

# I-SPOT PROGRAM HANDBOOK



This handbook outlines the program design, delivery and evaluation approach Connection Works takes for the I-SPOT program.

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## Needs Analysis

### Suicide Rates in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Communities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face disproportionately high suicide rates. In 2023, the age-standardised suicide rate was 30.8 per 100,000, compared to 11.1 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous Australians — more than double.<sup>1</sup> Suicide remains the leading cause of death among Indigenous children and significantly impacts younger age groups.<sup>2</sup> Data from Victoria between 2018–2023 reflects a similar trend: Indigenous suicide rates (~28.4 per 100k) were nearly three times those of non-Indigenous populations (~10.8 per 100k), with over half of the deaths occurring in those under 35 years.<sup>3</sup> These statistics underscore the urgent need for culturally aligned intervention training.

### Government and Sector Context

The **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy (2025–2035)** and the earlier 2013 strategy emphasise Indigenous-led solutions and culturally safe approaches.<sup>4</sup> These frameworks highlight the importance of community ownership and culturally responsive interventions.

Government data confirms that suicide accounts for around 5.3% of total Indigenous deaths (versus 1.8% for non-Indigenous Australians).<sup>5</sup> Despite national targets to reduce this, suicide rates continue to climb, showing the current approaches are insufficient.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Life In Mind (2024), Australian Bureau of Statistics, Causes of Death, 2023, <https://cbpatsisp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/LiM-CBPATSISP-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-communities-suicide-data-summary-2023.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The University of Western Australia, (2024), Alarming rise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide rates, <https://www.uwa.edu.au/news/article/2024/october/alarming-rise-in-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-suicide-rates>

<sup>3</sup> Coroners Court of Victoria (2024), Suicide rates of First Nations people in Victoria still almost three times higher than state's non-Indigenous population, <https://coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/suicide-rates-first-nations-people-victoria-still-almost-three-times-higher-states-non-indigenous>

<sup>4</sup> Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia and Department of Health and Aged Care, (2025), National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy 2025–2035, <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-12/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-suicide-prevention-strategy.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Suicide Prevention Australia, (2025), Closing the Gap Report reveals worsening suicide rates among First Nations communities, <https://www.suicidepreventionaustralia.org/closing-the-gap-report-reveals-worsening-suicide-rates-among-first-nations-communities/>

## Available Suicide Prevention Trainings: Review

Several suicide prevention training programs are currently available in Australia, and each offers strengths. However, many existing programs—though useful—are not specifically designed from the ground up by Indigenous organisations, nor are they always flexible or culturally aligned enough to meet the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The I-SPOT program fills a specific and currently unmet need in this space.

### **I-ASIST and safeYARN (LivingWorks)**

Programs such as I-ASIST and safeYARN, developed by LivingWorks, have been adapted to better suit Indigenous contexts. While these programs have value and have been delivered widely, they are mainstream training models that have been modified to include some Indigenous content—not programs designed and led by Indigenous organisations from the beginning.

Their structure and content are largely based on Western clinical models of suicide intervention. In addition, both programs come with rigid delivery requirements (including fixed formats, and delivery timeframes), which can make implementation challenging in remote or culturally specific settings. While Indigenous trainers are involved, the governance, intellectual property, and delivery model remain external to Indigenous control.

### **Aboriginal Mental Health First Aid (Mental Health First Aid)**

The Aboriginal Mental Health First Aid program, developed by Mental Health First Aid Australia, provides a culturally adapted approach to general mental health support. It incorporates Indigenous-specific content and is delivered by Aboriginal facilitators. While it offers foundational knowledge and is beneficial in raising awareness of mental health issues, AMHFA is not specifically focused on suicide intervention skills, and therefore does not provide the depth of practical training required to respond directly to suicide crises.

### **The Role of I-SPOT**

I-SPOT stands apart as an Indigenous-led, Indigenous-designed program developed specifically to address suicide prevention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is built on Indigenous knowledge systems, guided by lived experience, and shaped by the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) framework. The program is governed and owned by an Indigenous organisation (Connection Works), allowing greater flexibility in delivery, deep cultural embedding, and community responsiveness.

Where other programs offer broad awareness or adapted clinical models, I-SPOT delivers a targeted, culturally grounded suicide intervention skillset. Its flexible delivery model (including outreach, self-paced online, and group-based training) makes it suitable for urban, regional, and remote settings.

In short, while other programs provide useful tools, I-SPOT can fill a critical gap: culturally relevant, community-driven, and designed with the realities of Indigenous people at its centre.

### Community Consultation Process

I-SPOT has been ideated and designed in collaboration with Professor Maree Toombs from the Indigenous Health Education Unit at the University of NSW Extensive. She has lent to the design process detailed wisdom gained from the INSIST project which involved community consultation with 94 Indigenous communities around Australia to understand their unique training needs. The research utilised:

- Yarning circles in diverse Indigenous communities (urban, regional, and remote) facilitated by Indigenous researchers and community members
- Targeted consultation with high-risk groups including young men, LGBTQIA+ community members, and those in remote communities
- Elder consultations to understand traditional approaches to supporting community members in distress
- Focus groups with Indigenous health workers to identify challenges in existing suicide prevention approaches
- Interviews with family members affected by suicide, conducted with appropriate cultural protocols and support
- Consultations with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations regarding service gaps
- Forums with Indigenous youth to understand contemporary experiences and needs
- Engagement with Indigenous mental health professionals about appropriate clinical-cultural integration

These consultations were documented through culturally appropriate means, including audio recordings (with permission), visual mapping, and narrative summaries reviewed by participants.

## Unique Training Needs of Indigenous Communities

The specific training gaps that I-SPOT must address include:

- **Cultural relevance:** Training must reflect Indigenous ways of knowing—yarning, connection to Country, collective healing, and respect for intergenerational trauma.
- **Lived experience integration:** Embedding people's stories and cultural leadership ensures the training resonates and feels authentic.
- **Flexibility in delivery:** To meet diverse contexts—rural, remote, language differences—training must adapt in format and pace.
- **Trust and ownership:** Programs led by Indigenous people build trust, relevance, and local uptake—core for effective suicide prevention.

## Training Needs for I-SPOT

Bringing all this together, I-SPOT's training needs profile includes:

1. **Cultural grounding:** Ensure content, examples, and facilitation methods align with Indigenous lived experience and cultural protocols.
2. **Lived experience integration:** Involve Indigenous people with direct experience in the design and presentation of content.
3. **Flexible delivery models:** Create adaptable curricula suitable for different settings (online, outreach, in-person).
4. **Measurement framework:** Build simple evaluation tools to assess participant confidence, skill uptake, and cultural appropriateness.
5. **Continuous improvement loop:** Use participant feedback and cultural advisory input to refine training continuously.
6. **Alignment with national strategy:** Position I-SPOT as a leading example of NATSISPS-aligned, community-controlled suicide prevention.

## Summary

I-SPOT addresses an urgent need identified by rising suicide rates in Indigenous communities. Its underpinning by Professor Maree Toombs' Indigenous-led research, specifically through the findings of the Indigenous Network Suicide Intervention Skills Training (INSIST) project, gives it authority and cultural relevance. In comparison with mainstream programs, I-SPOT's strengths lie in its

design, ownership, and lived-experience grounding. Training must meet unique Indigenous needs—culturally safe, flexible, and measurable.

## Program Development

### Program Design Process

I-SPOT (Indigenous – Suicide Prevention Online Training) was created in direct response to the need for culturally appropriate suicide intervention training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The program is Indigenous-led and based on Indigenous worldviews of health, healing, and connection.

Its design is grounded in the research of Professor Maree Toombs, particularly the insights gathered during her Indigenous Network Suicide Intervention Skills Training INSIST project, which engaged 94 Indigenous communities across Australia. Professor Toombs' work identified that conventional suicide intervention approaches often failed to reflect the lived realities and cultural frameworks of Indigenous peoples. Her research, paired with the lived experience and leadership of Eli Toombs, formed the basis for I-SPOT's unique approach and four-step LALA framework: Look, Ask, Listen, Act.

### Consultation and Lived Experience

The program was shaped through extensive consultation with:

- Indigenous Elders and community leaders
- People with lived experience of suicide, including program Director, Eli Toombs
- Indigenous mental health professionals
- Community organisations working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Importantly, lived experience has been embedded from the start, not added as an afterthought. The LALA framework itself was shaped by personal and collective experiences of suicide, largely informed by the insights learned from the INSIST program. The learnings underpinning the LALA framework are focused on what helps or harms in times of crisis. Language choices throughout the training are also informed by lived experience, ensuring the program avoids stigma and reflects cultural realities.

## I-SPOT's Alignment with Connection Works' Organisational Direction

### Connection to Vision

The I-SPOT program directly supports Connection Works' vision of a world where individuals are met with dignity, cultural respect, and connection in times of crisis. I-SPOT contributes to this by equipping people with culturally grounded, practical skills to respond to suicide risk in ways that reflect Indigenous values and relational ways of being. It also supports the broader goal of community-driven and culturally safe suicide prevention systems, especially in places where standard approaches have lacked relevance.

### Connection to Mission

I-SPOT is a key expression of Connection Works' mission to create safer systems and stronger communities through culturally led education and training. The program delivers on this mission by building local capability, using culturally developed frameworks (like LALA), and addressing the real experiences of Indigenous people impacted by suicide. It is about empowerment through connection, not just technical skill-building.

### Connection to Organisational Values

- **Connection:** At its core, I-SPOT is about strengthening relationships—between individuals, families, communities, and culture—as a protective factor against suicide.
- **Cultural Leadership:** The program is Indigenous-owned, Indigenous-designed, and Indigenous-led. It centres cultural authority at every stage.
- **Collective Healing:** Guided by the Social and Emotional Wellbeing framework, I-SPOT recognises the broader context of intergenerational trauma, colonisation, and disconnection, and leans into the strengths of culture and community for healing.
- **Adaptability:** I-SPOT is designed for flexible delivery—including outreach, online, and hybrid formats—ensuring accessibility across diverse locations and learning needs.
- **Empowerment through Education:** The LALA framework gives participants clear, teachable skills that can be applied immediately in community settings.

## Connection to Organisational Goals

- **Expand Access:** I-SPOT's flexible design allows it to be delivered in remote, rural, and urban settings, including areas with language and accessibility barriers.
- **Embed Cultural Safety:** Every aspect of I-SPOT is shaped by Indigenous knowledge and guided by cultural advisors to ensure safety, relevance, and respect.
- **Build Connection-Based Skills:** The program teaches participants to identify and respond to suicide risk using culturally safe, relationship-focused approaches.
- **Lead by Example:** I-SPOT is a working model of Indigenous-led program development. It reflects best practice by embedding lived experience, Indigenous scholarship, and community consultation into its structure and content.

## Aims and Objectives

### Program Aims and Objectives

The core aim of I-SPOT is to reduce suicide in Indigenous communities through a culturally safe, strengths-based approach. The program is designed to increase the confidence, knowledge, and cultural safety of individuals and service providers responding to suicide risk.

The specific objectives are structured around the **LALA framework**:

- **Look** – Teach participants to recognise signs of suicide risk in culturally relevant ways
- **Ask** – Build the skill to ask clearly and directly about suicide, with respect and safety
- **Listen** – Support participants to listen without judgment and understand stories of pain about suicide
- **Act** – Empower participants to co-create safety plans using both cultural and clinical tools

These objectives are practical, teachable, and tailored to the social and emotional wellbeing needs of Indigenous people.

### Measurability of Aims

I-SPOT's learning objectives are measurable and evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative tools:

- Participant feedback forms assess learning, confidence, and practical application
- Follow-up evaluations explore how skills are used in real-world settings
- Testimonials and case studies provide insight into community impact
- Evaluation methods are being further developed in partnership with Professor Maree Toombs in the Indigenous Health Education Unit at the University of NSW, with the goal of strengthening long-term outcome measurement.

In addition to evaluating the overall impact of I-SPOT, each component of the LALA framework can be assessed on its own—for example, how confident

someone feels asking about suicide, or how well they understand what a culturally safe safety plan looks like.

### Ongoing Review and Evaluation

The I-SPOT program is reviewed regularly to ensure it continues to meet community needs and reflect current best practice. This includes:

- Reviewing participant feedback after each session
- Ongoing consultation with cultural advisors and Indigenous mental health professionals
- Formal periodic reviews to incorporate emerging research and community feedback
- Adjustments based on trainer insights, delivery experience, and regional relevance

As the program grows, the aims and objectives are treated as living components, open to revision as the community context changes. This flexibility is a key part of the program's cultural safety and relevance.

## Diversity and Inclusion

I-SPOT is built to meet the varied needs of Indigenous participants.

### Flexible Access

The program offers in-person, online, and blended delivery options, including on-Country sessions, to suit urban, regional, and remote communities. Scheduling includes nights and weekends, and there is no direct cost for participants. Physical venues are selected for both cultural appropriateness and accessibility (see Training Venue Checklist in Organisational Handbook).

### Respect for Cultural Variation

We adapt content to respect the distinct practices, languages, and protocols of different Nations. We accommodate diverse community settings (urban, rural, remote), gender-based protocols, age-specific learning needs (youth, adults, Elders), varied family and kinship structures, and a range of educational backgrounds, spiritual beliefs, and lived experiences.

Every I-SPOT workshop begins with an Acknowledgement of Country as detailed here:

*"Connection Works acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional custodians whose ancestral land we gather upon for this workshop.*

*Furthermore we acknowledge the spiritual, social, historical and ongoing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to these lands and pay our respects to the cultural authority of the traditional custodians, their Elders Past, Present and Emerging.*

*Connection Works also wishes to acknowledge any Sorry Business which might be happening across these lands at this present time."*

### Inclusive Resources

Our program materials reflect diverse Indigenous experiences – from imagery and case studies to storytelling – that avoid stereotypes. Language is chosen for clarity, inclusivity, and respect. Digital resources are designed for different devices and connectivity levels.

### Disability and Accessibility Support

Physical venues are selected to support mobility access, and I-SPOT materials and delivery modes can be adapted to work with sign-language interpreters and

cultural interpreters, upon request. Visual aids and flexible participation options can be arranged as needed.

### Consultation

I-SPOT was co-designed with input from Elders, subject matter experts, Indigenous researchers, and health professionals to ensure real-world relevance and cultural safety across diverse identities.

I-SPOT's strength lies in its flexibility, cultural relevance, and intentional design—ensuring all participants feel seen, heard, and supported in a way that respects their community, identity, and experience.

## Program Delivery

The I-SPOT program is designed to be delivered in ways that are flexible, culturally appropriate, and responsive to the needs of diverse Indigenous communities and service providers working alongside them. The program can be delivered through three formats:

- **Self-Paced Online** – Participants complete the program independently via an online learning platform, with clear guidance and culturally safe materials.
- **Facilitated Online** – A trainer delivers the program in a live, virtual group setting using video conferencing tools.
- **Face-to-Face Delivery** – The preferred model, allowing for deeper relationship-building, discussion, and shared learning in community settings.

### Facilitation Protocols

- Indigenous-led delivery is central to the I-SPOT model. The program is delivered by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander lead facilitator.
- Where it is not possible to secure an Indigenous co-facilitator, a non-Indigenous co-facilitator may be involved *only* if they have received appropriate cultural training and have demonstrated experience working respectfully with Indigenous communities.
- Facilitators with lived or living experience of suicide are preferred wherever possible, as this supports the integrity, depth, and authenticity of the training.
- The program can be delivered by a solo facilitator, but a two-facilitator model is preferred—especially in group or face-to-face settings— to ensure cultural, emotional, and learning safety for all participants.
- Where travel for facilitators is required, especially in rural and remote areas, facilitators must familiarise themselves with the guidelines laid out in the Transportation Policy (see Connection Works Organisational Handbook) to ensure their safety during travel.

### Training Materials

Each delivery of I-SPOT includes the following core materials:

- A printed or digital participant workbook
- A set of training slides aligned with the LALA framework
- A crisis resource / community helpers contact detail page
- A wallet card reference guide for ongoing use
- A participant feedback form (digital for online participants; paper-based for face-to-face training) for evaluation and continuous improvement

Facilitators are expected to follow the approved content and structure, while tailoring examples and delivery style to suit the group's context. Training can be adapted for delivery in urban, rural, or remote communities, and additional support is available where participants or groups have individual learning or accessibility needs.

### Delivery for Service Providers

I-SPOT is also suitable for non-Indigenous service providers and organisations who work closely with Indigenous communities. The training helps build cultural safety, practical suicide intervention skills, and a clearer understanding of the unique strengths and challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Facilitators always adapt tone, pace, and discussion methods to meet the cultural, emotional, and educational needs of the group, while upholding the integrity of the program.

Connection Works values feedback from program participants and integrates insights from participants during program reviews.

## Safe Language

The development of the I-SPOT program and its course materials have been carried out in alignment with Connection Works' Safe Language Policy (see the Connection Works Organisational Handbook), which requires all staff to be informed and committed to safe language use. All materials are open to ongoing review and feedback from cultural advisors and suicide prevention subject matter experts.

## Crisis Support

### Crisis Support During Training

Delivering suicide prevention training like I-SPOT requires careful attention to the emotional wellbeing and safety of all participants. Conversations about suicide can bring up strong feelings, especially for those with lived or living experience. Research shows that safe and supportive training environments—where people know what supports are available—can reduce distress and improve outcomes in suicide prevention education.

For this reason, I-SPOT facilitators are required to cover crisis support information at the beginning of every training session, and to repeat this information each day during multi-day programs. Facilitators should also restate the availability of support services during breaks and at the close of each session.



Participants are provided with a range of emergency and culturally specific support resources, including national and local options. These are detailed on the Crisis Support Resource handout and participant Wallet Card resource. These may include services like Lifeline, 13YARN, Kids Helpline, and other culturally safe services. When I-SPOT is delivered on location (especially on Country), facilitators must identify and note locally relevant crisis and community support services before the training begins, to ensure participants have access to appropriate help if needed.

## Facilitator Wellbeing

Delivering I-SPOT can also have an emotional impact on facilitators. Sharing space with participants' lived experience, holding conversations about suicide, and managing group dynamics can take a toll. Facilitators are encouraged to be mindful of their own wellbeing and seek support when needed.

Support options for facilitators are outlined in the Connection Works Staff Wellbeing Policy. These include:

- Peer-to-peer debriefing and reflective practice
- Access to Connection Works' cultural and clinical advisors
- Referral to an external counselling provider (EAP equivalent), funded by Connection Works for staff and regular contractors

## Feedback and Evaluation

### Evaluation Partnership with UNSW Blakacademy

Connection Works partners with the Blakacademy at UNSW, who support ongoing qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the I-SPOT program. This partnership ensures the program is guided by current research, culturally safe methodologies, and rigorous evidence collection. The Blakacademy contributes to:

- Analysis of participant outcomes and experience
- Identification of program impact across different community settings
- Advice on the integration of data into program planning and updates
- Ongoing research collaboration that supports the broader suicide prevention sector
- Pre-post evaluation tools to assess the efficacy of the Indigenous-led suicide intervention training program
- Longitudinal data collection and analysis focusing on:
  - Lives saved through I-SPOT interventions
  - Surveillance of suicide hotspots and their prevalence over time
  - Long-term community impact assessment

This partnership strengthens I-SPOT's credibility and ensures that quality improvement is grounded in both Indigenous-led research and sector best practice.

### Feedback Policy

Connection Works has a Program Feedback Policy (see Connection Works Organisational Handbook) that outlines how feedback is collected, reviewed, and acted upon. Feedback is actively sought from:

- Program participants
- Host organisations and delivery partners
- Facilitators
- Sector collaborators
- Community stakeholders

Feedback is gathered primarily directly from program participants who are requested to complete a feedback form at the end of their training. Feedback is also sought through a mix of structured forms, informal conversations, email submissions, and consultation meetings.

All feedback is reviewed by the Director of Connection Works, who determines necessary actions and ensures contributors are acknowledged and kept informed where appropriate.

## Participant Feedback Process

After every I-SPOT workshop, participants are asked to complete a Participant Feedback Form, which includes questions about:

- Content relevance and cultural safety
- Confidence and knowledge gained
- Facilitator performance
- Safety and emotional support during delivery
- Suggestions for improvement

I-SPOT programs delivered in person use a paper-based feedback form, while online and self-paced delivery options utilise an online survey platform (e.g. Survey Monkey) to collect data. The feedback form questions are identical between these forms.

Responses from these forms are entered into a central Participant Feedback Log, which is regularly reviewed to identify patterns and priority areas for program enhancement. Insights are collated for annual reporting, program evaluation, and advisory discussions.

## Program Evaluation Policy

Evaluation of I-SPOT is governed by a detailed Program Evaluation Policy (see Connection Works Organisational Handbook, which ensures the program remains effective, evidence-based, and culturally safe. Evaluation occurs at least annually. The program evaluation process includes:

- Review of all feedback from the previous year
- Consultation with facilitators, host organisations, and advisory members
- Update of any outdated content or statistics
- Reflection on facilitator and participant experience
- Inclusion of data and insights from UNSW Black Academy and other research partners

This policy ensures that evaluation is cyclical, transparent, and directly tied to quality improvement.

## Program Review Checklist

Connection Works uses a formal Program Review Checklist (see Connection Works Organisational Handbook) as part of its evaluation process. This checklist ensures all aspects of the program are assessed, including:

- Alignment with Connection Works' vision, mission, and values
- Currency and accuracy of training content
- Cultural safety and relevance
- Effectiveness of delivery formats
- Adequacy of resources provided (e.g. workbook, slides, wallet cards)
- Facilitator feedback and wellbeing
- Participant outcomes and learning objectives

## Continuous Quality Improvement

All feedback and evaluation activities feed into a continuous improvement cycle. Updates or changes to program content, delivery structure, or resources are:

- Documented and version-controlled
- Shared with all facilitators and relevant staff
- Communicated to key partners where appropriate
- Integrated into updated facilitator packs and participant materials

This process ensures that I-SPOT remains responsive to community needs, rooted in evidence, and effective in achieving its goals.