



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership for Mental Health Equity

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.

About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia is the national leadership 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.

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Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia asserts that the effectiveness of the Australian mental health system in addressing the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is severely hampered by the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation at all levels of leadership. Existing policies, while acknowledging the need for increased representation, lack concrete strategies, measurable targets, and adequate funding for achieving this goal. Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia emphasises the importance of dismantling systemic barriers, empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, and investing in culturally appropriate training and initiatives.

To achieve equitable and culturally safe mental health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia recommends the following:

1. Establish clear, measurable targets and timelines for increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation at all levels of the mental health workforce, including leadership positions, with regular progress reporting and accountability mechanisms.
2. Develop and fund comprehensive, culturally relevant training and mentorship programs specifically designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals aspiring to leadership roles in mental health.
3. Actively create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to shape mental health policy and practice at all levels of government and the healthcare system.



Address the Need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Presence Across all Parts of the Australian Mental Health System

The Australian mental health system, despite its vast resources and professional expertise, struggles to adequately address the unique needs and challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Upton et al., 2021). This systemic shortcoming stems from the chronic underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at all levels of the mental health workforce, particularly in leadership and decision-making roles (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2022). The lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation not only hinders the development and implementation of culturally appropriate interventions but also perpetuates a climate of distrust and disengagement among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals seeking mental health support (Gee et al., 2014).

The absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership further compounds this issue, as it deprives the system of the invaluable cultural knowledge, lived experience, and community connections necessary to effectively navigate the complex social and historical factors that contribute to mental health disparities among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Jongen et al., 2019). Moreover, the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in policy and governance arenas limits the potential for meaningful systemic change that reflects the priorities and perspectives of those most affected by mental health inequities (National Mental Health Commission, 2014).

Addressing this issue necessitates dismantling the systemic barriers that have historically and continue to impede the meaningful participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the mental health workforce. Racism, discrimination, and limited access to education and training opportunities have all played a role in perpetuating this underrepresentation (Nathan et al., 2023), thus compromising the system's ability to understand and effectively address the unique cultural needs and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Existing Initiatives and Policies

Existing policies recognise the need for greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the mental health workforce. The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (2020) sets a target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals by 2% by 2030. However, it lacks specific strategies and resource allocations to achieve this target in the mental health sector. Similarly, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework 2023-2030* outlines a strategy for



"Investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health leadership development," but implementation details and measurable outcomes are not explicitly defined (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2023).

The Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing (TIMHWB) program is one example of an initiative that aims to transform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health care through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and authentic partnerships with Aboriginal organisations (National Mental Health Commission, 2014). Its mission is to empower access to services, build a culturally responsive workforce, and establish cultural safety in mainstream clinical services, including through the employment of traditional healers and Elders.

Despite these acknowledgments, significant gaps remain in existing policies. The lack of specific targets and timelines for increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in mental health leadership roles hinders accountability and progress tracking. The availability of culturally appropriate training and mentorship programs for aspiring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders in mental health remains limited. Moreover, greater investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led mental health organisations and initiatives is crucial for sustainable and culturally responsive service delivery (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021). Addressing these gaps is essential for realising the full potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in transforming the mental health system and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Conclusion

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia firmly believes that centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledges, and self-determination within the mental health sector is paramount to achieving culturally safe, effective, and sustainable mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The holistic approach outlined in the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration, prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence and leadership across all levels of the mental health system, is essential for a system that is truly accountable to, and reflective of, the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



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