

Three Rivers Regional Assembly

NSW OCHRE Healing Forum

June 2018





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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 Healing Forum hosted by the Three Rivers Regional Assembly (TRRA). The Local Planning Committee for the Healing Forum was drawn from TRRA members, who worked tirelessly with staff from The Healing Foundation and Aboriginal Affairs NSW to bring the Healing Forum together.



About the Three Rivers Regional Assembly

The role and responsibilities of the TRRA is to work towards ensuring Aboriginal communities have a real and genuine voice in negotiations/consultations in determining what services are being developed and implemented.

The TRRA as a collective authentic Aboriginal leadership role is to provide the highest standard of regional governance, through mutual accountability, advocating, supporting and strengthening local communities towards sustainable long-term partnerships. This will be achieved through strengthening the capacity of leaders and community members as a group, in negotiating and setting regional priorities.

There are 12 regions represented on the TRRA with delegates from Bathurst, Dubbo, Gilgandra, Mudgee, Narromine, Nyngan, Orange, Parkes, Peak Hill, Trangie, Warren and Wellington.¹

¹ Information sourced from <http://www.trra.org.au/>



Three Rivers Regional Assembly Healing Forum in Context

The TRRA Healing Forum incorporated cultural ceremony ensuring the Healing Forum was a culturally safe space for discussions to take place. We were welcomed to country in Wiradjuri language by Michael 'Micka' Newman from the Orange Local Aboriginal Land Council.

The Healing Forum was held from 14-15 March at the Orange Function Centre. There were 42 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, and government and non-government service providers.

In planning the TRRA Healing Forum, the Local Planning Committee identified the following goals:

- To develop a clear and shared understanding of the healing needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people residing within the Three Rivers geographical boundaries;
- To establish effective strategic partnerships between key agencies and service providers that will play a role in delivering initiatives targeted at the community's defined healing goals and priorities;
- To ensure that key government agencies consider the healing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the development and implementation of their key policies, programs and service delivery.

In order to meet the goals of the Healing Forum the Local Planning Committee developed a series of questions to be explored during three Yarning Circles. These were:

- **Yarning Circle 1**

- » What are the critical issues causing trauma for communities?
- » How do these issues impact of our communities?

- **Yarning Circle 2**

- » How can we strengthen awareness of trauma and its impact amongst key stakeholders and service providers?
- » How can we ensure that services are connected to communities to build their awareness?
- » How do we measure if services are trauma informed?

- **Yarning Circle 3**

- » What are the priority solutions to support healing for communities in the TRRA region?

The Yarning Circles were facilitated by representatives from Aboriginal Affairs NSW and The Healing Foundation to allow maximum participation from community members. Conversations were scribed for reporting back to the broader group. These conversations for the basis of the findings presented in this report.

Key Findings

We are survivors and by that I mean we have life-long trauma as people were removed and now re moved from families and then we are raising our grandchildren. We have trauma memories of abuse and then people in goals with trauma because behaviours are not understood

Trauma Issues and Impacts

There were a number of issues at the Healing Forum that were consistent across communities within the TRRA footprint. Many of these related to trauma – past and present – and were reported by communities as having their effects in past and present government policies.

Across communities it was identified that there is a lack of understanding of trauma and how it manifests in a range of negative outcomes for Aboriginal peoples – *“people don’t know they are traumatised or why they are being traumatised”*.

Many felt that trauma was a result of colonisation but participants strongly suggested that trauma is also not a thing of the past – *“it is here and now and happening to everyone but not in the same way”*.

Current government policies were identified as retriggering old trauma and producing new trauma. This was loaded onto the trauma of historical practices. Community reported policies that lead to the removal of children and high rates of incarceration have led to broken and disconnected families:

Kids are being removed at a great rate and this is causing massive trauma and people are fearing another Stolen Generation. The lack of respect for clients and lack of accountability for agencies means government has the power but there is no accountability back to the communities

The lack of understanding and trauma awareness was also reported in the context of institutionalised racism. Participants talked about ignorance, overt and systemic stereotyping and out of date attitudes causing further anxiety and trauma. Such racism was reported as occurring in systems and institutions. These included schools and education institutions, work places and agencies delivering services. Specific examples included medical/hospital services where racism and stereotyping impacted on communication and treatment which in turn had specific impacts on young mums and dads seeking support. Racism and lack of cultural competency (e.g. shaming offenders and disclosing private information) in the corrections and juvenile justice system also had further negative impacts. Government policies and practices and mainstream environments were also reported as being generally racist. According to community members, racism leads to trauma and a loss of identity and belonging as well as *“loss of connection to culture and land”*.

Loss was a significant theme at the Healing Forum, including the loss of families and Elders who have passed. Agencies were reported as having a poor understanding of this kind of cultural loss:

Loss of Elders leaves a big gap in the family and people do not cope with loss but there is an associated lack of understanding of Aboriginal loss and services do not take this into account when they are with clients

Across the Healing Forum, there was also a reported loss of trust between government and communities. Participants reported the need to re-establish trust over time:

We can't trust the government at the moment and trust takes time to build. It has to be done alongside the community and with the community... when you feel government contributes to the issues you face it's hard to trust them... something has started here though... maybe

Participants identified that many of the issues they faced were clearly the result of trauma. These included high rates of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) for young people and this is seen as a significant and increasing problem. Further, in communities there are high rates of young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) and increased homelessness (particularly for young people and women) as well as unrecognized and undiagnosed mental health problems. Community members described how they were greatly anxious about and for their young people.

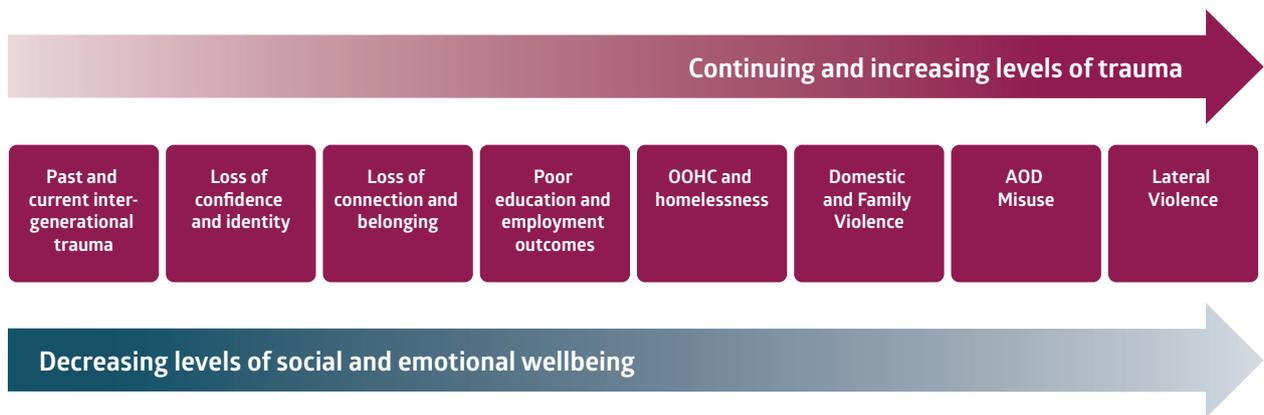
Added to this was a reported poor transition for children and young people to and from care. Poor education and employment outcomes for young people was a key concern for community members who felt young people were not able to engage fully in education and employment opportunities. Levels of literacy and numeracy were reported as low and affecting educational outcomes. This was deemed the result of trauma and the lack of trauma awareness in the education system and the labour market. Lastly, lateral violence in communities was described as substantial and destructive:

Lateral violence is causing more trauma – we need to own and address that, white fellas can't address it

In summary, participants at the Healing Forum were clear that trauma is the base of the complex issues communities are facing. The relationship of trauma to issues and health and wellbeing was reported as outlined in Diagram 1. Trauma leads to loss and poor social and emotional wellbeing outcomes and the diagram demonstrates the need for trauma-informed practices if needs and issues are to be adequately addressed.²

² Note this construction was developed in one of the Yarning Circles and reflected in each of the others. The identified links have been 'modelled' into this diagram being reflective of the conversations

Diagram 1: Communities' view of the relationship of trauma to community impacts



Unresolved trauma was seen by forum participants as the underlying base of the issues communities faced. The lack of supports and programs to address such issues (especially in the more regional and isolated communities) was also reported as significant and a further cause of trauma. Participants described the lack of men's and women's support groups, mental health services and AOD services as a poor response to trauma but also a source of trauma.

Further, participants described how the lack of a trauma informed service system and inability to access services can re-traumatise. Participants also felt that the lack of Aboriginal service providers and poor Aboriginal input (from the communities) into policy development was compounding trauma.

Solutions to Trauma – Healing Communities

It [the Healing Forum] was fantastic as we shared our trauma with non-Indigenous people and I think it opened their eyes... we should keep doing that [share our trauma]

The collective in the room was great... the trauma part was good as I did not know there were so many of us... the sad thing is that all communities face trauma and we have a long way to go

The conversations held had a specific focus on what community-based solutions might be established to support healing in communities. These are set out under three themes as they emerged from the Healing Forum.

Diagram 2: Community solutions to improve healing in communities



Community, Culture and Identity

It was noted that there is a need to think more deeply about trauma, what it is and how it affects people and communities. There was agreement that the Healing Forum itself was one way that awareness of trauma was being raised however, much more needed to occur.

As a starting point participants suggested that stories and story-telling need to be introduced in a way that makes Aboriginal culture and community life understood. One suggestion was for Aboriginal culture and trauma awareness to be incorporated into cultural days, events and festivals as well as driving awareness through national days:

Telling stories of Aboriginal culture in the region and the impact of Stolen Generations in communities. The truth needs to be told and truth-telling is the only way to build awareness of trauma... we need some myth-busting!

Truth-telling was described as a means to building an awareness of the existence and reasons for trauma – alongside being part of a healing process. Participants suggested there as a need to discuss the issues of trauma in safe spaces and places “*as it’s still a taboo subject*”.

Communities within the TRRA footprint suggested that there is a need for local healing centres where people can come and share stories and heal. They were also reported as places where there can be support for “*our existing leaders to avoid burnout and where we can invest in new leaders to alleviate pressure*” – a place to heal the healers.

Participants suggested healing centres would be sensitive to the fact that some communities, families and individuals are further along their healing journey than others. Healing Centres were said to be places where people build confidence, address loss and can reconnect to culture.

Participants reported that healing can also take place in schools and through community events where stories are shared and understanding of Aboriginal culture for non-Aboriginal people is built.

Further, more respectful engagement of community people and genuine interaction and engagement with families and Aboriginal people is how healing solutions will emerge. Communities also acknowledged that they had strengths and had survived and continue to survive trauma. From this place of strength communities can build healing strategies on their own terms and connect to each other and their culture.

Education, Training and Employment

Healing solutions were reported as also needing to focus on education, training and employment. Schools need to be safe places for students and curricula needs to include “*stories of truth*” to raise trauma-awareness:

Principals say they’re trained but we need more trauma awareness. Schools don’t understand why kids behave the way they do and we need to involve the Elders

Accordingly, communities strongly suggested that story-telling in schools should be done by Elders who are paid to go into schools and tell their stories. Participants suggested this process needs to

be facilitated by the Department of Education who need to “*first know the impact of colonisation and that there is a repeat of stolen generations ... taking children reminds Elders of their own child removal*”.

Further, communities reported there needs to be better transitions and pathways for young people into employment – either from school, OOHHC or juvenile justice. This process needs to be one of healing for young people from their trauma. Participants suggested the employers and employment agencies need to be more responsive to what Aboriginal people want to support healing.

Finally, there needs to be increased training for Aboriginal people to work in areas where trauma exists and healing is needed:

We need trained Aboriginal workers in programs... like our youth workers are unskilled ... that's [skilled Aboriginal people providing services as] the way to healing. There's no opportunities for workers to get skilled

Enhanced Service Delivery

At the service level, participants maintained that the employment of specialized trauma workers who are culturally appropriate was the key. Communities suggested there should be mandatory trauma awareness training and trauma-informed policies within services – “*this needs leadership from the hierarchy to filter down to frontline workers including supporting staff to be encouraged to be trained*”. Such training would be for non-Aboriginal staff “*with Elders telling the story of trauma and how colonisation hurt our people ... but ensure people know trauma is not a thing of the past*”.

Participants further noted that trauma awareness should start with education in schools and the stories that need to be told in schools. Teachers should be trained to be trauma-aware in order to have attitudes that support culture and connection and that will build attendance and respect.

Communities suggested that institutions and agencies providing services need to change focus and prioritise clients from a base that they have trauma. Communities want to challenge the service system to build their understanding of trauma and promote safe(r) conversations. According to participants, as cultural competency is built, it could be benchmarked to showcase good practice of trauma-informed practice (see section below). Participants said that when trust and confidence grows, mutual respect can be built to enable communities to co-design policies and programs.

It was noted that services need to be held accountable and understand how even the turnover of staff can be traumatic for clients. Participants reported the need for tertiary training / qualifications / courses to include trauma-training so those coming out of tertiary education (e.g. doctors, clinicians and teachers) are trauma-aware.

The Healing Forum reported that healing solutions will best emerge and be established when services “*deliver on promises, deliver outcomes and follow up*” and “*when government and non-government services to listen as a starting point!*”. There was an acknowledged need to ensure safe environments be established to facilitate better engagement between services and communities.

Importantly, communities suggested trauma would be less likely and healing would be enhanced if there was a shift from relying on government solutions to a genuine interest in community solutions. Community-based solutions were then reported as being able to respond to particular localised community needs as *“one size fits all won't work as communities need flexibility and solutions need to recognise community dynamics”*.

Increasing local services, including reliable and sustained services (rather than episodic and irregular) outreach services to more isolated communities beyond Dubbo and other larger service centres was deemed important, as was funding to Aboriginal organisations and building their capability. As previously noted, an important healing solution was engaging a trauma – informed specialist worker within each community or region where communities of practice could be developed.

The Healing Forum provided a mechanism for services / agencies and communities to come together. This was reported by participants as an important initiative. When discussing how services and communities could be better connected more opportunities to come together was seen as important:

We need to get to know each other. We come to tell our stories and government comes to talk but also to listen... but will they hear it differently from how they have heard us before? Will they listen or will their embedded racism get in the way? It does not need to be overly structured. We need to gain confidence to be connected to each other

There was a call for getting to know each other through increased networking, where mutual respect could be built and where local cultural knowledge was prioritised. This was reported as being enabled through community events and connection to country activities that are funded and attended by government agency representatives.

Connection between services and community was deemed to be important but connection between the services themselves was a key focus of conversations during the Healing Forum. Participants suggested there was a need for coordination and integration of services and to build interagency approaches to care. This would require information sharing (noting privacy issues would need to be managed) to improve communication between services when families were accessing multiple services or referrals were being made. Such service coordination and integration was reported as requiring client permission for service providers to work together for the best outcome for the client.

Further, there was a suggestion that outreach services be introduced / increased – *“take the services to the people”*. This could include ‘Wellbeing Expos’ in communities as well as community friendly events where agencies can promote the use of services and facilities. All of this was said to require a less competitive service system.

Finally, in terms of services and communities having increased connection to each other, services would need to understand and acknowledge cultural boundaries – *“different protocols are needed for different communities since cultural boundaries do not align with Shire/LGA boundaries”*. Overall, participants suggested that for services and communities to be connected time needs to be taken to get to know each other through both formal and informal mechanisms.

Measuring the Degree to Which Services are Trauma-informed

Having established that there was a requirement for services to be more trauma-informed, conversations turned to how services and communities could measure the degree to which services achieve this. The suggested measures are included in Table 1 on page 12.

Participants suggested that a Cultural Framework based on community input could be developed to report the levels to which services are trauma-informed. Further, participants suggested a formal accreditation of services as being ‘trauma informed’ could be established as a means to ensuring services are accountable to community not funders.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers Association framework for measuring wellbeing was noted as an example that TRAA could use to develop its own framework and establish a set of key indicators of wellbeing.

Table 1: Community and service provider suggestions for measuring trauma-informed practice

Organisational Measures	Community Measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Records of increased numbers of Aboriginal people accessing the services provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More community members are accessing the services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retention and referral rates of Aboriginal clients are reported to be increasing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communities view the service as being culturally competent and culturally safe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Feedback Survey measuring satisfaction levels of service delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community reports services reflect and is supportive of community needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Client feedback (case studies) of improved outcomes for Aboriginal people and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health and SEWB are improving against a set of agreed measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meetings, consultations and communication with Aboriginal communities are taking place and recorded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is evidence of communities making referrals for the service to other family and / or community members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transparent governance and reporting of outcomes to Aboriginal stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community reports having meaningful engagement with the services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trauma-informed training is available and numbers of staff undertaking trauma-informed training are recorded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community feels they are contributing to policy development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outcomes are measured alongside outputs 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policies around respect for Aboriginal cultural protocols are in place 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policies and procedures are evidence-based and informed by Aboriginal communities / organisations 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is demonstrated evidence of a commitment to self-determination and co-design 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is evidence of collaboration and partnerships with Aboriginal communities / organisations 	

Some Next Steps Being Taken

During the Three Rivers Healing Forum, participants were encouraged to reflect on the conversations and consider actions they could take that would support the findings from the forum. These included the following.

“Actions I will take as a result of being at the Three Rivers Healing Forum”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring our own agency is trauma informed through what we've learned at TRRA and all other forums
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being aware that trauma affects Aboriginal staff in our own agency and being mindful of how staff feel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The true lack of services that are available and lack of black fella's in those services and to make those organisations accountable.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how agencies are using a trauma informed framework to make their decisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay well myself so I am strong to help others on their healing journey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging staff to undertake more frequent and robust consultations with family, elders, and Aboriginal staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up via TRRA and LALC to support training education in cultural awareness training to include trauma modules
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nominate community representatives to undertake trauma awareness vicarious training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like to be able to get involved in my community to try and instill confidence where it is needed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work on identifying and showcasing examples of good trauma informed practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep listening so I understand trauma
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More frequent consultation with the local Aboriginal communities and extended families of the communities I work in, alongside trauma informed practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening the healing workplace, providing more training materials and support the communities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue educating by letting people know about intergenerational trauma in the Aboriginal community

“Actions I will take as a result of being at the Three Rivers Healing Forum”

- Ensure our service/caseworkers are trauma informed and deliver the programs in a culturally appropriate way
- Constant reminding that trauma exists and have frameworks created.
- Working together better networking within our community and services
- Be a part of training and awareness programs and understanding culture to appropriately be able to support clients/education
- Hold community yarning circles in culturally safe places, inform whole community about trauma and look at delivering a healing program, regarding trauma
- Advocate and network with local service providers and give guidance on what Aboriginal people are saying and facing on healing and trauma
- I will go back to my community and utilise groups/meetings to remind workers/services trauma exist and to keep in mind to practice trauma informed care
- Make sure voices from yarning circles are fed into the development of policy on health/trauma informed
- Yarning circles in the workplace with deeper understanding of the context of our work based on the forum
- In my work, via recommendations to government, emphasis trauma training and awareness for service providers
- Undertake further trauma training so I can raise awareness in my community and help others to heal
- Keep raising the awareness of trauma and the need for healing in our communities by influencing the government sector
- Changing the healing agenda – Spread the word
- Work to support our community and hopefully get some training for some people in the community
- Continue to do what we are already doing, building better relationship with agencies and schools with a focus to identify those suffering trauma by listening to community.

Next Steps for Consideration

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

1. **Support communities within the TRRA footprint** to hold local healing forums to continue the healing conversations and raise awareness of the impacts of trauma locally.
2. **Begin the process of developing a Three Rivers Trauma-Awareness Strategy** to:
 - » increase trauma-awareness and trauma informed practice among service providers within the TRRA footprint
 - » continue to build awareness of trauma and strategies to prevent vicarious trauma for members of TRRA and local healing leaders within the TRRA footprint
 - » promote opportunities for Elders to share and document their stories in schools and other places as a means of supporting community members to understand their own trauma
3. **Establish opportunities for communities to meet / engage formally and informally** with government and non-government agencies to advance the Healing Forum conversations. The aim should be to further develop / co-design community healing solutions and how a healing lens can be embedded in government policy and practice.
4. **Begin work on a Trauma-Informed Practice Measurement Framework** (or similar) that assists organisations to develop trauma-informed practices and report to communities' improvements and success.
5. **Record and document all current programs and services** supporting Aboriginal people, families and communities from across the region and identify service gaps and how service deficits in each community can be addressed.
6. **Develop a strategy to build consistent and accessible service support** for people who live outside of Dubbo and other larger communities with a service infrastructure. A strategy to provide transport to essential services is a priority while support should be sought for enhanced local service infrastructure in communities within the TRRA footprint in the longer term.



