

**Australian Senate
Community Affairs Committee**

Inquiry into Suicide in Australia

Submission by OzHelp Foundation Ltd



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Introduction

The OzHelp Foundation (OzHelp) is a workplace based early intervention suicide prevention and social capacity building program. It is built on a vision to enhance the resilience of apprentices and workers in the construction and building industry, while strengthen the leadership and support roles of industry leaders. OzHelp's programs and services are an excellent example of effective suicide prevention activities targeted to a specific high risk group.

OzHelp is a participant in a group submission to the Australian Senate Community Affairs, Inquiry into Suicide in Australia with Lifeline Australia, Suicide Prevention Australia, Inspire Foundation, The Mental Health Council of Australia and The Salvation Army which deals with broad issues of suicide and self harm.

The purpose of the OzHelp submission is to illustrate how OzHelp's targeted suicide prevention activities are delivered to a specific community, that of the building, construction and mining industries (BCMI). This example illustrates how the use of workplaces has been a powerful way to capture an audience to provide suicide prevention training and support services.

Background

OzHelp Foundation was incorporated in 2001 after the construction industry in Canberra was shaken by the death by suicide of three of its apprentices. The mother of one of these apprentices (David Alan O'Bryan) persistently lobbied the Industry for action to address the problem of suicide and to prevent further deaths.

This resulted in an acknowledgment by key construction industry stakeholders of the need to protect its apprentices and workers from the risk of suicide and other negative health outcomes. From this impetus, an important collaboration was born between the ACT branches of Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and the Master Builders Association (MBA), resulting in the formation of the OzHelp Foundation.

The OzHelp Foundation, initially operating from a hospital based medical model, recognised the need for a proactive, strengths based service, using outreach, counselling and life skills training to address suicide prevention issues in this target group.

The OzHelp Community

OzHelp's suicide prevention activities are workplace based in the BCMI. These workplace environments are high risk groups for suicide and are characterised as:

- predominantly male;
- 'tough';
- not open to support or training programs;
- lacking in help seeking behaviours; and
- susceptible to overuse of alcohol and drugs in non-working hours.

More recently, OzHelp has been supporting the mining industry in remote areas such as the Pilbara. Its workplace characteristics increase the risk of mental health issues among workers through:

- the 'fly in fly out' nature of working conditions;
- separation from family and friends;
- long, hard working hours leading to fatigue and workplace accidents;
- overuse of alcohol and drugs in non-working hours;
- difficult living situations;
- lack of community involvement; and
- lack of community services and entertainment.

Another workplace element in the Pilbara region is the participation of Indigenous workers. OzHelp is developing and putting in place mentoring structures to support Indigenous apprentices and workers in the workplace.

The personal costs and effects generated by the characteristics of BCMI are:

- workplace bullying;
- reduced productivity at work;
- physical health concerns;
- potential financial issues;
- relationship problems at work and outside;
- overuse of alcohol and drugs; and
- mental health problems.

The social costs that arise from effects of working in the BCMI include:

- risk taking behaviours; and
- workplace accidents.

An example of the effects of this workplace culture can be illustrated by the following case study:

"Bob" was an OzHelp client who was being bullied at work. The bullying started to affect his mental health and he dealt with the resultant mental health issues by increasing his alcohol intake. Already living alone and with bad eating habits, his depression and high alcohol intake compounded until he noticed that he was not working up to his normal standard which gave more 'bait' to the bully. The result of the ongoing workplace bullying took away his motivation to go to work, leading to his working less hours and earning less money to meet the same financial obligations. OzHelp provided two counselling sessions after which a referral was made to a specialist drug and alcohol counselling service. OzHelp remained involved by providing supportive contact through visits and phone calls. Currently, Bob is employed in a different workplace, his mental health has improved and he is actively working through his issues with alcohol.

Overview of the OzHelp program

OzHelp addresses the issues of suicide prevention in the BCMI in pro-active and systematic ways through its various program components. The OzHelp approach contributes to the

creation of a healthy and resilient workforce through developing relationships between field officers and workers and a resulting support network. The OzHelp service is offered to all BCMI workers in areas that it currently services.

OzHelp collaborates and develops relationships and networks with other service providers for specialist services and to enhance the services that it can provide to communities linked into the BCMI.

The core components of OzHelp's program are support based activities including:

- regular visits to construction sites for outreach visits to develop relationships with workers and to provide counselling services;
- OzConnect events to facilitate networking within the industry;
- communication and mental health promotion; and
- awareness and support skills training for leaders and mentors at all levels within industry.

There are further components of OzHelp's services which strengthen the program including:

- Life Skills Toolbox training for Apprentices (see Appendix A);
- Mates in Construction (see Appendix B & C);
- Graduate Development Program, funded by Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (see Appendix D);
- Nutrition Toolbox for BCMI workers (see Appendix E); and
- Tradies Tune Up, on site general health check (see Appendix F).

A number of these components are briefly described below.

OzSupport

- OzHelp's support services are workplace-based and pro-active. The focus is on early intervention and prevention.
- Field officers conduct regular site visits to establish rapport with apprentices and workers. This provides a real person to whom they can confide their personal problems or crises, not just a number to call or an institute to approach.
- If needed, individuals may be referred to an OzHelp counsellor or service provider for further/ongoing counselling. The personal counselling service uses a collaborative and strength-based resource oriented approach.

Training and workshops

The main activities of OzHelp are supported by accredited and innovative training services for various sectors of the industry including:

- Life-Skills Toolbox Training for apprentices, which includes twelve sessions with content ranging from financial literacy, to anger management, to mental health (see Appendix G & H);
- support and mentoring training for industry leaders, Union Delegates, Occupational Health & Safety representatives and other personnel;

- Staying Connected, a four hour course designed to provide separated fathers with strategies to maintain relationships with their children;
- SafeTALK, a suicide alertness course;
- ASIST, a suicide intervention course;
- Bullying Prevention Workshops;
- Trauma and Serious Incident Management; and
- Mental Health in the Workforce (see Appendix I).

OzConnect

OzConnect events are held at lunchtime on site aiming to:

- Bring together the building community;
- Provide links between industry and general community health services;
- Provide a venue for mental health promotion;
- Improve industry acceptance of OzHelp services;
- Promote messages of resilience and general wellbeing to improve productivity; and
- Offer OH&S benefits.

Tradies Tune Up

Tradies Tune Up is another way of taking services to industry. These on-site health checks are aimed at making industry workers more aware of their physical health status, while connecting with an OzHelp support worker to discuss their mental health.

Testing includes:

- Cholesterol Check
- Blood Pressure Check
- Mental Health Check
 - Depression
 - Stress
- Blood Glucose Check
- Nutrition Check
- Alcohol Consumption
- Waist Measurement

Industry has embraced Tradies Tune Up in ACT and regional NSW with events booked out months in advance. Participant feedback indicates that the Tune Up has raised awareness of personal preventative health. Through three monthly follow up surveys, OzHelps registered nurse has found that the majority of participants remembered and stated they enjoyed the Tune Up and a number had implemented changes recommended by her.

Given that the project funding finishes early 2010, OzHelp is currently exploring options for ongoing funding to ensure this essential program can continue and be offered more generally across Australia and the community.

An example of how 'Tradies Tune Up' can be an integral part of a broader approach to providing support for individuals can be seen in following case study:

"Jack", a plumber, working on a commercial building site signed up for a health check through Tradies Tune Up. Jack was recently divorced, has two children that he was fighting to see whenever possible, and was feeling like it was all too hard and was contemplating suicide. The Tune Up went as per normal until questions were asked

about Jack's stress and mental health. The mental health worker in the van, as a result of Jack's responses, was able to ask Jack if he was having thoughts of suicide - he was. From this Jack was able to book an appointment with the OzHelp counselling team from which he received 3 counselling sessions and further follow up contacts from OzHelp field officers.

Jack is now doing well and has negotiated with his ex-wife regular times when he can see his children. It was fortunate that Jack was able to sign up for a Tune Up that day.

Mates in Construction

OzHelp's Mates in Construction model has been designed and proven to build early intervention competence in the front line of workplaces in the BCMI. This model operates by training workplace mentors to be **suicide and mental health aware**. Possible mentors to be trained include:

- project managers;
- company welfare officers;
- union delegates;
- OH&S officers;
- group training company and relevant government department field officers; and
- interested and motivated workers at all levels of each organisation.

The mentoring training provides/supplements the leadership and mentoring skills of industry supervisors, trainers and employers. This equips the industry leaders with skills to identify warning signs among their workers, identify their needs, improve their communications skills and become aware of the sources of assistance if they need to refer a worker.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)

In 2008 OzHelp was approached by DEEWR to adapt its BCMI support service model to the Australian Public Service graduate program. Throughout 2009 the graduate development program (GDP) has been successfully delivered to over 120 graduates. The program involves 12 sessions including:

- Session 1: Communication
- Session 2: Learning styles and Values and beliefs
- Session 3: Financial literacy: Budgeting, saving, and credit and debt management
- Session 4: Mental health in the workplace
- Session 5: SafeTALK
- Session 6: Work/life balance: Time management
- Session 7: Conflict resolution
- Session 8: Alcohol and other drug misuse and problem gambling
- Session 9: Resilience and assertiveness
- Session 10: Workplace bullying
- Session 11: Healthy living
- Session 12: Professional behaviour and management

In addition, trainers conducted support visits for graduates within their workplaces. This service was provided independently of their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and built on the rapport already established during training sessions.

The model has proved itself adaptable to environments outside the BCMI and OzHelp has been approached by departments involved to provide the GDP to graduates in 2010.

Public awareness programs

OzHelp's success has been in designing programs specifically to suit workplace community and to provide suicide prevention and mental health awareness training and support services. OzHelp believes that public awareness programs are beneficial when they are delivered in a systematic, targeted way rather than to random, disparate sections of the community. It uses a range of awareness programs and communication methods to meet the needs of target communities including:

- OzHelp Lifeskills Toolbox for apprentices;
- SafeTALK;
- general awareness training;
- face to face interventions;
- information on flights from Perth to Karratha (for Pilbara workers); and
- Tradies Tune Up, (on site general health checks)
- a suite of mental and physical health factsheets

Whenever a public awareness program or targeted suicide prevention and mental health and wellbeing program is being conducted, support systems must be in place to address the issues and needs that arise from raising both individual and group awareness.

Issues of reporting suicides

OzHelp's source for industry related statistics on suicides has been provided by the Construction and Building Industry Super Fund, CBus. According to internal figures from CBUS, from 1998-2004, the rate of possible suicides among their membership was 43 per 100,000. OzHelp's data supplied by CBUS is more likely to be accurate than other data collected in relation to suicide rates because it is collected by the superannuation fund and used for its claims analysis.

Organisations like OzHelp and CBUS require accuracy of suicide reporting in order to continue to apply for funding to provide evidence that their work is making an impact on industry.

OzHelp would benefit by having more accurate data in order to refine targeting of its activities to particular groups most at risk. It would be advantageous for data to be collected to include:

- age;
- gender;
- occupation/industry; and
- income and other social determinants of health.

It would also be beneficial to collect data and record attempted suicides, possibly through the hospital system and police reporting processes.

Ongoing suicide prevention research and translation into policy

The aim of all of the above services is to make the step for help as easy as possible for the workers of the BCMI.

OzHelp has been continually evaluated throughout its activities and uses the results of the evaluation process to improve its services. The most recent evaluation of OzHelp's activities by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health in September 2006 found that:

“There is a general consensus that the range of services offered by OzHelp are very beneficial for apprentices. With the closer integration of the training and support roles, it is apparent that the staff have been able to establish a close rapport with apprentices, and that from this apprentices have developed a range of socially useful skills. Openness of communication, groupwork and teamwork skills, and a willingness to discuss personal issues were commonly identified as immediate benefits.

“The OzBarbeques are universally supported as a way of creating awareness of the support services and of ‘normalising’ the process of seeking out help when in need.”

These comments illustrate the effectiveness of OzHelp's services to deliver suicide prevention activities and messages successfully and dispel the myth that men are not prepared to talk about their problems. They show that when men in the BCMI know where to go for support, they will use these services for themselves and identify and direct workmates.

The University of Western Sydney's July 2009 evaluation of OzHelp's activities in the Pilbara region illustrates OzHelp's success in developing links and relationships with community services which are essential to provide ongoing support and referrals and industry awareness:

“Overall, the Project has rapidly established a valued presence amongst service providers and community groups in the region. The Project has been providing targeted training in both community and workplace settings, and has begun work in developing ‘connectors’ in work settings.”

From evidence of the success of the OzHelp example, ongoing suicide prevention research should be directed towards worker populations, workplaces and associated environments. These workplaces may be conceptualised as communities to provide a structure from which to develop targeted, effective suicide prevention programs.