



Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

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

Submission to the Western Australian Mental Health Commission

Discussion Paper: Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy 2025- 2030

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.

Summary

In January 2022, the Government of Western Australia (WA) initiated an independent review of the WA health system governance to evaluate the effectiveness of the governance structures in the *Health Services Act 2016* (the Act) and their impact on patient outcomes. The Act established a legal framework defining roles within WA's health system, with the Department of Health positioned as the systems manager and seven health service providers commissioned to deliver a range of healthcare services. It introduced a devolved governance model to bring decision-making closer to service delivery and patient care (Government of Western Australia, 2022).

The review panel engaged a diverse range of stakeholders through surveys and submissions. Its findings supported a broad reform package, which formed the basis for the Mental Health Commission to develop the Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy 2025-2030 (The Strategy). The Strategy emphasises the need for changes that prioritise individuals with lived and living experience, and their families and carers; recognising that mental health and substance use issues are intertwined with physical health, relationships, environmental factors, and economic and occupational circumstances.

The need for culturally safe and responsive care

As the peak leadership body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB), mental health, and suicide prevention, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia is dedicated to championing, advancing, and advocating for the unique strengths and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We emphasise the importance of culturally safe

and responsive care that supports the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Some key issues and statistics raised in the discussion paper include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples frequently encounter racism and discrimination when navigating and accessing services. This experience is exacerbated by the enduring effects of historical and contemporary government policies, including colonisation and forced removals, which continue to profoundly impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing.
- There is a need for enhanced collaboration in decision-making, increased autonomy for Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations (ACCHOs), systemic transformation within government bodies, and the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more than twice as likely to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress compared to non-Indigenous Australians.
- While alcohol consumption is less common among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in comparison to non-Indigenous people, those who do consume alcohol are more likely to engage in high-risk drinking.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are disproportionately overrepresented in mental health-related emergency department visits across Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are also overrepresented in data related to the use of restrictive practices, such as seclusion and the use of physical and chemical restraints.
- From 2018-22, WA recorded the highest rate of suicide related deaths among Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples with 38.1 deaths per 100,000 population (National average being 27.6 per 100,000 population).

(Mental Health Commission, 2024).

The Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy 2025-2030

The Western Australian Mental Health Commission has developed and released a discussion paper on The Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy 2025-2030 as a guide for their consultation process. The focus is to develop a comprehensive strategy to address mental health and substance use disorders in WA. It will be a guiding document across community,

government, non-government, and private sectors that aims to improve leadership, accountability, collaboration, and coordination within mental health and alcohol and other drugs systems.

The Strategy will be designed to align with existing and emerging national priorities, with an emphasis on consistency, coordination, and informed strategic decisions. The Strategy identifies specific challenges in service delivery, including regional, remote, and very remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and children and young peoples. Recent reviews and reforms include, but are not limited to, the independent evaluation of the Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through Medicare Benefits Schedule (Better Access Initiative), and the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. (Mental Health Commission, 2024).

Recommendations

To promote equity, empowerment, and cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia proposes the following recommendations to build upon the existing strengths and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and enhance The Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy 2025-2030.

1. Implement the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration to address mental health disparities

Embrace the principles of the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration (2015) within The Strategy to address mental health disparities and promote wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, leadership, community-driven solutions, and holistic approaches to health.

Key actions

- a. Elevate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership across all levels of the healthcare system.
- b. Invest in developing a culturally safe and responsive workforce through targeted training, recruitment, and retention initiatives.
- c. Collaborate with communities to define culturally informed, measurable outcomes.
- d. Support community-led mental health and alcohol and other drug services integrating traditional and cultural healing practices.

2. Promote culturally safe and accessible services through co-design

Embed co-design processes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure services are culturally responsive, accessible, and free from discrimination.

Key actions

- a. Implement co-design frameworks prioritising two-way learning and respectful communication at all levels.
- b. Provide resources and training to deepen understanding of ongoing impacts of colonisation, racism, and discrimination.
- c. Establish anti-racism measures to tackle systemic racism within healthcare systems.

3. Empower communities through self-determination and data sovereignty

Prioritise self-determination by increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in key roles and transferring decision-making power to community-controlled organisations.

Ensure data sovereignty principles are upheld.

Key actions

- a. Prioritise recruitment, retention, and professional development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.
- b. Expand and strengthen the community-controlled sector through increased decision-making power and long-term, secure funding.
- c. Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in managing and utilising health data to guide culturally informed service delivery and policy decisions.

4. Address social determinants of health and intersectionality

Recognise and address the systemic factors driving mental health disparities, including housing, education, and employment. Acknowledge the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with intersecting identities. The strategy needs to ensure there is equity across the lifespan and that children and elders aren't left behind.

Key actions

- a. Develop targeted programs addressing social determinants of health in line with Outcome 14 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020).

- b. Create specific initiatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, LGBTQIA+SB individuals, and people with disabilities.
- c. Implement intergenerational programs that are responsive to the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and Elders.

5. Reduce restrictive practices and improve emergency care access

Prioritise culturally safe, community-led engagement to reduce over-representation in restrictive practices and emergency mental health care.

Key actions

- a. Invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health organisations to deliver community-focused services and design culturally safe emergency care.
- b. Provide training on trauma-informed care aligned with the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (currently being refreshed by Gayaa Dhuwi).

6. Establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms

Implement robust frameworks to track progress and ensure accountability in implementing these recommendations.

Key action

- a. Establish annual reporting frameworks led by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to evaluate the implementation of these recommendations.

By building on existing strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledge systems, while addressing systemic barriers and upholding principles of data sovereignty, this approach lays a strong foundation for sustainable, effective, and culturally responsive health services.

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