

Clarence Valley

NSW OCHRE Healing Forum

June 2018





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Left: Gurehlgam Aboriginal Corporation **Right:** Clarence Valley Aboriginal Healing Centre

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About the NSW OCHRE Healing Forums

During the consultations that took place with NSW Aboriginal communities, to inform OCHRE, the NSW Government's Aboriginal Affairs Policy, healing was identified as a priority. The state-wide *Healing Our Way Forum* held in July 2014 was the first step in formal healing conversations between Aboriginal people and government.

In the *Healing Our Way Forum* report, the NSW Government committed to continue the dialogue with interested communities to understand how agencies can operate to better support healing with Aboriginal people. Building on that commitment, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, in partnership with The Healing Foundation, committed to supporting six OCHRE Healing Forums across NSW. Expressions of interest were invited from organisations / communities to host a forum in their region.

This document presents the findings from the Clarence Valley Healing Forum.

Clarence Valley Healing Forum in Context

The Clarence Valley has three Aboriginal nations in the area being Gumbaynggirr, Bundjalung and Yaegl. The five Aboriginal communities in the area are Grafton, Baryulgil, Malabugilmah, Yamba and Maclean. There are 2,485 Aboriginal people in the Clarence Valley which represents five per cent of the total population.

The Clarence Valley Healing Forum was held on 5th December 2017 at the South Grafton Ex-Servicemen's Club. There were 55 participants comprising Aboriginal community members and representatives from a range of Aboriginal, government and non-government agencies.

The forum was facilitated by Grant Sarra, who was engaged by The Healing Foundation following discussion with the planning group that recognised the importance of experienced, independent facilitation. Cultural ceremony was included throughout the day to ensure a culturally safe environment for participants. Uncle Roger Duroux delivered a warm welcome to country and Aunty Lenore Parker gave a blessing. After lunch Dean Loadsman and Rachael Cavanagh led forum participants in men's and women's dances and Uncle Johnny Marshall played didge and guitar throughout the day.

The Healing Forum was hosted by Gurehlgam Aboriginal Corporation, an Aboriginal owned corporation that delivers services to the Aboriginal communities in the Clarence. Services include **provision of a healing centre, support for the homeless and those at risk of being homeless, management of a large cultural centre**, family violence prevention legal service, victims support, Aboriginal children and parents support and support for youth at risk.

In planning the Clarence Valley Healing Forum, the Local Planning Committee developed a vision for healing in the Clarence Valley – being that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

- Develop a greater understanding of the impact of trauma and to access help;
- Have access to culturally responsive counselling and trauma informed support services;
- Have access to much needed support services that help them deal with grief and loss (including the grief and loss associated with family suicide);
- Restore strong family structures and strong cultural knowledge within families and the broader community.

The goals for the Healing Forum were:

- To utilise the Clarence Valley Healing Forum to identify the specific service gaps and needs to address the healing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- To set clear short, medium and long-term healing goals that will form the basis for the development of a Clarence Valley Healing Strategy, post the Healing Forum;
- To develop a stronger level of understanding from key services about the impact of trauma and the healing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- To utilise the Healing Forum to highlight the need for greater access to Aboriginal counsellors and mental health support services to address trauma.

Across the day participants explored healing themes through a series of Yarning Circles facilitated by local community members. The questions explored in the Yarning Circles were:

- **Yarning Circle 1 – Healing Trauma in Our Community:** What are the issues causing hurt and disharmony in the community? What has to be done to address these issues?
- **Yarning Circle 2 – Strong Families, Strong Culture:** What is hurting our families and our culture? What do we need to do to strengthen our families and culture?
- **Yarning Circle 3 – Our Healing Actions:** What can we, as individuals, do to support healing in the Clarence Valley?

The following section presents the key findings from the Clarence Valley Healing Forum.



Key Findings

What I have seen is I have learnt about a massacre that occurred in a creek [Myall Creek] and it deeply affected me. A lot of non-Aboriginal people don't know the stories but if more people know the stories we would be better off... it would create a better understanding of the distress

Over the course of the conversations held in each Yarning Circle the following themes emerged.

Hurt and Disharmony in Families and Communities

Across the Yarning Circles there were a number of issues and challenges reported that were specifically hurting families and communities within the Clarence Valley. Healing Forum participants reported these as specific to culture, the challenges young Aboriginal people face and the way services were currently responding to these needs/issues.

Disconnection From Culture

The Healing Forum strongly reinforced that the effects of colonisation and past/current government policies had led to a loss of cultural identity through a process of disconnection. This was disconnection from culture, land, family and community protocols. There had been a loss of respect for self, others, community, kinship and culture.

Participants suggested that stories and community protocols had been lost and without such protocols strong leaders from within the community cannot emerge:

We can't build strong leaders if community protocols are not understood and there are no strong leaders without strong identity and culture to be able to lead. We need cultural reconnection

Trauma

The communities noted that there were high levels of trauma (described as “heavy” and “very heavy to talk about”) in the community and ongoing loss and bereavement:



*Dysfunction comes from loss and no sense of belonging...
I see trauma and its impacts every day*

*Stories of massacre are all around us... Myall Creek is all
around us*

*We are going around in circles with trauma and our kids
are going around and around... people are living in distress
as normal*

*Often our families are suffering intergenerational trauma
and this impacts on their ability to provide kinship care*

The general lack of understanding of such trauma from service providers and structural racism within the way services were currently being delivered was reported as impacting on families and communities. One participant at the Healing Forum suggested that as clients accessing services “we are treated as less than human” while another suggested there was “institutional racism in government and non-government agencies”. Indeed, for some participants a lack of understanding at the point of service delivery was causing many of the issues families and communities face.

Within the system that aims to support families, a lack of housing availability was described as leading to overcrowding and homelessness for families and young people – “many of our young mums are couch surfing”.

Along with this, people suggested that there is:

*Too much expectation on Aboriginal people to look after
Aboriginal people and every Aboriginal person is distressed
and worried about their children being removed... we
parent and we live with this*

Other issues that were identified as causing hurt and disharmony in communities and families were family violence, drugs, alcohol and a lack of respect.

Lateral Violence

In addition to family violence, significant levels of loss and trauma were reported as having led to high levels of lateral violence within the community – described as an “*endemic issue*” and is “*very large and not being addressed*”. Some individuals reported finding it difficult to be accepted as a member of the Clarence Valley Aboriginal Community, particularly in circumstances when they or their family did not originate from the area. Lateral violence takes many forms including abusive language, online abuse and bullying in schools. There was also a strong consensus that lateral violence was not a traditional cultural practice and that it is a symptom of trauma and unresolved hurt related to dispossession, colonisation and harmful government policies that aimed to strip Aboriginal people of their culture.

The answer to all of the reported issues relating to hurt and disharmony was the need for a process of healing to be introduced:

Healing needs to be holistic... healing for all of us, for our families and for our communities

For healing to take place there needs to be a deep-seated understanding of the trauma... within ourselves and within communities and then within the service providers... government and non-government agencies



Hurt and Disharmony in Young People

The Yarning Circles identified numerous challenges that were specific to young Aboriginal people living in the Clarence Valley. Cultural breakdown and intergenerational trauma was reported as playing out in particular ways for young people.

This included issues relating to a loss of cultural identity and boredom for young people:

If you don't have a sense of where you come from it hampers the future of where you go to... and what is your place in the world

At the most extreme end of loss of identity and connection for young people, Healing Forum participants reported knowledge of suicide ideation and attempts. The healing vision developed for the Clarence Valley ahead of the Healing Forum identified the need for support services that help families deal with grief and loss, including the grief and loss associated with family suicide.

Within this context, participants described how many young Aboriginal people were using drugs (ice in particular was reported), had early engagement and contact with juvenile justice and found themselves homeless. Further, communities reported that:

Our children are living in ice-addicted families but our children suffering and how do we keep them safe... children are sacred and they are distressed

There is an over-representation of children within juvenile justice and huge misunderstanding of juvenile justice issues. This lack of understanding leads to severe disadvantage for our young people

The stats in JJ are just shocking in over-representation of our young people... our children... if we cut off the tap we cut off the tap to the adults being incarcerated

Young people have too much chaos in their lives and there is no recognition of kinship for our children... they are lost

With regard to Juvenile Justice, the Healing Forum reported there is a lack of post-release services to help young people “*find their way back to community and families*” and for those addicted to drugs and alcohol a lack of services to support them. Where services do exist “*young people don't know where to go*”.

The issues facing young Aboriginal people in the Clarence Valley were reported as significantly impacting on their ability to engage and succeed in the school system. There were many sentiments of this disconnect:

The impacts of trauma are stopping our children participating in school and they are often not going very well as they are not in school often

There is a disconnection in education... from schools and services ... and then it's a vicious cycle with a lack of schooling that leads to poor outcomes and loss of payments and then homelessness and contact with juvenile justice

Generally, it was reported that schools did not have an understanding of the trauma and the disconnection young people have and therefore the school environment becomes further challenging for young people. This was described as leading to a lot of shame for young people both within and outside the school setting. Healing was described as the foundation for better outcomes for young Aboriginal people.



Building Stronger Families and Stronger Culture

The conversations at the Healing Forum that considered how to build stronger communities and stronger culture gave particular attention to the following areas:

- Addressing the healing needs of communities
- Addressing the healing and service needs of young people
- Strengthening service provision and addressing service gaps.

Addressing the Healing Needs of Communities

We need to be the holders of our own dreaming and showcase what the spirit has given us... this place and this land

The participants at the Healing Forum were in agreement that there was need for healing in the communities of the Clarence Valley. While there was a recognition of the contribution services could make to the healing process, in the first instance, it was suggested healing belongs to and with communities:

I feel we have reached a point where we can heal and take a care of our young ones to have a better life

We need to rebuild our culture and fight to bring culture back to our children... this is hard ... we have to eat, sleep and do this

Healing was reported as the number one priority for communities to have improved outcomes. Participants suggested healing begins with “*recognising that we have something special here*”. Community members described how the recognition of something special would increase understanding of the past and the present and that this involved listening to each other’s stories as part of a process of reconnection to country.

Through story-telling cultural pride could be built. Elders could tell their stories about their removal:

Tell your story and have the truth known... we need to capture history and tell the true history... it's important for us to know and understand



Story-telling was seen as critical to the healing process and participants, in describing trauma as heavy, suggested there was a need to “unload” and tell the stories of where and how trauma emerged. This part of the healing process was described as having an empowering effect. It was recommended that such stories could then be collected and published in a local book of stories written by local Aboriginal people from the Clarence Valley.

The keys to healing identified at the Healing Forum were empowerment, engagement and support for community leadership, and building connection to country, culture and spirit. That is, build up the strength of the community taking a strength-based approach – *“we have to take ownership of where we are moving forward to”*.

Participants suggested that as communities become stronger they can in turn support governments and agencies to have a better understanding of trauma and then develop more community based programs that include culture and are culturally appropriate. This could include cultural activities, monthly cultural gatherings and bring ‘Culture of the Clarence’ back.

Addressing lateral violence was seen as critical to developing healing within communities and some practical ways this could be done were suggested. These included:

- Strategies to discourage and reduce gossiping and online abuse
- Engaging schools on anti-bullying programs and supports;
- Providing community education about alternative ways of speaking and behaving;
- Educating people on lateral violence and its effects and how to deal with it;
- Shifting conversations from ‘me’ versus ‘you’ to ‘we’; and
- Promoting positive culture.

The healing process was also recognised as needing more yarning and more forums, following on from the Clarence Valley Healing Forum.

Addressing the Healing and Service Needs of Young People

The participants suggested that young people needed to have an increased sense of belonging and purpose for “*our kids need to find their way back*”. Further, there was a recognition that strong communities are better able to take care of their young people and it is now time to begin to make a stand for young people:

We have to make a stance for our young people and our youth and look at our own family stories and support healing... our kids matter... and we really need to explore and find out the trauma young people are carrying and then address it

In making a stand for young people, participants felt that with support there could be increased parental responsibility and ownership. A family-based approach to healing would be important. Additionally, young people could be supported through mentoring with Men’s and Women’s programs that have a focus on youth participation and provide young people with role models, leaders and mentors.

Specific programs and supports that were needed to assist young people and identified during the Healing Forum were drug and alcohol education, healing programs in schools and education pathways developed with student and parent involvement. With regard to juvenile justice, participants suggested “*we need everyone at the table to work on better outcomes for young people at first point of contact through to post release*”.

Other ideas that were suggested during the Healing Forum were sports programs, activities that build trust and connections with police (e.g. similar to the midnight basketball program), a youth facility with resources and crisis accommodation for young people.

Finally, a key outcome proposed by participants at the Healing Forum was for the establishment of a Youth Advisory Committee for the Clarence Valley.

Strengthening Service Provision and Addressing Service Gaps

Participants reported that there were significant service gaps in the Clarence Valley for Aboriginal people. There is a need for improved services where organisations have an understanding of trauma and are culturally safe and culturally competent with community consultation and involvement. Services need to address institutional racism and discrimination – viewed by the participants as best addressed by having more Aboriginal people employed and managing services.

Better case-management is required and participants suggested face-to-face service coordination with family at the core. Further, better communication and coordination is needed for improved services with planning taking place with community organisations involvement ensuring services are not competing, duplicating or over-servicing. Indeed, participants reported the need for greater flexibility of funding for local initiatives and services that are flexible themselves and able to adapt to community needs.

Participants also suggested that community organisations could partner with schools to provide better supports to Aboriginal students and that generally, there needed to be more conversations between communities and government departments (beyond the Department of Education) about what supports can be provided for / to young people.

Commitments to Action

Towards the end of the Healing Forum, participants volunteered specific actions they would take when returning to their workplace and communities. These are summarised below.

Be aware of others healing	Healing myself	Being available	Be the change – model change	Acknowledge trauma
Give feedback and encourage change	Enhance the status of Elders	Listen and hear	Always do a welcome to country	Empower young people
Increase my knowledge	Persevere	Be sensitive	Take time	Ask the community how and when
Help services lobby for funding	Assist agencies to engage with communities	Be there to help and support	Collaborate	Role model for others
Celebrate young people's achievements	Build positive connections	Share information	Hold more yarning circles	Hold more healing forums



Next Steps for Consideration

Many solutions were discussed at the Healing Forum. The following outlines some possible actions for consideration to support the Grafton Aboriginal community achieve the next steps on their healing journey. They are drawn from input across the day.

1. **An overarching Clarence Valley Healing Strategy be developed**, led by local Elders and community leaders and supported by key partners and stakeholders. This may include:
 - Identification of opportunities for Elders and others to share their stories and promote understanding of the truth
 - Events to celebrate the strong Aboriginal culture of the Clarence Valley
 - Strategies to reduce and prevent family violence and lateral violence
 - Pathways to improve access to counselling and family support services.
 - Development of a targeted youth healing strategy
2. **A Youth Advisory Committee be established** in the Clarence Valley. Schedule of meetings, governance protocols and membership to be determined.
3. **A series of Youth Forums be established** where young people can bring their concerns and fully articulate their needs and supports.
4. As an outcome of the previous two recommendations, **youth programs be established** that support cultural connection, education about AOD use and misuse, and sport, health and wellbeing programs
5. **Additional Healing Forums are facilitated** to continue the conversations from the Clarence Valley Healing Forum
6. **Build stronger relationships with schools** to build trauma-informed, culturally safe schools that will improve student learning outcomes
7. There needs to be specific investment in **initiatives that focus on increased and better engagement of parents** in schools to support better outcomes for young people
8. **Work closely with service providers** to increase their cultural understanding and competency so that clients receive better levels of service
9. **Develop strategies that support Aboriginal young people to become job ready** and aim to increase Aboriginal workforce participation, especially within agencies that provide front line services to Aboriginal community members and families



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