



Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Social and Emotional Wellbeing, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention



THIRRILI

MEDIA RELEASE

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Bodies call for urgent action on deaths in custody

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia and Thirrili are calling for urgent action following the death of Warlpiri man Kumanjayi White, who died in police custody after being forcibly restrained by two non-uniformed officers inside a supermarket in Alice Springs in May 2025.

Since the [Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody \(1987–1991\)](#), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody continue to grow. According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples died in custody in 2023-2024; the highest number recorded since 2000-2001.

Despite a [Closing the Gap target to reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15 per cent](#), the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prison population has increased by 21 per cent since 2019, while imprisonment of non-Indigenous people has been slowly declining. In 2024, four out of every 100 Aboriginal adults in Western Australia were incarcerated.

Calls for reform are further amplified by the [recent coronial findings](#) into the 2019 death of Warlpiri man Kumanjayi Walker. Recently, Northern Territory Coroner Elisabeth Armitage found the police officer who shot Mr Walker was racist and that it was not possible to rule out that his racist attitudes contributed to the fatal shooting.

“Each death in custody is a deep wound carried not only by their family, but by our entire community. At Thirrili, we stand in solidarity with those grieving, and we continue to call for urgent, systemic change to ensure our people are no longer overrepresented in these devastating statistics,” said Ms Tanja Hirvonen, Interim Chief Executive Officer of Thirrili.

“Our work at Thirrili is firmly grounded in cultural strength, compassion, and community leadership, and we remain steadfast in walking alongside families to support and advocate, and hope for a future where these injustices no longer occur,” she continued.

“The ongoing loss of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives in custody is a national tragedy and a failure of justice. These deaths are not isolated events – they are the consequence of deeply embedded systemic issues that continue to harm our people, their families, and communities,” said Ms Rachel Fishlock, Chief Executive Officer of Gayaa Dhuwi.

“At Gayaa Dhuwi, our goal is to transform Australia’s mental health system, so it is culturally safe, responsive, and grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership. True change requires that our voices are not only heard but lead the way.

“For our people, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, disability, and justice are not separate issues – they are deeply connected, and we experience these together, not in silos. A



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system-wide approach is desperately needed if we are ever going to close the gap for our peoples”.

Gayaa Dhuwi reminds the public and media outlets of the importance of responsible and culturally respectful reporting when it comes to issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This includes adhering to the [Good Yarn Guidelines](#) and ensuring that crisis support services are promoted effectively.

24/7 crisis helpline services available to the community include:

- **13 YARN (139276)** – a dedicated support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- **Brother to Brother crisis line (1800 435 799)** – providing support for men
- **Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800)** – for young people in need of support

For further information, and resources, or to access support services, please visit www.gayaadhuwi.org.au.

About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention. As a community-controlled organisation, it is governed and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and peak bodies, working to promote collective excellence in mental healthcare.

About Thirrili

Thirrili is a proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. Its vision is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities are thriving and flourishing for future generations to be free from the traumatic impacts of suicide.

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