

## **BLANK PAGE SUMMIT ON SUICIDE COMMUNIQUÉ**

### **Billard Aboriginal Community 27-31 July 2009**

In July 2009 in the remote North West Kimberley Aboriginal community of Billard, 147 people with the will and capacity to effect fundamental and immediate change gathered on country to stop the epidemic of suicide by Indigenous people.

Called "The Blank Page Summit", the gathering was devised by community leaders, Stephen Victor Snr and his family including his daughter Mary Victor O'Reeri. Mr Victor Snr lost two of his sons to the preventable tragedy of suicide.

The blank page strategy for the Summit engaged the relevant experts in suicide to devise a new set of solutions to prevent any more unnecessary loss of life.

The result of the Summit was a call to action to all Australians to fundamentally restructure the way we address suicide prevention through the family, our communities, and with all of us working together.

The 147 participants were invited to join the Summit in their capacity as key contributors capable of effecting outcomes vital to stopping this epidemic in Australia. They came from communities across the country and from fields as diverse as child protection, land management, justice, mental health, sport and recreation, counselling, education, vocational training, children and youth services, disability, academia, government, Catholic Church and a range of community-led initiatives.

Specific communities currently experiencing horrific youth suicide rates such as Balgo in East Kimberley were central drivers of the call to action which guided the Summit.

Informing the work of the Summit over its four days and nights were the Hon Jenny Macklin, MP, Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, the WA Deputy Premier Kim Hames, the WA Chief Justice Wayne Martin, and the WA State Coroner Alistair Hope.

All participants worked together to create the environment where a breakthrough strategy free of 'old thinking' could be achieved.

## **Call for action**

Stephen Victor Snr, Mary Victor O'Reeri and members of the Billard Aboriginal Community now invite others to join them in the call for action arising from the powerful work of the Summit.

This call for action is both specific to the Kimberley and of critical relevance to the rest of Australia.

The key messages are to:

- create suicide-proof communities
- train families to be families
- encourage self-care through staged support

The details of the key messages are as follows:

### **Creating suicide-proof communities**

Zero tolerance of those things that are killing people, either by 'slow suicide' or self-destruction on the spot.

1. Create communities in the Kimberley according to the following self-imposed conditions:
  - no grog
  - no illegal drugs
  - no child neglect and abuse
  - no pornography
  - adherence to a Community Code of Conduct
  - use of a formal dispute resolution process
2. Build communities that are based on:
  - effective internal problem solving
  - strong sense of civic virtue
  - shared recreational and cultural activities open to all

The critical distinction drawn in this message is 'self-imposed'. This is not a call for legislative prohibition - it is concerned with individuals deciding in a collective setting to act in a lifesaving manner rather than in an habitually self-destructive way. Dispute resolution is included because of the impact of feuding in triggering suicide, as recounted by Coroner Alistair Hope at the Summit.

In this context, adequate housing is of particular relevance as a suicide prevention measure. The opportunity for government is to resolve how communities willing to self-impose and benchmark protective behaviours including internal dispute resolution processes are figured within the roll-out of new housing to create better residential and environmental conditions in the longer term. What emerged from the Summit is that is untenable to sustain arrangements which are 'stuck' either due to cross-governmental red tape, poor governance or mismanaged processes of any kind, as this in itself is life threatening in the vein of 'slow suicide'.

### **Training families to be families**

1. Train families to be families that can save the lives of people at risk right now.
2. Train families to be functional and safe families.
3. Train families to nurture individual growth within the family.

This is a message about 'first principles' - start with a blueprint for a family. What is a family? What does it uniquely do? What are its characteristics? How is a family created (i.e. not just by birth)? What does it mean to be a member of a family? How do families plan their lives, their futures, their housing, their schooling, their leisure time and their retirement? How do families interact with each other to make communities?

### **Healing and self-care**

We must have a means of saving the lives of the most distressed and acutely troubled individuals in our communities. When we know people are suicidal, we must have the capacity to act.

We need to develop self-care based on staged support.

1. The means to intervene to ensure the safety of a person in the Kimberley who is at risk of self-harm.
2. The tools to engage families in their own self-care and well-being.

'Healing' is viewed as a formal set of interventions from early counseling responses through to therapeutic treatment, where necessary.

This includes provision for own healing processes based on Aboriginal spirituality.

### **How were these messages created?**

The Summit was designed to unearth what isn't readily talked about that is at the heart of the renewal and repair of people's wellbeing in order to save their lives. People spoke about grog and ganja, family breakdown and community decay. They described 'humbug' in its various forms including violence and feuding. In the same way that acute trauma such as a heart attack, gives legitimacy to self-imposed restrictions, the epidemic of suicide requires removal by zero tolerance of those triggers which contribute to slow and spontaneous suicide.

### **Actions taken after the Summit**

In convening the Summit, Billard Aboriginal Community - a community which has developed suicide prevention strategies designed to make the community 'suicide proof' - aims to enable others to take action to protect the lives of every day citizens at risk.

In its call for action, Billard Aboriginal Community will also work by invitation with individuals, communities and other stakeholders including government to implement the key messages of the Summit.

Billard Aboriginal Community is guided by its own *Principles of Engagement* in its ongoing activities.

The majority of actions arising from the work of the Summit will be undertaken by individual contributors to the Summit in their operating environments.

There are some actions which require implementation by individuals with specific responsibilities at a senior level in government whose contributions informed the work of the Summit:

- Hon Jenny Macklin, MP - Minister for Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs (Cth)
- Hon Kim Hames, MLA Deputy Premier and Minister for Health and Indigenous Affairs (WA)
- Chief Justice Wayne Martin (WA)
- State Coroner Alistair Hope (WA)

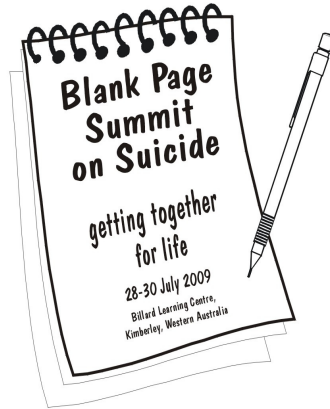
**Summit conveners - Billard Aboriginal Community**

*"Mission accomplished - if we saved just one life through the Summit, it was worth all our hard work."*

Stephen Victor Snr (Main Person-in-Charge)

*"We broke new ground - people concentrated on the future. We found out how to stop people dying from suicide."*

Lendal Victor (Young Person-in-Charge)



OPENING REMARKS BY STEPHEN VICTOR  
27 July 2009

Good afternoon everyone.

As you know, my name is Stephen Victor Snr - I am the Chairperson of the Billard Community.

Today is a very big day in our lives as a family.

It is a day we knew was coming for a long time.

On behalf of my wife Dorothy and our family, I welcome you here to our community.

We have done our best to make you comfortable - please forgive us for any hiccups along the way.

The Summit has come from our truths as a family, our drive to achieve our true potential as people and our motivation to help everybody find a better way for our people.

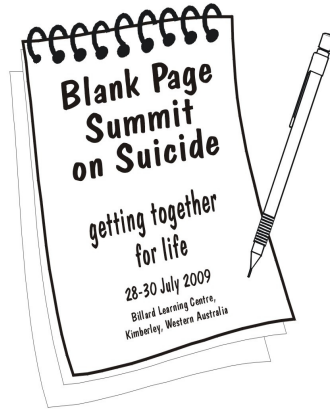
I would like to say also that suicide is a human problem, it goes across all races - many of you are experts in this field.

Thank you for bringing yourselves and your knowledge here to this Summit.

Let's reach for the top of the mountain in our thinking and planning.

Thank you again and a very warm welcome from all our community.





**SPEECH BY MARY VICTOR O'REERI  
27 July 2009**

Good afternoon everyone,

May I first of all join with my father, my family including Lendl, Bishop Saunders and my colleagues Kari Kristiansen and Richard Aspinall in welcoming you here today.

Welcome to Billard and welcome to the Blank Page Summit on Suicide.

Thank you for putting up your hand, thank you for traveling from close and far and thank you the confidence you have shown in our community by being here this week.

To be here together today is such a very great achievement.

Before I go any further I would like to acknowledge my family - my father, Stephen Victor Snr, my mother Dorothy Victor, my husband Nelson, my children and grandchildren which also means my nephews and nieces and also my brothers and sisters including my adopted sister Tauri D'Eatough.

My family has shown on an individual basis their love and care - you will see it all around you here in the community during your stay - and they have worked hard over many months to make the Summit happen.

They are the essence of the Summit and to them, I say thank you for what you do and say every day to strengthen our family life.

On behalf of my father and our whole family, I also convey our deepest gratitude to Kari Kristiansen, our external adviser and the Summit Director.

Kari, to know you is to respect you and in working with you, we learn more about ourselves and our freedoms and what we are truly capable of doing, not just for our community but for what we want to give to society as a whole. Thank you a million times over.

Today is a pivotal point in time for our community at Billard.

Today is the product of our highest aims.

Today has come about because we decided as a family to move out of the shadows and trust our instinct.

Today is also the day we invite you to trust in your instincts.

We ask you to join us in what we have built with our bare hands and our strong wills -

The Blank Page Summit on Suicide.

As we have planned it, the Summit is a process without compromise.

It is about more than hope - it is about recasting the die at the highest level within ourselves.

Friends and countrymen, when we lost not one but two boys - our brothers and my parents' beautiful sons - we could have become the walking dead ourselves.

We could have benchmarked suicide as a fault line within our family.

But our resolution was not to get stranded.

We knew we were very vulnerable - we didn't need research and statistics to tell us that.

But bigger than death is life.

And we knew there was more to life than just existing or having to keep tagging those within the family that were at risk of suicide.

What we found was our will to prevail and to grow and to change the course of our world and to stare down the statistics and predictors and trends.

What we decided was to be as great as we could be.

Today our kids - our primary kids - hate to miss even half an hour of school.

Some of our bigger kids are not here today because they are fulfilling their ambitions across the country.

Those amongst us who are struggling, one by one they know what can be and where there are stars that they can shoot for - no one is without a role model at their fingertips.

Just over a month ago we wrote a letter to a very special person. In the first sentence we said:

"The Summit will not be what we have worked hard for it to be WITHOUT YOU."

Ladies and gentlemen, that very special person is Minister Jenny Macklin.



When Jenny visited our community here in Billard in April, we showed her this spot where we're now gathered and said: "That's where the Summit will be held."

We know she believed us - we felt her confidence in us. But we're pretty sure that when she got our letter what drew her back was not the trees and the uncleared bushes!

What drew her back was us and what we stand for and her drive to break new ground at a grass roots level.

Today Jenny joins us after a very long journey - we welcome you, Jenny and say our thanks for making it back - we are so very happy to see you again.

When we sat with Jenny a little while ago over at the home block, we expressed to her what we need from her. We asked her to grant us her trust in the journey of this Summit. We underlined to her that we believe we have some profound work to do. We asked her to agree that we could meet again quite soon after the Summit, to share its outcomes and to test our wills together.

We are pleased to let you know Jenny as committed to do this - thank you, Jenny.

We cannot say what this Summit will create - after all, it is a BLANK PAGE SUMMIT.

What we know is that it is in all of our hands.

We stand before you as catalysts, as change agents, as natural peacemakers and as people searching for excellence.

Billard Community is our centre of excellence.

We have invited you personally here - each and everyone of you - so that you may share your excellence and change the course of life for Indigenous people.

Again please accept our heartfelt welcome, our warmest greetings and our total respect for your decision to join us at this innovative and groundbreaking event in time and space on our country.

Thank you.

**JENNY MACKLIN MP**  
**Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services**  
**and Indigenous Affairs**

**The Blank Page Summit on Suicide**

**Billard, Western Australia**

**27 July 2009**

**Check against delivery**

Thank you Mary for your introduction.

And your wise and gentle words.

I pay my respects to all the elders past and present on whose land we are meeting today.

I pay my respects to Mr Stephen Victor, his wife Dorothy, Mrs Mary Victor O'Reeri and all of the members of the Victor family at Billard Aboriginal community.

And to the elders from across the land who have travelled from all parts of Australia to be here.

I particularly acknowledge Mr Paul Sampi – distinguished Bardi elder.

Often words like honour and privilege are spoken too lightly, too easily.

But today I want to say, with all my heart, that it is truly a great honour and privilege to be back at Billard for your forum.

Because you are strong and self reliant people.

Mary and Stephen.

And your sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, nieces and nephews.

All of you knowing who you are, where you are going and how you intend getting there.

I first travelled down the bumpy road from Beagle Bay to Billard three months ago.

I had absolutely no idea what to expect.

Stephen – traditional owner and wise leader.

And how could I have anticipated Mary?

From the minute we met something clicked.

I'm pretty sure many people feel that way about Mary.

Her words have stayed with me and always will.

She said we are modest people, but successful.

Successful, not by accident but through our own efforts.

She told me too that we are people who have known great tragedy.

And she was sad because I would not meet her brothers Stephen Junior and Vincent – young men in their twenties lost to suicide.

Mary said as a family they could have been bitter and angry and stayed inconsolable forever.

But instead they channelled their grief.

Because through the deaths of these much loved young men they were determined to learn more about life.

Which is why we are all here today.

Starting with a blank page we are here to learn, to talk of our experiences and, in many cases, to ease the pain by sharing the burden of loss.

And can I say to Stephen and Mary, after the forum, I want to have a long discussion with you about what everyone wrote on that blank page.

When I look around at what you have done here - the huge logistical challenge of getting hundreds of people to Billard from all over Australia I am in awe.

Where once was bare ground is now the Learning Centre - home to the Billard Literacy and Numeracy Program.

Its construction gave the building team new skills in project management, design and construction.

And the fantastic Billard Bus – amazing what you can achieve when you let the kids loose with a few cans of paint.

As I said I'm in awe but frankly I'm not surprised.

It's what you'd expect from people who asked themselves, "what can we do as Aboriginal people, to close the gap?"

And who decided they could do a lot.

And got on with doing it.

It's what you would expect from people who have developed and adopted their own community code of conduct.

A code which requires everyone to act with care and thought and strong ethics.

It's all about self-reliance but at the same time being there to give someone a hand when they need it.

Helping each person get their lives together through My Action Plan or MAP as it's called.

Understanding the great power of learning, tackling problems like alcohol and drugs, organising your money, improving health, getting a job.

Giving purpose and meaning to life.

And now, tackling the tragedy of suicide.

Which means grappling with some difficult questions.

All of us who are parents have asked these questions.

Why do our young people fall into such despair?

How do we help these young people withstand the inevitable conflicts and pressures of growing up?

What are the warning signs and when should we intervene?

And how do we save those who are already struggling – with substance abuse, family violence and mental health problems?

How do we deal with the terrible phenomenon of suicide clusters?

West Australian Coroner Alastair Hope, who is here at the forum, confronted some of these issues when he investigated the deaths of 22 Kimberley men and women.

Twenty-one suicides in 2006 alone, one of them an eleven year old boy.

He painted a picture of failed communities where conditions were, in his words, "appallingly bad" and where the "plight of little children is especially pathetic."

We must face up to the brutal realities of life for many people in these communities.

As one contributor here today puts it – "these are communities which are living between suicides."

Today I would like to pose another question.

As we work together to tackle this tragic pattern of self-destruction among our young people, we must ask ourselves where does responsibility lie.

I do believe it's the responsibility of government to shape a society which protects and nurtures our people, especially the most vulnerable.

A government which gives our people the structures and support they need to live safe, healthy and productive lives in strong, resilient families and communities.

That's why this Government is determined to make sure that all children go to school and get a good education.

So they grow up safe and well in families where parents have jobs.

Where they have pride in what they do and who they are.

It's why we are working so hard to overcome decades of failure which have left too many Indigenous families and children living in appalling squalor.

And it's why we will harness all our efforts to stop the abuse and neglect of children, family violence and alcohol and drug addiction.

Sometimes being a responsible government demands tough decisions.

We've made tough decisions already and we will continue to make them.

Because every decision we make must be in the best interests of those who are most vulnerable – especially children.

But governments can't and shouldn't be responsible for everything.

There must be individual responsibility. And people must look out for each other.

Just like Mary and Stephen do.

And Emily Carter and June Oscar, in Fitzroy Crossing and Doreen Green and Robyn Long in Halls Creek who took matters into their own hands.

They saw the hopelessness and despair caused by alcohol and decided to do something – winning alcohol restrictions despite strong opposition.

Of course taking responsibility for yourself has many faces.

You don't have to look further than little Daneyo here in Billard.

Daneyo is only seven years old but he already has an impressive sense of responsibility.

He took a lot of convincing to miss school today to be here.

It's great to see you here today Daneyo.

But you're right – school is very important.

Last time when I left Billard and said goodbye to Mary and Stephen they said to me - travel well, keep up the good work and let us know if you need us for anything.

Since then, their words have played on my mind.

Over the last few weeks as I've been thinking about coming back to Billard I've been thinking about them again.

When I made the connection with a song which I love and have often sung with my family.

It's a song, written by an African American who found himself far from home, missing his family and his hometown.

I think the lyrics reflect why we are all here today:

*Lean on me, when you're not strong  
And I'll be your friend  
I'll help you carry on  
For it won't be long  
'Til I'm gonna need  
Somebody to lean on*

## SPEECH AT THE BILLARD SUMMIT

**Mr Stephen Victor Snr, Mrs Dorothy Victor and Mrs Mary Victor O'Reeri**  
**Main People-in-Charge**  
**Billard Aboriginal Community**  
**Other members of the Billard Aboriginal Community**  
**Summit team, volunteers and invited guests**

distinguished guests.

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important event,  
the Billard Summit.

I am particularly please to be able to support any project  
aimed at providing recommendations on how to build  
community resilience and reduce risk factors for suicide in  
the Kimberley region and to have suicide prevention given  
high priority by governments, state and federal.

As the State Coroner in West Australia I am responsible for  
the investigation for all sudden deaths. In that capacity the  
WA Coroner's Court investigates approximately 300 deaths  
by suicide each year. Last year, for the first time, the  
number exceeded 300.



By comparison, there were 225 motor vehicle deaths for that year.

To put these numbers in a context, I expect to see a new Mortuary Admission Form for death by suicide at least every working day.

Of the categories of sudden non-natural deaths investigated by the Coroner's Court, death by suicide constitutes the largest number.

Clearly many people in our community do not appreciate just how much a problem suicide is for our society.

This problem is particularly bad for the aboriginal people in the Kimberley. Over a 7 year period, the numbers of aboriginal deaths by self harm have been more than four times higher than those of non aboriginal persons in the Kimberley region. Since 2000 there have been at least 96 aboriginal self harm deaths in the Kimberley region.

In 2006 the number of aboriginal self harm deaths reached record proportions. In that year there were 21 deaths in the Kimberley region and the death rate was seven times higher than the non Aboriginal deaths by self harm for the year. This is in spite of the fact that the aboriginal population was slightly smaller than the non aboriginal population.

It should be recognised that even these very large numbers do not entirely reflect the true total of deaths by suicide. There are a large number of deaths which occur by drug overdose or as a result of motor vehicle collisions where it is assumed that the deaths have resulted from accidents, but in some cases it is likely that these deaths were intentional.

The grief and distress associated with so many deaths is immeasurable. The Coroner's Court comes into regular contact with families struggling to come to terms with these deaths, which are always shocking for family and friends. The impact of a death by suicide on a family can be quite drastic, and extended family members, friends and community members can also be very distressed by the

death. As you would be very aware, in country regions a death by suicide can affect an entire community.

In 2008 I conducted an inquest into 22 deaths in the Kimberley region in which drug or alcohol abuse was a factor.

Seventeen of those deaths were suicide deaths, and it was important at that time to review the reasons for high levels of suicide of aboriginal people in the Kimberley region.

### **The Evidence Gathering Process**

When a death occurs by way of suicide in Western Australia an investigation is usually conducted by police who should interview relevant witnesses and obtain information in respect of various issues and explore any possible suspicious circumstances.

In each case the Coroner's Court conducts a review of the information which has been obtained and in most cases the

investigation is finalised by way of a finding based on the papers. In all deaths in custody there is an inquest into the circumstances of the death which involves a close review of the events leading up to the death.

The Coroner's Court, therefore, retains a valuable source of information relating to suicides and information which has been obtained is accessed by various organisations who first make an application to the Coronial Ethics Committee of the Coroner's Court, which is a committee set up under National Health and Medical Research guidelines.

Investigations into the circumstances of deaths by way of suicide often identify recent events which have been a trigger to the suicide. There is often a relationship breakdown, argument or family dispute which has upset the person who has then taken his or her own life. On some occasions investigations reveal more basic causes for the death such as past sexual abuse, family breakdown etc. Factors responsible for suicide can be complex and difficult to identify.

While frequently recorded precipitating causes would include relationship breakdown or issues with family or friends, people wouldn't take their own lives unless they were otherwise extremely unhappy or have low self esteem.

It has been said by one author that a common factor in suicide and all other forms of self harm is distress. It has also been said that *"the author of suicide is pain"*.

In that context it is clear that the very high numbers of aboriginal suicides in the Kimberley result from the fact that many people are very unhappy and live in unsatisfactory and distressing conditions.

### **Alcohol Involvement**

The inquest that was conducted in 2008 revealed that there was a very high correlation between death by self harm and alcohol or cannabis abuse. Of the 21 suicide deaths in 2006, there are only two cases in which alcohol or cannabis was not detected by toxicological examination of the blood.

In 16 of the 21 cases the blood alcohol level of the deceased was in excess 0.15%, three times the maximum permissible level for driving a motor vehicle.

In 11 of these cases the blood alcohol level was in excess of 0.2% which is an extremely high reading.

The association between alcohol and suicide has been established by a number of population and clinical studies.

The impact of alcohol abuse in this context should not be underestimated. As well as having a direct involvement in a number of the deaths, problems associated with alcohol abuse impact on every aspect of life for many people.

Alcohol and drugs have provided an escape for many and as such are a symptom of the problems encountered, but have also become a problem in their own right.

The plight of little children caught up in an environment of alcohol abuse is especially pathetic. Many have been born to alcoholic parents and have failed to thrive as a result of being undernourished. For many the future appears bleak. Unless some major changes occur many of these children will fail to obtain a basic education. They live in an environment where they can expect to be the victims of violence and possibly also sexual abuse.

Foetal alcohol syndrome is common, according to witnesses at the inquest, the incidence for aboriginal babies may be as high as 1 in 4 in some locations.

Babies with foetal alcohol syndrome are born very small, sometimes with very small brains. They often suffer from mental retardation and other birth defects and later experience an inability to control their behaviour.

In commenting on this problem of foetal alcohol syndrome Professor Fiona Stanley AC stated at the inquest: *"It's another stolen generation"*.



It is not surprising that children brought up in such an environment have low self esteem, experience depression and are vulnerable for suicide.

In this context it is pleasing to note that there have been significant changes identified in Fitzroy Crossing following the recent restrictions on availability of full strength take away alcohol. Following those changes, crime rates have been down, school attendances have increased, attendances at the emergency department of the hospital have reduced and suicide numbers are down substantially.

It is important to note that the changes in this regard were driven by aboriginal members of the local community, desperate for change.

I also note that it appears similar changes are taking place in Halls Creek and elsewhere.

## Health

Another major factor impacting on high suicide rates for aboriginal people in the Kimberley region is the poor health of many aboriginal people which impacts on the general wellbeing of those people and also impedes the ability of parents to look after children etc.

The Coroner's Court receives information relating to the poor health of the aboriginal community as a result of large numbers of relatively young people dying from alcohol and diet related conditions such as diabetes and early cardiac disease.

## Depression

Depression is a major issue for many aboriginal people in the Kimberley and the levels of depression are increased by the high numbers of non-natural deaths. In many cases children within a community have found bodies of relatives who have suicided or otherwise suffered sudden death. This trauma adds to the psychological pain for all concerned.

At the inquest a mental health nurse employed by the Kimberley Mental Health and Drug Service Team described a “*huge*” level of depression among the aboriginal population of the areas covered by his team which he believed was linked to unresolved grief.

### Positive Health Programs

There are a number of examples of success stories in the context of aboriginal health. One is the swimming pool study which related to the Burringurrah and Jigalong communities. In each community a swimming pool was put in and the impact of the pool on the community was evaluated.

The results were surprisingly positive. Professor Stanley told the inquest that the results revealed dramatic improvement in skin sores, respiratory infections and ear disease. School attendances were improved. Self esteem was improved and there was less need for antibiotics.

Another example of successful positive health programs has been the encouragement of football with young aboriginal men. According to Professor Stanley, research has revealed that young men involved in football attend school more often and have reduced smoking and drinking.

In this context the Clontarf Foundation, in partnership with the State government, has established a number of football academies in selected schools for the purpose of engaging aboriginal boys in schools through the medium of Australian Rules football.

The efforts of the Clontarf Foundation are a success story in Western Australian of which most people would be aware. The Clontarf Foundation has the additional benefit of encouraging school attendance which is particularly important in this context.

### **School Attendance**

One of the reasons for low self esteem which is a major background problem for many suicides is the fact that there

are serious unemployment problems for aboriginal people in the Kimberley which result largely from the fact that there are also serious education issues.

In almost every case of a self inflicted death the subject of the 2008 inquest, the deceased had achieved a relatively low level of education and was on either unemployment benefits or the CDEP program.

As education and employment would be a pathway out of the cycle of poverty in which most of the deceased persons were living in the time of their deaths, this issue is of fundamental importance in addressing the circumstances surrounding these deaths.

Sadly the level of education attained by most aboriginal students in the Kimberley generally is pathetically low.

At the inquest Margaret Cornes, Acting Executive Director, Teaching and Learning North with the Department of Education and Training, provided a report which revealed

that in the Kimberley only about 30% of aboriginal students leave school with the literacy and numeracy skills required to successfully engage in further training and employment. The percentage is higher in the major centres of Broome and Kununurra and much lower in almost all of the remote community schools.

The main reason for this poor level of education achievement is very high truancy rates and the fact that many children leave school at an early age.

In a number of schools efforts are made to encourage attendance by organising a bus “pick-up” after teachers have identified absent children at the start of the day. In addition breakfasts are often provided on an informal basis to encourage children to attend school.

There are also programs which have been put in place to make school more attractive to students such as excursions, camps and inter-town sporting events.

A major part of the problem results from the fact that many people in the Kimberley do not see education as important. In many communities there are no success stories and no student has attained a high level of education.

Improving the quality of education is one of the matters which needs to be addressed in a holistic way.

It is clear that there needs to be a whole of government approach aimed at addressing truancy and its causes for aboriginal students in the Kimberley.

### **Housing Issues**

Nearly all of the deceased persons the subject of the inquest lived in overcrowded and substandard public housing. In many cases the housing was on land held by the Aboriginal Lands Trust which holds almost 12% of the state land on trust for indigenous people in Western Australia.



In many cases the housing which is available is substandard, in need of urgent maintenance and the interiors of many houses are extremely dirty.

The quality of housing in which many aboriginal people live, often in seriously overcrowded conditions, is relevant to the high levels of distress and dissatisfaction felt by the aboriginal people and is a factor in the high suicide rates.

Recent media reports to the effect that the problems of housing shortage are not yet being addressed are concerning.

### Conclusions

Of particular concern in this context is the fact that evidence available at the 2008 inquest revealed that living conditions are continuing to deteriorate in spite of a considerable investment of funding into services and programs targeted to aboriginal people in Western Australia both by the State and Commonwealth governments.

The inquest revealed that at that time there was almost a complete lack of leadership in the response by government to the disaster of aboriginal living conditions.

The inquest identified extremely serious deficiencies in respect of almost all aspects of the current response to the problem; from the education system, which is failing to produce results, largely as a result of massive truancy rates, to the housing issues, in respect of which it was learnt that until recently there had been very little monitoring of the standard of public housing for aboriginal people and almost no maintenance of that housing.

In the above context I adopt the observation made by the South Australian State Coroner, Mr Wayne Chivell, commenting on the problems faced by aboriginal people in remote regions of Australia was observed:

*“That such conditions should exist among a group of people defined by race in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a developed nation like Australia is a disgrace and should shame us all”.*

Current aboriginal suicide rates for aboriginal people in the Kimberley are so high as to constitute a disgrace.

Before these excessively high suicide rates can be brought down, however, there is a need for positive and direct action on the part of governments and individuals. There is a need for leadership in government and provision of adequate funding for constructive programs with a realistic chance of success.

There is a need for allocation of responsibility in government and bureaucratic circles. It is important that there should be identifiable individuals who accept the responsibility for change – in each location and community. There have been too many committees and meetings of bureaucrats and too little action.

There is also a need for aboriginal people to embrace change and to make a real commitment to overcoming the difficulties which are faced. The Fitzroy Crossing alcohol restrictions have been successful because the call for

change has come from aboriginal people who are determined that there should be real change. No individual or organisation can turn around the situation unassisted, there is a need for co-operative action and for a holistic approach.

There is a need to address the problems associated with alcohol abuse, cannabis use and solvent sniffing, health issues need to be addressed, education levels need to be improved and more people need to be involved in gainful employment. For the wellbeing gap to be closed between indigenous and non indigenous Australians, it is necessary for aboriginal people to have better health, be better educated and fill more positions in the workforce. In the context of employment, it has been pleasing to see that a number of mining companies have taken positive action to employ young aboriginal people. It is action of this type which is needed for real change to take place.

This summit is an example of what appears to be a real across the board desire for change. While there is a positive

momentum it is important that the desire for changes is translated into action so that houses are built, children go to school, health is improved. Only when the gap is reduced in wellbeing will these unacceptably high suicide rates go down.

**SPEECH BY MARY VICTOR O'REERI – Monday 17 August 2009**

**National Museum, Canberra ACT**

**Good afternoon everyone**

**UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples Professor James Anaya  
Hon Jenny Macklin, MP - Minister for Indigenous Affairs  
Members of the Australian Government  
Distinguished guests and friends**

**I am truly full of wonder and excitement to be here today in Canberra.**

**In standing here on this ground, I thank the Ngunnawal people for welcoming me. I have been called to this place this week and I promise to respect this land for the duration of my stay.**

**I thank also my family including my daughter Tasha who accompanies me here today, my countrymen and my close colleagues for their ongoing support.**

**I'm a long way from home here in Canberra. I live and work on the Central Dampier Peninsula in the remote North West Kimberley region of Western Australia.**

**I am also a traditional owner of the place where I live. This means that I was born into a distinct language group – Nyul Nyul – which informs my understanding of who I am and my relationship to others.**

**This includes the natural environment. At home we are blessed with many springs which are reflected in our community's name – Billard Burr – which means 'spring country'.**

**I'm fortunate because as I say, I live and work on my country – this is the way it turned out for me – and as the sun comes up each day, my good fortune in this way never leaves my thoughts.**

**My community of Billard is about 3kms from a township called Beagle Bay. Beagle Bay was a home to many Aboriginal people who, as children, were separated from their families as a result of past government policies, including my own mother Dorothy.**

**I've come to Canberra this week fresh from a very significant event in my community of Billard called the Blank Page Summit on Suicide.**

**Together with my father, Stephen Victor Snr and the rest of my family, we invited 150 people from across Australia to Billard to sit down with us on country to find ways to stop our people taking their own lives and not dying in the proper way.**

**The Summit came from our own journey as a family. We lost our two brothers – Stephen Jnr and Vincent – to suicide a few years ago. We found them hanging from the same fan in the same room in the same house in Beagle Bay within three years of each other.**

**Stevo and Goodie as we called them, were young men who couldn't see their way clear to keep on living. They chose to die by their own hands in their early twenties.**

**Unfortunately my brothers were not the last to die from suicide in our part of the world.**

**In the past two years the rate of youth suicide in the Kimberley has soared. As one of our countrymen puts it, 'We are living between suicides.'**

In February 2008 the WA State Coroner Mr Alistair Hope reported his findings into 21 deaths by suicide including a 9 year old boy over the previous two year period.

In those findings Mr Hope spoke about the dramatic increase of 100% in suicide rates, the 'appallingly bad living conditions for many Aboriginal people in the Kimberley', the 'pathetic plight of the little children with bleak futures' due to widespread foetal alcohol syndrome and the ongoing grim prospects for adequate education, improved health profiles and job readiness for coming generations.

When our family read Mr Hope's findings, we were keen to find out what the WA Government planned to do about the situation.

We got nowhere. Our communications were ignored. There was a sad silence.

So we decided to take the matter into our own hands and hold a summit on suicide which we called a Blank Page Summit because a blank page is what we needed to start with.

There was no point starting with pages of problems or tinkering around the edges. That's what we all normally do with our hard problems. I mean all of us, not just Indigenous people.

So our Summit started with a blank page open to new ideas and the collective wisdom of the people we invited.

Three weeks ago we brought that powerful group of people together at Billard to help us fill up the blank page.

We left no stone unturned in the range and depth of people we invited to join the Summit. We were delighted that almost 100% of the people we invited said yes.

It turned out to be 147 people, all of whom arrived with the will and capacity to do something about this 'unnatural' disaster of suicide amongst our people.

We were joined at the Summit by the State Coroner Mr Alistair Hope. Present also were WA Chief Justice Wayne Martin, WA Deputy Premier Kim Hames and Federal Minister Jenny Macklin. But importantly we also had individuals from government, NGO's, community folk and professionals in the field, so as to cover every aspect of the problem.

Today in the presence of the UN Special Rapporteur I am pleased to launch the Blank Page Summit on Suicide Communique – it sets out the work we did as 'summiteers' over those few days that we lived and worked together on country.

The Summit was a transformative event – it was not a bunch of talking heads going around in circles saying what's already been said. Nor was it a series of presentations from experts telling others what to do, or a one-way download of information. This was a strategic gathering where we started with the highest ambitions for individuals and communities across the country.

What we learnt early on in the Summit is that more people die in the state of Western Australia from suicide than road deaths and that suicide is an emerging national phenomenon.

To make serious progress, we needed to walk together in trust very quickly. By doing so, we were able to look at Australian society in its entirety and acknowledge that both our cultures are weakening. We asked ourselves - "What is our best way forward?" We



realized that it was by a call for action on the fundamental principles that are central to a successful Australian society.

Therefore as a direct result of the Summit, on behalf of Billard Aboriginal Community I now issue a call for action - some elements are relevant to the Kimberley and other elements apply to all communities where individuals and families are in trauma.

Our fundamental message is that suicide is preventable.

To ensure suicide is prevented, we need to be doing three things as soon as possible:

Number 1 – In the Kimberley, we need to create suicide-proof communities

This involves zero tolerance of those things that are killing people, either by 'slow suicide' or self-destruction on the spot.

The slow killers are grog, illegal drugs, child neglect and abuse and pornography.

We need three more things in this zero tolerance environment:

- i. a Community Code of Conduct to stop the rot and humbug;
- ii. a formal way of resolving our differences that works on the ground (at the Summit, Coroner Alistair Hope spoke of feuding as a trigger for suicide); *and*
- iii. better social inclusion in our communities through shared recreational and cultural activities open to all

Now the critical distinction we make here is that a zero tolerance situation must be self-imposed. This is not a call for laws to ban grog – it is about waking up as individuals to what is causing members of our community to kill themselves and adjusting our behaviours accordingly.

If I have a heart attack and the doctor says, “you’ll have another heart attack if you keep doing x, y or z” then it’s actually up to me to do whatever I can to avoid that next heart attack.

Our community at Billard is a self-imposed alcohol, drug and humbug-free zone – we have set this standard and it works every day of the year without compromise.

Can I just tell you about humbug? It is about our every day dealings. “No humbug” means to live and work with honesty and integrity – it applies to any and all communities where people co-exist.

Looking more broadly now beyond the Kimberley – for all the talk about families being the centre of our communities and our lives, I believe we actually need to be honest. Families don’t just happen.

So the second part of our call to action is training families to be families.

This is a message about ‘first principles’ – let’s start with a blueprint for a family. What is a family? What does it uniquely do? What are its characteristics? How is a family created (i.e. not just by birth)? What does it mean to be a member of a family? How do families plan their lives, their futures, their housing, their schooling, their leisure time and their retirement? How do families interact with each other to make communities?

The beauty of the Summit is that this aspect within the call to action applies to anyone.

**My family has an action plan. We don't guess about the future. We are planning our future. Every family can do this if they have access to the tools.**

**Turning now to the final part of our call to action - it is concerned with healing and self-care based on staged support.**

**We must have a means of saving the lives of the most distressed and acutely troubled individuals in our communities. Let me be clear, this means that when we know people are suicidal, we must act.**

**It also means that we need to see dramatic changes in the way services are delivered at every stage in the continuum from the moment a person presents as vulnerable through to marked suicidal behaviour.**

**In my community, this also includes our own healing processes based on Aboriginal spirituality.**

**So to sum up – these are the three key messages which make up our call for action:**

**Creating suicide-proof communities;  
Training families to be families; *and*  
Healing and self-care through staged support**

**This is a call to action that compels us to walk together – I will now explain why.**

**As a primary school teacher, I've taught children suffering from the irreversible impacts of foetal alcohol syndrome. I've also read the Productivity Report about my people's disadvantage, especially as it relates to children.**

**I have seen children grow into teenage drug addicts in homes where parents smoke marijuana for breakfast.**

**I have also seen the enormous energy put into land and native title meetings compared with the low investment into strategies to strengthen family life and develop individual resilience.**

**I have lived through the ebb and flow of government policy making, the waves of hope and the expectation that this new program or that new policy would change things for the better. The results have been uneven, no doubt about it.**

**People such as me don't need to read the newspaper to know how cheap life has become in Aboriginal communities. We see it literally every day of the week.**

**To be truthful, I am tired of seeing a sad Aboriginal child, a mangy dog and a filthy mattress on the front page of the national print media on a regular basis.**

**I know housing is a continuous problem and right now, it's an issue of main focus for all of us. At the Summit we identified the issue of poor housing as a significant suicide risk for Indigenous people. But there's a piece of this housing dilemma that doesn't get talked about. It's the one that no one really wants to confront and the one we decided as a family to deal with. I'm talking about how it's been an excuse in many Indigenous communities that overcrowding is acceptable, normal and part of our culture. We let everybody and anybody into our homes. It may sound harsh but we contribute to the housing problem in this way too.**

**We've got to stop talking about housing and start talking about homes. I'm very particular about who comes into my home because this is where my family lives and creates its future every day. In fact, I turn away my own siblings if they arrive intoxicated. Some would say this is a rejection of my family. I say it's a strengthening and educating of my family. I will not put my family and our plans and dreams at risk. I believe every family has this aspiration. But if all that's on offer is a house without the means to create a home and a safe family, then is it any wonder the whole program is stuck and unnecessarily wasteful?**

**If you accept our call to action to train families to be families, then we must stop talking about housing and start talking about homes and give ourselves the chance to create functional families and suicide-proof communities.**

**None of this is easy. It saddens me to say that when I was growing up, we were surrounded by alcoholics and perpetrators. My parents were good people who greeted everybody in good faith and allowed them into our house in large numbers. What they didn't know at the time – they know now – is that as a 12 year old girl, I was living a chaotic and frightened life where I was often defending myself against the sexual advances of drunken relatives, pushing beds against the bedroom door and protecting my younger siblings from the same sort of attacks.**

**I had to wise my parents up in later life about what we'd been through and teach them that there's a difference between an open house and a safe home.**

**I'm so pleased to say that both of my parents are today the architects of our alcohol, drug and humbug free community that is Billard.**

**I'm raising difficult issues today. We raised these difficult issues at the Summit and we demonstrated that there are solutions. But it requires all of us to have a hard yarn. It's about the truth of our ways. It's about how we've neglected each other and made up excuses. It's about what we need to be doing to build a whole and functioning society.**

**We need a new conversation where we can talk honestly about these things. We at Billard started this process with a blank page on the specific issue of suicide.**

**As a nation we could start with a blank page about how we create healthy and functional homes and families, caring and well run communities and support for the vulnerable among us.**

**Frankly this is our golden opportunity – we must do it together. It involves all of us.**

**In the presence of Special Rapporteur James Anaya, I make this important point – we can only start with a blank page, if we are indeed going to have a new conversation. A blank page is what we must offer to ourselves and others. There is a great power and joy in us filling up those pages together.**

**It has been my privilege to stand before you today as a person from a tiny community in this vast country - I believe the strength of our humanity is what will transform Australian society now and in the future.**

**“We are the people we've been waiting for”.**



# Parliamentary Debates

(HANSARD)

THIRTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT  
FIRST SESSION  
2009

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Thursday, 10 September 2009

<001> O/2

## Legislative Assembly

Thursday, 10 September 2009

**THE SPEAKER (Mr G.A. Woodhams)** took the chair at 9.00 am, and read prayers.

.....

### SUICIDE

*Statement by Minister for Indigenous Affairs*

**DR K.D. HAMES (Dawesville — Minister for Indigenous Affairs)** [9.08 am]: Mr Speaker, before I make my three-minute statement, I acknowledge representatives from the Billard community here today in the Speaker's gallery.

I rise today to talk about suicide. It is a startling and saddening fact that more Australians die every year from suicide than are killed on our roads. For every suicide, there are approximately 30 suicide attempts. It is widely known that suicide rates are higher in rural and remote areas and that there has been an alarming increase in the incidence of suicide amongst our Indigenous communities. I recently visited such a community; a community ready to focus on the issue of suicide and its effect on its members. I was privileged to be invited to the Billard Aboriginal Community on the Dampier Peninsula, or Nirrumbuk, the home of the rainbow serpent, to participate in the Billard Blank Page Summit on Suicide. I would like to read an extract from Mary Victor O'Reeri's speech made in Canberra on 17 August 2009 about the reasons behind the summit being called. Mary is in the Speaker's gallery today.

<002> P/5

The Summit came from our own journey as a family. We lost our two brothers — Stephen Junior and Vincent — to suicide a few years ago. We found them hanging from the same fan in the same room in the same house in Beagle Bay within three years of each other. Stevo and Goodie as we called them, were young men who couldn't see their way clear to keep on living. They chose to die by their own hands in their early twenties.

The Billard Blank Page Summit was also attended by an extraordinary collection of 150 participants, including the Hon Jenny Macklin, federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Chief Justice Wayne Martin, Coroner Alistair Hope, Bishop Christopher Saunders of Broome, and Hon Helen Morton, MLC, along with representatives of many peak government and non-government organisations from all over Australia. All were there because we care, all were there because we acknowledge we are stuck and need a way forward and a way to help Indigenous communities stop feeling that they are "living between suicides", as I have heard it put.

I would like to acknowledge the amazing job that the Billard Learning Centre did in organising and running the summit. I would particularly like to acknowledge Stephen Victor Senior, Mary Victor O'Reeri and their extended families, Kari Kristiansen, the summit director, and the many participants, sponsors and volunteers all too numerous to mention now but who all contributed and made the summit the success it was.

This afternoon I will be presented with a communiqué from the summit by Mary Victor O'Reeri. I look forward to reading about the outcome of the summit and contributing to making a real change to the lives of people living with the issue of suicide in their community.

It is of note that my colleague Hon Graham Jacobs, Minister for Mental Health, is not in the house at present. At this moment he is officially launching the State Suicide Prevention Strategy. The Liberal-National government is committing \$13 million over the next four years to implement the strategy. The strategy calls for all state government departments to work together on a coordinated response to the issue. A Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention will, amongst other things, coordinate statewide initiatives for suicide prevention and identify communities requiring additional support.

I will conclude with a comment from Mary, who said, "We must do it together. It involves all of us." I agree with Mary, and I can assure her that this government is committed to working together with Aboriginal communities on this very important issue.

I advise members that at 3.00 pm this afternoon I will be presented with that communiqué in the Aboriginal People's Room, and I invite all members to attend if they wish.



# Parliamentary Debates

(HANSARD)

THIRTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT  
FIRST SESSION  
2009

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Thursday, 10 September 2009

## Legislative Council

Thursday, 10 September 2009

**THE PRESIDENT (Hon Barry House)** took the chair at 11.00 am, and read prayers.

.....

### WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGY 2009-2013

*Statement by Parliamentary Secretary*

**HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary)** [11.06 am]: Preventing suicide and suicidal behaviour is a key priority for the government of Western Australia, and today, on World Suicide Prevention Day 2009, the minister launched the government's strategy to reduce the number of suicides in Western Australia. The government has committed \$13 million over the next four years to implement the strategy.

Suicide is a tragedy that results in the loss of more than 250 loved and valuable lives in WA each year, and for every person who dies in this way, there are 10 other people whose attempt to kill themselves is so severe that they require admission to hospital. The effect of suicide and serious self-harm has a profound impact on the lives of those people close to them.

Throughout 2007, the Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention undertook a comprehensive consultation program throughout WA. The strategy responds to the key themes provided through that consultation, in particular the need for a whole-of-government approach; a focus on suicide prevention at a whole-of-community level; stronger coordination in prevention strategies, especially in response to emerging clusters of suicides; room for regional people to develop regional-specific strategies; and Aboriginal suicide having to be a priority.

The following people make up the new Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention: John Franklyn, chairman, Lifeline WA; Vicki O'Donnell, chief executive officer, Derby Aboriginal Health Service Council; Adele Cox, lecturer, University of Western Australia; Rob Donovan, professor, Curtin University of Technology; Brian Mayfield, farmer; Sam Buckeridge, director, BGC Australia; Jade Lewis; Sam Walsh, chief executive, Rio Tinto Iron Ore Group; Christopher Wharton, chief executive officer, West Australian Newspaper Holdings Ltd; Eric Lumsden, director general, Department of Planning; Paul Hasleby, Fremantle Football Club of the AFL; Dr Steve Patchett, executive director, mental health, Department of Health; and Christopher Gostelow, manager, School Psychology Service.

The council will lead the statewide comprehensive strategy, which is well aligned with the national suicide prevention strategy, Life is for Living. Using existing recurrent resources, a non-government organisation will be contracted to undertake the day-to-day work of the council.

<002> P/F

Suicide prevention requires a comprehensive whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach. This approach depends on consistent and effective coordination between a range of services and agencies. Cabinet has mandated that all government departments will prioritise suicide prevention and participate in a coordinated response to the issues. This strategy provides a framework for the government to coordinate and invest in suicide prevention strategies at all levels of the community. Everyday people, frontline people, professionals involved in any work, families, friends and workmates will learn how to recognise that someone near to them may be feeling suicidal, how to talk to that person about it, and how to get the help if needed. This strategy signals a change in attitude; suicide is preventable and it is everybody's business.

Consideration of the statement made an order of the day for the next sitting, on motion by **Hon Ed Dermer**.

.....

*Suicide Prevention — Billard Community — Adjournment Debate*

**HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary)** [5.27 pm]: Today is World Suicide Prevention Day and earlier today the Minister for Mental Health, as I mentioned, launched the government's \$13 million suicide prevention strategy. However, another significant event also took place this afternoon.

Members of the Billard Community presented a communiqué to the Deputy Premier outlining fundamental and immediate changes to stop the epidemic of suicide by Indigenous people. The Billard Community is located on an outstation of about 14 hectares, which is two and a half kilometres from Beagle Bay on the Dampier Peninsula, 122 kilometres north of Broome on the Cape Leveque Road. The community is normally home to about 65 people.

In July this year, Mary Victor O'Reeri and her father, Stephen Victor Snr—both present in the President's gallery this afternoon—along with other members of their family, members of the Billard Community and friends and

representatives of the community, invited about 150 people from across Australia to Billard for a blank page summit on suicide. People came from communities all over Australia. Some of the communities are currently experiencing horrific youth suicide rates—communities such as Balgo. They came from work areas as diverse as child protection, land management, justice, mental health, sport and recreation, the Australian Football League, counselling services, education and training, academia and churches. It was truly an expression of suicide prevention being everybody's business.

Together we all sat down on the pindan of the Kimberley uninterrupted for five days to talk about ways to stop young Indigenous people killing themselves. Mary and Stephen Victor Snr also invited, for shorter periods throughout the five days, Chief Justice Wayne Martin; the Western Australian State Coroner, Alastair Hope; the Western Australian Deputy Premier, Minister for Health and Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Dr Kim Hames; federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin; and Bishop Christopher Saunders.

<037> K/4

Along with Mr John Franklin, the new chairperson of the Ministerial Council on Suicide Prevention, I was able to stay for the full five days of the summit.

Members might ask what inspired the Victor family to take on such a monumental task. Mary's two brothers—Steven Victor, 23, and Vincent Victor, 25,—died by suicide just two days apart. Since Stevo and Goodie, as they were known, died the Billard Aboriginal Community has focused on developing a strong life base for the younger generations, particularly centred on education and meaningful work.

Mary is a trained primary school teacher and is the executive director of the Billard Learning Centre and she is also responsible for the overall operation of the community's activities, its external relationships, relationships and ongoing planning.

The summit was called the "Blank Page Summit" and Mary very eloquently explained the reason for that. My notes indicate that she said —

We can change many things for our people if we have the will and the wisdom to do it—everything is possible. It's time for a new conversation about what matters most for our people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We can only start with a blank page if we are indeed going to have a new conversation. A blank page is what we must offer to ourselves and others. There is a great power and joy in us filling up those pages together.

In opening the summit Mary said, again according to my notes —

Friends and countrymen, when we lost not one but two boys—our brothers and my parents' beautiful sons—we could have become the walking dead ourselves. We could have benchmarked suicide as a fault line within our family. But our resolution was not to get stranded.

This summit is about more than hope—it is about recasting the die at the highest level within ourselves. Today has come about because we decided as a family to move out of the shadows and trust our instincts.

I can tell members that they did. The summit facilities were constructed on site for 150 people, with volunteers. We enjoyed the most wonderful conversations, heard the most heartbreaking stories and met many inspirational people. That was apart from the dancing at night, the wonderful outback catering, great yarns around the campfires and somewhat interrupted sleep on camp stretchers in two-man tents. I feel very sorry for the young woman who shared a two-man tent with me.

**Hon Liz Behjat:** Why?

**Hon HELEN MORTON:** Because I snore.

Everything worked absolutely perfectly from the minute the bagpipes woke us at six o'clock in the morning. That was our wakeup call every morning.

I will give two examples of how wonderful this summit was for me. We had a breakout group at one stage of about 10 people. I was included in a group of people whom I had not previously met. Many were traditional people for whom English was their third or fourth language. We were pondering our difficult task, and as usual I had plenty to say. One chap, George from Balgo, had his eyes shut, I thought, and seemingly was not taking much notice of what people were saying. After about half an hour of all of us talking, we did our roundup of the group's views and George spoke for the first time. He had produced an amazing drawing, which he interpreted for us in about five minutes. In that drawing and in that interpretation he captured and integrated all the conversations of the entire group for the past half hour. I learned not to underestimate George.

My second example is that on the last day we broke up into three large groups. The women were in one group, the men in another and the young folk in another. We had a serious task to come up with; that is, how to make families strong. We reassembled in about three quarters of an hour and the women presented their information, the men did the same and then the kids did theirs. The kids presented their findings in the form of a play, clearly depicting roles of



a functional family and a dysfunctional family. They left absolutely no doubt at all about what they saw as the responsibility of family in regards to the young folk.

<038> L/3

People spoke openly about grog and gunja, family breakdown and community decay. They described humbug in the context of violence and feuding. In the same way that people react to a heart attack and stop doing things that cause angina et cetera, they talked about restricting the things that trigger slow or spontaneous suicide. The result of the summit was a call to action to restructure the way we address suicide prevention through the family and our communities and with all of us working together. I was absolutely thrilled to see the close fit of the summit communiqué to the state suicide prevention plan, which at that stage was still in draft form. The communiqué is specific to the Kimberley but relevant to the rest of Australia.

The key messages of the communiqué are: to create suicide-proof families through self-imposed conditions such as no grog, no illegal drugs, no child neglect and abuse, no pornography and adherence to a community code of conduct and agreement to use a formal dispute resolution process to resolve feuds; to build communities that are strong on effective internal problem solving, a strong sense of civic virtue and shared recreational and cultural activities open to all; and to train families to be families that can save the lives of people at risk right now, that can be functional and safe families and that nurture individual growth within the family environment and have the capacity for healing and self-care and being able to act and save the lives of the most distressed and acutely troubled people in the community.

I salute the courage of the Victor family and the endeavour of the Billard community in bringing this successful summit together, ably assisted by Kari Kristiansen, the executive advisor to the Billard Aboriginal community and summit director, and Sam Mostyn, the summit facilitator. This family and community are not looking for excuses or for someone else to take responsibility for their circumstances. They are focusing on empowering their own community to make sure their kids have a good education and a safe place to live and that they develop respect for their culture and can easily integrate as and when they need to both their Aboriginal culture and non-Aboriginal elements into their total lifestyle. I thank Stephen Victor and Mary Victor O'Reeri for attending the WA Parliament to present this important communiqué to the Deputy Premier today. I table a copy of the blank page summit communiqué.

[See paper 1140.]

**SPEECH BY MARY VICTOR O'REERI – Thursday 10 September 2009**

**Presentation by Billard Aboriginal Community of the Blank Page Summit Communique to Hon Dr Kim Hames MLA, Minister for Indigenous Affairs**

**Aboriginal People's Gallery, Parliament House  
Perth, Western Australia**

**Good afternoon everyone**

**Hon Dr Kim Hames, MLA, Minister for Indigenous Affairs  
Hon Dr Graham Jacobs, MLA, Minister for Mental Health  
Hon Helen Morton, MLC, Parliamentary Secretary for Mental Health  
Members of the WA and Australian Governments  
Distinguished guests and friends**

**We gather here on the country of the Noongar people – we as countrymen from the Kimberley are very happy to be here on your land on this important occasion.**

**At the outset, on behalf of our community, may I thank the government of Western Australia for its confidence in our community and for walking together with us.**

**Today in the WA Parliament Hon Kim Hames placed on the parliamentary record the significance of the Blank Page Summit on Suicide held at Billard Community in July 2009.**

**He spoke of the importance of us working and walking together to prevent ongoing suicides and of us filling the blank pages before us to make a better future.**

**These are wise and inspiring words.**

**These words – spoken at the highest level in the Parliament – uplift our spirit.**

**It is our pleasure today to present to Dr Hames here in the Aboriginal Peoples' Gallery of the Parliament the Blank Page Summit on Suicide Communique.**

**May I take a few moments to speak about the Communique.**

**Together with my father, Stephen Victor Snr and the rest of my family, we invited 150 people from across Australia to Billard to sit down with us on country to find ways to stop our people taking their own lives and not dying in the proper way.**

**As a direct result of the work we did collectively at the Summit, we are able to share our fundamental message which is that suicide is preventable.**

**Central to preventing suicide is training families to be families.**

**Families don't just happen.**

**Families need an action plan.**

**Families need access to the tools that can make them functional and safe families.**

**This learning has as much relevance to families in Cottesloe, Launceston, Blacktown and Rockhampton as it does to families in the remote Kimberley region.**

**This is because there is a general weakening of society across Australia.**

**Although the economic data suggests we are a prosperous country with an optimistic future, there is clearly a shadow over our society.**

**We are struggling with unemployment, homelessness, poor mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, an inability to care for our children adequately and the means to strengthen the vulnerable among us.**

**We raised these difficult issues at the Summit and we demonstrated that there are solutions. But it requires all of us to have a hard yarn about what matters.**

**We at Billard have opened the door to a process of resolution – it is about walking together to create healthy and functional homes and families, caring and well run communities and bringing people through who are being left behind.**

**Today on World Suicide Prevention Day, on behalf of Billard Aboriginal Community, I present to Hon Kim Hames, Deputy Premier, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Minister for Health, the Blank Page Summit on Suicide Communique.**

**Minister Hames, we formally invite you to join in our call for action.**

**We call upon you to walk together with us in filling the blank pages – let us develop together a safer, more inclusive and suicide-proof society in which the pathways that my brothers chose to tread cease to be rewalked and our children forever grow up to know the joy and magnificence of life and living.**

**Thank you**

## **REMOTE SERVICE DELIVERY NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP WORKSHOP**

**SPEECH BY MARY VICTOR O'REERI**

**PAVILION ON NORTHBOURNE, Canberra ACT  
Tuesday 27 October 2009**

**Good evening everyone – distinguished guests, fellow visitors to Canberra from COAG sites and representatives from the Australian Government and various state governments.**

**First of all, to the traditional owners of this land, I am here in a spirit of respect for your country – thank you.**

**To the Australian Government COAG team in the Kimberley, in particular Richard Aspinall, thank you for the invitation to speak here this evening.**

**As you know, I come from the Beagle Bay area of the Dampier Peninsula in the remote north-west Kimberley.**

**I was one of the last babies born in the old hospital in the Beagle Bay township. It's now a house occupied by the priests. My grandfather was born under a tree about 500 yards away near the store and the oval which are both within walking distance of our family's community known as Billard.**

**In days gone by, the Beagle Bay area (or Ngarlan as it is known in our Nyul Nyul language) was a main place for ceremonies. It was also a major trading post in the region.**

**These days Beagle Bay is still a service centre for the central Dampier Peninsula residents with a clinic, school, Church, store and other services.**

**As most of you know, the Beagle Bay area is also a COAG site under the National Partnership Strategy.**

**Tonight I plan to focus on what I believe it means for our people to be a part of a major investment on the ground such as the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Strategy.**

**I will start with some background to my remarks.**

**In July this year we at Billard held a Blank Page Summit on Suicide on site in the community. We were joined by 147 people from across Australia who shared our aspiration to do something about the ongoing suicides amongst our people. We all lived together on country in a purpose-built tent city for five days.**

**The Summit came from our own deep grief and frustration. We lost our two brothers to suicide a few years ago. The Summit was brought on also by what we felt was a general inertia about the problem. It worried us how people – governments, NGO's, our own people – were getting used to suicide.**

**We decided to bring together people who had the power and capacity to do something about the problem.**

**We knew we needed to start with a blank page. I think Prime Minister Kevin Rudd put it well in his Apology Speech when he talked about ‘laying claim to a future’.**

**He said:**

**“A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.”**

**When you set about fixing a problem, you need to make sure it doesn’t happen again. That is the fundamental goal of problem-solving.**

**When people are dying from suicide – person after person – a lot of milk is already spilt. You can’t bring people back from the dead.**

**As a family, we knew that taking responsibility wasn’t about blame. Nor was it about regret and staying stuck in the torment.**

**It was about finding the courage to have a hard yarn.**

**The hard yarn means being honest. It also means getting to the bottom of the problem.**

**The Blank Page Summit on Suicide provided a perfect launching pad for the hard yarn.**

**We spoke about the triggers for slow suicide. We were honest about the fact that we live in communities where drugs and alcohol are a way of life. Where pornography and the devaluing of women and children are par for the course. Where self-neglect and poor relationships are accepted as normal. All of this makes us lose our ambition to be deadly people with strong and powerful dreams that can come true.**

**The result of the Summit was a call to action by Billard Aboriginal Community.**

**There are three elements to the call to action:**

- 1. To create suicide-proof communities;**
- 2. To train families to be families; *and***
- 3. To strengthen self-care amongst our people.**

**The call to action is designed to attack the roots of the problems that continue to cause low quality of life and slow suicide for our people.**

**The call to action also very much reflects the priority outcomes identified in the strategic framework of the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report.**

**To remind us all, OID’s priorities are:**

1. **Safe, healthy and supportive family environments with strong communities and cultural identity.**
2. **Positive child development and prevention of violence, crime and self-harm.**
3. **Improved wealth creation and economic sustainability for individuals, families and communities.**

When we read the full Summit Communiqué, the OID Key Indicators and numerous other reports, there isn't any significant debate about what we all want for Indigenous Australians.

In turn, when we look into the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Strategy, it's clear that we have a golden opportunity to make some real and tangible headway on our common goals.

As a resident of a COAG site, I'm very optimistic about the road ahead.

I believe that the Strategy's success will depend on a combination of factors. I'd like to take a few moments to talk about them:

1. **Co-operation between governments**

This is something every day folks don't have much control over. We need governments to get on well together. We're used to blame shifting between governments. How governments get on has a direct bearing on the level of hardship on the ground.

2. **Robust relationships**

People make good things happen. People also stop good things happening. The roll-out of the Strategy is a giant food chain. There are so many levels to it and players in it – senior government officials in Canberra, local and regional staff, end users, NGO's and other service providers. What people do on an individual basis will shape the whole look and feel and result of the Strategy.

3. **Proper communication strategies**

It's been said many times – we need to take people with us. I find that communication habits need a lot of work in the world in general. At a community level, where the environment is ripe for paranoia and false yarns and gossip, how we communicate makes a big difference.

4. **Inclusiveness**

The time for the "haves" and "have nots" is finished. What I mean by this is the bad habit of resources being used by a handful for the benefit of a chosen few. This behaviour is not only wrong, it is inhumane. The best way to gain people's trust and confidence is to include them.

5. **Minimum standards**

**Any person who has authority, power or strategic clout in a community, will be watched at every turn for the standards they set. This is how people work out who to respect, who they will listen to, who they hold a good liyarn for.**

**If people can take a stand about bad behaviours in the community and be supported, we'll start to cut through many deep-seated problems like drug and alcohol abuse and illegal activities.**

**Sometimes this means standing up to the bad habits within our own immediate and extended families.**

**Unless and until we do that, we will be leading double lives. People won't take us seriously.**

**To sum up the 'make or break' factors:**

- **Co-operation between governments**
- **Robust relationships**
- **Proper communication strategies**
- **Inclusiveness**
- **Minimum standards**

**You'll notice I haven't included money amongst the success factors.**

**This is because money is not in my top 5.**

**It has a place, of course.**

**But putting biggest mob money into solving Indigenous problems hasn't necessarily delivered big solutions.**

**Turning directly to my own people, I would like to send a reminder that there are many things that only we can do as individuals.**

**Here are six suggestions which I believe can have an immediate impact on our lives irrespective of what government does or doesn't do. These suggestions are based on my own experiences:**

***Number 1***

**Clean up our houses.**

**If someone is staying in your house and they don't sleep in a bed in a bedroom, put a resettlement plan in place for them. No matter they're your nephew, favorite uncle or best friend. Chronic and long-term overcrowding causes life-threatening strain.**

***Number 2***

**Have a medical check-up.**

Take responsibility for your health – don't expect anyone else to do this for you. If you smoke, give up. If you drink alcohol, analyse your drinking pattern and check it's not slowly destroying your life and the lives of those around you. If you smoke marijuana, accept that you are stranded in a cycle that will demotivate you every single day that you put your time, energy and money into your habit. It's also illegal in most parts of Australia.

### *Number 3*

Sort out your financial affairs.

Get rid of your debts including all credit cards. Replace them with a debit card so the only money you can draw out is money that's already yours.

### *Number 4*

If you're unemployed, get a job.

This is about acting like a free person and not a victim.

### *Number 5*

If you're employed, know your value as an employee.

Know more than how much you're paid – find out what your job is really about and what it means for you and your family. Hang on to it and improve on it.

### *Number 6*

Keep up with the rest of the world.

We may live in remote communities but we're part of the world.

Technology, climate change and becoming financially savvy are on our doorstep – we need to come to grips with them.

My final message is to all of us – my own people, government and anyone who has a stake in making a better world.

Many of the wealthiest people in the world got going on the track to their good fortune with very little money and know how. Last year we were lucky enough to receive some funding from Visy Industries to buy a worm farm for the Billard Community Garden. When we heard that the Managing Director of the company was dying – his name was Richard Pratt – we wrote to him personally to thank him for the worm farm. But we also thanked him for his inspiring words and actions. He said one time that you'll always succeed when you stay to the end. Most people drop off along the way, some might go 70 or 80 % of the way. But if you commit and stay to the end you will receive the rewards for your commitment because you will achieve your goals.



**This leads me to the last success factor which I've saved until the end. That is, our commitment.**

**Our commitment is the cornerstone – it will get us through the frustrations and the delays and the blockages.**

**I wish all of you every success in rolling out this important initiative on behalf of the government in the interests of our people.**

**Thank you for your attention.**