



SUICIDE PREVENTION AMONG FARMERS POLICY POSITION STATEMENT 2020

POSITION

1. Farmers need specialist support for suicide prevention, especially through better access to support services to build their resilience, social inclusion, economic security and mental wellbeing.
2. Farmers and their families need targeted assistance to recover from droughts and natural disasters, as well as specialist support to build their resilience to future natural disasters

CONTEXT AND COMMENTARY

Farmers and farming communities need support for suicide prevention.

Analysis of suicide deaths data in Queensland found farming is an occupational category associated with a higher rate of suicide.¹ While comprehensive data on suicide rates among farmers across Australia is not readily available, studies in the United States of America and the United Kingdom have identified significantly increased rates of suicide among farmers, particularly in the wake of natural disasters.

We need a concerted effort to address the suicide risk factors unique to farmers, enhance access to support services and provide specialist support during times of drought.

Better access to services

Farmers experience the same risk factors and social determinants of suicide as the mainstream population. Relationship breakdowns, unemployment, alcohol addiction and debt are all factors that, if proper support is not available, can lead people to crisis point. Farmers, however, also experience unique stressors and risk factors due to their occupation. Farmers work long hours, often have access to firearms (a means of suicide), and experience significant rates of illness and pain due to the often physical nature of their work.

The presence of these added stressors and risk factors means farmers and their families need ready access to support services. The services needed to build resilience might include access to counselling and other mental health support; access to health services; and access to a range of other systems designed to enhance social and economic inclusion.

The majority of Australia's farmers, however, live and work in rural and remote communities. Support services are often patchy at best in these areas, due to the thinness of the market, lack of connectivity to transport and, sadly, underinvestment by Governments. We need farmers and the communities they live within to have the same support mechanisms available to them as to the rest of the Australian community.

¹ Kunde, L., Kólves, K., Kelly, B., Reddy, P., & De Leo, D. (2017). Pathways to Suicide in Australian Farmers: A Life Chart Analysis. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 14(4), p. 352, accessed 1 November 2019 at <doi:10.3390/ijerph14040352>.

There are crisis services available 24/7 if you or someone you know is in distress:

The Productivity Commission into the Mental Health system has flagged digital technology as a key means of expanding access to health, mental health and other support services. Digital technology offers the opportunity for clinicians to consult with patients remotely; and other service providers in the suicide prevention continuum to connect with their clients regardless of their geographic distance.

Suicide Prevention Australia strongly supports the Commission's view. Expanding access to digital service provision requires three key actions from Government: expedited delivery of the National Broadband Network; investment in digital technology tools for health and mental health services; and rapid collaboration between the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments to make the tools available where they are most needed.

Specialist, targeted support in times of natural disaster and downturn

The drought is having a profound economic and social impact on Australians living in rural and remote communities: especially farmers. Residents in rural and remote areas already experience significant rates of social exclusion due to the difficulty of making meaningful social connections and, as discussed earlier, accessing formal support services when needed. The stressors on people living in these communities are now even more acute, with the drought affecting employment, finances and their everyday lives.

The effect of droughts and other natural disasters on the mental health and wellbeing of farmers is particularly heavy. A recent longitudinal study found farmers experience significant psychological impacts in times of drought, with particularly high rates of general and drought-related stress amongst young farmers under 35, in remotely located properties and experiencing financial distress.²

We need a special support package to help farmers and their families to navigate the personal impacts of the drought. A significant proportion of the disaster recovery package proposed by the Commonwealth Government should be sequestered to services that will help farmers navigate the profound impacts of the drought on their mental health and wellbeing.

We can't, however, predict when the next drought will occur. As a result, we also need to help farmers build resilience to future natural disasters and crises that may affect their businesses and personal wellbeing. An important mechanism for boosting resilience is income diversification. There are economic reasons for this as well: our agricultural sector is a critical part of our economy, and if we want it to continue we must help farmers have the capacity to stay in the industry they have dedicated their lives and finances to.

Helping farmers explore alternatives for their farms during times of downturn – such as agritourism – will build their confidence as business owners and, we hope, minimise the economic and personal toll enacted by future droughts.

Lived experience: farmers helping farmers

Farmers, as with people in any other industry, need to feel connected with their peers. Linking in with others sharing the same experiences and challenges can be an important way of supporting people to feel more included, more heard and able to seek help when they need to. Suicide Prevention Australia believes there needs to be a concerted effort to overcome the social distance experienced by farmers through a mechanism to create these peer connections, particularly during times of drought.

Workers in the construction industry, for example, also experience significant work-related challenges. A 10 per cent reduction in suicide risk in Queensland coincided, however, with delivery of an industry based, peer-led

² Austin, E. Handley, T. Kiem, A. Rich, J. Lewin, T. Askland, H. Askarimarnani, S. Perkins, D. Kelly, B. (2018). 'Drought-related stress among farmers: findings from the Australian Rural Mental Health Study', *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 209 (4), p. 161, accessed online on 24 October 2019 at <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.5694/mja17.01200>>.

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www.lifeline.org.au

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Suicide Prevention Australia

Phone: 02 9262 1130

Email: admin@suicidepreventionaust.org

Web: www.suicidepreventionaust.org

program integrating training and support to address suicide risk factors and behaviours present in the construction industry.³ The MATES in Construction program involves training construction workers to notice behaviour changes or signs in conversations with their colleagues that might indicate they needed help; and then pointing them in the direction of support services such as psychologists and social workers.⁴

Suicide Prevention Australia is of the view that there is merit for investing in a similarly industry-based, peer-led initiative for farmers. As established earlier in this statement, farmers typically, however, are isolated geographically. A peer support initiative for farmers would ideally be delivered digitally so that as many people as possible could benefit; and via a platform facilitating two-way discussions.

³ Doran, C. Ling, R. (2015). *The economic cost of suicide and non-fatal suicidal behaviour in the Australian construction industry by state and territory*, Hunter Medical Research Institute, University of Newcastle, accessed online on 8 November 2019 at <<http://matesinconstruction.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Cost-of-suicide-in-construction-industry-final-report.pdf>>.

⁴ MATES in Construction, *The MATES Model*, website, accessed online on 8 November 2019 at <<http://matesinconstruction.org.au/about/how-mic-works/>>.

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