

## **REMOTE SERVICE DELIVERY NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP WORKSHOP**

**SPEECH BY MARY VICTOR O'REERI**

**PAVILION ON NORTHBOURNE, Canberra ACT  
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**Good evening everyone – distinguished guests, fellow visitors to Canberra from COAG sites and representatives from the Australian Government and various state governments.**

**First of all, to the traditional owners of this land, I am here in a spirit of respect for your country – thank you.**

**To the Australian Government COAG team in the Kimberley, in particular Richard Aspinall, thank you for the invitation to speak here this evening.**

**As you know, I come from the Beagle Bay area of the Dampier Peninsula in the remote north-west Kimberley.**

**I was one of the last babies born in the old hospital in the Beagle Bay township. It's now a house occupied by the priests. My grandfather was born under a tree about 500 yards away near the store and the oval which are both within walking distance of our family's community known as Billard.**

**In days gone by, the Beagle Bay area (or Ngarlan as it is known in our Nyul Nyul language) was a main place for ceremonies. It was also a major trading post in the region.**

**These days Beagle Bay is still a service centre for the central Dampier Peninsula residents with a clinic, school, Church, store and other services.**

**As most of you know, the Beagle Bay area is also a COAG site under the National Partnership Strategy.**

**Tonight I plan to focus on what I believe it means for our people to be a part of a major investment on the ground such as the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Strategy.**

**I will start with some background to my remarks.**

**In July this year we at Billard held a Blank Page Summit on Suicide on site in the community. We were joined by 147 people from across Australia who shared our aspiration to do something about the ongoing suicides amongst our people. We all lived together on country in a purpose-built tent city for five days.**

**The Summit came from our own deep grief and frustration. We lost our two brothers to suicide a few years ago. The Summit was brought on also by what we felt was a general inertia about the problem. It worried us how people – governments, NGO's, our own people – were getting used to suicide.**

**We decided to bring together people who had the power and capacity to do something about the problem.**

**We knew we needed to start with a blank page. I think Prime Minister Kevin Rudd put it well in his Apology Speech when he talked about ‘laying claim to a future’.**

**He said:**

**“A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.”**

**When you set about fixing a problem, you need to make sure it doesn’t happen again. That is the fundamental goal of problem-solving.**

**When people are dying from suicide – person after person – a lot of milk is already spilt. You can’t bring people back from the dead.**

**As a family, we knew that taking responsibility wasn’t about blame. Nor was it about regret and staying stuck in the torment.**

**It was about finding the courage to have a hard yarn.**

**The hard yarn means being honest. It also means getting to the bottom of the problem.**

**The Blank Page Summit on Suicide provided a perfect launching pad for the hard yarn.**

**We spoke about the triggers for slow suicide. We were honest about the fact that we live in communities where drugs and alcohol are a way of life. Where pornography and the devaluing of women and children are par for the course. Where self-neglect and poor relationships are accepted as normal. All of this makes us lose our ambition to be deadly people with strong and powerful dreams that can come true.**

**The result of the Summit was a call to action by Billard Aboriginal Community.**

**There are three elements to the call to action:**

- 1. To create suicide-proof communities;**
- 2. To train families to be families; *and***
- 3. To strengthen self-care amongst our people.**

**The call to action is designed to attack the roots of the problems that continue to cause low quality of life and slow suicide for our people.**

**The call to action also very much reflects the priority outcomes identified in the strategic framework of the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report.**

**To remind us all, OID’s priorities are:**

1. **Safe, healthy and supportive family environments with strong communities and cultural identity.**
2. **Positive child development and prevention of violence, crime and self-harm.**
3. **Improved wealth creation and economic sustainability for individuals, families and communities.**

When we read the full Summit Communiqué, the OID Key Indicators and numerous other reports, there isn't any significant debate about what we all want for Indigenous Australians.

In turn, when we look into the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Strategy, it's clear that we have a golden opportunity to make some real and tangible headway on our common goals.

As a resident of a COAG site, I'm very optimistic about the road ahead.

I believe that the Strategy's success will depend on a combination of factors. I'd like to take a few moments to talk about them:

1. **Co-operation between governments**

This is something every day folks don't have much control over. We need governments to get on well together. We're used to blame shifting between governments. How governments get on has a direct bearing on the level of hardship on the ground.

2. **Robust relationships**

People make good things happen. People also stop good things happening. The roll-out of the Strategy is a giant food chain. There are so many levels to it and players in it – senior government officials in Canberra, local and regional staff, end users, NGO's and other service providers. What people do on an individual basis will shape the whole look and feel and result of the Strategy.

3. **Proper communication strategies**

It's been said many times – we need to take people with us. I find that communication habits need a lot of work in the world in general. At a community level, where the environment is ripe for paranoia and false yarns and gossip, how we communicate makes a big difference.

4. **Inclusiveness**

The time for the "haves" and "have nots" is finished. What I mean by this is the bad habit of resources being used by a handful for the benefit of a chosen few. This behaviour is not only wrong, it is inhumane. The best way to gain people's trust and confidence is to include them.

5. **Minimum standards**

**Any person who has authority, power or strategic clout in a community, will be watched at every turn for the standards they set. This is how people work out who to respect, who they will listen to, who they hold a good liyarn for.**

**If people can take a stand about bad behaviours in the community and be supported, we'll start to cut through many deep-seated problems like drug and alcohol abuse and illegal activities.**

**Sometimes this means standing up to the bad habits within our own immediate and extended families.**

**Unless and until we do that, we will be leading double lives. People won't take us seriously.**

**To sum up the 'make or break' factors:**

- **Co-operation between governments**
- **Robust relationships**
- **Proper communication strategies**
- **Inclusiveness**
- **Minimum standards**

**You'll notice I haven't included money amongst the success factors.**

**This is because money is not in my top 5.**

**It has a place, of course.**

**But putting biggest mob money into solving Indigenous problems hasn't necessarily delivered big solutions.**

**Turning directly to my own people, I would like to send a reminder that there are many things that only we can do as individuals.**

**Here are six suggestions which I believe can have an immediate impact on our lives irrespective of what government does or doesn't do. These suggestions are based on my own experiences:**

***Number 1***

**Clean up our houses.**

**If someone is staying in your house and they don't sleep in a bed in a bedroom, put a resettlement plan in place for them. No matter they're your nephew, favorite uncle or best friend. Chronic and long-term overcrowding causes life-threatening strain.**

***Number 2***

**Have a medical check-up.**

Take responsibility for your health – don't expect anyone else to do this for you. If you smoke, give up. If you drink alcohol, analyse your drinking pattern and check it's not slowly destroying your life and the lives of those around you. If you smoke marijuana, accept that you are stranded in a cycle that will demotivate you every single day that you put your time, energy and money into your habit. It's also illegal in most parts of Australia.

### *Number 3*

Sort out your financial affairs.

Get rid of your debts including all credit cards. Replace them with a debit card so the only money you can draw out is money that's already yours.

### *Number 4*

If you're unemployed, get a job.

This is about acting like a free person and not a victim.

### *Number 5*

If you're employed, know your value as an employee.

Know more than how much you're paid – find out what your job is really about and what it means for you and your family. Hang on to it and improve on it.

### *Number 6*

Keep up with the rest of the world.

We may live in remote communities but we're part of the world.

Technology, climate change and becoming financially savvy are on our doorstep – we need to come to grips with them.

My final message is to all of us – my own people, government and anyone who has a stake in making a better world.

Many of the wealthiest people in the world got going on the track to their good fortune with very little money and know how. Last year we were lucky enough to receive some funding from Visy Industries to buy a worm farm for the Billard Community Garden. When we heard that the Managing Director of the company was dying – his name was Richard Pratt – we wrote to him personally to thank him for the worm farm. But we also thanked him for his inspiring words and actions. He said one time that you'll always succeed when you stay to the end. Most people drop off along the way, some might go 70 or 80 % of the way. But if you commit and stay to the end you will receive the rewards for your commitment because you will achieve your goals.

**This leads me to the last success factor which I've saved until the end. That is, our commitment.**

**Our commitment is the cornerstone – it will get us through the frustrations and the delays and the blockages.**

**I wish all of you every success in rolling out this important initiative on behalf of the government in the interests of our people.**

**Thank you for your attention.**