



## **MATES IN CONSTRUCTION**

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House of Representatives Standing Committee on  
Education and Employment  
**Inquiry into mental health and workforce participation 2011**  
Submission by MATES in Construction, August 2011

### **Summary**

MATES in Construction welcomes the inquiry into mental health and workforce participation as providing an opportunity to acknowledge the stigma surrounding the employment of workers with a mental illness while also enabling the development of collaborative partnerships to reduce this stigma and build community resilience particularly among construction workers.

This submission highlights the level of suicide within the construction industry and the achievements to date of the MATES in Construction community development model including the general MATES in Construction program and the Life Skills Training provided to Queensland construction apprentices.

It acknowledges the synergies between the MATES in Construction community development model and current Queensland Government strategies pertaining to early intervention and prevention of mental illness and suicide in the community as well as stigma reduction in the mental well-being of Queensland construction workers.

### **Suicide and the Construction Industry**

The National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2007 reported that one in five Australians experienced a mental illness in the last 12 months with 45% of Australians experiencing a mental disorder at some point in their lifetime.

A report issued in 2006 by the Australian Institute for Suicide and Prevention noted that among the Queensland Commercial Building Construction Industry young employees, (15 to 24 years) there was a higher rate of suicide (58.6 deaths per 100,000 head of population). This figure was reported as being 2.39 and 1.93 times greater than the working-age male population in Australia and Queensland respectively.

The suicide rate for young workers in the Queensland construction industry has been found to be 2.39 times higher than the national average for men. This means a construction worker is up to six times more likely to die from suicide than from an accident at work.

In response MATES in Construction (MIC) was launched in 2008 with the aim of reducing suicide in the construction industry as well as improving the mental health and well-being of Queensland construction workers. The self-declaration of mental ill health is a personal and at times difficult decision made by construction workers, with a common belief that the impact of declaring will mean loss of employment. Therefore, a long-term objective of MIC is that mental health and wellbeing, suicide awareness and prevention is accepted as a normal part of working in the construction industry.

The effect of the MIC community development model with a long-term objective of creating self-sustaining suicide intervention structures on site is to de-stigmatise mental health and wellbeing issues and encourage help seeking for a range of issues - not just those that pertain to suicide.

The model is based on the idea that mental health and suicide prevention is too large a task in the construction industry simply to be left to health professionals and Employee Assistance Programs. The MATES in Construction model focuses on making better and more useful connections between workers in the industry and external professionals.

### **Principal sponsor:**



**Other sponsors & supporters:** Queensland Health, Construction Skills Queensland, BUSSQ, CBUSS, STIF, Abigroup Ltd, CIRT, Master Builders Queensland, Evans Harch, ETU, CFMEU, BLF, Queensland Plumbers Union, Glenzeil, Electro Group, Laing O'Rourke, Boulderstone, Mirvac Group, Leighton Contractors

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MIC provides a number of services and supports to the industry in a way that is open, honest, proactive and respectful including:

- **MATES in Construction** – A program run on various construction sites discussing suicide as a preventable problem, making seeking help easy and appropriate to the needs of the workers
- **Life Skills Tool Box** – A program focused on teaching basic life skills such as financial literacy, relationships management, mental health at work, drug and alcohol awareness, anger management, values and similar topics MIC in Construction program
- **Case Management for workers** – MIC provides a brokerage service that connects, supports and monitors workers access to external providers as based on an agreed case planned approach and their identified needs
- **ASIST** – Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training – An internationally accredited workshop in suicide first aid
- **Staying Connected** – A program developed by the Child Support Agency aimed at non-custodial parents in the workforce
- **Industry Expansion Project** - Helping construction workers in disaster affected areas to better support their community. A program sponsored by Queensland Health aimed at using construction workers involved in reconstruction following disasters as connection points to help in distressed communities.
- **Other Industries Project** – Following the success of the MIC in Construction program Queensland Health is funding consultancy provided by MIC to other industries who are interested in establishing similar programs.

## MATES in Construction Program

The MIC program focuses on making better and more useful connections between workers in the industry and external professionals to the extent that mental health and well-being including suicide awareness and prevention becomes simply another part of doing business in the Queensland construction industry.

MIC is working to achieve this through the delivery of a number of training programs on site. These programs are aimed at:

- Raising awareness about suicide and mental health and well-being in the workplace
- Making it easy to access help
- Ensuring that the help offered is practical, professional and appropriate

This training falls into three categories:

- General Awareness Training (GAT)
- Connector Training
- ASIST Training

Since launching MIC in October 2008 over 12,500 workers have participated in the General Awareness Training, 1,000 are functioning as Connectors and over 100 workers have been trained as ASIST Suicide First Aid workers.

**General Awareness Training (GAT)** portrays suicide as a preventable issue faced by the Queensland building and construction industry.

This training explains the high rates of suicide within the industry and the emotions friends, family and colleagues may feel when someone suicides. The concept of “tip over points” and the importance of getting help early as well as how to identify a mate who may be tipping over are also discussed.

Participants learn to understand the strong biological urge to live that exist within most humans and that suicide often is a result of an internal struggle between the living and the dying side of a person. During that struggle, the “living side” is likely to send out invitations for people around to take an interest and offer help. Invitations are identified and responded to appropriately. Finally, workers are provided with the knowledge that if they see a mate struggling and/or sending out invitations all they have to do is to find a Connector on site or contact MIC.

A **Connector** is a MATE who can keep you safe while connecting you to help.

During GAT workers have the opportunity to nominate to become a Connector. A Connector is someone who is trained to help keep someone in crisis safe, while at the same time connecting them to professional help. They are also given the chance to discreetly ask for help if they themselves are struggling with any issue. This is followed up by a field officer after the training.

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A Connector is not a counsellor or any other kind of professional, they are simply a mate who knows how to help. Most people participating in Connector training have naturally been in the role without even knowing it. The Connector training provides some extra skills for people to facilitate this.

The role of a Connector is to connect workers on site to a suicide first aid resource.

Connector training takes 4 hours and can be done on or off site. Connectors are trained in the following:

- What is a Connector's role?
- What is not a Connector's role?
- How to look after yourself as a Connector
- How to be alert to the signs of suicide
- How to ask about suicide
- How to connect a person to help

This training will help a Connector to understand the help that a MIC Case Manager can offer. One of the most common sources of referral to MIC case managers is from Connectors on site. It is important to ensure that Connectors from different areas, trades and ages represented on the site or company.

Connector training includes the internationally accredited LivingWorks course safeTALK.

An **ASIST** worker can be compared to the first aid officer on site.

ASIST workers will talk to a person contemplating suicide with the object of making this person "safe". Using simple skills an ASIST worker will listen to a worker's concerns and respond to them appropriately with the object of reaching a "contract" or "safe plan" for the worker involving extra help and safety.

Just like a first aid worker can make an assessment about injuries deciding if a visit to the doctor or an ambulance is required, an ASIST worker will use tools and skills to assess if a worker needs immediate help and/or hospitalisation, emergency counselling or a simple connection to family or friends.

ASIST workers undergo a two-day Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) workshop. The Workshop has been developed by LivingWorks in Canada and is used widely internationally as well as within Australia. Lifeline is using ASIST as their primary suicide intervention model and the Australian Defence Forces and Police are using the same model.

## MIC Life Skills Training

The aim of the **MIC Life Skills Training** (Life Skills) is to increase the basic life skills of Construction Industry apprentices with a view to improve their resilience. Life Skills has been a major initiative of the construction industry in Queensland addressing the comparatively high level of suicides in the industry, particularly among younger men.

In 2008, MIC worked in collaboration with Queensland Health to develop a pilot Life Skills in the Queensland Construction Industry. This pilot assessed the most appropriate way to deliver the Course to 500 apprentices over a three year period as part of their apprenticeship.

The Life Skills training aligns with Queensland Government strategies, particularly those of Queensland Health and the Department of Education and Training, in particular the mission and objectives of the Queensland Plan for Mental Health 2007-2017.

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The Queensland Plan for Mental Health 2007-2017 states a clear intention to support collaboration of the kind established between the Life Skills Course Program and Queensland Health:

*"The mental health sector needs to build stronger partnerships with consumers, families, carers, and government and nongovernment services to achieve better outcomes for Queenslanders."(p2)*

The stated mission of the Queensland Plan for Mental Health 2007-2017 is:

*"To provide a comprehensive, resilience and recovery-based mental health system across Queensland, with emphasis upon promotion, prevention and early intervention."(p9)*

Life Skills Training targets the development of "resilience" and effectively aligns with the objectives of "promotion, prevention and early intervention".

Alignment is also evident between the program and the National Approach to mental health (as prescribed in the COAG - National Action Plan on Mental Health 2006 - 2011 and the Fourth National Mental Health Plan 2009-2014). The National plan places strong emphasis on Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention:

*"The Plan aims to improve mental health and facilitate recovery from illness through a greater focus on promotion, prevention and early intervention..." (COAG - National Action Plan on Mental Health 2006 - 2011 (p i).*

In addition to the links the Life Skills Course has with the strategic direction of Queensland Health, links can also be identified with that of The Department of Education and Training.

The Department of Education and Training Strategic Plan for 2010-2014 states that the Department's purpose is:

*"To provide Queenslanders with the knowledge, skills and confidence to maximise their potential, contribute productively to the economy and build a better Queensland."*

The plan goes on to outline the Department's key values, two of which directly relate to the objectives of the Life Skills Course:

The Life Skills Training program has a strong acceptance by apprentices and employers. The strong message perceived from these impacts, is that the program has provided apprentices with:

- An overall greater awareness of where they can contact help if required to (for both their own and their friends benefit)
- An overall greater likelihood to actually contact help if required

## ***Conclusion***

Since its inception in 2008, MIC has drawn to the construction industry's attention the importance of accepting and understanding that the mental and emotional well-being of its workers is inherent to the ongoing success of the Queensland construction industry.

The declaration of mental ill-health is not widely accepted within Queensland construction workers with a common belief that this will impact a workers' ability to gain and maintain employment. MIC through its community development model, including the MIC Program and the MIC Life Skills Course is working to break down the stigma associated with mental ill-health and suicide in the construction industry.

MIC makes connections for construction workers, employers and their families with the broader mental health community with a view to building their capacity and resilience to recover and continue to live a meaningful life in the community.

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