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(Youth Suicide)

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Stephen Victor Snr – Chairperson & Director of Reputation
Mary Victor O'Reeri – Executive Director – WA Local Hero 2011
BILLARD ABORIGINAL CORPORATION incorporating Billard Learning Centre

Billard Lagoon Causeway Road via Beagle Bay WA 6725 (no mail please)
P O Box 3224, Broome WA 6725 (postal address)

www.blankpagesummit.com.au

**SUBMISSION TO STANDING COMMITTEE
ON HEALTH AND AGEING**

YOUTH SUICIDE

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CALL TO ACTION

Creating suicide-proof communities in the Kimberley

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Attachment A: Speech – 17 August 2009 – National Museum, Canberra

Attachment B: Speech – 27 October 2009 – RSD Workshop, Canberra

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SUBMISSION TO STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND AGEING

YOUTH SUICIDE

BACKGROUND

Billard Aboriginal Corporation t/as Billard Learning Centre is the organizational entity which operates an Aboriginal community located 122 kms north west of Broome on the Dampier Peninsula known as 'Billard'. Billard is a clan-based community comprising 65 members.

Mary Victor O'Reeri is the Main-Person-in-Charge of Billard Aboriginal Community along with her father Stephen Victor Snr, is WA's Local Hero 2011.

For further information about Mary, the following documents are provided:

Attachment A: Speech - 17 August 2009 - National Museum, Canberra

Attachment B: Speech - 27 October 2009 - RSD Workshop, Canberra

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BLANK PAGE SUMMIT ON SUICIDE 2009

The Billard Community has direct experience of suicide and trauma due to the death of two young brothers/sons/uncles (Stephen Jnr and Vincent) from suicide 10-12 years ago. In the instance of the second death (Vincent) which occurred three years after the Stephen's passing, it was evident to family and community members that the young man suffered from untreated mental illness. Whilst his family identified that he was at risk of suicide, they were unable to obtain the help needed to refer him on for treatment by professionals.

In 2009 in the wake of Coroner Alistair Hope's findings into the deaths by suicide of 22 Indigenous individuals in the Kimberley and his subsequent recommendations, Billard Community took the initiative to convene a five day residential gathering at the Billard Community known as the **Blank Page Summit on Suicide** with the following intent:

"The Blank Page Summit on Suicide 2009 will be the first time that the new WA Government will sit down on country with the Commonwealth Government, Indigenous people and others on the pindan of the Kimberley to find ways to stop Indigenous people killing themselves."

The Summit comprised 147 participants who were invited in their capacity as key contributors capable of effecting outcomes vital to stopping this epidemic in Australia. They came from communities across Australia and from fields as diverse as child protection, land management, justice, mental health, sport and recreation, counselling, education, vocational training, children and youth services, disability, academia, government, Catholic Church and a range of community-led initiatives.

Approximately half of the participants were Indigenous people including individuals from specific communities experiencing horrific youth suicide rates such as Balgo in East Kimberley. Such individuals were central drivers of the call to action which guided the Summit.

Informing and supporting the work of the Summit were the Hon Jenny Macklin, MP, Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, the WA Deputy Premier Kim Hames, the WA Chief Justice Wayne Martin, WA State Coroner Alistair Hope and WA Parliamentary Secretary for Mental Health Hon Helen Morton. In attendance as well were eminent mental health and suicide experts such as Dawn O'Neil (then CEO of Lifeline Australia), John Mendoza (then Chair, Chair of the National Advisory Council on Mental Health), members of ASPAC and the newly convened WA Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention and others.

The 'blank page' strategy for the Summit allowed participants to work together to create an environment where a breakthrough strategy free of 'old thinking' could be achieved resulting in a new set of solutions to prevent any more unnecessary loss of life.

The result of the Summit was a **call to action** both specific to the Kimberley and of critical relevance to the rest of Australia.

CALL TO ACTION

The key messages of the **Billard Call to Action**:

- create suicide-proof communities in the Kimberley
- train families to be families
- encourage self-care through staged support

The details of the key messages are as follows:

Creating suicide-proof communities in the Kimberley

Zero tolerance of those things that are killing people, either by 'slow suicide' or self-destruction on the spot, was found to be central to saving lives.

1. The need to create communities in the Kimberley according to the following self-imposed conditions:

- no grog
- no illegal drugs
- no child neglect and abuse
- no pornography
- adherence to a Community Code of Conduct
- use of a formal dispute resolution process

2. The need to build communities that are based on:

- effective internal problem solving
- strong sense of civic virtue
- shared recreational and cultural activities open to all

The critical distinction drawn in this message was 'self-imposed'. This was not a call for legislative prohibition - it was concerned with individuals deciding in a collective setting to act in a lifesaving manner rather than in an habitually self-destructive way. Dispute resolution was included because of the impact of feuding in triggering suicide, as recounted by Coroner Alistair Hope at the Summit.

In this context, what emerged from the Summit was that it is untenable to sustain arrangements which are 'stuck' either due to cross-governmental red tape, poor governance or mismanaged processes of any kind including ineffective service delivery, as this in itself is life threatening in the vein of 'slow suicide', i.e. deteriorating and self-defeating behaviours left unchecked and/or untreated in the case of poor mental health.

Training families to be families

1. Train families to be families that can save the lives of people at risk right now.
2. Train families to be functional and safe families.
3. Train families to nurture individual growth within the family.

This was a message about 'first principles' - start with a blueprint for a family. What is a family? What does it uniquely do? What are its characteristics? How is a family created (i.e. not just by birth)? What does it mean to be a member of a family? How do families plan their lives, their futures, their housing, their schooling, their leisure time and their retirement? How do families interact with each other to make communities?

Healing and self-care

The need for a means of saving the lives of the most distressed and acutely troubled individuals in our communities. When it is known that people are suicidal, there must be the capacity to act.

The need to develop self-care based on staged support.

1. The means to intervene to ensure the safety of a person who is at risk of self-harm.
2. The tools to engage families in their own self-care and well-being.

'Healing' is viewed as a formal set of interventions from early counseling responses through to therapeutic treatment, where necessary.

How were these messages created?

The Summit was designed to unearth what isn't readily talked about that is at the heart of the renewal and repair of people's wellbeing in order to save their lives. People spoke about grog and ganja, family breakdown and community decay. They described 'humbug' in its various forms including violence and feuding. In the same way that acute trauma such as a heart attack, gives legitimacy to self-imposed restrictions, the epidemic of suicide requires removal by zero tolerance of those triggers which contribute to slow and spontaneous suicide.

Actions taken after the Summit

In convening the Summit, Billard Aboriginal Community - a community which has developed suicide prevention strategies designed to make the community 'suicide proof' - aimed to enable others to take action to protect the lives of every day citizens at risk in their own settings.

In its call for action, Billard Aboriginal Community committed also to work by invitation with individuals, communities and other stakeholders including government to implement the key messages of the Summit.

As a result of the Blank Page Summit on Suicide, lines of communication focusing on 'suicide-proofing' Indigenous communities came to the forefront of cross-sectoral discussions and the initiative shown by Billard Community set a benchmark for government and community folks to encourage locally-driven initiatives.

Billard Learning Centre was the recipient of the National LIFE Award for Suicide Prevention (2010) presented by Professor Pat McGorry, then Australian of the Year.

In summary the Blank Page Summit on Suicide 2009 came from the drive of the people of Billard to reach out and work willingly and collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders including government to effect a change to the adverse statistical profile of suicide in the Kimberley. Whilst the Summit itself was an event, it was the culmination of a decade-long process by members of the Billard Community to stem the tide of preventable loss they had sustained in losing two sons/brothers/uncles to suicide.

By the time the Summit was convened in 2009, the Billard Community had well and truly addressed its vulnerabilities as a suicide cluster and was well placed to lead a legitimate process of action learning resulting in the Call to Action.

Attachment D: Blank Page Summit on Suicide 2009 - Comments in WA Parliament by Hon Helen Morton including specific reference to George Lee, Balgo (2009)

BLANK PAGE SUMMIT HARD YARN 2010

As a result of the 2009 Summit, there was a yearning by the Billard community and others who had joined the Summit, to come together again with a view to progressing understanding about slow suicide in particular and inviting fresh participants to join in the opportunity to tackle deep-seated impediments to improved quality of life. Central to this aspiration was the knowledge that to effect change at a community level (as set out in the Call to Action), some difficult conversations and candid reflections are needed. In Aboriginal parlance, these processes are called 'hard yarns'.

Therefore Billard Learning Centre convened the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn 2010 at Billard Aboriginal Community. The Summit was well supported as people from all over Australia gathered to focus on the challenges involved in 'closing the gap', i.e. addressing disparity in quality of life for Indigenous people today across a range of key indicators.

Joining the Summit were Indigenous people from 34 diverse communities, townships and cities across 6 states and territories, senior public officials from Cth and State governments, representatives from NGO's and service providers, politicians (Senator Rachel Siewert, Chair of Senate Inquiry into Suicide and WA Parliamentary Secretary for Mental Health Hon Helen Morton) and representatives from all Remote Service Delivery Sites in WA as well as select sites in NT, SA and NSW.

Residents of Balgo Hills Community in remote East Kimberley along with residents from other sites such as Warmun (Turkey Creek), Kununurra, Kalumburu, Oombulgurri and Mulan were invited and supported to join the Summit.

The theme of the Summit was ***closing the gap means no more muckin' around.***

Three core **HARD YARNS** emerged after many facilitated discussions together in focus groups:

1. How do we better support alcohol and drug abuse programs in order to solve the problems of drug and alcohol abuse? This was not about creating more programs. It was about doing more and better with what's available particularly at a community level.
2. How do we get the leaders we deserve? This was a reframing of governance and leadership to open up strategies to improve individual capacity and create better leaders and in so doing, to challenge some of the assumptions behind prevailing Indigenous leadership orthodoxy.
3. How do we start addressing the 'attitude gap'? This related to what is seen as an underlying gap in attitude arising from a tendency and habit of entrenching difference rather than finding commonality - intra-Indigenous, rest of society and Indigenous, government to government, resource agencies to users, community to community, urban v remote etc. It also relates to attitudes towards community peers who are suffering from poor mental health and face defeatism.

Feedback - here is a sample of comments about the Hard Yarn Summit:

"It was unbelievable. The hosts, the land, the administration, the staff, the event, the result."

"Listening and sharing issues at grass roots level, community level, government level. I came here to learn and meet other people from all these walks of life - they were here."

"So vastly different from anything I have ever been to. The Victor family is so welcoming and exemplary role models. Incredible to have community members, NGO's and government all in the one place listening and talking together."

"Meeting people, the mix of people who attended, mixing in both small and bigger groups, the food, sharing of ideas, getting completely away from work by being on spring country assisted in getting everyone into the same space - the blank page."

BALGO INITIATIVE

A specific outcome of the Hard Yarn Summit 2010 was an invitation from the Balgo community to hold a Summit-like gathering at Balgo in 2011. This was received in the spirit of the Billard Call to Action 2009 which included a willingness to work with others by invitation. The invitation from Mr George Lee, cultural boss of Balgo (and Chairperson - Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation, the peak community organisation in Balgo) and others, was compelling. George had come to the Summit in

2009 on the back of 9-10 suicides of young men in a short preceding period. After the 2009 Summit, by his own admission, he had begun to implement the Billard Call to Action. He stated unequivocally that he wanted to continue the momentum and drive an initiative from within his community in the way that the Billard Community had done.

The response of the Billard Community was to agree to support the aspirations of George and others in Balgo by developing a strategy jointly with the Australian Government.

BLANK PAGE SUMMIT HARD YARN YOUTH MOB 2011 - *everything is possible*

At the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob 2011 we'll gather on spring country in the Kimberley to find the best ways to ensure that our young people can lead long, strong and confident lives.

Joining the Summit will be Indigenous youth from across Australia along with representatives from the government, private, not for profit, philanthropic and community sectors.

Threshold questions at the Summit

What is 'success' for young Indigenous people - we'll find out as we hear their stories of initiative, resilience and unique problem solving.

No longer children, some of them already mothers and fathers, our young people are the adults of the future.

They will decide many things when we are old.

Improving the prospects for young Indigenous people does not lie in any one single sector, program or community response.

What sort of conversations can we be having with our youth?

What ambitions are we encouraging our youth to hold?

How have waves of rapid policy change influenced the expectations of young Indigenous people?

How can we ensure our young people have the opportunity to thrive?

Is an economic framework enough to build a future?

How can we approach the transition from school to training to work?

Many Indigenous youth in remote communities are only one or two generations on from a non-cash economy - how do we help them build a bridge to financial security?

As we speak about familiar issues - culture, land, governance, economic development, political and constitutional issues and educating the rest of the world about the uniqueness of Indigenous Australians - we face an ongoing pattern of personal and community dysfunction.

Sometimes life itself is at grave risk.

How do we make sure our young people are not left behind in 21st century Australian society?

What shifts do we need to make for conditions to change?

How will we make sure we're good ancestors?"

At the Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn Youth Mob 2011 we will build on the work of previous Blank Page Summits:

Blank Page Summit on Suicide 2009 - Call to Action

- creating suicide-proof communities
- training families to be families
- encouraging self-care through staged support

Blank Page Summit Hard Yarn 2010 - Hard Yarns

- why are we failing so badly in supporting endeavours to solve alcohol, drug and other abuse issues?
- how do we get the leaders we deserve?
- how do we begin addressing the 'attitude gap'?