

# HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People



## Our Healing Our Way

Alice Springs Healing Forum Report May 2012





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## Contents

Introduction	3
Who we are	4
Background	6
The forum	7
Key messages	8
Recommendations	13
Healing Foundation response	14

“Our approach to healing in our nation is like global warming – it is up to all of us to contribute to the solutions for healing our nation.”

Forum Participant

## Introduction

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation’s first healing forum, **Our Healing Our Way**, was held in Alice Springs on 25 October 2011.

More than 150 people from Aboriginal organisations and communities, government and non-government agencies and local businesses attended. Among them were 110 Alice Springs community members and 30 representatives from business, government and non-government organisations working in Alice Springs and surrounding areas.

The forum was an opportunity for representatives of the Central Australian Aboriginal community to define healing, discuss their healing needs, share information about healing work within the community and identify the way forward.

Participants identified the causes of disharmony in the community, articulated healing needs and aspirations and suggested ways to restore the balance.

### This report contains:

- Key messages
- Recommendations
- Healing Foundation response



## Who we are

Following the Apology to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in 2008, \$26.6 million was provided in the 2009–10 budget to establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing foundation to address the profound legacy of pain and hurt in people's lives left by past government policies.

From May to August 2009, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people around Australia were consulted on the structure and role of such a body, and on 30 October 2009 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation was established as a national independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation.

The Healing Foundation is governed by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board, whose members have strong connections to community and provide a dynamic mix of experience. It includes members of the Stolen Generations and people working in the areas of youth affairs, health, justice, healing and trauma.

The Healing Foundation is improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by:

- Funding healing programs
- Documenting the importance of culturally strong healing programs through research and evaluation
- building the capacity of communities and workers to deal with trauma through training and education



## Our priorities

Our priorities were shaped by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community healing program representatives from throughout Australia at the first national healing gathering, Let's Talk Healing, in June 2010.

These priorities include:

- Defining what healing means to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Acknowledging the intergenerational impact of trauma on families and communities
- Developing links between Indigenous and non-Indigenous healing models
- Working with young people to build strong spirits and connections to culture

- Supporting Stolen Generations survivors
- Developing programs relevant to men and boys
- Building on the work women have done to unite and heal families and communities

“We have the opportunity to put down all our ideas and develop the idea that we need to do things together. No one else is going to do it for us. They can support us, but we, here, are the only people that can do it.”

## Background

Of the 28,000 people living in Alice Springs, about 7,000 identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Extreme inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is evident on a number of levels. Alice Springs has a large transient population, as it is the central health and economic district for over 100 remote Aboriginal communities. It has over 22 identified town camp communities and a high homeless population. As Alice Springs is the major service centre for the region, the Aboriginal population changes as people travel into and out of Alice to access services.

There are marked differences in income between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. For instance, in the latest available census data, 2006, the average weekly income for Aboriginal people in the Alice was \$248 compared with \$725 for non-Aboriginal people. The average household size in the Alice

at the same time was 3.4 people per Aboriginal residence compared with 2.5 people per non-Aboriginal residence. Similarly, unemployment for Aboriginal people was 10.1 per cent and for non-Aboriginal people was 1.7 per cent.

Significant social and economic inequality results in poorer health among Aboriginal people. We also know that Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory experience extreme rates of violence and trauma and that abuse of alcohol and other drugs is often implicated in family violence and child neglect.



## The forum

The purpose of the Alice Springs healing forum was to hear and document the healing needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal community so as to build the story of healing in Central Australia. More than 150 people attended the forum. The majority of participants were Aboriginal community members.

Forum participants examined two key questions:

1. What are the issues causing disharmony and imbalance within the community?
2. What will it take to restore balance within the community?

The forum highlighted the importance of healing for the community and showcased local healing work to state and federal government agencies and mainstream organisations. It was an opportunity to develop linkages between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations engaged in healing work and between these organisations and mainstream and government agencies.

At the forum the Healing Foundation had the opportunity to engage with the Central Australian community, including members from the Pitjantjatjara Lands and Santa Teresa. By hearing and documenting the story of healing, the Healing Foundation ensures that community aspirations genuinely inform our healing work at the national level. The Healing Foundation is planning to hold up to 4 forums per year in selected communities across Australia. The forums are a means to assist communities to identify their healing goals and support them on their healing journey. Information gained at the forums will enable the Healing Foundation to ensure we have the right processes to achieve this.



## Key messages

Forum participants formed talking circles to discuss the two key questions and solutions for their healing. The key messages from these discussions are outlined below. Figures 1 and 2 give a breakdown of participants' responses.

### What are the issues causing disharmony and imbalance in our community?

#### 1. Domestic and family violence

Community members said domestic and family violence was a key problem, causing many complexities for their families and creating a lot of concern for their children.

Domestic and family violence continues to have far reaching consequences across the Northern Territory. The latest AIHW statistics show what a significant problem it is. Indigenous women in the Northern Territory are 82 times more likely to present at hospital for assault than non-Indigenous women. Dangerous assault is at the top end of the domestic and family violence scale, so from this statistic we can also presume that children and their families are daily battling with violence in their lives. We also know that violence is fuelled by alcohol and drug use, overcrowding, poverty, stress and lack of appropriate support.

Forum participants felt that many families are unable to access appropriate help because agencies struggled to adopt an Aboriginal world view in their response.

#### 2. Grog and drugs

Alcohol and drug abuse in Alice Springs continues to pose a significant problem. Many people have come into Alice from dry communities and are finding the easy availability of alcohol difficult to deal with. Forum attendees discussed the hopelessness many of their people felt, saying they then turned to alcohol and drugs as a solution. This was now exacerbating many issues, such as domestic and family violence and increasing rates of contact with the police and justice system and was highlighted as an area of ongoing concern.

#### 3. Dislocation—denial of history and loss of land

The impacts of colonisation were widely discussed at the forum. People talked about the loss of connection to country and the loss of languages and traditional knowledge. They said the grief that communities felt over these losses had not been attended to. Many community members felt that family structures and social hierarchies had broken down as a result, which was evident in the increased violence and drug and alcohol abuse in their communities.

#### 4. Suicide

Suicide continues to be a prevalent problem for communities and government in the Northern Territory. The recent Northern Territory parliamentary inquiry into youth suicide in the NT has heard of the ongoing struggle culminating in 2009, 11 deaths of 15 to 24 year olds determined to be suicide. In the period 2002-06, the suicide rate of 15 to 24 year olds was over twice that of other Australian jurisdictions.

Many families and communities at the forum were struggling to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of their people. The failure of the mental health system to address the problem was of great concern.

#### 5. Lateral violence and family conflict

There was much discussion across communities about the emergence of lateral violence. The Alice Springs community talked about the distress it was causing. 'Lateral violence happens when people who are both victims of a situation of dominance, in fact turn on each other rather than confront the system that oppresses them both. Lateral violence occurs when oppressed groups/individuals internalize feelings such as anger and rage, and manifest their feelings through behaviours such as gossip, jealousy, putdowns and blaming.' Community members identified that more work was needed in this area to restore harmony in their families and communities.

#### 6. Trauma, loss and grief

Bringing them home, the 1997 report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, concluded that the poor outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection and out-of-home care were in part because of:

- the legacy of past policies of forced removal and cultural assimilation
- intergenerational effects of forced removals
- cultural differences in child-rearing practices.

Historical and ongoing dispossession, marginalisation and racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have led to high levels of unresolved trauma and grief among Australian Indigenous people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Alice Springs has been significantly affected by the Stolen Generations. Many children were interned at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station from around the Northern Territory and then taken to missions across the Territory and interstate. Many of these adults now live in Alice and surrounds. They are still finding it difficult to come home to families and communities who do not speak their language and where they struggle to belong. Forum participants felt this had had a very significant impact on the town, though it had received little attention.

### 7. Systemic racism

Community members felt that racism was becoming more entrenched in their town and the divide between Aboriginal people and white people was widening. They said that often racism was difficult to identify but spoke of not feeling welcome in their town. They said that policies often led to Aboriginal people feeling increased shame and receiving differing treatment to non-Aboriginal people. The implementation of the use of the basics card to purchase groceries and other goods was given as an example of this.

### 8. Living between two cultures and loss of identity

Participants reported that they often felt a widening divide between the life they were living and their cultural and traditional ways. They said it had become more complicated to manage their obligations within the town of Alice Springs. Participants felt that they were being pressured by the many systemic interventions in their lives to live more like non-Indigenous people and there was no consideration of the cultural impact this would have on them.

## What will it take to restore balance in the community?

### 1. Reconnection with country

Participants spoke about access to bush medicine, bush tucker and the importance of the land as a healer. Many said that reclaiming ancient wisdom that has helped Aboriginal people deal with trauma over many centuries is essential to assisting families and communities in these modern times. Land, they said, was a means to care for both the spirit and the body.

### 2. Building cultural strength

Maintaining cultural law and building cultural strength through ceremony, song, dance, language, beliefs and values would enable families to create healthy identities and a sense of belonging. This would in turn bring many communities back into harmony.

### 3. Reconciliation

Participants recognised that reconciliation can only occur where there is a true acceptance of our history, including the impact of the Stolen Generations. Community members saw repairing and healing the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as central to finding a way forward for the community of Alice Springs and our nation.

### 4. Holistic programs

Programs need to focus on the whole community and not be split between services for men, women, mothers, children and young people, because this approach is not congruent with how Aboriginal society operates. As one participant said: 'Somewhere along the line the division between men's, women's and youth programs has to close up. We need to move towards family programs.'

### 5. Strengthening our men

Many participants observed that men in their communities are struggling to find their role within the community. Colonisation and subsequent policies have displaced the roles that men have traditionally played. Strengthening the role of men is critical to growing strong families and communities. As some young men noted, 'Strong man makes family strong.'

### 6. Growing our children strong

Providing good role models and strengthening families was seen as essential, including in addressing violence and drug and alcohol problems. However, participants felt it was important that this occurred within a holistic framework of healing and was focused on a whole-of-family response. Growing our children strong will also require

greater connection to our Elders. Passing on our wisdom to our children will build their cultural identity.

### 7. Genuine consultation

Participants felt that identifying the right solutions takes time, deep listening and engagement and that many modern processes do not enable this.

### 8. Strengthening the healers

Taking care of those providing healing and support to our communities is essential. Many of our people have dual roles and can be overburdened by the pain and distress of those they are required to care for. Whilst supporting their communities, Aboriginal staff and healers are called upon to provide support to children, young people and Elders in their family structures after work hours.



Figure 1: Views on issues causing disharmony and imbalance

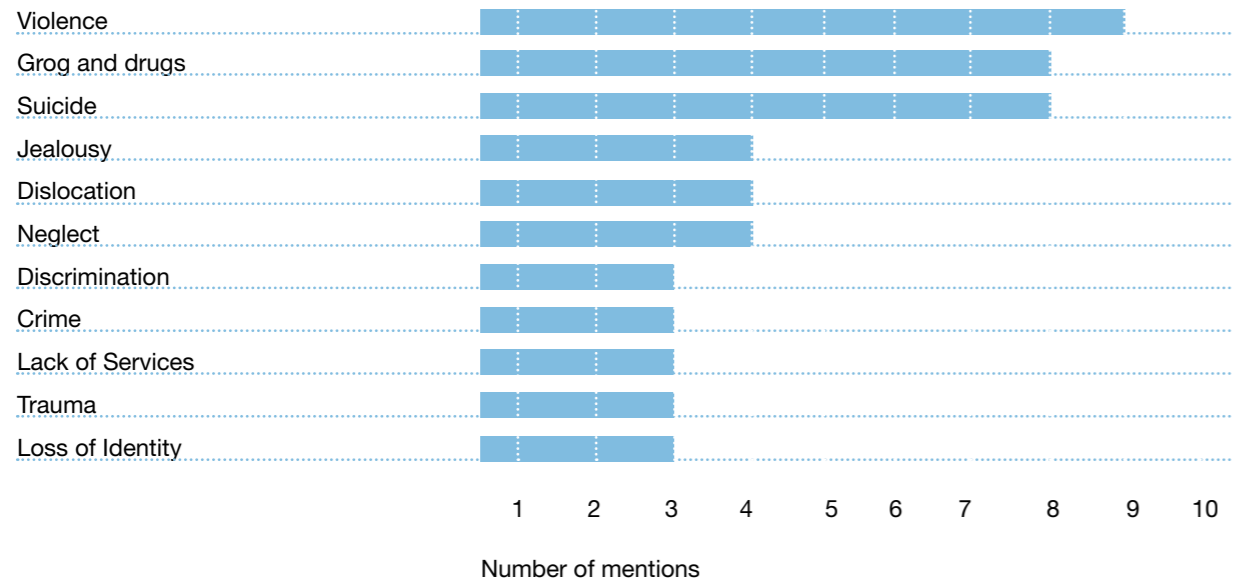
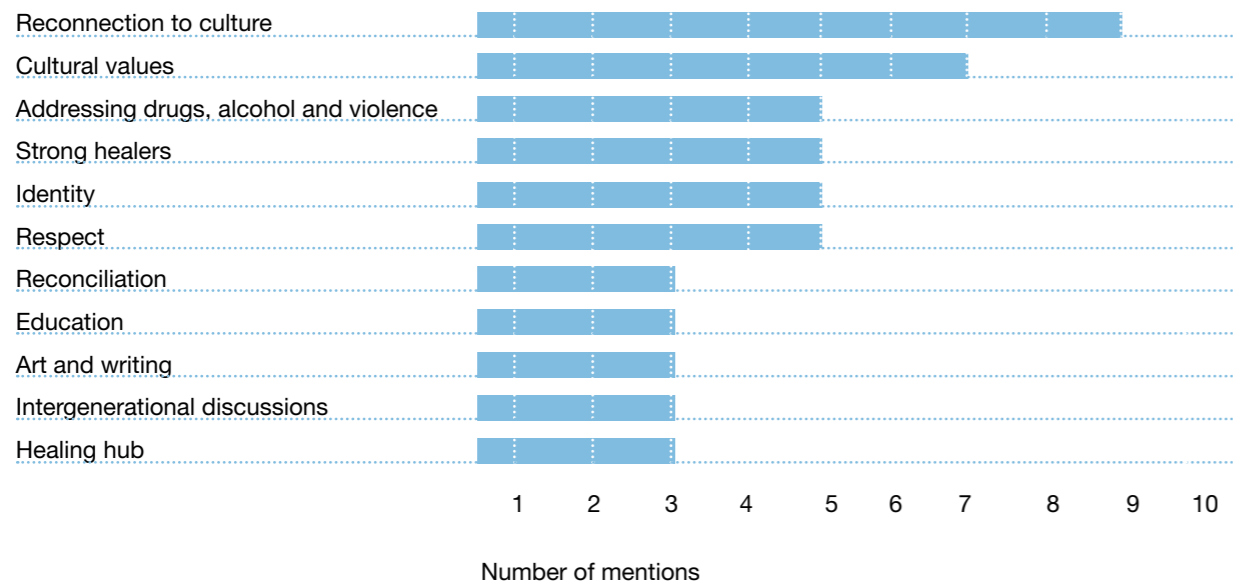


Figure 2: Views on restoring the balance



## Recommendations

The forum made the following recommendations to assist the Alice Springs community in meeting their healing goals.

### Integrated healing services—a ‘healing hub’ for Alice Springs

Within the talking circles, three separate groups independently suggested an integrated ‘hub’ for healing services. During whole group feedback, the other participants showed great support for this concept, and the idea was discussed at some length among the whole group.

The group saw a healing hub as an integrated interagency service that would bring a range of relevant services to one physical location. The idea was that existing agencies and services—for example, the Alice Springs Hospital, the Drug and Alcohol Services Association (DASA), Centrelink, mental health services, justice services and housing services—would base a staff member or contact person at the hub. That person would have a deeper engagement with the services that were available and could refer people to the service that best suited their particular needs.

In addition to providing access to existing services, the healing hub would have specialised healing services that focused on individual and community wellbeing. These would include mentoring programs and yarning circles. They would support people in reconnecting with and returning to country. The healing hub would provide a safe place for community members to meet and connect. It would promote cultural knowledge, practices and beliefs and provide opportunities for learning within both Western and Aboriginal world views. The healing hub would be a suitable place for many language groups to work together to heal the Central Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

A healing hub would be a culturally strong, culturally driven solution to many of the complex loss and grief issues that communities have. Participants strongly recommended that traditional healing methodologies be part of the model.



### Funding for the development of more healing programs

Additional funding is required to develop and deliver more healing programs. This could be achieved partly by realigning current funding to make service delivery more holistic and to support programs in making healing a central part of their work.

The call for a healing hub also points to the need for current programs to collaborate on addressing the issues highlighted in this report. In particular, men's, women's, parents' and children's services need to adopt a more holistic service delivery model.

### Development of traditional healing models

Traditional healing methodologies are essential to growing the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. To date there has been very little emphasis on the development to this work and the important place it has in healing our people. Critical investment is required to ensure that this knowledge system is grown and developed and that its role and place in our people's lives is preserved for future generations.



## Healing Foundation response

The Healing Foundation recognises the work of the Australian and Northern Territory governments in addressing many of the issues of disharmony identified in this report. This includes significant investment in a number of strategic areas, including housing, alcohol and drug treatment services and family support.

Our hope is that the material in this report will continue to assist policy development that meets the aspirations of Aboriginal people in Alice Springs and surrounds.

### Funding for healing work

The Healing Foundation currently funds five projects within Alice Springs alone. While much of the work has resulted in significant development in areas of traditional healing, in particular men's healing, these projects will require long-term sustainable funding to build upon the work we have seeded. The Healing Foundation is working on sustainable solutions, including a partnership with Baker IDI to build the evidence base for effective healing programs in the Northern Territory. The Healing Foundation would encourage the Territory and Australian governments to continue to support this work to grow its reach and practice over time. Currently we cannot meet the funding needs of healing programs

within Alice Springs and we encourage government to look at how current funding streams might incorporate healing within their scope.

### Healing centres

The development of healing centres, or hubs, is an emerging approach to addressing the healing needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The Healing Foundation is currently funding the preliminary development of three separate healing centres. We are aware of a number of others in development and of communities who are pursuing the development of a healing hub to meet their healing needs.

The work involved in designing and developing a healing centre is significant. Dedicated time and resources are needed to document the model's theoretical design, an appropriate staffing structure and the incorporation of current evidence. Many of these projects have not moved to a more comprehensive design and development phase because they lack dedicated resources.

The Healing Foundation is commissioning a program design consultancy to support the development of healing centres that are informed by research evidence and have clearly documented program structure and program logic. This will provide concrete

models for future investment and implementation as well as supporting the development of emerging healing centres.

### The program design consultancy will:

- investigate innovative and best practice models, both globally and within Australia, for establishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing centres
- identify funding options for developing healing centres
- development models for healing centres that are informed by theory and research and have documented program logic
- fully cost models and create staged development plans.

We anticipate that this work will be concluded by October 2012 and will be made available to communities across Australia to assist them in developing healing centres.

## The Healing Training Institute

The Healing Foundation wants to ensure that communities are able to sustain quality healing initiatives and services. With this in mind we have commissioned a feasibility study into establishing a Healing Training Institute. The study will be driven both by the importance of providing healing services in Aboriginal and



Torres Strait Islander communities and by the associated need for a suitably skilled workforce to provide these services.

In the past 12 months the Healing Foundation has funded 21 programs across Australia that provide healing services to our communities. Data generated from these programs forms the beginnings of an evidence base for effective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing strategies. The data demonstrates a need to support our people in meeting their own healing needs.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation wants to explore ways to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have access to an appropriately trained and qualified healing workforce. While a number of higher education institutions and training establishments provide courses in social and emotional wellbeing, there has been limited investigation and development of healing qualifications from an Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander world view, including the place of traditional healing.

It is important that healing services and initiatives in our communities are sustainable so that we can continue to direct our healing our way. The feasibility study will explore the best ways to achieve this. It is therefore a very significant project for the Healing Foundation.

#### The feasibility study will:

- investigate innovative and best practice methods to support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in accessing approved training and qualifications in healing
- Improve healing knowledge and skills transfer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community
- identify the qualifications and training our people need to work in healing.

The study will be concluded in July 2012 and will guide the Healing Foundation's continuing work in this area.

## Traditional healing work

Supporting and sustaining traditional healing methodologies is of utmost importance to the Healing Foundation. We are developing a project that will look at how we can best sustain traditional healing across our nation. The project will work with traditional healers nationally on the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and other ways to support and sustain our ancient knowledge for the benefit of our future generations. We anticipate beginning this project in the second half of 2012 and we will be drawing on the knowledge of traditional healers from across Australia in the project.