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## Local communities now have increased access to mental health, drug and alcohol counselling delivered by Aboriginal health professionals

Indigenous communities throughout the Nepean Blue Mountains region now have increased access to mental health, drug and alcohol counselling delivered by Aboriginal health professionals.

Nine students have completed a customised Diploma of Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs that was tailored by TAFE Digital for the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, Sydney University to provide training to Indigenous communities. This program was commissioned by Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network and funded by the Australian Government.

Amy Traeger, Senior Project Officer at Poche, said “We successfully gained a tender from Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network (NBMPHN) to empower the Indigenous workforce, specifically in the field of mental health, alcohol and other drugs.”

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay said, “Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people often face extra barriers when accessing health services and these graduates will help our community by providing culturally safe and appropriate support that will help break down some those barriers.”

“Before these nine students graduated, our consultations indicated that there was only one qualified Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander community worker to providing drug and alcohol counselling in our region. As a result of this program there are now 10. We think that is a great result for our community.”

“Four students from the cohort applied to undertake cadetship, which involved completing the qualification, whilst undertaking paid work in four host organisations in the NBMPHN catchment area [1],” said Ms Traeger.

All students gained specialised knowledge and practical skills in the areas of mental health, and drug and alcohol counselling and are now able to take these skills into their workplace to contribute more holistically regarding appropriate treatment and management.

“To date, the graduates have engaged with over 655 clients, with interaction and monitoring progress, being a key success metric,” said Ms Traeger.

“The graduates are able to help improve Indigenous health outcomes, with the Aboriginal workforce increasing retention of Indigenous clients in their local communities.”

In conjunction with the Diploma, a community engagement and education program was implemented.

Level 1, Suite 1, Werrington Park Corporate Centre, 14 Great Western Highway Kingswood NSW 2747  
Post to: WHL, Blg BR, Level 1, Suite 1, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith NSW 2751 | T 02 4708 8100 | F 02 9673 6856  
[www.nbmphn.com.au](http://www.nbmphn.com.au)

“Through Rural and Remote Mental Health, a ‘Deadly Thinking - train the trainer’ event was held to upskill local community members in Indigenous mental health, to build awareness and improve health outcomes,” said Ms Traeger.

“Following this training, four community workshops were planned and facilitated by the newly trained trainers.”

Cadet Mikielah Leigh, who worked at Hawkesbury District Health Service, St John of God, said, "The Poche cadetship has been an incredible learning journey for me, as I started with little experience in the area of Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol health services. I now have the essential skill sets to pursue my dream of a career in healthcare and plan to become one of only a few Aboriginal Social Workers in Western Sydney, once I've obtained a degree.

Throughout the 18 months of my cadetship I have gained knowledge and skills not only in Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol healthcare, but also in how to work professionally with a passionate and hardworking team."

As a result of Poche and TAFE Digital's shared vision and effort, graduates and cadets have gained employment and are excelling in their workplaces.

“To make a positive difference of this magnitude in so many people’s lives is awe-inspiring,” said Ms Traeger.

[1] The four NBMPHN host organisations were Neami Nepean Penrith; WHOS West; Hawkesbury District Community Health (St John of God Healthcare); and Ted Noffs Mt Druitt.

**Media contact:** Bonny Gunn, TAFE Digital Media and Communications Business Partner.  
M: 0459 563 531

The Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network is a program run by Wentworth Healthcare – a not for profit organisation which works to improve health for the communities of the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith.

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For interviews or more information contact:

Bess Bosman

**Media & Marketing Officer**

T 02 4708 8148

M 0438261015

E [Bess.Bosman@nbmphn.com.au](mailto:Bess.Bosman@nbmphn.com.au)

Nicole Parsons

**Media & Communications Manager**

T 02 4708 8191

M 0412 505 854

E [Nicole.Parsons@nbmphn.com.au](mailto:Nicole.Parsons@nbmphn.com.au)