repair of people's wellbeing in order to save their lives. People spoke about grog and ganja, family breakdown and community decay. They described 'humbug' in its various forms including violence and feuding. In the same way that acute trauma such as a heart attack, gives legitimacy to self-imposed restrictions, the epidemic of suicide requires removal by zero tolerance of those triggers which contribute to slow and spontaneous suicide.

Actions taken after the Summit

In convening the Summit, Billard Aboriginal Community - a community which has developed suicide prevention strategies designed to make the community 'suicide proof' - aims to enable others to take action to protect the lives of every day citizens at risk.

In its call for action, Billard Aboriginal Community will also work by invitation with individuals, communities and other stakeholders including government to implement the key messages of the Summit.

Billard Aboriginal Community is guided by its own *Principles of Engagement* in its ongoing activities.

The majority of actions arising from the work of the Summit will be undertaken by individual contributors to the Summit in their operating environments.

There are some actions which require implementation by individuals with specific responsibilities at a senior level in government whose contributions informed the work of the Summit:

- Hon Jenny Macklin, MP - Minister for Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs (Cth)
- Hon Kim Hames, MLA Deputy Premier and Minister for Health and Indigenous Affairs (WA)
- Chief Justice Wayne Martin (WA)
- State Coroner Alistair Hope (WA)

Summit conveners - Billard Aboriginal Community

"Mission accomplished - if we saved just one life through the Summit, it was worth all our hard work."

Stephen Victor Snr (Main Person-in-Charge)

"We broke new ground - people concentrated on the future. We found out how to stop people dying from suicide."

Lendal Victor (Young Person-in-Charge)