

Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee

Inquiry into Suicide in Australia

On Behalf of OzHelp Queensland Ltd.

About the writer and this submission:

1. My name is Jorgen Gullestrup of Suite 7 Level 6 101 Wickham Terrace, Spring Hill Qld 4004. I was born 11 March 1965. I am Chief Executive Officer of OzHelp Queensland Ltd. I am making this submission on behalf of OzHelp Queensland Ltd.
2. This submission will address terms of reference point a),c),d),e) and f) but will not specifically deal with b), g) and h).
3. I was initially employed as project manager of the Building Employees Redundancy Trust Suicide Prevention Project from 3 September 2007 and became the Chief Executive Officer of OzHelp Queensland Ltd when the organisation was established.
4. I was previously Queensland State Secretary and National Assistant Secretary of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, Plumbing Division for a period of 6 year and I was an official of this Union for a total of 13 years. I am a plumber by trade and have worked in or around the Queensland building construction industry since my arrival in Australia in June 1988.

About OzHelp Queensland Ltd:

5. OzHelp Queensland Ltd is a registered charity established in February 2008 by the Building Employees Redundancy Trust (BERT) to reduce suicide rates amongst Queensland Construction workers.
6. OzHelp Queensland Ltd's registered office is at the BERT trustee office, Suite 70, Level 6 Silverton Place, 101 Wickham Terrace, Spring Hill Qld 4004.
7. OzHelp Queensland Ltd employs a total of six staff – A manager, a training manager, a program coordinator, a case manager and two field officers.
8. OzHelp Queensland Ltd is part of a national network of "OzHelp" organisations tied together by a common approach to suicide prevention within the Construction industry. OzHelp commenced in Canberra and sister organisations now exist in Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland. The common approach is around community development and a non-medical model of suicide prevention. OzHelp organisations use Living Works¹ programs as

¹ Living Works is a Canadian organisation dedicated to enhancing suicide intervention skills at the community level, and committed to making its suicide prevention training programs widely available, cost effective, interactive and easy to learn, with practical applications designed for all types of caregivers.
<http://www.livingworks.net/>

the foundation for educating and building community resilience within the construction industry.

Background

9. The Building Employees Redundancy Trust (BERT) is the primary redundancy trust within the Queensland Construction industry with more than 15,000 active members receiving regular contributions. BERT was established in 1989 as part of an industrial agreement between the QMCA, the CFMEU (then the BWIU), the BLF and the Plumbers and Gasfitters Union to protect construction workers redundancy entitlements.
10. The BERT Welfare Fund was established to support workers within the construction industry. The BERT Welfare Fund provides a broad range of industry support services including training, financial planning, accidental dental cover, funeral assistance, workplace injury rehabilitation support to mention some.
11. In 1999 the BERT Welfare fund engaged an organisation called ITIM (later Converge International) as an industry Employee Assistance Program (EAP) primarily to provide industry trauma counselling following a serious incidence or death on site. Following concerns over what appeared to be very high suicide rates within the industry this was later extended to offer general counselling for workers and their families.
12. The BERT fund consistently noticed that a disproportionate high number of death claims appeared to be about suicide. As an illustration; within the period 1999 and 2007 the BERT fund paid out account balances to the estates of 425 members; 399 had a defined cause of death and of these deaths, 88 seemed likely to be from suicide. Similar trends are visible within other funds such as superannuation funds².
13. The issue of suicide within our industry has been raised in a range of forums by industry leaders over a period of time without any response from Government. For example, in evidence to the Royal Commission into the Building Construction Industry by Mr Wally Trohear, director of the Building Unions Superannuation Scheme and the then secretary of the CFMEU Queensland Branch, it was suggested that as much as half of death payments made from superannuation schemes could be the result of suicide. In evidence to the same commission the writer documented that in 2001, BERT paid out 41 death claims knowing the cause of death for 31, and in 17 of these cases the cause was likely to be suicide³. However the Commission did not make any recommendations regarding this matter.
14. Following government inaction, a number of industry funds, unions, employers and employer associations commissioned a study by the Australian Institute for Suicide Research

² The Building Unions Superannuation Scheme Queensland (BUSSQ) underwriter ING notice that the number of death claims from suicide is 15.36% of all claims against their general portfolio where such claims make up 6.95%.

³ Transcript of hearing in Brisbane 17 April 2002, Evidence by Mr Wallace Trohear (P5606) and Mr Jorgen Gullestrup (P 5662) - <http://www.royalcombc.gov.au/docs/transcripts/Day%200071%20-%2017-Apr-2002.pdf>

and Prevention (AISRAP). AISRAP reported to the industry in 2006 and published their findings in January 2007⁴.

15. AISRAP study covered 167,103 active workers over a period of 7 years (an annual population of between 21,158 and 26,577 workers). The study found that suicide rates for the industry were higher than the average Australian male rate across all periods of investigation (although comparable with Queensland averages). Particularly concerning was the indication that workers between 15 to 24 years of age could be 2.52 times more likely to die from suicide than similar aged men across Australia (2.03 times more likely than their Queensland cohort)⁵. AISRAP report noted: "The period of investigation was a time when rates for young Australians and Queensland males were the highest they have ever been, so the CBCI rates exceeding these highlights the extent and seriousness of this problem".

a.) Personal, Social and Financial Costs of Suicide in Australia

16. It is hard to estimate the cost to society of a completed suicide however Professor Beverley Raphael has estimated that it could be as much as \$250,000.00. AISRAP found the construction industry in Queensland to have an average mortality rate from suicide of 40.3 per 100,000 construction workers⁶. The size of the Queensland construction industry is estimated to be 250,000 workers. Therefore up to 100 Queensland construction industry workers could die from suicide each year costing society as much as 25 million dollars per year. Some have suggested that an effective suicide prevention program could reduce suicide rates by up to 30%. OzHelp Queensland Ltd estimates that an industry wide peer support program on a state wide basis could cost as little as 1.5 million dollars per year causing a net saving of \$6 million dollars per year for this industry alone. This figure does not include the ongoing savings to the Health Departments for successful interventions where the worker, through the assistance of OzHelp, is able to return to a stable situation and stay at work, maintain his relationships with his family, and return to good health. In the year 2008/2009, OzHelp successfully intervened in 52 cases where the worker was contemplating suicide and in some cases already had the date and method determined. In addition to this, OzHelp connected over 300 vulnerable workers to appropriate help in the same time period. The flow on effect to the community in terms of the services that these people could have potentially used, (Juvenile justice, family court, child safety, health system, legal system etc) is huge. The social investment of OzHelp has a social return to the industry and community. This type of community support and intervention represents a massive savings to the Government and society in general.

17. As a point of reference, the Queensland Division of Workplace Health and Safety assessed mortality rates from on site construction accidents in 2007 to be 6.1 in 100,000 construction workers; the Australia Bureau of Statistics recent figures found mortality rates from traffic

⁴ Heller T, Hawgood J and De Leo D (2007) 'Correlates of Suicide in Building Industry Workers', *Archives of Suicide Research*, 11:1, 105-117.

⁵ AISRAP noted that due to the number of suicides studied in this age group statistical anomalies could occur.

⁶ Heller T, Hawgood J and De Leo D (2007) 'Correlates of Suicide in Building Industry Workers', *Archives of Suicide Research*, 11:1, 105-117.

accidents in Australia to be 8.3 out of 100,000. According to these figures construction workers are more than 6 times more likely to die from suicide than a workplace accident. The Division of Workplace Health and Safety employ more than 55 inspectors to reduce workplace accidents, while efforts to reduce road toll are well known through policing, advertising and public education.

18. In Queensland, the construction industry has been pro-active and supportive around suicide prevention strategies. OzHelp Queensland has been established as a lean, outcome focused organisation with less than 7 % of its annual budget used on administration. More than 75% of OzHelp Queensland's budget is sourced from industry; however these funding sources are increasingly getting exhausted. The situation is such that industry has demonstrated what is achievable; it is now up to government to support and assist these types of programs so they may continue to grow as an effective means of dealing with Australia's high suicide rates.
19. OzHelp Queensland is primarily funded by industry donations and grants. By far the largest part of our operating costs is provided by the BERT Welfare Fund. The BERT fund considers itself a long term contributor, but not the only contributor and funding is conditional on OzHelp Queensland Ltd growing its funding base to such an extent that BERT contributions cover less than 50% of the total operating costs.
20. Other industry contributors are the CBUS superannuation fund and the Services Trades Industry Fund (STIF) who are assisting OzHelp in trying to reach BERT's funding objectives for OzHelp Queensland. OzHelp Queensland also receives support from Queensland Health who is funding a particular program involved in teaching Life Skills to apprentices. However without increased funding from non-BERT sources, it has been made clear from the BERT fund that future funding will not be guaranteed.

c). The Appropriate role and effectiveness of government agencies

21. The focus of OzHelp Queensland Ltd is to keep workers safe within their daily surroundings including use of outside institutions or health care facilities, which allows them to continue working. While this is possible in most cases, there are a few cases where this is not possible and admission to a public hospital is the only safe option.
22. Over the past 12 months OzHelp Queensland has attempted to admit 6 out of more than 250 clients to a public hospital. Each attempt has failed. When bringing a suicidal person to an emergency department, the person is triaged according to a direct risk to life criteria. Five or eight hours waiting in the Emergency Department have not been uncommon before the person is seen by the acute care team or psyche registrar. At this stage the person is often agitated and upset. Valuable agency resources have been wasted and in all cases the patients have been turned away. In one occasion the person later attempted suicide.
23. As an agency, it is easy to feel like "baby sitters" making up for lack of Emergency Department resources. When a suicidal person is accompanied, the urgency is lessened. This means that other admissions to the Emergency Departments take precedence. Agency

resources – for a home call out – two staff, are tied up on occasions for hours simply to be allowed to “hand a person over”.

24. The decentralised nature of acute care in Queensland is problematic for a state wide agency such as OzHelp Queensland. It would be natural to seek to build networks and contacts with the acute care teams, but as each region has its own team, policies, contacts and procedures this is not a feasible option. The Queensland Health Mental Health Branch has offered to provide an opportunity for OzHelp Queensland to provide a workshop or presentation to a meeting of representatives of each of these acute care teams which without doubt will increase understanding of OzHelp work within some of these teams but yet provide no guarantees of improved access to mental health facilities when needed.
25. The OzHelp Queensland approach to suicide prevention is built on trust and integrity. The companies, the unions, site staff and workers support the program and trust the organisation will deliver what is promised.
26. This situation may be best illustrated by example. On one occasion OzHelp Queensland was contacted by a Union organiser who was concerned about the behaviour of one of his members. He felt the member was potentially suicidal. In conversation with the member, OzHelp staff was concerned that the member could be experiencing a schizophrenic episode. The member was not prepared to consider any medical assessment or attend any medical facility. OzHelp Queensland worked with this person daily for close to a week, supporting his ability to make good decisions. Finally on a Saturday morning, the person was ready to trust us enough to take him to hospital for an assessment. A week's work of building trust was lost following 6 hours waiting in the Princess Alexander Hospitals Emergency Department during which time the person became increasingly suspicious and agitated. He was referred to Logan Central Adult Mental Health Servicecentre but by this time the client attended alone. Following their assessment the police was notified to take the client to the Psychiatric unit at Logan Hospital under the *Mental Health Act*. Following his discharge a few weeks later, the trust with OzHelp Queensland had gone and the client was no longer interested working with us. OzHelp Queensland receives calls about this person regularly from concerned co-workers it appears that no other agency is maintaining contact with him and he works in the industry today unsupported and clearly not well.
27. In another situation OzHelp Queensland was called to an intervention on a building site. The female client had active thoughts and plans about suicide. She had been the victim of a sexual assault which was having serious consequences for her. On the past three anniversaries she had attempted suicide on the day. There was no social support we could identify as it appeared that all her relationships were abusive at one level or another. She had a long history of self-harm and had been admitted to psychiatric units several times. We were able to maintain her on short term safe plans, but were not confident that this could be done past the anniversary. Despite contacting various agencies and hospitals it was not possible to find a safe place for her on these days. Attempts were made to get her admitted to Pine Rivers Private Hospital but the cost of this was prohibitive. Eventually the only option was to take the client to Ipswich hospital. Arriving in the emergency department

around 2 pm the client was assessed by the psychiatrist by 9 pm and discharged with a safe plan of sorts put in place. Five days later the client was admitted to Ipswich Hospital following an attempted suicide.

28. A parallel system of admission to hospital for psychiatric and mental health issues should be established. Opportunity to go directly for triage outside the normal emergency admission system would make admission less traumatic for persons in need. The current system where admission is through the ordinary Emergency Department is slow and has little or no regard for the special needs and vulnerabilities of the person in need.
29. A central referral service for agencies dealing with suicide and mental health in general will ensure such clients are dealt with in a consistent and efficient manner. If an agency such as OzHelp Queensland could contact a central point when extra resources was needed, it would make a significant difference to the final result.
30. As an agency manager I am concerned that the lack of back-up for the work done by agencies such as OzHelp Queensland eventually will cost lives. OzHelp Queensland staff are very reluctant to take any client to a public hospital. It is concerning to me that staff may not take a client to hospital when it is really needed as the general experience is that clients are not admitted and the waiting times extreme.

d.) Effectiveness, to date, of public awareness programs and their relative success in providing information, encouraging help-seeking and enhancing public discussion of suicide

MATES in Construction

31. MATES in Construction (MIC) was launched in October 2008 and is a peer support program for the industry. After some initial reluctance, employers have embraced the program and demand is now firmly outstripping capacity. The program is implemented at the invitation of the project manager, builder or employer and has several stages:
 - a.) **General Awareness Training (GAT)** – Initially all workers receive a 45 minutes general awareness session. As staff turnover top up GATs are conducted ensuring 80% or more of the workplace are suicide aware. GAT is a power point driven presentation with a complementary workbook and is delivered on site. Workers are asked if they want to be further involved in the program and consistently 20% to 30% of participants want to become “Connectors” within the program. Workers are also given the opportunity to ask for help by ticking a box on the enrolment form, consistently 7% to 10% of the participating workers request help. Over the past 12 month OzHelp Queensland have inducted just under 4000 workers into the program on over 40 sites in South East Queensland. GAT inducted workers get a white sticker for their hard hat.
 - b.) **Connectors** – A “connector” is a mate who can keep you safe while connecting you to help. The program require between 1 in 15 and 1 in 30 of the workers in the workplace to become connectors. Connector training is based on the Living Works safe TALK training with some additions and takes 4 hours. Connectors are easily

recognisable by having a green sticker on their hard hat. The sticker signifies that this person is prepared to listen to you if you have any concern about your own or your mate's mental health and wellbeing. Connectors are ordinary workers and can be apprentices, labourers, trades men, foremen, supervisors, union delegates or safety representatives in other words 'one of us'. To date 400 workers have been trained as "connectors".

c.) Suicide first aid – On most sites OzHelp Queensland Ltd provide the suicide first aid support. A connector will stay with the worker in question while OzHelp Queensland staff goes to the site. However, more sites now train their own staff on site in this role as well. OzHelp Queensland Ltd runs ASIST workshops for Lifeline to train construction workers in suicide first aid.

d.) Case Management – OzHelp Queensland Ltd provide case management for workers within the industry. We do not have the funding to be "the help", we can only connect workers to existing help. The issue is dealt with in some detail below.

32. Most workers in the construction industry know of a mate who died from suicide. It is a sad fact of life. MATES in Construction open a discussion with the industry about how to prevent this from happening again. Wayne Pitt, Workplace Health and Safety Manager with Leighton Contractors have explained it this way:

"I had a thought this morning when I was watching the workers doing the GAT, they just seemed really interested. People now appear to be more open and willing to talk, sometimes to a third party , but are still willing to talk."

Other OzHelp Queensland Programs

33. OzHelp Queensland Ltd runs several other important programs for the industry. The Life Skills Toolbox program is funded by Queensland Health and is aimed at providing life skills training to apprentices over the first two or three years of their apprenticeship. The training starts by setting the class up as a "MATES in Construction" class and they do the GAT training. Teachers in the college are "connectors" and the apprentices are also offered the connector training and role. The program is accredited and has been mapped against the national employability skills for the construction industry.

34. The program has been highly successful despite its limited resources. Close to 500 apprentices are participating in the program and the feedback from employers and apprentices are overwhelmingly positive. Several high risk apprentices have been identified through this process and provided with alternatives to suicide.

35. The Staying Connected program is significant in that it addresses one of the most obvious and persistent issues facing our case manager – Relationship breakdown, separation and divorce. The ASIRAP report suggested that relationship breakdown could have been the trickier event in as many of 53% of the completed suicides within the industry. The program will be delivered through MATES in Construction program mechanisms but will feature peer support to separated men, the Child Support Agency training program "Staying Connected"

and case management assisting workers in the industry getting into support groups and qualified help.

36. The AISRAP report identified as many as 15% of all construction suicides as having occurred in far North Queensland. At the moment very little if any support exist for workers in this area. OzHelp Queensland Ltd is currently investigating funding prospects for having a presence in this area. As this is an area where many contractors does not participate in BERT and other industry schemes we have to cast the net wider in seeking support. Contractors in the area are very supportive and several contractors have even send staff to Brisbane to be Suicide First Aid trained so the MATES in Construction program could be implemented on their site.

Results to date

37. OzHelp Queensland Ltd case management load is steadily increasing. Over the past year the case load has increased to more than 250 clients with between 20 and 30 new clients per month. This is an active case load of about 80 to 90 clients for our case manager. While this is unsustainable in the longer term, we are managing in the short term. Most clients are from the construction sector (77%), the civil sector accounts for 12% while family and others account for 11%.
38. The focus of the MATES in Construction program is to encourage workers to seek help before they reach a tip-over point. The experience to date is encouraging. Through the increased awareness, use of the industry EAP programs has increased by 120% over the first 10 months of the program. This is especially encouraging as the AISRAP report found that despite significant evidence of mental illness amongst workers who suicided, only 7% of these workers had sought professional help.
39. Workers are now actively looking for signs of suicidal thoughts amongst their mates. OzHelp Queensland has over the year assisted 55 workers who had suicidal thoughts. Of the 55 workers seen 15 had active suicide plans including time, place and method.
40. Due to the itinerant nature of the industry the program gradually becomes part of all of the construction industry. Workers who are GAT or Connector trained on one site take this knowledge and awareness with them to the next site. Each time MATES in Construction is implemented on a new site the starting point and awareness generally is improved over that of previous sites. Even builders who have no formal arrangements to implement MATES in Construction on their site find that workers themselves make it a MATES in Construction site regardless.

e.) The efficacy of suicide prevention training and support of front-line health and community workers.

41. The success of the MATES in Construction is predominately due not to understanding of the industry by health professionals, but by the industry demystifying health professionals and empowering local workplaces to drive as much of the program as possible.

42. As the industry's awareness about suicide as an issue increase it would be desirable if frontline health and community workers also were aware of the issue. Part of the issues faced within the Queensland Construction industry is a reluctance to ask for help. A peer support program can go somewhere to alleviate this. However, where connecting health and community workers does not understand these barriers the results are often very bad. An example of this was experienced by OzHelp staff while waiting in an emergency department with a client. When the client eventually seen by ED staff an opening question was "so are you or are you not thinking about suicide now?" The client was made to feel that he had to justify his attendance at the emergency department. Only one day earlier OzHelp Queensland Staff had removed a noose, sleeping tablets and put the person on watch with a neighbour. But asked this directly after an excessive period of waiting the response was "no of course not." The fellow did not want to be a further burden to an overstretched emergency department and especially not to a clinician not taking the time to build some sort of connection with him.
43. In 53% of the completed suicides in the industry relationship breakdowns were a factor in the decision to suicide. Men within the industry are often strangers in the system of child support, legal issues following separations and the emotions around no longer being desired as a provider. The Child Support Agency, Family Law practitioners and social security staff could be important gate keepers with proper training. OzHelp Queensland has provided training to call centre staff employed by the industry's superannuation scheme (BUSSQ). Call centre staff now pay extra attention to members checking on insurance cover or making hardship claims. Several serious situations have been avoided by staff referring clients to OzHelp Queensland. In at least one case such referral was life saving.
44. OzHelp Queensland has entered into a partnership with the Building Services Authority. Before the end of the year all call centre and field staff will undergo the General Awareness Training and key supervisory staff the Connector training. BSA often talk to contractors in the industry at a time when these contractors are under severe stress, this could be financial stress, a job that have been performed to an unusually low standard, a consumer dispute or a combination of the above. The hope is that the success of providing training to call centre staff can be repeated.
45. Recently OzHelp Queensland Ltd provided Connector training to most of the Division of Workplace Health and Safety workplace inspectors. These inspectors play an important part in normalising suicide prevention strategies on sites.
46. The BERT fund recently introduced a major health initiative into the industry. As a pilot program 1000 workers received basic health screenings on site. Many of these workers had not seen health practitioners for a considerable period of time. The pilot found higher rates of obesity than the national average, a disproportionately high group of workers had dangerously high blood pressure and higher than expected skin cancers were found. This experience illustrate that in a male dominated industry with long working hours the norm, health and community professionals in health and community facilities can be as skilled as

possible with little effect as a large group of workers simply do not access them. However, the health screening process and the MATES in Construction program show that when approached in the workplace in a culturally appropriate way workers will respond positively. Suicide first aid trained Workplace Health and Safety Officers, Union delegates, Leading hands etc can in my experience make a much greater difference.

47. An area where workers often feel great stress is following a workplace injury. Workers feel a loss of identity especially as they discover in the construction industry a back injury leading to compensation based on 5 or 10% loss of body function means 100% loss of employability. OzHelp Queensland has been called to several situations where such realisation has led to thoughts and even plans of suicide. BERT recently took the initiative to establish a Work Cover hub assisting workers in the industry in the rehabilitation phase through a workplace injury. Staff working within this hub has been Connector trained and several of them will undertake suicide first aid training as well.

f.) The role of targeted programs and services that address the particular circumstances of high-risk groups.

48. The Queensland construction industry have not only taken the initiative to establish whether a problem of high suicide rates exist within the industry, but also to establish and fund an organisation charged with doing something about it. Across the industry all recommendations made by the AISRAP report are in various stages of implementation.
49. In their final report AISRAP made a series of recommendations for universal prevention activities directed at the entire population of construction workers –
- a.) Establish a working group overseeing suicide prevention activities
 - b.) Promote awareness of suicide as a preventable problem
 - c.) Reduce stigma of help seeking, promote wellbeing, resilience and coping
 - d.) Develop and implement training for volunteer gate-keepers focusing on identifying warning signs.
 - e.) Provide mentoring services for new employees to the industry
 - f.) Provide support services for men experiencing relationship difficulties
 - g.) Include families and partners of workers in offers of support
 - h.) Specific support for at risk workers.
50. The industry has acted to implement most of these recommendations. The BERT Suicide Prevention Project, which in turn became OzHelp Queensland Ltd became the working group overseeing the suicide prevention activities within the industry. OzHelp Queensland Ltd developed the MATES in Construction program (MIC) described above, available to both workers and their families to:
- a.) Promote awareness of suicide as a preventable problem
 - b.) Make getting help easy and acceptable
 - c.) To ensure that the help offered is culturally and practically appropriate to the needs of workers within the industry.

51. All elements of the program start from an examination of what the industry actually is doing, and what the industry culture actually is. Programs are then designed to be as compatible and as similar to what the industry is already doing. The role of General Awareness Training is known to the industry as we have years of on-site workplace health and safety inductions. GAT is simply a different type of the on-site induction already known to the industry. The concept of Connectors is similar to the role played by the Site Safety committee, Union delegates or workplace safety representatives. Suicide First Aid trained staff have a similar role to that of the general first aid officers on site. We have a culture of mateship and “looking after each other” similar to that promoted in the MATES in Construction program.
52. The industry looking after the industry has overcome some if not all of the stereotypes to be expected when an industry such as the construction industry looks the social welfare sector. With the MATES in Construction program the industry have actually invited a social welfare initiative to join the industry and become part of doing business.
53. The program has proven extremely resilient and adaptable. It has been implemented on large and small sites, on construction and on civil sites, across trades, labourers and apprentices. It has been applied across multiple contractors on a site and within a single employer across numerous sites. There is no reason why similar programs cannot be implemented in other industry settings such as mining, transport and manufacturing.
54. The Federal and State Government have in past years used purchasing power to enforce certain behaviours on contractors and builders in the industry through the National Code of Conduct and contract pre-qualification. The MATES in Construction program is evidence that relatively simply employers can do something to improve access to help on their sites. It would not be a significant impost on the construction industry to require some type of consideration of mental health and wellbeing or even suicide prevention as part of site Occupational Health and Safety or general welfare provisions.
55. With the support of the Queensland Government OzHelp Queensland Ltd is providing 40 hours of life skills training to selected apprentices within the industry. Although currently only funded for 500 apprentices the early indications is that the program is highly effective in increasing help seeking and building resilience amongst the apprentices.
56. With the support of Construction Skills Queensland OzHelp Queensland Ltd is currently establishing the program “Staying Connected”. The program is based on the Child Support Agency occupationally based training course “Staying Connected” but will also include intensive support for separated workers.
57. Several organisations such as the CFMEU Apprentice Scholarship Program and the Plumbing industry’s Services Trades Industry Fund (STIF) have employed apprentice support officers focusing on working intensively with the apprentices to ensure completion. Both areas have significantly lower drop out rates amongst apprentices than the industry average.

Recommendations:

58. Adequate funding is made available to organisations engaged in actual preventative activities around suicide. Preventative initiatives can be both general and universal and specific and targeted such as the MATES in Construction program. Expenditure in suicide prevention results in actual savings to the tax payers.
59. Public hospitals and/or facilities should recognise the efforts of community organisations in the area of suicide prevention. A central help line aimed at supporting community effort and “brokering” access to public facilities as needed should be established. Alternatively psychiatric emergencies should as far as practicable be separated from general medical emergencies at admission in emergency departments to prevent people suffering from psychiatric conditions being treated as less serious than “real” medical cases and emergencies.
60. A targeted industry solution which in some industries appears to be an industry problem, involving employers and unions have proven to be highly effective in the construction industry and could be tried in other industries.
61. Where an industry approach exist it is important to involve peripheral industry organisations and services. In the construction industry these include Workplace Health and Safety Inspectors, Building Services Authority staff and Union officials. These roles typically deal with workers under stress and basic knowledge of suicide prevention could therefore be life saving.
62. Basic suicide awareness should be part of safety inductions and apprentice training. Employers engaging in effective mental health and wellbeing promotion within their workforce should be recognised and advantaged when seeking government funded work.

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