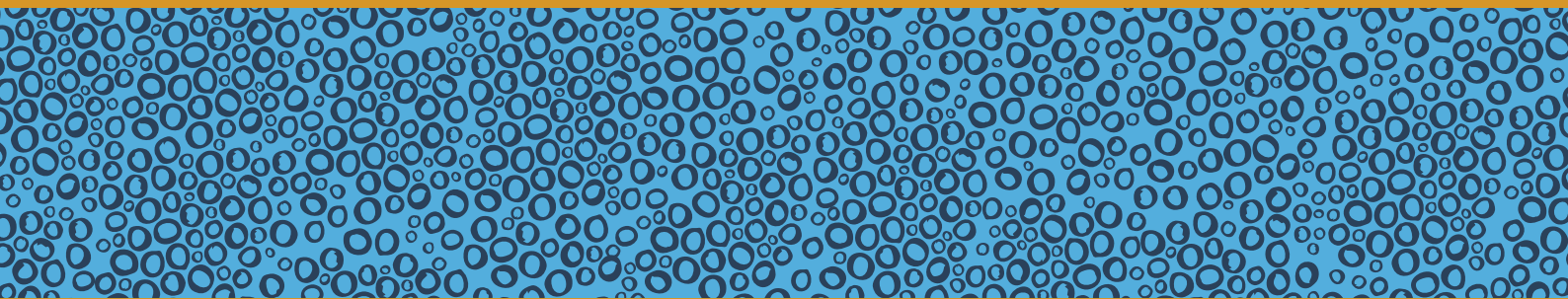


Riverina-Murray Regional Alliance

NSW OCHRE Healing Forum

June 2018





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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RMRA logo artwork: A logo competition was undertaken in September/ October 2015 with the winner being an Albury resident, Tamara Murray. RMRA wish to acknowledge and thank Tamara Murray, a proud Yorta Yorta/Barkinji woman who has ties to Wiradjuri country for providing the cover artwork – the snake (gadi) symbolising the river that sustains our communities, and represents the strength and unity of our communities. Nine circles represent the nine original community members of RMRA – this membership continues to grow.

Contents

About the NSW OCHRE Healing Forums	1
Riverina-Murray Regional Alliance Healing Forum in Context.....	2
Key Findings	5
Key Challenges in the RMRA Member Communities	5
Intergenerational Trauma Impacts.....	5
Community Challenges.....	6
Services that do not meet needs.....	7
Strategies to Support Trauma-Informed Healing.....	8
Strategies to Support Young People	10
Strategies to Strengthen Cultural Responsiveness and Cultural Safety.....	10
Strategies That Support Communities	10
Community and Government Working in Partnership	11
Actions Going Forward.....	14
Next Steps for Consideration	16

About the NSW OCHRE Healing Forums

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

This document presents the findings from the Riverina Murray Regional Alliance Healing Forum.



Riverina Murray Regional Alliance Healing Forum in Context

'We are here to discuss some of Australia's past, how we got here today. And how our future and the future of our children and grandchildren can be brighter... We want community to have purposeful and meaningful conversation with government and business, that respects our knowledge, that reaches agreement on ways to do business that support healing' (Opening Comments from Chairperson – RMRA)

The Riverina Murray Regional Alliance footprint is home to the Wiradjuri, Wamba Wamba/ Wemba Wemba, Perrepa Perrepa, Yorta Yorta, and Muthi Muthi nations. The Riverina Murray Regional Alliance Healing Forum was held from November 22nd to November 23rd 2017 at the Griffith Showground. There were 90 participants at the event, with representation from a range of communities and agencies including health service providers, Land Councils, training and education providers, child and family services, local council, government and non-government service providers.

The Healing Forum was facilitated by Benny Hodges, being of both Aboriginal (Waanji-Garrawa & Kaureg) and Torres Strait Islander heritage (Erub Bam Le'-Kul Gal Gal). Benny was engaged by The Healing Foundation following discussion with the planning group that recognised the importance of experienced, independent facilitation.

Aunty Judy Johnson gave a warm Welcome to Country in Wiradjuri language, with responses from representatives of other nations present on the day. Didgeridoo and dance by the Tirkandi Inaburra dancers also contributed to creating a culturally safe space for discussions to take place.

The Riverina Murray Regional Alliance (RMRA) hosted the Healing Forum. The RMRA commenced with community discussions in Wagga Wagga on 22nd August 2014 regarding the formation of a regional governance structure for Riverina Murray Aboriginal Communities:

'We see the establishment of the RMRA as an opportunity for our communities and government agencies to work together to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people of the Riverina Murray region' (RMRA Chair)

The RMRA aims to ensure each member community (Albury, Cumerghunja, Cootamundra, Deniliquin, Griffith, Hay, Leeton, Narrandera, Tumut and Wagga Wagga) have a genuine voice in determining how and what services are delivered in their communities. The RMRA also aims to increase the capacity of each community to make decisions about their future.

RMRA's vision is to align, unify and strengthen communities to ensure effective localised responses to identified service gaps and priorities. RMRA saw the Healing Forum as a way to build and strengthen the knowledge and capacity within communities and government to work in partnership.

RMRA is championing change for their communities and committed to utilising the evidence that emerged from their healing forum so the community's healing aspirations could be embedded in future planning for the region.

With this in mind, the Local Planning Committee identified two goals for the Healing Forum:

- A purposeful and meaningful conversation with government and business that respects Aboriginal community knowledge and reaches agreement on ways that agencies can support healing;
- Recognition of the prevalence and impacts of intergenerational trauma and the identification of solutions that community and services can adopt to support healing.

Ruth Davys, Chair of Riverina Murray Regional Alliance and the RMRA Healing Forum Local Planning Committee set the scene for healing in the Riverina Murray region. Across the two days of the Healing Forum, three Yarning Circles were facilitated by local community members and explored the following questions:

- **Yarning Circle 1** – How do we reinstate cultural ways of interacting and respect for each cultural group in the Riverina Murray?
- **Yarning Circle 2** – What are the impacts of intergenerational trauma in the Riverina Murray and what strategies can we adopt to support trauma-informed healing?
- **Yarning Circle 3** – How can we improve how community services and business work together to support healing in the Riverina Murray?



Importantly, participants at the Healing Forum determined a set of Healing Principles and Values that would *“guide how we will talk over the next few days”*. There were adhered to over the course of the Healing Forum and it was decided such principles and values should guide future conversations, collaborations and actions. The Riverina Murray Healing Principles and Values are:

- Listening to the community
- Everyone has a say
- Non-judgmental attitudes
- Respect for self and others
- Being comfortable / confident to speak
- Respecting Elders (past and present)
- Unified to work together
- Learning together and from each other
- Open to new ideas / ways
- Commitment, participation and accountability.

The following sections present the themes and findings from the RMRA Healing Forum.

All quotes in this report are from participants at the forum and were recorded verbatim on the day by scribes so as to ensure the report captured the voice of community.



Key Findings

'This Forum is a time for healing... just being here we can heal because we carry trauma and there is trauma in the room... it's a time to learn together if we are open'

Key Challenges in the Riverina Murray Regional Alliance member Communities

Intergenerational Trauma Impacts

While the Healing Forum largely focused on solutions and how community, government and NGOs could work together to build stronger communities and families, there were many challenges reported that were affecting families and communities across the RMRA footprint. These challenges were recognised as being the result of intergenerational trauma:

'We all know the impacts [of intergenerational trauma] as we struggle with them every day and the research has told the story about trauma and what it leads to'

'Everyone has trauma and the impacts are the same but they play differently for each person and we need to understand this'

Some of the impacts of intergenerational trauma reported at the Healing Forum (for the RMRA footprint) included alcohol and other drug use and misuse, homelessness as well as family violence:

'The impacts in the RMRA Footprint are drugs and alcohol addiction and it's killing our people'

'Intergenerational trauma has left us with lateral violence, shame and family violence... abuse'

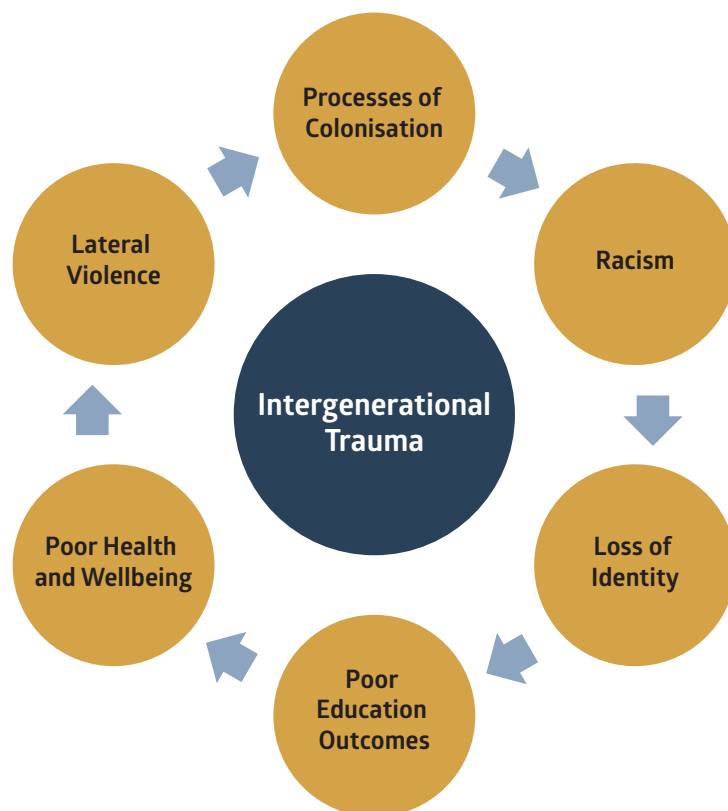
Further, anxiety and depression, mental health issues and suicide were reported as specific outcomes of intergenerational trauma for young people. In part this was reported by communities as amplified by poor education outcomes for young people:

'Intergenerational trauma means poor education outcomes'

'Our people are denied access to education and then we have poor self-worth and self-esteem'

The education system and schools were reported as being unsupportive of at best, and racist at worst of Aboriginal students that were carrying intergenerational trauma. There were too few role models and / or presence of Aboriginal people in schools. Further, community reported that *"a lack of identity and a loss of cultural identity"* increased *"shame and fear in our young people"* which added to young people's poor self-worth and self-esteem.

Diagram 1: Community members' explanation of how the cycle of intergenerational trauma impacts people in the RMRA footprint



Community Challenges

There was an acknowledgement that the (ongoing) processes of colonisation and current policy development and practices were causing community trauma and within these processes cultural knowledge and traditions had been lost. Participants felt that healing would require a reinstatement of cultural ways:

'We have lost the old ways and we need to find our way back. Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in this room has trauma... everyone has intergenerational trauma... we can't reinstate cultural ways without healing'

The loss of the “old ways” in community had been replaced by broken families, violence, young men who have lost their identity, loss of community power and agency where communities are not being listened to and with a loss of beliefs but a strong voice of trauma.

Specifically, there was a reported loss of respect for Elders and older members of the community and a feeling that there was little acknowledgment or support for them. There were too few services and given the size of the region, those that existed had limited reach.

The number of communities and the size of the region was consistently noted as a key challenge with too little recognition of the size of the region and the diversity of the communities:

'We are not one community and we need to be acknowledged as different from each other instead of all being lumped together as one'

There needs to be more involvement and engagement with communities since *"we have the solutions to the challenges we face"*.

The effects of intergenerational trauma were also reported as having broken families up and families and communities were viewed as fractured and therefore had limited voice in which to express their needs. Also, given the number of communities and the breadth of communities ensuring there is a representative voice from the region was reported by the community as challenging.

The community reported that lateral violence was a significant issue across the RMRA footprint:

'We need to stop bringing each other down...'

'Lateral violence within our own mob ... we need to mindful of others feelings stop the lateral violence and stop the tall poppy syndrome'

'We need to have more empathy for others and be proactive with each other'

Services that do not meet needs

The Healing Forum reported a number of challenges with regard to the delivery of services into communities and available services for families with specific needs:

'Services don't like getting out our way... We are so limited in resources with no transport, no services and broken spirits'

Further, participants reported that there was a general disconnection from services and *"if people aren't connected to the mob that run the services, they won't access them"*. Access was also reported as being effected by the ability of the services to meet and understand the needs of Aboriginal people – *"The services need to listen to Aboriginal people ... they don't listen though"*.

Communities also reported that *"a lack of service coordination means we have to keep repeating our stories and that is hard"* when what most participants suggested was needed was wrap around services catering for diverse family and community needs.

Generally, participants described how communities were rarely if ever involved in the design and delivery of the services they received. The solutions determined the need for greater voice and greater involvement of communities in the service they receive.

Strategies to Support Trauma-Informed Healing

At the base of all strategies suggested to support trauma-informed healing was the need to address intergenerational trauma through raising and documenting the “*true stories*” of communities and the impacts of colonisation:

‘We need to build true stories and record the lost stories and tell the truth about colonisation in this region’

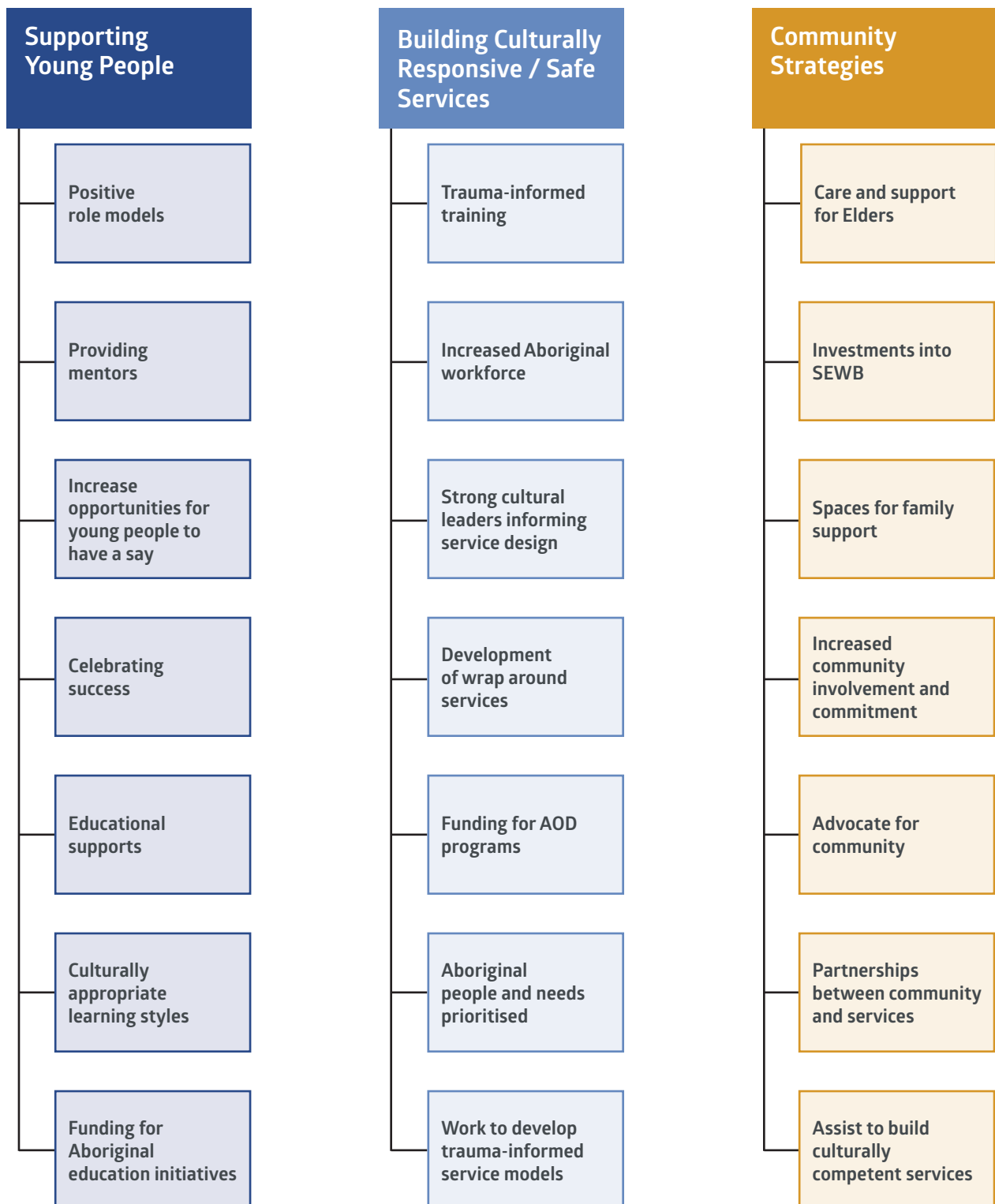
‘We need stories so we can stop the denial of our stories and stop covering up the real issues’

‘There are stories to tell and they need to be recorded before its too late and so they are not lost ... like everything else’

The strategies that were developed and described during the Healing Forum that support healing across the communities of RMRA were essentially across three main themes: Supporting young people; Building culturally responsive and safe services; and community strategies. These are described below and summarised in Diagram 1.



Diagram 1: Strategies identified by community to support trauma-informed healing



Strategies to Support Young People

Strategies identified to support young people included the identification and development of positive role models and mentors. This included but was not limited to Elders and older members of the communities. It was noted that there are young people who have completed Year 12 and then gone on to university and successful careers. These young people need to be celebrated, have their story told and become role models and mentors for others.

However, to ensure there is more success, a key strategy was to reinstate support staff in schools and consider the expansion and re-introduction of educational support programs (e.g. the Parental and Community Engagement Program (PACE)) and strengthen the presence of family counsellors. There also was reported need to acknowledge different types of learning and that curriculum be developed and tailored to such differences:

'We need an education that teaches our kids to be stronger and gives them survival skills... more supports in school can foster pride through education Having more family counsellors'

It was reported that the RMRA has a strong voice and could hold schools in the region and their respective principals accountable regarding the funding provided to support Aboriginal education initiatives and outcomes. The Healing Forum reported a need for investments to be made in the emotional and spiritual development of young people – through the use of Elders and community leaders as mentors.

Strategies to Strengthen Cultural Responsiveness and Cultural Safety

The Healing Forum reported a need for services and agencies to better engage with communities. Key strategies need to include increased opportunities for upskilling non-Aboriginal employees through trauma-informed training as well as increasing the number of Aboriginal people working in services.

Services need to work alongside strong cultural leaders to determine how to best provide wrap-around care for families. Additional funding was required to strengthen AOD services and specific Aboriginal focused rehabilitation programs in the RMRA footprint. The Healing Forum identified a crucial service gap being the lack of a detox / rehabilitation facility that works with families or communities or a specific place for mothers and children. For the more isolated communities in the region the service gaps were reported as being amplified.

Strategies that Support Communities

The Healing Forum reported that strategies that supported trauma-informed healing at the community level needed to begin with additional care and support for Elders – including visits *"to see how they are and see how they are going"*. Community representatives also suggested they could increase their community involvement and commitment and advocate more for the community to promote healing:

'We need to help the community to grow and break barriers and get move involved in community particularly in strengthening the voice of young people'

Trauma-informed healing strategies at the community level were reported as being grounded in the fact that *"firstly we must try heal our own communities and families"*. Families needed to heal and come back together – *"a restoration of families"* – and supports in place for families with a focus on family wellbeing. Further, healing needs to happen across generations:

'We need Aboriginal culture taught in our families ... and early learning centres ... we start the healing with our youngest people in the community and the process of reinstating cultural ways'

There is a need for safe places for men and women to meet and heal. Such spaces and places could also have services located there that provide family case management, trauma counselling, narrative therapy and healing through art, music and play. They would be places where healing takes place, that is, local meeting places in communities for family and community healing.

Community and Government Working in Partnership

In line with the aims of the RMRA, the Healing Forum identified as a key theme the need for government / service providers and communities to work together in genuine partnerships to build local strength-based, trauma-informed service models. The RMRA would lead this work and ensure *"we have ... the right community consultation process and engagement process in place"* where all agencies commit to the engagement process:

'... bringing together government agencies... they all need to be there ... police, FaCS, hospitals, schools... if they are not there then there can be divisions created'

The practice would be driven by a commitment from all partners to a process of self-determination and where government policies and practices are aligned to community goals and are *"congruent with our outcomes"*.

There would also be more sharing of information and data, whereby government processes would foster service integration rather than competition – which the Healing Forum reported as leading to the duplication of some services and gaps in others. The development of a Riverina Murray Community Healing and Services Directory was suggested a number of times as a means to *"avoid duplication and encourage collaboration"*.

In turn this would build possibilities for better funding agreements that could more readily address intergenerational trauma and target the areas of change the community identify:

'An intergenerational approach to funding is required to address intergenerational trauma and supported through collaboration between local, state, commonwealth and community'

'We need collaboration between state and commonwealth to agree with community outcomes and overcome confusion with multiple services delivering health in one community'

'Three to five years funding is not enough to see change and we lose continuity, when the funding changes all the time... we lose the good stuff and intelligence and community trust... Government should value the Aboriginal knowledge from our programs'

In working together, the Healing Forum described how partnerships and collaboration could build capacity for Aboriginal organisations mainstream services. Sharing of knowledge, skills and expertise would increase Aboriginal workforce capability and non-Aboriginal people working in services and agencies would have a better understanding of Aboriginal people, families and communities. This would strengthen the way agencies better respond to Aboriginal clients' needs – that is, enhanced cultural responsiveness and cultural safety for Aboriginal clients.

Collaborations and partnerships require trust based on open and honest communication with information freely shared within and across communities. The conversations at the Healing Forum were seen as one way to strengthen trust but conversations must result in or be based on actions:

'There will need to be more of these forums to ensure there is action as well as talk and that actions that are committed to are followed through'

Further, collaborations and partnerships require respectful engagement with agencies engaging in ways that are aligned with local community protocols:

'Government needs to better understand who represents what communities... don't just talk to one mob or one person but know and respect local community protocols. Agencies need to know, acknowledge and respect the fact that all Aboriginal communities are not the same'

'They [agencies] need to talk to everyone and think about gender, men's and women's business and about age and location. They need to work with each community not what they think is a regional approach'

Generally, there was an emphasis on the need for more participation from community in policy development processes that acknowledge and understand that disruption and intergenerational trauma not only exists in communities but pervades communities. With that, community members recognised the need for a unified voice while acknowledging the diversity of communities within the broader Riverina-Murray region. Knowing and telling local stories from each of these communities will emphasize the differences and diversity while highlighting a unified voice across communities. There needs to be clearer cultural protocols so agencies / service providers have a better understanding and recognition of representation, who to talk to and involve and manage the current tendency for only certain people to be consulted.

Across the conversations held during the Healing Forum, the elements required for healing of people and communities in the RMRA footprint were identified. These are summarised in Diagram 2 below.

Diagram 2: Critical healing elements identified by RMRA Healing forum participants



Actions Going Forward

As the Healing Forum came to an end, participants (community, government representatives and service providers) made commitments regarding the immediate actions they could / would take. These are presented in Diagram 4 below noting that more than one person may have committed to the action.

Diagram 4: Healing forum participants commitments to action



Beyond these actions, service-providers that attended the Healing Forum committed to raising Aboriginal issues within their departments and spheres of influence. Aboriginal Affairs NSW committed to ensuring that the appropriate level regional managers from government agencies would attend RMRA meetings to better engage and partner with the RMRA to progress healing priorities.

The Healing Forum also considered the need for a Riverina Murray Healing Group to be formed and leaders identified to guide the development and implementation of a Healing Strategy.

The priorities for action were discussed and as they reported to the Healing Forum, are included in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Priority actions identified by forum participants to support collaboration and healing

Priorities for Action
Family healing in places and spaces where grief and loss for the community / communities can be addressed
Tools and resources for family members to better support and be involved with family issues
Increased Aboriginal workforce capability and participation across services
Commitment from Government to meaningful engagement with communities that can hold service providers and agencies accountable
A Riverina Murray Service Directory so people know what is available and when and to avoid duplication of services and encourage collaboration
Ensure relationships with smaller communities are also prioritised and services are available.

Next Steps for Consideration

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

- The RMRA Health and Healing working group to oversee the development of an evidence-based healing strategy for the region that will:
 - » promote and celebrate local Aboriginal culture and the achievements of local Aboriginal people (across generations)
 - » seek commitment from local service to the implementation of training that supports the strengthening of trauma-informed practices in service delivery (in partnership the RMRA and communities)
 - » identify mechanisms to collaborate with local service providers to increase cultural responsiveness and cultural safety through trauma-informed practice
 - » encourage stakeholders in the region to increase their Aboriginal workforce capability and participation across the service sector
- Investigate the feasibility of establishing a family healing centre and identify the resources needed to support and sustain it
- Hold cultural camps for young people that build cultural pride, confidence and self-esteem.
- Develop a Riverina Murray Aboriginal Service Directory to ensure people are aware of the current services that can support healing and to support better coordination of services.
- RMRA to continue to leads the conversations and builds collaborative relationships to support healing across the region with government, service providers and other stakeholders with a priority focus on schools.



