



Northern
Territory
Government

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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Secretary
Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT
GPO Box 3721
DARWIN NT 0801

Dear Secretary

RE: Call for Submissions to the Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT

Thank you for the letter of 30 August 2011 from the Chair, Ms Marion Scrymgour MLA inviting the Department of Justice to make a submission to the Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT.

Contact with the criminal justice system and particularly incarceration are recognised as significant escalators in the risk factors associated with ideation and enactment of self-harm/suicide behaviours amongst youth. As the entity responsible for incarceration of young offenders, NT Correctional Services has a range of strategies relating to the management of young offenders identified as being at risk of self harm or suicide.

The basis of the Department of Justice's submission to your Committee focuses on these strategies. The submission is attached (*) for your consideration.

If you require further information please contact Ms Margaret Anderson, Deputy Director, Strategic and Executive Services, NT Correctional Services on 8935 7476.

Yours sincerely

Greg Shanahan
Chief Executive Officer

4 October 2011

Encl (*)

Department of Justice Submission to the Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT

Term of Reference 3(d) 'The Committee to inquire into and report on.....the roles of targeted programs and services that address particular circumstances of high risk groups, and identification of the strengths and weaknesses of existing suicide prevention responses;'

Current and Emerging Issues of Youth Suicide in Northern Territory Correctional Services

Introduction

Contact with the criminal justice system and particularly full incarceration are recognised as significant escalators in the risk factors associated with ideation and enactment of self-harm/suicide behaviours amongst youth. As the entity responsible for incarceration of young offenders, NT Correctional Services (NTCS) has a range of strategies relating to the management of young offenders identified as being at risk of self-harm or suicide. Most of these strategies offer an immediate emergency response to offenders assessed as being "at risk"¹ and rely upon the services of external specialist health providers to assess and plan the longer-term management of offenders considered at risk.

A policy document called "Inmates located in adult correctional facilities 'at risk' of suicide or self-harm" has been developed by NTCS in consultation with internal and external stakeholders including Forensic Mental Health Services (FMHS), the Department of Health, and the Health Service Provider in correctional facilities. Although a similar policy is to be formally adapted for use in Juvenile Detention facilities operated by NTCS, the intent of the policy is already implemented in the Juvenile Detention facilities.

Access to Commonwealth funding programs

Nil

Suicide prevention and awareness education

The two Youth Detention Centres operated by NTCS located in Darwin and Alice Springs have on-site schools run by the Department of Education and Training. These schools provide the core educational programs in line with mainstream curriculum which includes elements of suicide awareness as part of general health studies.

Further awareness training is also available as part of in-reach health education programs from general health providers such as Danila Dilba Health Services.

Individual counselling is provided to all young offenders who are identified as being at risk and this may be provided by both internal professional staff and external health professionals from the contracted health service provider and/or FMHS depending upon the severity of the case.

¹ "At Risk" is defined by NTCS to refer to inmates and detainees in full-time custody who exhibit behaviours and actions (verbal and non-verbal) and ideation about self-harm or suicide. At risk behaviours form a continuum ranging from indirect self-harming behaviour (such as placing oneself in a physically dangerous situation), to suicidal ideation, threats of suicide (verbal and non-verbal), non-accidental self-infliction of injury and attempted suicide.

Cross agency policy and program responsiveness

There are existing mechanisms to flag young offenders identified at risk by external agencies such as NT Police and the Sheriff's Office. These offenders are managed in line with existing at risk procedures.

Roles of targeted programs

The Primary Health Care Service provider and FMHS of the Department of Health provide crisis services to youth detained at NT facilities that are classified at risk of self-harm or suicide.

NTCS offers both pre- and in-service training to staff dealing with young offenders in Applied Suicide Intervention Training and Mental Health First Aid.

Adequacy and appropriateness of programs

The ongoing treatment of young offenders post an at risk episode is able to be further developed. NTCS is of the opinion that greater emphasis needs to be given to young offenders post an at risk episode and specifically designed education and counselling programs should be implemented by trained mental health professionals.

NTCS harbours on-going concerns about the capacity to appropriately house a young offender who is deemed at risk and is concurrently suffering from a mental illness. Those offenders who have long-term mental illness are currently not provided with on-going multi-disciplinary interventions such as those that exist at the Tamarind Centre.

Significant gaps exist in the ongoing treatment and through care of offenders returning to the community who have been identified as at risk of self-harm or suicide. Links between services such as correctional facilities and community mental health providers need to be strengthened.

Accuracy of reporting

All young offenders identified as at risk of self-harm or suicide in NTCS are reported to FMHS. Further, all such at risk episodes are flagged in the computerised Integrated Offender Management System operated by NTCS.