

Submission to the Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT

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INTRODUCTION

This submission to the Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT has been developed by the team from the Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation (WYDAC) and members of the Yuendumu community. Throughout this submission, we will attempt to outline our approach to keeping young people in Yuendumu safe from the risk of suicide, and the strategies and ideas we have found successful along the way. However, we present these ideas simply as a working model, which continues to grapple with this and associated at-risk issues on a daily basis. We present our model not as a finalized, ideal, or one-size-fits-all solution to the devastating problem of youth suicide in central Australia; we recognise that *any* suicidal behaviour from young people is too much, and continually struggle to find better ways to work with this problem. Rather, we see that our primary value lies in the collegial and community feedback that we have received over the past four years, and the way we have built this extensive and practical experience into our model. Here, we simply share what we have learnt through those years of late nights, fears, heartbreaking losses, efforts and communions which have informed the birth of these ideas, in the hope that other communities may find them useful.

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SECTION 1:

This section of the submission gives an introduction to the Mt Theo Program (WYDAC). It also introduces the recent, known history of the problem of youth suicide in Yuendumu, and recent, known responses to it.

1.0 An Introduction to WYDAC

The Mt Theo Program (WYDAC) was started in 1993, by elders from Yuendumu community in the Warlpiri region of Central Australia. The Program achieved unprecedented success in successfully ending chronic petrol sniffing in Yuendumu, through a dual focus. The first step was the consistent removal of any petrol sniffers to the remote Mt Theo Outstation for 1-2 months of cultural respite and rehabilitation under the care of Warlpiri elders. The second step was creating a 7 day/night youth diversionary service in Yuendumu filled with sports, art, bush trips and discos to keep Warlpiri youth entertained and engaged.

In 2002 the program expanded, with the Outstation broadening beyond petrol sniffing to other substance abuse, or indeed any youth at risk issues. Similarly in 2003 there was a deepening of basic youth program beyond an 'entertainment' and diversion focus. The Jaru Pirrjirdi (Strong Voices) project continued the youth diversion activities but also built a more comprehensive youth development program incorporating education, training, cultural activities, mentoring, leadership and career pathways. This project seeks to create meaningful and positive futures for Yuendumu youth aged 16-25, and currently has 107 participants and 50 'graduates' following their development pathways.

The success of the Jaru Pirrjirdi project in Yuendumu resonated loudly in other Warlpiri communities. At the express invitation of these communities, youth diversionary programs were begun in Willowra (2005), Nyirrpi (2008) and Lajamanu (2009). Similar to the growth of the Yuendumu youth program these services are growing from an initial solid diversionary base to broader, more comprehensive youth development programs including training, education, employment and leadership outcomes.

In 2008 Mt Theo Program client services were augmented by the creation of the Warra-Warra Kanyi (WWK) Counselling and Mentoring service in Yuendumu. Senior Jaru Pirrjirdi members were employed as WWK youth mentors to work with a WWK Counsellor to target critical youth issues. The WWK team engage with youth issues such as alcohol or other substance abuse, suicidal behaviours, sexual health, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, depression and grief. In the twelve month period to June 2011 WWK worked with 111 young people as well as providing services in crisis response, education, group project work and bush trips.

WYDAC works to facilitate the profound strength and capacity of Warlpiri people to create positive and meaningful futures for Warlpiri youth. The program has grown significantly since its grass-roots inception into a comprehensive program of youth diversion, development, leadership and rehabilitation throughout the Warlpiri region. Most critically Warlpiri people themselves created the program, and its ownership, design and growth remain under the control of the governing committee of Warlpiri people. As community leader and respected local teacher Barbara Martin states, the humble and community-initiated program origins are important to the later outcomes:

“When Mt Theo started, it was the community coming together to deal with the problem of petrol sniffing. We didn't have funding from government; families and some organisations donated a little bit of food or money. It was something

that came from the community, and I think any new program that wants to deal with a problem has to start like this, small and from the community. Ngurlu-jangka, watiya-kirra; it's like a big tree that grew from a small seed. This is a metaphor for the Mt Theo Program, and for how kids grow up and become strong. This is why Yuendumu people feel strong and know how to take action when things are going wrong for their kids."

Barbara Napanangka Martin, October 2011

Throughout the remainder of this submission, we will attempt to outline our approach to keeping young people in Yuendumu safe from the risk of suicide, and the strategies and ideas we have found successful along the way.

1.1 A Short History of the Problem, and Our Responses in Yuendumu

Since approximately July 2006, WYDAC have compiled data regarding the scope of youth suicidal behaviours in Yuendumu, and this data is shared here in the interests of contributing to a large-scale picture of the problem in central Australia. There were undoubtedly ongoing attempts, threats and completed suicides before this time, but we unfortunately do not have reliable data relating to that time. Tragically, this focus and energy upon suicidal behaviours by WYDAC occurred in response to the loss of a young person to suicide in 2005. The next paragraph deals briefly with three deaths by suicide of young people from Yuendumu of which we are aware in the intervening period; families of these young people may wish to avoid reading the next paragraph (although they are not referred to by name).

In mid-2005, a young Warlpiri person in Yuendumu took their own life while in the community. In November 2006, a young person from Yuendumu completed suicide during an extended family visit to another community. Although this young person had been away from Yuendumu for some time, he had been involved with WYDAC and was considered a client at the time of his death. In July 2007, a third young person completed suicide in Yuendumu. All three of these young people were male, and all three had been experiencing personal problems (namely substance misuse and/or relationship issues) at the time of their deaths.

Since July 2007, and the advent of the serious WYDAC focus upon suicide as a serious youth issue, there have been no completed suicides at Yuendumu. However, suicidal behaviour, ideation, threats and attempts from young people are still serious problems, and indeed two young people from other Warlpiri communities have tragically lost their lives to suicide in 2011. Youth suicide continues to be one of the most serious and devastating issues that we – the WWK team and community at Yuendumu – struggle with.

From the period of July 2006 – June 2007, the WYDAC team are aware of 28 separate suicide attempts by young people in Yuendumu (please note that this is a count of attempts, not people – more than one attempt was made by some people during this period). In the following twelve-month period (July 2007 – June 2008), following the concerted efforts of members of the WYDAC team, the number of attempts of which we are aware dramatically reduced to 14. At this stage (that is,

before the formal inception of WWK) suicide prevention work was conducted by members of the Jaru Pirrjirdi team; nonetheless, the refocussing from general youth work, diversionary and youth development activities to a specific suicide prevention and response focus was critical (and significant in terms of effort and time involved). The then Jaru Pirrjirdi coordinator (who possessed tertiary qualifications in psychology) and an experienced male youth mentor began to dedicate their effort and skill towards this issue, with a specific aim to reduce the number of threats, attempts and completed suicides in Yuendumu. These efforts were specifically focused towards young men as a high-risk group, and the group of workers were available on a permanent on-call basis. Although this effort was growing as part of the Jaru Pirrjirdi project at this time, it was the effective birth of the WWK counselling and mentoring service. Sherman Jungarrayi Spencer was a key member of that team, and describes his work during that early period:

“Some of the young people living in Yuendumu have some big problems... they might be thinking about suicide, they might talk about suicide, sometimes they might actually do it. We support young people with counselling and mentoring that fits in with culture. No young Warlpiri person has to worry on their own, we are here to help them. The program is about day trips out bush with mentors and other young fellas. Its also about taking them to sports weekends and getting strong through football. When all the guys are together it’s a good chance to talk about their problem.”

Sherman Jungarrayi Spencer, September 2009

Since July 2008, our data for young people and suicidality has remained fairly constant. In each six-month period, we have on average experienced 2 serious suicide attempts from a young person, and work with an average of 9 young people who are experiencing suicidal ideation or impulses. This is a dramatic change from earlier periods, reflecting those targeted efforts to reduce the risk of suicide for young people in Yuendumu. The model that is described below grew out of these initial, unfunded late-night efforts. The success of the peer mentoring model, and the weight of community support behind it, meant that WYDAC were able to secure federal government support from the Personal Helpers and Mentors project (Mental Health branch, FAHCSIA) and formally establish Warra-Warra Kanyi, our community-based counselling and mentoring service for young Warlpiri people, in December 2008.

SECTION 2:

This part of the submission gives an overview of the WYDAC Counselling and Mentoring project Warra-Warra Kanyi. Special attention is given to those elements of the project that relate most closely to suicide prevention work.

2.0 Warra-Warra Kanyi – An Overview

The Warra-Warra Kanyi (WWK) Project is comprised of five main elements: 1) Prevention and Education; 2) Early Intervention; 3) Peer Mentoring and Counselling; 4) Community and Family Engagement; and 5) Re-engagement with the youth development project, Jaru Pirrjirdi (a full description of WWK is available by contacting the correspondence details below). WWK is a counselling and mentoring project that combines formal, tertiary counselling skills with a local Warlpiri approach and methodology to target high-risk behaviours in Warlpiri people aged approximately 12-25 in Yuendumu community. In the twelve month period to June 2011, WWK worked with 111 young Warlpiri people on a variety of personal risk issues, most notably relationship issues, family violence, substance misuse (alcohol and cannabis) and suicidal and/or self-harming behaviour. The WWK team is uniquely comprised of four important parts: the WWK Coordinator/Counsellor, the WWK Youth Mentor, a team of Jaru Pirrjirdi Trainee Mentors, and the WWK Senior Cultural Advisor.

WWK Counsellor

The WWK Counsellor has two main responsibilities within the project: the administrative running of the project (including the maintenance of detailed client histories and case notes), and the provision of qualified counselling services.

The primary care responsibility for all young people participating in the WWK Counselling and Mentoring project rests with the WWK Counsellor. The provision of therapeutic services from a counsellor with tertiary qualifications is critical to the success of the project in fundamental client care processes, including the development of client care plans, identifying and implementing coping strategies, identifying and accessing sources of support, monitoring and managing risk, and exploring the deeper causes and triggers for the issues in a young person's life. It is important to distinguish the WWK Counsellor role from that of a generalised youth worker providing diversionary activities and general support for youth; the current WWK Counsellor has completed postgraduate study in Counselling (and membership of the Australian Counselling Association), and has lived and worked in Yuendumu for more than five years. The previous and founding WWK Counsellor (not named as such at the time, but essentially fulfilling the same role) has tertiary honours qualifications in psychology (and Masters in Community Development) and has now worked in the Warlpiri community for seven years. This combination of a) professional skill, a) community experience and c) longevity of community relationships has been a crucial factor in the successes that WWK has experienced.

In addition to this, the role of the WWK Counsellor currently involves an on-call element, such that the Counsellor is expected to be available to community members at all times, day or night, weekends, and public holidays (with clear on-call protocols covered by other appropriate WYDAC staff members during periods of annual leave). As such, both of the WWK Counsellors that the project has employed have had a strong commitment to living full time in Yuendumu community, and a focus upon having an active role in community life. Although the management team and the board at WYDAC are very understanding of the difficulties of these hours, and allow for considerable flexibility in rostering, it must be clearly understood in terms of

planning and modeling, that the average weekly workload for the WWK Counsellor is well above a normal full time load, almost without exception. This is evidenced in our client care data for the period from July 2010 to June 2011, when the WWK Counsellor had 1673 therapeutic contacts with 111 youth clients. (It would certainly be possible, and perhaps even preferable, for prospective future programs to split this role into two counselling positions so that more rostered time off can occur, thus contributing to increased sustainability).

The WWK Counsellor is also responsible for the maintenance of interagency relationships for the project. As with any client care/case management service, productive and fruitful partnerships are key to success, and we are very fortunate in Yuendumu to have some very skilled and generous partners to work with. Of particular note are our relationships with other mental health organisations that provide services to Yuendumu, including Central Australian Mental Health Service, the General Practitioners Network NT, the Mental Health Association of Central Australia (based in Alice Springs but collegially supportive of WWK in Yuendumu), the Yuendumu Clinic team and Mobile Outreach Service. In the first six months of 2011, we had 36 collaborative contacts with these other mental health services; the stream of communication with these agencies flows freely in both directions, with many referrals or expressions of concern coming from these agencies to WWK and vice versa. Other important community partners for the care of young people include the Yuendumu Police (77 contacts), the Yuendumu School (13 contacts), Legal Aid services (20 contacts) and Community Corrections (14 contacts). On average, the WWK Counsellor attends just over thirty meetings per month with partner agencies, indicating that this is a significant and important role within the project.

WWK Youth Mentor

WWK Youth Mentors are young Warlpiri people who have demonstrated particular strength, skill and capacity at caring for their at-risk peers. The WWK Youth Mentor position works very closely with and reports to the WWK Counsellor, who in turn supports the development of, and provides professional supervision to, the Youth Mentor. The WWK Youth Mentor is an active collaborator in the care of appropriate clients (with primary care responsibilities remaining with the WWK Counsellor).

There is currently one young Warlpiri person employed as a WWK Youth Mentor (although there is capacity for other young people to develop into similar roles). This young person was identified through his involvement in the Jaru Pirrjirdi peer development project (namely, young men's football activities), where he demonstrated distinct leadership qualities, and a keen interest in helping young men who were experiencing difficulty. The WWK Youth Mentor is a lifelong member of the Warlpiri community, with extensive family ties across the four Warlpiri communities. He possesses considerable interpersonal and communication skills, and has the ability to work in a culturally sensitive way, as well as having pursued workshop-based training to develop his capacity to respond to young people in need. He is currently engaged in the early stages of a Certificate IV in Mental Health Work.

It is critical to note that the WWK Youth Mentor is carefully matched with his clients based upon important local factors such as family and skin relationships, gender, and ceremonial status. There are some WWK clients with whom it would be inappropriate

and indeed harmful for this young person to work (for this reason, WWK strives to continually develop a pool of ‘trainee’ mentors from the Jaru Pirrjirdi project – see below). It is also important and intentional that the current WWK Youth Mentor is male, given that the current WWK Counsellor is female.

Typically, the WWK Youth Mentor will become aware of a risk situation very early in its development, through his close relationships with at-risk young people, his status as a helpful and supportive person in the community, and his increased awareness and experience of signs and symptoms of risk in the remote context. The Mentor will typically raise the attention of the WWK coordinator, often in partnership with the young person’s family, and sometimes with the young person themselves. His experience and capacity means that he is able to deploy basic safety strategies, such as ensuring that the young person is not left alone, while further help is sought.

The WWK Youth Mentor also assists in the ongoing case management support of some clients. Weekly young men’s mentoring trips, for example, are a regular event that involves the WWK Youth Mentor, Jaru Pirrjirdi Trainee Mentors and a group of at-risk young men with whom the team are currently working. Going out bush and hunting means that counselling and mentoring takes place with appropriate people, in an appropriate setting (in the bush and out of community) and during an appropriate activity (for example, whilst hunting or whilst sitting together for 1-2 hours and waiting for the kangaroo to cook). In the first six months of 2011, nine mens hunting trips were conducted (that is, weekly since mid-April; prior to this, vehicle availability and extended staff leave had made these trips difficult to conduct). To give some idea of the scope of the Youth Mentor’s role, in the last financial year he had 344 therapeutic contacts with 24 male WWK clients, as well as participating in numerous projects, events and trips to support these young men.

Jaru Pirrjirdi Trainee Mentors

The Trainee Mentors are a group of young people who are currently active in the Jaru Pirrjirdi youth development project, and who have demonstrated a clear interest and capacity for helping at-risk peers. They are casually employed, operate under the close supervision of the WWK Counsellor (and, where appropriate, the WWK Youth Mentor) and are ‘matched’ with suitable clients according to important local and cultural factors such as gender, family group and skin name. This not only ensures that Trainee Mentors are in very frequent contact with their at-risk peers, but importantly that they are well-placed and appropriate people to work with young people involved in WWK.

Trainee Mentors are significant and powerful in this field for a variety of reasons. There is a particular reliance and use of the Trainee Mentors as a unique ‘early warning’ or risk-identification system. It is our experience that at high risk times, such as late at night or when substance misuse is a factor in a situation, the only other people present are peers. In these situations, the Trainee Mentors represent the crucial link between a developing crisis, and professional assistance. Usually, Jaru Pirrjirdi Trainee Mentors have struggled with and successfully resolved issues in their own lives which are similar to those faced by youth in crisis; hence, their mentorship is particularly relevant, effective and appropriate. Youth mentors will often have genuine, direct, honest and insightful advice on preventative behaviours, coping

strategies and positive pathways. Evidence of this capacity came in the last financial year, when 21 Jaru Pirrjirdi Trainee Mentors had 312 therapeutic contacts with 70 WWK clients.

In addition to this, peer status is particularly powerful and important in Warlpiri youth culture. Through kinship and ceremonial systems, Warlpiri youths have formal obligations and responsibilities of care and protection towards certain other youths. Each person is in a particular relationship with each other and there is an appropriate peer to provide validated and skilful support. The exact same kind of support may not be accepted from a different peer (or indeed older person, or other mental health professional) simply because they are not the trusted or appropriate person to deliver this support. The WWK mentoring system is thus an attempt to further support and employ these traditional and functional care systems.

The role of the WWK Counsellor is a critical element to the success of our youth mentoring model. This support is integral to the safety of Trainee Mentors and their young clients. The WWK Counsellor is responsible for making critical safety decisions regarding a young person at risk (for example, deciding at which point clinical services or even the police need to be involved). This would be a very difficult decision for a Trainee Mentor to make, not only because they have not yet received the clinical training and experience that allow them to safely make these judgement calls, but also because WWK clients are often closely related to them and there may be family or cultural reasons that make these decisions difficult. The WWK Counsellor is also able to provide debriefing and supervision to the team of Trainee Mentors, in the interests of increasing their knowledge and capacity, and avoiding fatigue or 'burnout'. There are currently efforts underway within the WWK team to develop a 'basic skills' training package for mentors, with a local focus, that will help to enhance the knowledge and safety of Trainee Mentors.

Finally, given that the Trainee Mentors have usually had a personal experience of risk or difficulty themselves, the WWK Counsellor role is critical in continuing to monitor the Trainee Mentors and ensuring that they are not undertaking unduly difficult or taxing care tasks at a time when they need to give attention to their own ongoing recovery. Further, due to the permanent on-call role of the WWK Counsellor, Trainee Mentors are confident in the knowledge that other members of the WWK team will respond to help them, and no matter what the day or time, are aware that they can phone, knock on doors or come into offices, and have their concerns dealt with immediately.

Professional Support for Mentors

WWK Youth and Trainee Mentors are closely supported by the coordinator of the WWK team (who has tertiary qualifications in counselling, social work or psychology) and the WWK Senior Cultural Advisor (who is a senior person in the Warlpiri community, able to provide cultural support and guidance for the work of the youth mentors). Elders of the Warlpiri community frequently provide further support to the mentoring process, as do interagency partners such as the staff at the Yuendumu clinic, who increasingly recognise the protective benefits of the youth mentoring mode.

The Senior Cultural Advisor acts as a cultural supervisor and advisor, particularly for the non-Warlpiri staff of Warra-Warra Kanyi (and more broadly, other WYDAC and external agency staff). The WWK Senior Cultural Advisor also plays an important outreach and support role to the Mt Theo Outstation and to other Warlpiri communities requesting support. Finally, the WWK Senior Cultural Advisor plays an important supervisory role in the development of culturally relevant Warlpiri mentoring and counselling resources.

“This is the way we work with young people inside our Warra-Warra Kanyi project. In the centre sits a young fella. He gets into some kind of trouble – the trouble might be grog, gunja, fighting or worrying too much and these things make him sick in his heart. He is *milyapinja-wangu* – he’s forgetting everything he knows, and the right way to act, poor thing. There are different ways we might work with him. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers might be sitting together with that young person and helping him. We might show him that he is surrounded by his community, who are gathering round him and supporting him. And we see young man getting stronger and sitting with his family. In this way, he will get his memory and his strength back again. Yuwayi.”

Jean Napanangka Brown, February 2010

SECTION 3

Having familiarised the reader with the local context and the general structure of WWK, this section of the submission consists of specific strategies or experiences drawn out of the WWK model that are particularly relevant to suicide prevention for young people; namely, specific aspects of our crisis response approach, and the specific issue of cannabis misuse as it relates to suicide risk.

3.0 Crisis Intervention

The crisis response model described here has developed organically over many years, and reflects the efforts and ideas of the Warlpiri community, the WYDAC board and the WWK team. As will be explored here, we suggest that the crucial key in preventing and responding to suicidal behaviours is having responsive, local and informed people available in the community on a permanent basis. It is equally important that this team comprise people with local knowledge and people with qualified experience in the field. These are key emphases across the four points that are explored in greater detail below.

a) Empowering families/peers to seek help

As we have noted above, peer youth mentors are often the first people to recognise when a young person is at risk of suicidal behaviour; thus, the ability of families and the community to recognise suicide risk and respond to it appropriately is key. As such, the WWK team consider encouraging families to communicate their concerns as early as possible to be a key suicide prevention strategy. Indeed, in the six-month period between January and June 2011, 85% of WWK referrals came from family members of young people, a rate that is consistent across the years we have been keeping data.

The WWK team actively pursues relationships with a broad range of community and family members at Yuendumu, engaging them in discussions about risk issues affecting the community or specific families, and sharing ideas about warning signs and appropriate help-seeking strategies if a crisis does develop. This ongoing relational maintenance is often informal – a chat at the shop, a cup of tea on the verandah of our office or homes, or time spent together while enjoying community events. It is, however, a crucial strategy for building awareness and capacity in families and team members, and overcoming the strength of suicide as a frightening and difficult subject to speak about. In this way, relational expertise and fulfillment becomes a key strength of workers.

More formally, these capacity-building strategies have been addressed through suicide prevention training that's made available to community/family members, such as Suicide Story¹ (delivered at Mt Theo in September 2010) and Mental Health First Aid² (delivered at Mt Theo in June 2011).

Of greatest importance, however, is acting upon this increased capacity and awareness from families/community members when a young person is in crisis. In our experience, there is a self-perpetuating relationship between a rapid, consistent, high-quality response to a crisis situation, and a family's capacity to seek help and raise the alarm when that crisis situation arises.

“In my family we have had problems with young people who feel like they want to do suicide. It is very frightening for my husband and me, because we love our son so much but when he is acting like that he just won't listen to us or settle

¹ Suicide Story reference

² MHFA reference

down. When that is happening we need somebody to come and give us help straight away, as soon as we ring up, not to wait for a long time. We ring up to (a WWK team member) who comes around straight away with our son's big brother-in-law. They know our son really well and he usually listens to them and jumps in the car to go for a ride and settle down without feeling shame. It's better this way for our son, if we ring the police he'll only feel more upset and wild. When he comes home later on, the Mt Theo mob will keep visiting him and making sure he is ok. So now we know if a young person is talking like that or thinking about suicide, we can ring up those workers straight away."

Napurrurla, September 2011

A family who is confident of a helpful response is more likely to seek help effectively and early; we observe these skills in many Yuendumu families when faced with conflict. It is our anecdotal experience that such families will be more likely to closely monitor their at-risk young people, actively prevent their young people from walking/running away by themselves (family members will follow or physically restrain them), picking up dangerous implements or using these instruments to attempt to harm or kill themselves; in short, these families appear to be more likely and able to actively contain a crisis until help arrives. On the contrary, a family who requests help and receives inconsistent, delayed or no response will eventually lose hope and confidence in their ability to contain the situation, and may eventually stop responding to threats or actions around suicide.

b) Local Predictive Knowledge and Anticipation of Risk

Over many long years of experience and communication with the community at Yuendumu, the WWK team is able to identify critical periods or situations when a risk situation is likely to develop. This predictive knowledge is crucial in developing an understanding of a 'local calendar' which will enable the specific targeting and preparation for particularly high risk nights, weeks or times of year. This allows useful preparation of staff, of resources, and early preventive work with families and peers and external agencies such as the police.

This predictive calendar can be built by interpretation of community rhythms and events such as paydays, the return travel day of football matches from Alice Springs, after sports weekends, funerals, royalty payments, and so on. It can also be built through the active maintenance of contact with families, as information around this kind of prospective risk is often expressed informally. Longer periods of time can also be predictive of higher risk such as the several weeks before the local sports carnival and the several weeks after men's ceremonial business. On a more immediate scale, it has been noted that the vast majority of crisis incidents take place at night time, and usually on weekend nights (Thursday-Saturday). Thus a WWK presence and/or availability on these nights heightens the potential for prevention, early intervention, diversion or immediate crisis response, and we would imagine that any suicide prevention project that wishes to respond to crisis situations would have a similar availability over these high-risk periods.

Importantly, the WWK team includes people who have lived in Yuendumu for a considerable period of time (this is particularly the case for peer mentors and elders,

who have typically lived in Yuendumu for their entire lives!). This means the WWK team will usually have a high degree of knowledge about the young person, their history, their relationships with others in their families and, in many cases, a sense of those responses which will be most useful in a given situation. All of these factors assist towards providing a rapid, appropriate response to the crisis situation. Over a long period of time, the Mt Theo Program has been trusted by the Warlpiri community to care for young people at risk; this trust is continually earned by WWK team members through their effort, successes and active relational maintenance. This concept of the 'right' to worry and care for a young person, when recognised by that young person's family, can be another critical factor in effective suicide prevention care.

c) Giving consistent, appropriate responses to suicidal behaviour

This section will look at the ways a Warlpiri family in Yuendumu typically seeks help during a crisis, in the interests of planning appropriate services to respond to this. It will also briefly examine the aspects of interagency collaboration that are part of our model. We will then briefly examine some key suicide intervention skills/strategies that we have found particularly relevant or useful in our context.

As was stated above at length, the importance of a rapid, appropriate response to the concerns of families about their young people is absolutely vital in increasing the community's own capacity at dealing with suicidal attempts, threats and behaviours. In this sense, it is useful to reflect upon what an appropriate response actually constitutes. When they have concerns about a young person, the key sources of support that a Warlpiri family are likely to turn to are the WWK team, the local police and the local clinic. Given the widespread use and availability of mobile phones in Yuendumu, this initial request for help is likely to take place via a phone call. Less frequently, families may approach the service directly (out of hours, this might mean approaching the house where the clinic ambulance is parked, approaching the police station on foot and ringing the phone at the front door, or approaching the home of a WWK team member). Thus it is imperative that those services identified as a source of support are able to receive phone calls on a 24 hour basis, and are able to consistently respond in a rapid manner. These issues of access and response, although basic and logistical, are absolutely crucial, as it has been our experience that a family who asks for help and doesn't receive it will be less likely to raise the alarm about a potential suicide risk in the future.

In this context, the decision of the NT police at the beginning of 2011 to change the way that the local community accesses the services of local police officers was extremely disappointing. Out of hours requests for emergency assistance (including late at night and on weekends, when most crisis situations develop) are now often forwarded to a national call centre, and the decision about whether or not to respond to a request for help lies outside the power of the local police. This system undermines the knowledge, experience and skills of local police officers who have consistently done an excellent job in Yuendumu of responding to crisis situations and keeping young people in their community safe. Furthermore, it discourages and frustrates family members who may feel they are not being responded to appropriately; as noted above, this might have the effect of discouraging family

members from seeking help at all, especially in those crucial early stages of a crisis situation developing.

The WWK team attempt to encourage this kind of access by community members, on any day and at any time of the day or night, in the interests of providing an immediate response to a young person in crisis and their family. As noted above, the WWK youth mentoring model forms a key point of access. There is a staff member with professional qualifications on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with a special focus and preparedness around those high-risk times identified through local knowledge (see above). WYDAC staff live in the community on a permanent basis, compared with other services who have their staff based in major centres like Alice Springs and are only able to travel to communities like Yuendumu on weekdays; we well recognise and sympathise with the frustrations of these workers, who are often spreading their time between several communities. WYDAC management are sympathetic to these needs and allow for flexibility within the rostering of the WWK team, allowing for late nights and long weekend hours.. All of this combines to create a service that is useful to, and very frequently used by, the community; since July 2011, for example, the WWK team have experienced an average of nearly three weekly callouts for assistance after hours by Warlpiri families. The qualitative responses from families indicate that the WWK team is a culturally safe and accepted source of support, who are able to work closely with young people over a sustained period. Families are aware that young people are more accepting of help from the WWK team than other sources of support (for example, a young person with existing criminal matters will likely be highly resistant to the intervention of the local police, despite the best efforts of local officers); however families are also aware that the WWK team won't hesitate to involve other relevant agencies when necessary (typically the police, in a situation of extreme volatility or violence, or the clinic, when a referral to clinical mental health services is deemed appropriate).

Indeed, interagency collaboration and knowledge is another beneficiary of the WWK model. Because families are approaching the WWK team directly when a crisis occurs, and due to the broad and balanced nature of our team's experience and training, we are able to share a wealth of information with clinical and other support services who might be providing support to that young person. Often this will entail communication with other arms of WYDAC, who are able to tailor specific diversionary or development activities for the young person; other mental health or case management services have also become close partners in care, who may otherwise not have known about these crises or issues that arise out of hours. Finally, our consistent responses and attendant reliable reputation in the community have allowed us to develop a large-scale picture of the rates and nature of suicidal behaviours, attempts and threats in Yuendumu, as we are reasonably confident of our knowledge of most, if not all, incidences of suicidality in young people (aged 25 and under) over the past five years.

The WWK team, through their long experience in Warlpiri communities and often close familial relationships with youth at risk, are able to identify key and locally specific needs of Warlpiri young people in crisis. The expressive style of Warlpiri young people, and the deeper nature and meaning of suicidal ideation and attempts in contemporary Warlpiri culture, are subjects probably beyond the scope of this

submission and the cultural authority of its writer; however, it is extremely important to note in the context of suicide prevention work that particular acts, expressions and interpretations might have cultural meanings that will affect our suicide prevention work. Here, we will briefly identify two key concepts – the need for exit and movement from a crisis situation, and the concept of ‘showing’ oneself and one’s risk.

The exit and movement concept refers to the spatial and kinaesthetic needs of Warlpiri youth in crisis. The need to exit a situation is predicated on the need to remove the powerful tripartite concepts of the 1) need for the young person to continue public demonstrations of the extent of their negative emotions 2) the need to remove/disrupt blame cycles (especially, for example, where suicidal behaviour or threats are taking place concurrently with harmful or violent actions towards others) and 3) disruption of fixation on harmful idea or action and thus shift the intensity of the situation. The WWK team has become an accepted next step or alternative in a crisis situation whereby a young person can leave that situation as a trusted next step without any great shame, which is a further very powerful concept for Warlpiri youth. Movement of the young person around or just outside of the community in a vehicle has been shown to be a useful strategy for literally transporting the young person through their period of most intense risk; it is a safe, contained environment that is relatively anonymous to the general community, and usually contains enough stimulation or diversionary qualities to calm a young person’s suicidal fixation that may occur in a crisis situation. (This movement strategy also reduces extremely risky behaviour such as trying to run away from, or evade, concerned family members while making suicidal threats). Please note that these strategies are only employed when the WWK Coordinator has decided that the situation is safe to do so, and that this is often a decision made in collaboration with local police or clinic staff.

The concept of ‘showing oneself’ is associated with knowledge of the time period over which a suicide crisis may play out. There are well-known local constructs associated with suicide risk in Yuendumu, and the WWK team are well placed to decipher these. For example, some crisis situations require the safe passage of a young person through a critical ‘spike’ of short-term, very high risk behaviour, perhaps only lasting 10 or 15 minutes. If a young person can be successfully kept safe during this critical period, then it is highly likely that they will continue to be safe for a period of time, with subsequent work focusing on the maladaptive function of the suicidal behaviour as a response to pressure or stress in the first place. Other young people may experience a more sustained risk over time, and may actively shield or hide this risk from those who would seek to help them, producing a sense of ‘false calm’ that might evaporate as soon as they re-enter the antagonistic situation. In these situations it is imperative that would-be helpers recognise the ‘false calm’ and attendant long-term or ongoing risk to the young person; the WWK youth mentoring structure, in conjunction with close ongoing communication with families and long-term knowledge of the young person and the context, means that the WWK team is usually able to fulfill this recognition task well. Young people, families and community members are aware that the WWK team will not leave a young person until they are absolutely deemed to be safe, to the extent that they will be prepared to spend several hours sitting with or attending to that young person. As is stated above, it is also clear that the WWK team will not hesitate to involve other useful services in managing or containing this ongoing risk. This commitment has been demonstrated

countless times by the WWK team, is thus widely known and understood by the community, and consequently has engendered further trust in the WWK method and practices.

d) “Warra-Warra Kanyi” - Ongoing Care

“We also work to stop an emergency from happening. Usually this happens late at night, so we work any time. For example, we might see someone coming into the community who is really drunk or stoned. We know that young person has talked about suicide in the past. So we watch that young person to keep him safe until he is sober. Sometimes we get family members for him. Other times we get help from police or night patrol. We also keep an eye on him after he has calmed down. We always make sure there is a brother or sister or cousin with him for company. The next day we will talk to that young person about not drinking or smoking too much. If they were talking suicide way, we would ask them why. We help him to think about the reason for living. Sometimes I have seen a young man cry when he thinks about his younger brother or sister, how they will miss him and be so sad if he dies. I talk to him about his important role in his family and in the community as a young Warlpiri man. We might talk about the things he’s good at and ways he can learn new things. ... We can help young people to get a job, or a driver’s license. We work with these young fellas so they can grow into strong, proud Warlpiri people.”

Sherman Jungarrayi Spencer, September 2009

Beyond crisis situations, the WWK team work closely with young people who have experienced suicidal thoughts, impulses, threats or attempts, in the interests of dealing with the issues underlying these problems and moving them forward towards a positive future pathway. Our case management work with Warlpiri young people is described more fully in the WWK project description (available by emailing counsellor@mttheo.org), however we would like to draw attention to some relevant points in the context of this discussion.

The youth mentoring model/process has been discussed at length, but must once again be referenced as a truly foundational element of our method. The peer mentoring strategy ensures that counselling and mentoring practise happens in an appropriate and youth-friendly location, which is usually removed from a traditional clinical or therapeutic setting. The WWK approach also attempts to take into account the needs, values and vulnerabilities of young Warlpiri people. This sensitivity can be clearly seen in the way that mentors approach and interact with our young clients:

“Sometimes the young fella doesn’t wanna talk straight away about what happened, he might feel shame or maybe wanna keep it private. I let him be quiet, I won’t put too much pressure on him, I wait until I feel that he trusts me. I just concentrate on talking about how we can help him and how he can get help from me any time, how he might do that. We might get some food and drink, find out what the young fella needs, visit other family or friends, and maybe pick up other young fellas to remind him that he is part of our group.

Some of us might talk to him together and make him feel safe. Sometimes it might take two or three days of doing that before I will ask the young fella, “Do you want to tell me about what happened?” and he might say yes. Then I sit quiet and listen and he might tell me everything. Usually the young fellas and especially the parents are really happy to see me come and pick that young fella up and to spend time with him.”

Aaron Jakamarra Bradshaw, WWK Youth Mentor, September 2011

The existence of the Jaru Pirrjirdi (‘Strong Voices’) youth development project (another key element of WYDAC – see above) is the final critical element of our model. Jaru Pirrjirdi gives young people in Yuendumu an opportunity to explore their hopes and dreams for the future and receive support to achieve their goals, while making a positive contribution to their community. The attendant sense of self-worth and hope is immeasurably valuable to a young person who is attempting to move forward from a period of difficulty and risk, and our ultimate goal for WWK participants is re-engagement with Jaru Pirrjirdi and movement along a positive future pathway.

3.1 Cannabis Misuse Strategies and Suicide Prevention

We have included this special section dealing with cannabis misuse, because it has been our experience that heavy cannabis misuse in our program participants has been associated with a higher risk of suicidal ideation, threats and attempts. We would consider that any sustained effort to deal with youth suicide across the region must also attempt to work with the underlying problem of cannabis misuse.

It would appear that reduced social activity/engagement associated with high rates of cannabis misuse, as well as well-documented physiological effects, may be instrumental in raising the level of suicide risk. A growing community awareness and concern around cannabis misuse itself, even when not associated with suicidal behaviours, is increasingly identified as a problem by Warlpiri communities; as a result of this renewed focus and energy, and the community development approach outlined below, the WWK team has been able to work with increasing numbers of young people misusing cannabis who had hitherto gone undetected. From July 2009 to June 2010, WWK worked with 9 young people experiencing problems related to cannabis use, whereas from July 2010 to June 2011 this number had increased to 26. During this period, the Mt Theo Outstation also admitted 10 young people who were struggling with cannabis misuse. This trend reflects a growing community awareness and experience of the mental health dangers of sustained, heavy cannabis use.

a) Community Development Approach – Awareness and Prevention

The WWK team attempts to deal with the problem of cannabis use through direct awareness-raising and capacity building within the local community. In 2007, Warlpiri elders from Yuendumu, together with members of the WWK team and other community organisations, formed an informal group of concerned people who wished to take action around the cannabis problems that were emerging in the community. This group named themselves the Gunja Action Group, and developed a number of strategies that may assist in the reduction of cannabis misuse in Yuendumu. The

group meets together roughly quarterly, although much more frequently, communication among members takes place through much smaller, regular, informal interactions. The Gunja Action Group has been successful at raising the profile of the problem of cannabis misuse among community members, as well as developing specific strategies around such issues as supply reduction (see below).

This community development strategy has also seen the development within the WWK team of Warlpiri resources for dealing with cannabis misuse, in the interests of providing education and prevention services to young people and their communities. Community elder Lottie Williams has recently produced a painting for WWK, “Ngurruju Nginyi-Nginyi Manu Ngawu Nginyi-Nginyi”, demonstrating the psycho-social effects of cannabis on young users and focusing on the metaphor of the brain as a way of telling this story. Lottie has developed a strong narrative that accompanies her painting, as a comprehensive resource for speaking with young people about the dangers of cannabis misuse.

Jaru Pirrjirdi graduates Azaria Robertson and Francis Forrest have also joined up with WWK mentor Aaron Bradshaw, Mt Theo Outstation Assistant Coordinator Steven Marshall and PAW designer Jason Woods to produce a graphic poster illustrating the effects of ongoing cannabis misuse, with a particular focus towards young men and linking the health effects of cannabis misuse with sport. (We anticipate that this poster will be completed in late 2011).

b) Counselling and Mentoring for Individuals - WWK

Case management by the professional WWK Counsellor is the centerpiece of the WWK response to cannabis misuse in individual young people. The WWK Counsellor, often with support from the WWK Mentors, will work with the young person to identify risk factors and triggers; identify, strengthen and employ coping strategies and sources of support; develop and ongoing recovery plan, and strategies to support it; and provide educational information to the young person around the risks associated with ongoing cannabis misuse. The WWK Counsellor is also primarily responsible for liaison and engagement of the family of the young person in their ongoing care. The WWK Youth Mentor is able to target these individuals for weekly men’s trips, and reinforces the messages being presented by the Counsellor. The WWK Youth Mentor and the Trainee mentors are also able to continually monitor their at-risk peer for signs of relapse.

As has been described above, our ultimate aim for working with young people who are misusing cannabis is to admit them to the Mt Theo Outstation for a suitable period of respite and cultural rehabilitation. If this isn’t possible (due, for example, to cultural or clinical risk factors) then that young person’s care will usually adopt a heavy focus upon re-engagement with Jaru Pirrjirdi youth development. This may often also involve re-engagement with Yuendumu school, or other educational opportunities. Community and family members are continually involved in the monitoring and identification of at-risk young people who are misusing cannabis, and this is a key component to the ongoing success and validity of our work; in our

previous six month reporting period, there were 271 family contacts conducted by the WWK team.

c) Rehabilitation - Mt Theo Outstation

In the WWK team, our ultimate goal for any young person who is misusing cannabis is to admit them to the Mt Theo Outstation, where they have the opportunity to undergo cultural rehabilitation and a period of detoxification with support from experienced Warlpiri carers. This is an incredibly useful tool in assisting young Warlpiri people to deal with their cannabis misuse, as it gives young people respite from the pressures, demands and temptations of community life that may lead them to continue their misuse, despite wanting to stop. In the twelve month period from July 2010 to June 2011, the Mt Theo Outstation admitted 10 young people who were experiencing problems with cannabis misuse.

The successes of the Mt Theo Outstation lie in its unique emphasis upon cultural rehabilitation, the bedrock of which involves the instilling of cultural knowledge and strength by senior Warlpiri people as an integral underpinning of the health and well-being of Warlpiri youth. Aside from the inherent value of sustaining Warlpiri culture, it has overwhelmingly been our experience that the strongest, most empowered Warlpiri youth who are connected to, and confident within, their cultural identity, move naturally away from cycles of violence, self-harm, substance misuse and criminal behaviour towards more positive and meaningful life pathways. Mt Theo fosters a strong link with Warlpiri culture and with all the inherent benefits embedded in that culture for at-risk Warlpiri youth. It is a place where strong, positive, healthy Warlpiri identity is forged, promoted, practiced and imparted. The physical place Mt Theo (Puturlu) has enormous significance as a cultural site among Warlpiri people, containing powerful Jukurrpa (Dreaming) sites and stories.

We also recognise that there are occasionally reasons that a young person experiencing significant problems with cannabis misuse is unable to be admitted to Mt Theo (for example, if they are experiencing serious mental health problems that would place them in danger living in such a remote place). In these cases, WWK and the youth mentoring model becomes the main mode of care for that young person in Yuendumu (see above); nonetheless, daytrips and overnight excursions to Mt Theo will usually still be very useful.

d) Youth Development – Jaru Pirrjirdi

With specific reference to cannabis misuse, the opportunities that Jaru Pirrjirdi offers in moving forwards to more positive pathways is an integral part of recovery from substance misuse. Of the 111 young people WWK worked with from July 2010 – June 2011, 50 exited WWK to become active Jaru Pirrjirdi members. Of particular relevance for young people recovering from cannabis misuse is the opportunity offered at the first stage of Jaru Pirrjirdi, where young people are engaged as trainees within the diversionary youth program at Yuendumu. This opportunity gives young people a positive, meaningful way to spend their time, having fun and contributing to their community while gaining skills and the opportunity to move into casual and then full time employment. The youth culture at Yuendumu is such that those young Jaru

Pirrjirdi youth program trainees are very highly regarded by young people and older community members alike.

Jaru Pirrjirdi also supports access to education, training and employment, with Jaru Pirrjirdi Night Club (re-engagement with school and formal education) running 56 times in the first six months of 2011, and 14 long-term development projects (such as music production, filmmaking and training trips) taking place in the same period. Through Jaru Pirrjirdi, a young person also has contact with many capable and skilled workers, from Jaru Pirrjirdi Trainee Mentors, to full-time Youth Workers, to the Jaru Pirrjirdi Coordinator; all of these groups of people are aware of, and can monitor for, increased risk in Jaru Pirrjirdi participants.

e) Supply Reduction – Yuendumu Community and Police

The WWK team and the community members with whom we work closely view the supply of cannabis to be a large obstacle to preventing cannabis misuse in Yuendumu. As such, we have established an extensive network of responsible people who are able to watch out for cannabis misuse in their own homes, and their family's homes, with a particular focus upon young people who are gaining access to cannabis. Identifying these sources of cannabis helps elders and community leaders to raise the issue of cannabis misuse as an important local issue at meetings or community discussions. Alternatively, elders, WYDAC board members and WWK team members are sometimes able to directly approach this problem and speak to members of a household where cannabis is easily available; often, however, this information is passed along to the local police who can then act on it as appropriate.

Some remote community members have expressed that they feel uncomfortable approaching the police directly about their concerns, as they did not wish to cause problems with their families or neighbours. This is especially true of younger community members who have concerns about cannabis use among their peers. In this way, the Gunja Action Group is able to act as an intermediary between young community members and police in sharing information about the transport and availability in Yuendumu (and sometimes, in Alice Springs as well). We will continue to share information with the police in the interests of reducing the supply of cannabis into Yuendumu; in the six months to June 2011, the WWK team had a total of 77 contacts with the Yuendumu police, which is consistent across the life of the project.

SECTION 4: SUMMARY OF KEY STRATEGIES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

4.1 Summary of Key Strategies for the Select Committee

WYDAC experience demonstrates the following elements are critical to an effective preventative and therapeutic model of care to address youth suicide:

1. A permanent, locally-based qualified counsellor with significant time and relevant experience in the community, and ideally, adequate resources to ensure appropriate relief by a second qualified professional.
2. Peer mentoring - particularly critical in raising awareness during crisis situations.
3. Programs that are locally developed, preferably based in a non-government organisation or community-oriented/outreach clinic
4. Rapid, consistent, accessible, local and informed crisis response to address suicide attempts, and preventing attempts from becoming completed suicides
5. Ongoing suicide prevention incorporating a holistic view, involving a youth development type model (or solid link with an appropriate youth development service) focusing upon education, development, wellbeing, and diversion
6. Efforts to address suicidal behaviour in Central Australia must also seek to address cannabis misuse as a significant underlying factor in suicide risk.

4.2 Correspondence Details and Acknowledgements

This submission has been compiled for consideration by the Northern Territory Government's Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT. Correspondence details for this submission are:

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