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## Background and geography shouldn't dictate health outcomes

### **Mallee District Aboriginal Services has responded to the latest Coroner's Court Report into Suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria.**

Describing the report as 'sobering reading', Chief Executive Ms. Thomas says it is deeply concerning that three years on from the State Government's Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and fourteen years on from the launch of Close the Gap, we are still seeing Aboriginal people disproportionality represented in suicide rates and she says this speaks to a need to provide increased funding for wrap-around support services with a focus on early intervention and prevention.

Reflecting on what she believes must be done to address the issue, Ms. Thomas says that while there has been notable investment in mental health awareness activities, it should be matched with targeted funding for regional services.

"We know the need is there, we see it every day and these latest statistics paint the picture – if you live in a regional area, such as Mildura, and you're struggling with mental health issues, you're less likely to get a good outcome. This should not be the case. Geography should not dictate health outcomes any more than cultural background should."

The Coroner's Court Report revealed that whilst there has been a small decline in deaths by suicide over the last five years, the rates remain troubling. The Mildura Local Government Area has one of the higher rates of suicide frequency and this is data that's borne out by the anecdotal evidence MDAS hears on the ground. In response to what they've seen at a local level, Ms Thomas said MDAS has redesigned their mental health approach to support as many of their community members as they can.

"We have adopted a holistic, culturally informed approach that unites a range of services into 'pods' meaning clients receive wrap-around support. We recognise that many clients are struggling with several issues, outside the mental health diagnosis. They may have substance abuse or gambling issues. They could be financially insecure and experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. They could also be impacted by trauma or family conflict.

"Our model offers clients the supports they need, under one roof, with a team dedicated to their mental health and wellbeing journey and this is proving to be successful. We have also established relationships with our local hospitals so that when our clients and community members are hospitalised, we can support the clinical response to mental health with culturally safe care.

"We would like to receive additional, flexible funding that allows us to further expand our model and to be able to offer youth mental health support programs how, where and when they are needed."

Ms Thomas said that in addition to their Mildura service, MDAS offers outreach support to their Swan Hill and Kerang community and while the increased number of people contacting the Organisation for help across the Mallee is worrying on one level, she says it is also an indication of the community's growing understanding of the importance of caring about their own mental health and the services that exist to help them.

"Calls to our service have increased ten-fold over the last year but every call that is made represents a life that we can potentially save."

With a view to further strengthening the approach to Aboriginal health and wellbeing, MDAS is also calling for increased funding for programs that support carers of people living with mental health issues and for those dealing with the suicide of someone close to them.

"We need to focus on prevention. We need to educate people so they can recognise the signs of a mental health crisis in both themselves, and in others, and how to respond. We need to improve early assessment and treatment for people living in regional areas and funding needs to be directed to placed-based programs that address the trauma experienced in the wake of a suicide because it casts a long shadow."

Ms. Thomas says that mental health and suicide is an all-of-community problem and she appealed for kindness and understanding.

"We all need to take the time to check in on those around us. We need to be asking people if they are ok and critically, we need to have the courage to answer that question honestly.

"There is support available, so I encourage anyone who is struggling, or who knows someone who's struggling, to seek help."

Meanwhile, MDAS will continue to support its community and advocate to government for the funding they need to close the gap in mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living beyond the borders of major cities.

**ENDS**