

Submission
No 39

INQUIRY INTO REPARATIONS FOR THE STOLEN GENERATIONS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Clarence Valley Healing Centre

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SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY

INTO REPARATIONS FOR THE STOLEN GENERATION 2015/2016

My name is Janelle Brown and I am the Co-ordinator of the Clarence Valley Aboriginal Healing Centre auspiced by Gurehlgam Corporation. I appeared before the Inquiry into the Reparations for the Stolen Generation in New South Wales at its hearing in Grafton on 8 December 2015.

I am forwarding this submission on behalf of the Clarence Valley Aboriginal Healing Centre, as a follow-up to my appearance at the Inquiry. (The Clarence Valley Aboriginal Healing Centre is funded by the Healing Foundation. It is a place that supports and runs healing practices within an Aboriginal cultural context.)

THE TRAUMA OF THE STOLEN GENERATION

It has been widely acknowledged and documented, including in the 1996 Bringing Them Home Report, that the forced removal of the thousands of Aboriginal children from their families was a deeply traumatic experience. Both the removal itself and the subsequent abuse that was often experienced by the children after removal.

Unfortunately the forced removal of Aboriginal children continues today. In fact, statistics have shown that the removal of Aboriginal children in NSW and Australia wide is at an all-time high (At 30/6/14, 14,991 Aboriginal children were in out-of-home care Australia wide. Despite Aboriginal people being only 2.5% of the population these Aboriginal children comprise 35% of all children in out-of-home care).¹ Many are being placed with non-Aboriginal families as out-of-home care organisations struggle to keep up with the demand for foster families.

Many of these children are the offspring of parents who themselves were removed from their families and sometimes these children are the grandchildren or great grandchildren of people who had been removed as children.

These children are being removed simply because their parents and family are often so deeply traumatised and therefore unable to develop and maintain adequate parenting skills.

The parents, having no concept of trauma and/or healing concepts may view self medicating on drugs and alcohol as the only form of respite from their trauma. This self medicating can create a vicious and destructive cycle which creates further trauma and problems for children and family.

The forced removal of children not only affected the Stolen Generation themselves and their families but also entire Aboriginal communities. The practice was so widespread that it is unlikely that there is an Aboriginal person alive today, who has not been affected in some way by the removal policies (either being removed themselves as a child, or having an ancestor or another family member who had been removed)

THE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

So how do we assist members of the Stolen Generation, traumatised Aboriginal communities and individuals to heal? How do we break the cycle of trauma and abuse? How do we stop, or at least reduce the numbers of children being forcibly removed from their families?

Well, for far too long the focus has been solely on the symptoms of the underlying grief loss and trauma issues eg: poor parenting skills, child abuse, drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, crime

¹ Source: aifs.gov.au, Australian Institute of Family studies – Child Family Community, Australia

rates, mental health and general health issues etc. It's no secret that the Australian Governments (both State and Federal) have spent billions of dollars over the years, yet the problems remain and in some respects, have worsened.

The reality is until the unresolved trauma resulting from the Stolen Generation/Protection era policies (and other previous detrimental government policy and practices), are addressed the symptomatic problems will continue to have devastating impacts on our communities.

NEED FOR TRAUMA INFORMED PROGRAMS AND TRAINING

This does not mean that funding that addresses the symptomatic problems should be reduced in any way. Instead **additional long-term funding needs to be allocated to address grief loss and trauma**. Only by working in a holistic manner to address both the symptoms and underlying grief, loss and trauma, will there to be significant and long lasting change for the Stolen Generation, their families and Aboriginal communities in general.

This additional funding needs to be focused on providing:

- **programs for the Stolen Generation, Aboriginal communities in general and traumatised individuals, that incorporate trauma informed practices** as advocated by Professor Judy Atkinson (amongst others).² Programs focused on mentoring young Aboriginal people who are at risk, including those who have been forcibly removed are also considered to be essential. Ideally mentors would be older Aboriginal people who have gone through their own healing process. They could include members of the Stolen Generation.
- **training Aboriginal workers in trauma informed practices**. Although highly skilled in the in their area of expertise, unfortunately most community workers are profoundly under qualified in terms of knowledge regarding trauma informed practices and healing from trauma. **To give Aboriginal communities and individuals any chance to heal, Aboriginal community workers must be equipped with these skills, knowledge and qualifications.**

Short term courses focusing on trauma have been provided on the North Coast (and elsewhere) on an ad hoc basis and some of these have been attended by Aboriginal community workers. Also there are at least two people within the Clarence Valley who have undertaken tertiary qualifications in Trauma and Healing from Southern Cross University.

However this is not enough. All service provider workers working closely with Aboriginal communities need to be qualified in grief, loss and trauma informed practices.

It is acknowledged that trauma research specific to Aboriginal people is still relatively new with Professor Judy Atkinson being one of the forerunners of this research³. She was instrumental in developing the Bachelor of Trauma and Healing currently offered at Southern Cross University, Lismore.⁴

² The Healing Foundation funds a number of programs and reports on the area of grief, loss and trauma - <http://healingfoundation.org.au/>-

^{3 3} Refer Judy Atkinson's paper "Trauma Informed Services and Trauma Specific Care for Indigenous Australian Children" produced for the Closing The Gap Clearinghouse

⁴ Southern Cross University Website Address: <http://courses.scu.edu.au/courses/bachelor-of-trauma-and-healing>

In regard to this course, students can be awarded a Diploma or an Advanced Diploma in Trauma and Healing if they complete a certain number of the modules but do not finish the whole degree.

A Diploma of Trauma and Healing based on this model could be run by Southern Cross University (or any other university for that matter) within the Clarence Valley as a pilot. There are many appropriate venues to run this training in our community including our Healing Centre.

Subjects in the Diploma could include⁵:

- Transgenerational Trauma
- Secondary Traumatization
- The Biological Effects of Traumatic Stress
- Healing Childhood Trauma
- Cultural And Spiritual Well-Being
- The Story of Healing/Indigenous Healing
- The Mental Health of Aboriginal People
- Grief Trauma and Crisis Counselling

GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT TO HEALING AND TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICES

In addition to extra funding for training and programs, trauma informed strategies, practices, policies and procedures need to be developed within all government agencies who are providing support to indigenous communities. NGOs too, should be required as part of their funding agreements, to incorporate trauma informed practices into their service delivery. Furthermore, it is essential that experts in indigenous trauma like Prof Atkinson have an input in all new developments in this regard.

It is noted that the NSW government gives a commitment to healing with the launch in 2013 of its Aboriginal Affairs' OCHRE strategy (Opportunity Choice Healing Respect and Empowerment).

On its website Aboriginal Affairs states: "*OCHRE includes a commitment from the NSW Government to work with Aboriginal communities, policy practitioners and service providers to advance the dialogue in NSW about trauma and healing and to begin developing responses informed by evidence of good practice and the real-life experiences of Aboriginal people.*"⁶

However, to our knowledge, except for a state wide healing forum in July 2014 and a subsequent Report in 2015⁷, there has been very little progress undertaken in terms of a focus on healing by the NSW Govt.

⁵ All these modules are currently offered in the Bachelor of Trauma and Healing

NSW Aboriginal Affairs' Website Address: <http://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/ohcre-healing/>⁶

⁷ http://aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/HealingForum_150305_FINAL.pdf, Mapu Yaan Gurri Mapu Murrunggirr – Healing Our Way Forum Report

Progress has been way too slow. Three years down the track there now needs to be more than just the occasional “dialogue” about trauma and healing, talk needs to be put into practice.

Also at a Federal and COAG level, organisations encompassing indigenous healing such as the Healing Foundation and its funded healing centres need to be provided with a long term funding commitment to enable healing programs to be continued to be provided.

Our healing centre is funded by the healing foundation until the end of February 2016. No further funding commitment has been given beyond this time.

Even though, the creation of the Healing Foundation was a result of the Closing the Gap Strategy more focus on grief loss and trauma and healing practices needs to be included in the Strategy.

The grief loss and trauma experienced by Aboriginal people and communities has been 228 years in the making. Therefore solutions must be long term - healing will not happen overnight.

Furthermore, until these major changes are made, every generation of indigenous people in Australia will have a “stolen generation” and our communities will continue to be impacted by grief loss and trauma.