



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **Victorian Aboriginal health organisations launch**

#### ***Yarning SafeNStrong* crisis helpline – a national first**

#### **ACCOS continue innovative approach to supporting Aboriginal Communities during COVID-19**

**Victoria, 12 June 2020:** Responding to calls from the Aboriginal Community, the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service ([VAHS](#)) have partnered with the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation ([VACCHO](#)) to launch a central '1800' statewide social and emotional wellbeing helpline for Aboriginal Victorians.

*Yarning SafeNStrong* (YSNS) is a confidential phone crisis line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families who need to have a yarn with someone about their wellbeing. COVID-19 has seen many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without access to their family and other supports, including face to face access to workers from Aboriginal services, leaving many feeling vulnerable and isolated.

*Yarning SafeNStrong* will be available from Monday 15th June. The hotline (1800 95 95 63) will operate 7 days a week from 12noon – 10pm. If anyone calls outside of these hours there will be a recorded message suggesting other 24/7 phone counselling services (Lifeline, Beyond Blue and Kids Helpline) and an opportunity for the person to leave a message and have their call returned the following day.

VAHS CEO Michael Graham said the *Yarning SafeNStrong* helpline “comes at an important time for Aboriginal communities, with recent events such as COVID-19 and global unrest around the death of George Floyd triggering a long history of trauma and injustice alongside already very high levels of psychological distress.”

He went on to add that “the cumulative impact of colonization and continued injustice for our communities is a major concern to the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service.

“Today, we have not only the highest recorded suicide rates in the country, but across the world. It has taken a global pandemic for governments to fully acknowledge this challenge and to support initiatives such as the need for our own helpline. We are thankful for the resource which is a small but important step towards the level of resourcing needed,” he finally said.

VACCHO CEO, Jill Gallagher AO said “the helpline is a vital service which VACCHO has been advocating for some time and draws on VACCHO’s successful track-record of community-led initiatives.

“We are proud to partner with VAHS to launch the *Yarning SafeNStrong* service today and we acknowledge the team at VAHS and VACCHO for their hard work bringing this new service to our communities, and also opening the service early in light of recent events,” she said.

“We’ve seen incredible resilience within our communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. There’s no doubt this remarkable outcome is a result of good planning by our ACCOs and hundreds of support workers across our entire community and shows us the importance of self-determination in delivering improved community health and wellbeing outcomes,” said Ms Gallagher.

“We acknowledge the investment in Aboriginal Health - including the deep and leadership work being done in Victoria in the Mental Health Royal Commission. This important work not only addresses immediate community health concerns but could also help reduce impacts on our Communities in the long run. If successful, VACCHO would like to see this work used as a model for other areas of Aboriginal Health,” said Ms Gallagher.

Aboriginal people continue to have significantly poorer health and wellbeing outcomes than the overall population. Our populations will grow by almost 50% by 2026, meaning much deeper investment is required into flexible and holistic Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing service models like YNS.

There is strong evidence to support the concept of a state-wide Aboriginal counselling service model with strong cohesive links to existing regional and metropolitan Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing support services. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS) have the knowledge and expertise about how to engage and respond to the social, cultural and emotional needs of local Aboriginal people, their families and their communities.

Without culturally safe options designed and implemented by Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal people are at risk of disengaging from service systems and supports, exacerbating disadvantage and poorer outcomes, and leading to increased service demand both now and into the future. Local and international evidence shows us that self-determination is the key policy approach that has produced effective and sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal people and communities.

ACCOS or ACHOS for consistency provide at least three million episodes of care each year for about 350,000 people and employ about 6,000 staff.

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## **ABOUT VACCHO**

[Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation](#) Inc (VACCHO) is the peak body for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples living in Victoria. Established in 1996, VACCHO's vision is that Aboriginal people will have a high quality of health and wellbeing, enabling individuals and communities to reach their full potential in life. This will be achieved through the philosophy of community control and the role of VACCHO is to build the capacity of its membership and to advocate for issues on their behalf.

The VACCHO COVID-19 online [information hub](#).

## **ABOUT VAHS**

The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) was established in 1972 to address the specific medical needs of Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

VAHS provides a comprehensive range of services, including: allied health services, healthy lifestyles programs, smoking cessation, male health and men's unit, social and emotional wellbeing, women and children's services, in-home support, parenting resources, family counselling services, financial wellbeing, medical services, home visits, referrals, transport, visiting medical specialists (cardiologist, gynaecologist, geriatrician, ophthalmologist, general surgeon, ear, nose and throat surgeon) and dental services.

As well as providing a variety of medical services, VAHS is committed to supporting the wellbeing of the community through contributions to community events and activities. VAHS is also committed to assisting research into the ongoing needs of the community.

Abstract adapted from the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service

## **BACKGROUND NOTES: Mental health statistics:**

- Aboriginal peoples in Victoria are three times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress. New research identifies Victoria as having the second highest rate of high to very high levels of psychological distress in 39% of young Aboriginal people (AIHW, 2018).
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- We know that there is a very strong link between Stolen Generations and poorer mental health. Amongst the Stolen Generation, 40% of Aboriginal people aged 50+ have poor mental health directly as a result of the trauma of removal.
- This costs us on many levels. Mental Health and related conditions have been estimated to be as much as 22 percent of the health gap (Burden of disease report 2003.)