



Frontier Services Submission to the Senate Committee - May 2018

Inquiry on Accessibility and Quality of Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Australia

Frontier Services is pleased to provide a response to the Senate Inquiry into accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia.

Frontier Services is standing with people in the bush, providing practical, pastoral and spiritual care where it's needed most, to enable well-being and quality of life. Our vision is that all people can live a holistic and fulfilled life in remote Australia. Frontier Services has been part of the remote Australian community for over 100 years offering solutions where none exist. Without Frontier Services most of those communities have had little other support.

As a part of remote Australia for more than 105 years, we have seen considerable changes. In recent times we have noticed a decline in size and scope of remote villages and all their services. This translates to reduced accessibility and availability to mental health services, as well as declining mental health of those who live there. We believe that regardless of where you live you should have access to the essential support and services that provide critical care as those living in metro Australia take for granted.

As an organisation we are delivering two critical programs that improve the mental health of those living in remote Australia. These are:

- **Our Bush Chaplaincy Program**

We provide on the ground practical, pastoral and spiritual care directly with people within remote communities. Those who are in greatest need and primary users of our services are Graziers, Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO) workers and First Peoples. Our Bush Chaplains are living and working in their communities which gives them unique insight and credibility that those outside this closed community cannot achieve. The Bush Chaplaincy Program provides holistic care for each individual that needs support both in an immediate crisis and for long term needs. We currently have a network of 11 skilled Bush Chaplains who take on this role and are spaced across the country in Remote Areas. These Remote Areas vary in size, some larger than states, and are made up of different communities. [Remote Area map attached]

- **Our Outback Links Program - National Mobilisation of skilled volunteers**

This reinforces the practical support we provide and work at a one-to-one level. This works in direct collaboration with our Bush Chaplaincy Program. It's our Bush Chaplains who highlight areas and individual most in need.

Addressing mental health in remote Australia

Bush Chaplains are an important part of the solution in supporting the complex needs of mental health in remote Australia. The rationale is that they are a trusted member of the community and someone that sees and understands the issues early. As a part of the community they are a connector to enable other support services and professionals to offer support when needed.





By the nature of their role they are on the ground day in day out identifying issues as they transpire. This is vastly different from other transient health practitioners. A Bush Chaplain is an ordained Minister which again is unique. This makes them a trusted place to provide counsel regardless of the personal significance of the problem faced. They provide a safe place, a listening ear and advice. Part of a Bush Chaplain's role is to visit people in their homes or place of work which is an enabler to break down the barriers in seeking help.

A Bush Chaplain will support anyone regardless of their economic status, religious beliefs or cultural background. They are there with remote Australians who need help regardless.

The demand for Bush Chaplaincy in remote Australia is great and they are highly valued members of their community. They are an integral part of the community because they are the chaplain for the Police, SES, Schools, Hospitals and a voluntary active member of many other service organisations.

(a) the nature and underlying causes of rural and remote Australians accessing mental health services at a much lower rate;

- **Limited access to professional help when needed**

Anecdotally we hear consistently of people waiting long periods of time to see a mental health professional. A woman having to wait 9 months to see the psychologist for grief counselling in remote Queensland after losing her child and husband. With professionals only in the regional centre at best once a month often a full diary for that day and the following month there is no opportunity for immediate crisis support.

Internet and mobile access in remote Australia is patchy and not a solution to this complex issue.

When a crisis happens the need for mental health professionals is heightened. The solution is to fly in these resources. They are strangers, without an understanding of remote Australia, its idiosyncrasies and the people who live there. We have numerous examples of where professional mental health practitioners are left isolated and not engaged because they are not local and/or not trusted.

When an area has no resident mental health service the people must rely on visiting services that come through their towns or must travel to communities where services are available.

- **Stigma**

Rural stoicism makes it more likely that rural people will withdraw rather than seek help from appropriate mental health and support. Graziers and people living in remote Australia are renowned for their stoicism. This stoicism is what enables their families to stay on marginal land for generations regardless of the hardships. This stoicism is a significant contributor to the stigma and shame in reaching out to the medical profession for mental health support when needed.



Overlaying this cultural issue is the community involvement. The positive aspects of living in small communities is that they all band together in times of need. This negative aspect of this connected community is the sense of judgement with the community knowing the negative aspects of your life as well. There is no escape or anonymity to deal with highly personal issues. There is a real fear associated with exposing oneself.

- **Self-reliance**

As a person growing up and working “out bush” the struggles of daily life are very normal, and so they have built up a tremendous amount of resilience. They are self-reliant.

The vast difference between metro and remote Australia is choice and 24/7 availability. In metro Australia there is culture of outsourcing. With an abundance of choice, living in a 24/7 instant gratification environment, metro Australians are not required to be so self-reliant. This changing culture in metro Australia is an enabler to seek support for mental issues when they arise.

In remote Australia the opposite is true – there is a necessity to be self-reliant. This is driven by not having access to professional services when needed – often long waits for availability, limited choice, costs prohibitive and a learned behaviour of resolving problems with what is or isn’t available.

(b) the higher rate of suicide in rural and remote Australia;

- **The rate of suicide 1.7 times as high in Remote areas as in Major Cities**
(<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-health/rural-remote-health/contents/rural-health>)
- **Men in remote Australia live 7 years on average less primarily due to mental health and substance abuse.**
- **The significant contributors to the higher suicide rates are social isolation, financial, environmental and social stressors. These issues have compound affect by their nature. Some communities in remote Australia are experiencing multipliers of these issues.**
 1. In practical terms social isolation means that living and working on a property that is hours away from other people means that everyday social interaction requires planning and a conscious effort rather than accidental happening. A lack of positive social interactions contributes to poor mental health outcomes and feeling of disconnection.
 2. Parts of Queensland and Northern NSW are experiencing long term drought. These extreme weather conditions create depressed communities and significant financial and social stressors. Some of these communities are in their 6th year of drought.



3. Extreme weather such as flood, fire and cyclones are prevalent in regional and remote Australia. With extreme weather events also comes devastation of communities and properties. Given the prevalence of these often-catastrophic events some communities are experiencing many years of rebuild and sometimes multiple extreme events.
4. Social isolation interlaced with self-reliance can be a trigger to self-medicate. Individuals use drugs and alcohol as part of the coping mechanisms. These leads to more complex comorbidity health issues.
5. 54% of people living in rural and remote areas have one or more chronic diseases (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-statistics/population-groups/rural-remote-australians/overview>)

(d) the challenges of delivering mental health services in the regions;

In order for mental health services to be effective they need to be tailored to the individual's needs. This needs to be delivered in a timely and appropriate manner by the right professional when someone is at a point when they are ready to access to the help needed.

This is a complex problem when the geographically sparse population makes logistics difficult. Vast distances to travel, internet and mobile coverage is sporadic. Counselling services in order to be effective can be done via a mixed mode of delivery using telephone, online and face to face and with a trusted professional. In order to support good mental outcomes for individuals and communities require service delivery need to be available when needed.

Frontier Services throughout our history continues to believe that face to face delivery is a critical part of the continuum in the healing processes, this enables well-being and an improved quality of life.

(e) attitudes towards mental health services;

- **Incredibly poor**

A recent study actual found that “workers did not seek mental health support because they felt they should toughen up”. This attitude stems deep within remote communities, especially with FIFO workers. We know that this group of people struggle to come forward with their issues and when they do, they risk being judged. This reinforces the essential role our Bush Chaplains play here. (http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-19/fifo-mental-health-study-sparks-social-media-backlash/9533076?smid=Page:%20ABC%20Rural-Facebook_Organic&WT.tsrc=Facebook_Organic&sf184883883=1)

- **Mental health providers are often not trusted or understood as they are not “a local”.**

In remote Australia you are often an outsider until you have lived in the community for





generations. Anecdotally we have many stories about mental professionals not being engaged appropriately because they are not trusted.

- Our Bush Chaplain in Tom Price, retells his experience following a tragic suicide of a young FIFO worker. The psychologist flew in from Perth arriving weeks post the tragedy to offer grief counselling and support. What transpired in practical terms is this simply wasn't adequate or effective because they felt that they didn't want to discuss deep emotional issues with a stranger. Secondly, they had access to our Bush Chaplain in the immediate aftermath who they already had a relationship with and trusted.

(f) opportunities that technology presents for improved service delivery; and

- **It can assist but is not the complete solution**

There are many rapid advances in technology providing opportunities for individuals engage and reduce the sense of social isolation. Online counselling and support is an important part of the mental solution in these communities. Given the sporadic nature of mobile and internet coverage in remote Australia this part of the solution needs to be used with caution and not given as the primary answer.

It is essential to provide face to face interactions that are continuous and within the community. Technology works well as an additional resource but cannot replace the human interaction.

Working to resolve these issues

Growth in Bush Chaplains

The demand for Bush Chaplains is high, currently exceeding our ability to sustainably fund these positions. We need an additional 14 Bush Chaplains to address the critical mental health needs of those who are most marginalised in remote Australia.

Frontier Services Bush Chaplains are an essential service to the health and vibrancy of remote Australia. The significance of Bush Chaplaincy to remote Australia is an important part of our culture. So much so it is depicted on the back of the \$20 note. Frontier Service believes that this service is now more important than ever.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide feedback and would be pleased to provide more information on any of the points covered in this submission.

Jannine Jackson

National Director
Frontier Services

[Attached: [1] Frontier Services - Remote Area Map 2018 – 11 Bush Chaplains]





Frontier Services
Standing with people in the bush



Our Remote Areas - 2018



Pilbara - WA
Rev. John Dihn



Murchison - WA
Rev. Mitch Flalkowski



Ceduna - SA
Rev. Gary Ferguson



Parkin-Sturt - SA
Rev. Sunil Kadaparambil



Kennedy - QLD
Rev. Karama Ioapo



Tennant Barkly - NT
Rev. Peter Wait



High Country - VIC
Rev. Rowena Harris



Midlands-Glamorgan
Rev. Dennis Cousins



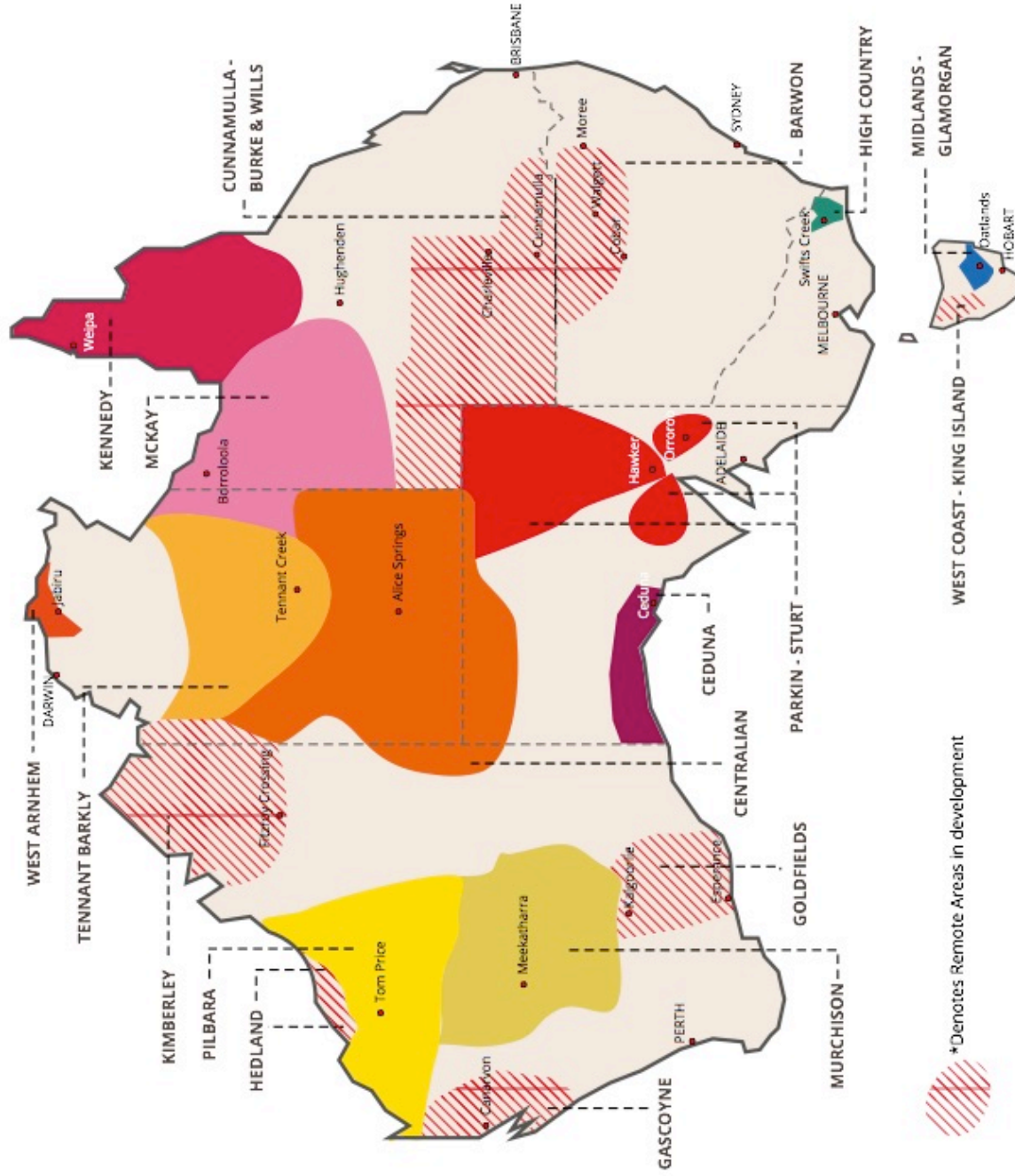
McKay - QLD
Rev. David Ellis



West Arnhem - NT
Rev. Lindsay Parkhill



Centralian - NT
Benjamin Quilliam



*Denotes Remote Areas in development