



Inquiry into Mental Health and Suicide Prevention



Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Response from First Nations Media
Australia

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This submission is made by First Nations Media Australia. Some members may make individual submissions in which case the First Nations Media Australia submission should not be taken to displace those submissions.

[First Nations Media Australia](#) (FNMA) is the peak body for the First Nations media and communications industry. The First Nations radio sector comprises 28 urban and regional radio services, 8 remote media organisations servicing 138 remote communities, collectively reaching nearly 50% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population each week. In addition, the sector publishes print media including Koori Mail and the National Indigenous Times, online news sites such as IndigenousX, a regional satellite television service reaching 240,000 remote households (ICTV), a free to air national TV service (NITV) and several narrowcast television broadcasters. As at March 2021, FNMA’s membership includes 60 organisations and 162 individuals. The industry has a strong web presence with First Nations broadcasters active on social media. Plus indigiTUBE, a dedicated online platform showcasing aggregated content complimented by an app, each of which streams 25 radio services. These channels offer a wide range of programming, including news and current affairs reporting from a First Nations perspective, in over 25 languages nationally.

FNMA contributes brief comments to the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention from the perspective of media as an essential service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Media is both support for community health and a sector in need of mental health support. FNMA raises topics in this submission that may not be covered by other contributors.



Impact of COVID-19

The primary impact of the pandemic within the First Nations media sector was been increasing pressure on the capacity of small teams to deliver essential information services to First Nations communities deemed particularly vulnerable to COVID-19-related deaths. First Nations media organisations remain at the frontline of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, working extended hours for months to ensure communities had the information they needed, in a manner audiences could understand.

First Nations media organisations immediately transitioned their operations to facilitate remote broadcasting and increasing hygiene processes for workspaces to protect their teams’ health. At the same time, broadcasters faced a significant increase in workload to effectively respond to rolling announcements and relay information specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences. This included a significant increase in translation requirements and a fast turn-around on information such as the closure of remote communities which was undertaken with 12 hours-notice.

First Nations media organisations carried a significant workload during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in increased stress and team members who are responding to trauma in a variety of ways both in their workplaces and outside of it. Many of our members are impacted by stresses associated with low socioeconomic status and significant social and emotional strain on themselves and their families.

During the pandemic, not-for-profit media organisations were not able to perform their usual outside broadcast and fundraising activities, resulting in the reduction of self-generated income to many media organisations. Managers continue to face significant financial strain on organisations, while also trying to support personnel through community lockdowns and work-from-home arrangements which nobody was prepared for. Working from home can be problematic in households impacted by low socioeconomic pressures where overcrowding can make workspaces difficult to negotiate. In addition, the pressure to keep communities safe has been significant, requiring increased work hours and additional services to the community which are outside the professional training provided to our broadcasters and administrative staff.

Black Lives Matter

Many media workers were already feeling the strain of consecutive weeks, spanning into months, dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic when the Black Lives Matters movement profile began to rise globally. First Nations media organisations have a responsibility to report on this critical moment in time from a First Nations perspective, even when it triggers trauma for themselves, their families and/or their communities.

Public debate, particularly on social media platforms can be extremely damaging in response to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism and in this case racially-motivated protests were rising in prominence on the world stage. First Nations Media Australia became increasingly concerned about the confluence of these conversations on staff who were already strained from their work on the COVID-19 pandemic response. Our question is, if self-care is not reading the comments – who supports the moderators? Our media workers do not have the opportunity to turn off the news for a few days, or to have a break from social media. They feel duty-bound to contribute a First Nations perspective on matters through their reporting, and to ensure those news stories reach their intended audience communities, including via social media. Deleting inappropriate comments and abuse from public news sources online is part of their daily work.

Peak Body Response

During 2020, First Nations Media Australia started receiving concerning feedback from its members about the mental health of some of our industry professionals reporting from the front line of both the impact of increased public conversation about the Black Lives Matter movement and the protracted health, cultural wellbeing and social distancing impact of COVID-19. We noted increased public discussion of workplace culture from some media organisations and wanted to ensure our grassroots media workers were supported within their organisations. However, this requires customised support for both management and individual personnel to seek professional assistance to manage stress, trauma and self-care. High rates of suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made FNMA particularly responsive to this feedback.

FNMA provided information to members on resources such as Support Act's Indigenous Support Line and held webinar discussions with FNMA members. We arranged for Stan Grant to share his experience on reporting on trauma and advice on self-care. Sue-Ann Hunter, a Wurundjeri and Ngurai illum wurrung woman with a Masters in Trauma & Recovery spoke with members about practical advice for managing mental health. Some members participated in online discussions with the DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma. These actions were appreciated and appropriate, however they do not provide the level of bespoke response our members needed.

While there are some dedicated First Nations mental health support services available in pockets across the country, there is no singular solution to meet the mental health needs of First Nations media workers operating in very different environments, in different states with varying levels of access to online and telephone services. For example, 3KND in Melbourne was under Stage 4 lockdown with team members suffering extreme mental health pressure. Emergency counselling support is required on a one-to-one basis at a cost of approximately \$5,000. For comparison, broadcasters at Wilcannia River Radio connect strongly to the Baarka River as a place of healing and reflection. An appropriate activity to provide mental health support for their small team would be a couple of days camping on Country with conversation led by a Manager and local Elders. The costs involved for that activity would only be food and transport at around \$1,000 in total.

Neither First Nations media organisations nor First Nations Media Australia as the peak body has the capacity to provide professional mental health support, or the resources available to pay for it. However, First Nations Media Australia does have demonstrable expertise in the management of project funding to its members and capacity to take on reporting and distribution of funding to the sector. We began seeking emergency funding support to enable an industry-wide mental health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but to date have not secured a funding partner to support this bespoke work. We raise this with the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention as a gap in service provision and resources caused primarily by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community engagement & mental health literacy

Throughout this period First Nations media organisations demonstrated their capacity to deliver timely and relevant information. Communities turned to First Nations media services as trusted sources of information, particularly amid conflicting reports shared through social media and other networks. First Nations media organisations worked to address misinformation within the community, such as connections between 5G and COVID-19 and more recently community concerns about vaccines.

First Nations media organisations reported receiving up to 40 calls per day from community members seeking information, reassurance, clarification and emotional support during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. This direct contact speaks to the strong connection between First Nations media organisations and their communities through in person conversation, broadcast information, social media and through their relationship to the community. First Nations broadcasters are not separate to the communities they serve, they are community members themselves. They speak to key issues on air, online, at the shop and with their families. This makes First Nations journalists, community reporters and broadcasters key influencers in their communities, as well as important links to ensure Elders and other relevant respected spokespeople within the community have a platform for getting important information across to people.

This role as connectors and curators makes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media workers vital to ensuring First Nations communities have access to the information they need to make decisions about their own lives. This includes explaining available services, facilitating discussions between community members and topic experts and broadening discussion in public forums to reduce stigma. FNMA members are very experienced in interpreting complex information and relaying it in local Indigenous languages and/or easily understood English.

First Nations Media Australia encourages the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention to consider the role our sector can contribute to improving mental health literacy, increasing community understanding of mental health services and encouraging community engagement toward early treatment and support. First Nations media organisations have the production capacity and expertise to develop messaging that will connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, drawing attention to telehealth and online mental health service providers, as well as localized services.

