



## Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Social and Emotional Wellbeing, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

# Workforce Wellbeing – Position Statement

## About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention. As a community-controlled organisation, it is governed and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and peak bodies, working in these areas to promote collective excellence in mental health care.

## Summary

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce plays a critical role in supporting social emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention within Indigenous communities. Through their knowledge, skills, and expertise, these workers are instrumental in developing culturally appropriate interventions and strategies to support the mental health and wellbeing of their communities.

It is the position of Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia (GDPSA) that the wellbeing of this workforce is paramount to the Australian health systems ability to deliver adequate and accessible care. It is important to recognise the inherent challenges that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social emotional wellbeing, mental health and suicide prevention workforce faces and the complexities of workforce wellbeing in this context.

Gayaa Dhuwi promotes workforce wellbeing as a key priority for all workplaces. As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social emotional wellbeing, mental health and suicide prevention we advocate for structural change and social justice to address the underlying social determinants of health and improve social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As a collective voice we ask that all levels of government increase their investment into the mental health, suicide prevention and social emotional and wellbeing Indigenous workforce and service provision by:

- increasing the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the social emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention sectors, particularly in remote and regional areas.
- investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led social emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention programs.
- recognise and value the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, Cultural Advisors and Cultural Healers have in supporting social emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention work.
- support the development and implementation of community-led initiatives and grassroots approaches to social emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention.



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### What is workforce wellbeing?

The term workforce wellbeing speaks to the ways in which individuals and services can engage in practices that support and promote positive biological, psychological, social spiritual and cultural health within occupational environments. Workforce wellbeing also refers to how these occupational environments and experiences directly impact on a person's mental health and overall social and emotional wellbeing.

Workforce wellbeing has been evidenced to have a direct impact on an individual's mental health and social and emotional wellbeing and can be detrimental to work performance and productivity, often affecting contributions made by employees in a professional context<sup>i</sup>.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working within the social emotional wellbeing, mental health and suicide prevention spaces, workforce wellbeing has additional complexities. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working within this space bring their personal and cultural knowledge and experience to work every day in order to provide a holistic support service to their clients.

### Workforce Wellbeing Challenges

Workforce wellbeing underpins and informs mental health and social and emotional wellbeing, as well as experiences relating to career satisfaction, workplace contributions and overall quality of life. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social emotional wellbeing, mental health and suicide prevention workforce is currently impacted by many issues including:

- cultural load
- under resourced workforce
- compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation
- burnout
- increased cost of living

Cultural Load defines the often-invisible responsibilities that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and other employees from diverse backgrounds endure as a result of their cultural identities and obligations. This load is often unrecognised by workplaces and oftentimes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff report feeling an unconscious expectation from workplaces to perform additional duties which have not been formalised in a position description<sup>ii</sup>.

Funding for positions is disproportionate to the need identified within the community which can often result in working beyond contractual hours. This leads to workforce strain, burnout, and exposure to mental health vulnerabilities. Compounding this is workplace burnout, which is termed by the World Health Organisation as chronic stress. This experience of chronic stress contextualised in workspaces often arises when employees feel consistent and often unrealistic expectations to perform certain tasks but experience complex barriers to doing so. Workforce stress is also about compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation that results from working in mental health and suicide prevention and not just expectations. This is far greater for our staff as they already carry a level of intergenerational trauma which is compounded by high workload and unrealistic expectations, vicarious traumatisation, and compassion fatigue, as well as community obligations which all combined create burnout.



The workforce is also currently dealing with the economic climate including increased cost of living<sup>iii</sup>. The cost of living has often been referred to as an unavoidable public health crisis as the impacts following on from this have been noted to be deleterious to physical and emotional health<sup>iv</sup>.

### **Workforce Wellbeing Solutions**

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and suicide prevention workforce need a staff wellbeing program that assists in supporting wellbeing rather than dealing with issues once they have arisen. It is essential that these staff have access to a culturally safe, proactive, supportive, and responsive staff program. Ensuring that workplaces have a comprehensive understanding of the existence of the cultural load for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff has been evidenced to help support the mental health of diverse communities. Cultural competency and awareness training may be beneficial in equipping staff with correct cultural information that is free of stigma, stereotype and myth.

Prioritising flexible working arrangements for staff, including creating safe and non-judgemental spaces for disclosure of mental ill health or disability to accommodate reasonable adjustments for employees is crucial in creating a strong workforce that also can contribute to work from a lived experience perspective<sup>v</sup>.

Prioritising the creation of internal processes and procedures that support the ongoing evaluation and continuous quality improvement relating to processes that support staff wellbeing is crucial to ensuring these processes are effective and responsive<sup>vi</sup>.

*Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia, and pay respects to all Elders, past, present, and emerging.*

<sup>i</sup> Adams, J. M. (2019). The value of worker well-being. *Public Health Reports*, 134(6), 583–586. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354919878434>

<sup>ii</sup> Easing the “cultural load” for indigenous people in the workplace. *Law Society Journal*. (n.d.). <https://lsj.com.au/articles/easing-the-cultural-load-for-indigenous-people-in-the-workplace/>

<sup>iii</sup> The Lancet Public Health. (2022). The cost of living: An avoidable public health crisis. *The Lancet Public Health*, 7(6). [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667\(22\)00120-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667(22)00120-7)

<sup>iv</sup> Walker, L. (2022, September 25). Scarlett can’t work, Can’t get disability allowance and now the cost of living is damaging her mental health. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-26/new-survey-shows-cost-of-living-biggest-suicide-rsk/101450548>

<sup>v</sup> Nielsen, K., Nielsen, M. B., Ogonnaya, C., Känsälä, M., Saari, E., & Isaksson, K. (2017). Workplace resources to improve both employee well-being and performance: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Work & Stress*, 31(2), 101–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2017.1304463>

<sup>vi</sup> Workplace Wellbeing Information and Resources. Black Dog Institute. (2022, June 16). <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/resources-support/wellbeing/workplace-wellbeing/>



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