

Geraldton community grieves as Aboriginal boy's suicide highlights prevention failures

THE suicide of an 11-year-old Aboriginal boy in the West Australian port of Geraldton has plunged the local indigenous community deep into grief, six months after the state's Mental Health Commissioner warned suicide victims were getting younger — and prevention strategies were not working.

Peter Little was playing with other children outside his grandparents' home on October 19 before he left the group and was found hanging from a tree soon after in a nearby patch of bush.

The Australian understands he was found by another child.

An inter-agency briefing note seen by *The Australian* says the boy “had a number of previously reported suicide attempts”.

The West Australian Department for Child Protection would not comment on the matter yesterday, saying only that it was providing support to the family.

People who know the Little family say Peter was being raised by loving grandparents and had been living with them since around the time his parents separated. His mother and father have travelled to Geraldton to grieve with the rest of the family. Peter had been living in an inland regional town before recently moving to Geraldton. He had struggled with numeracy and literacy at school but, according to one person who knows the family, he did not seem tormented or troubled and enjoyed being with his young relatives.

Peter's funeral will be held today.

Gordon Gray, chairman of the Midwest Aboriginal Organisation Alliance and a friend of the Little family, told *The Australian* the community was in deep shock.

“People are just stunned and in so much pain,” he said.

He said no matter what government inquiries found, the situation only worsened. “For this to happen to a little kid breaks all our hearts. We don't know where it's going to come from next,” he said.

Authorities remained silent on Peter's death for more than two weeks but indigenous leaders told *The Australian* yesterday that it was a matter that must be discussed publicly.

"It's like the biggest secret in the world this poor kid is gone and it's all hush," one elder said.

Geraldton Mayor Ian Carpenter was not aware yesterday of Peter's death. "Oh my God, that is so terrible," he said when contacted by *The Australian*.

Labor's state Aboriginal affairs spokesman Ben Wyatt said areas of regional Western Australia were facing a growing youth suicide crisis.

"It's almost at the ludicrous situation where the sheer numbers are normalising young Aboriginal kids suiciding," he said.

"There is a fundamental failure at a community level where kids feel as if the only coping mechanism they have is to end their life."

In 2008, Western Australia's then coroner, Alastair Hope, criticised state government policy and a lack of leadership in indigenous affairs in his report on a spate of Aboriginal suicides in the Kimberley, including that of an 11-year-old boy.

Mr Hope recommended the government put in place a leadership structure in the Department of Indigenous Affairs "which will command the respect of other government agencies and Aboriginal people". He also recommended better co-ordination among government agencies to stem the rate of Aboriginal suicide.

In June, Mental Health Commissioner Tim Marney said suicide rates in Western Australia continued to rise and warned that victims were getting younger.

Mr Marney said it was essential to address a "steady rate" of suicides, which claimed 336 lives in Western Australia in 2012. "For the current year, the trends are showing there has been further increase in the actual number of suicides," he said. "The upward trend we've seen since 2006 is unfortunately continuing."

A suicide prevention roundtable of indigenous leaders in Perth the same month was told 45 community action plans in 250 locations had been rolled out under the state's suicide prevention strategy.

Derby-based elder Lorna Hudson, who was awarded an Order of Australia in 2012 for community health work, said funerals of young people were a regular occurrence. Hot spots included Fitzroy Crossing, Derby and Halls Creek. “It’s getting worse with drugs and we’ll be left with no future leaders,” she said. “It wasn’t like that before.”

Suicide awareness workshops and mental health training have been focused on the Kimberley and in a number of southwest towns where indigenous youth suicide has reached six times the national level.

Mr Marney said a network of new psychiatrists, nurses and mental health workers — many of them Aboriginal — had led to a 120 per cent increase in Aborigines accessing mental health services, a 144 per cent increase in face-to-face clinical consultations and a 44 per cent increase in those accessing community health services. But he said a worrying trend was that even younger people were seeking to take their own lives. “Anecdotal evidence that I’m getting from clinicians is that there are younger people presenting,” he said.

A recent suicide case study by the Ombudsman’s Office of 36 deceased children, aged between 13 and 17, found that indigenous children were over-represented. Thirteen, or 36 per cent, of the suicides were Aboriginal, although they make up only 6 per cent of the total child population.

Pat Dudgeon, chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Mental Health, said indigenous communities needed a “smorgasbord” of suicide prevention programs and declining suicide rates would take time. “It won’t happen overnight,” she said.

Additional reporting: Victoria Laurie