

NEWS RELEASE



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Staying strong in Maningrida

A young leader in the Territory's mental health services has been recognised for his work helping people recover from mental illness in the remote community of Maningrida.

At the age of 31, mental health worker Blake Edwards has almost seen a lifetime worth of community harm involving drugs, alcohol and mental illness.

But it is his work heading up TEAMhealth's Remote Program in Maningrida that is making the biggest difference.

TEAMhealth is the leading provider of community mental health services in the Northern Territory, and supports more than 400 people and families dealing with mental health challenges across the Top End.

Sitting under trees, on the beach, in cars and on the ground talking to community members, elders and Traditional Owners were the best ways to find out how the Personal Helpers and Mentors program could work in Maningrida.

"We could see there was a really big need for community appropriate, ongoing mental health education in Maningrida that wasn't just one off and delivered in one place, but in each of the camps and each of the family groups," Blake said. "There also needed to be a message of hope and recovery."

The Personal Helpers and Mentors Program, which is funded by the Australian Government's Department of Social Services, is initially working with seven people in the remote community to create recovery plans to help them cope with mental illness.

Blake said the main goals of the remote program, which began 18 months ago, are providing community-wide mental health education, creating a recovery program suited to the community and building the skills of community members to eventually run the program.

TEAMhealth staff used the Menzies School of Health Research 'Staying Strong' app to create recovery plans for people in the community who needed help.

The app uses a compelling comparison between a strong tree relying on its 'roots', such as strong culture, eating good food, accessing health services, staying away from alcohol or drugs and a 'sick' tree with weakened roots from culture worries, smoking ganja, lots of stress or sadness.

Once the team helped identify the problems that made the client's tree 'sick', they put together a recovery plan on what they can do to help.

Blake has worked in the field of mental health and in remote communities for several years now after coming to the Northern Territory.

NEWS RELEASE

The 31-year-old trained as a social worker and spent his early career helping youth aged between 12 and 21 with alcohol and drug problems on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria.

Managing cases of teenagers as young as 12 battling heroin addictions in communities was gruelling for the young social worker, but he also saw a strong link between drug and alcohol issues and mental health, and seemed a natural step in his career.

After working in remote communities across the Northern Territory, Blake said he found mental health statistics in the Northern Territory very confronting.

One in four young people (aged 16 to 25) and one in five adults are diagnosed with a mental illness over a 12-month period.

And in remote communities, the risk factors are often worse, including isolation, reduced access to health services and lack of mental health education.

Blake finds his hands-on work with TEAMhealth at Maningrida very satisfying. The team now includes four local people trained in delivering mental health support services and they continue to use innovative ways to engage with local people and educate them about mental health.

A partnership between TEAMhealth and AFL NT in Maningrida is looking at introducing a mental health education program similar to a recent agreement for all players and families to undergo health checks, where players will participate in mental health education.

Blake said every event, conversation or interaction with local people helps educate the community about mental health.

“We want to educate and reach everyone in community and teach everyone about mental illness and teach everyone that people can get well, that recovery does happen and TEAMhealth can help,” he said.

Domestic violence was raised as one of the key issues linked with mental health and local youth recently participated in a White Ribbon day held by TEAMhealth to allow people to make a pledge to stop domestic violence.

Ultimately Blake wants a safe place built for the people they help in Maningrida, where they can access their support and mental health services free of stigma.

Blake recently won an award for his work as an Emerging Leader at the recent Northern Territory Disability Services Awards. Angela Greensill and Heather King were also recognised for their commitment to ensuring quality support for participants in TEAMhealth programs through nominations in the NT Disability Services Award.

Caption 1: TEAMhealth emerging leader Blake Edwards.

Caption 2: Maningrida’s Dylan Cooper join in White Ribbon Day stand against domestic violence as part of mental health education in the remote community.

Caption 3: Maningrida youth Cain Nangamu, Dylan Cooper and Jayden Dempsey all make a stand against domestic violence in the community.

Contact

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