



## **The FIVE project—addressing the stigma of mental health through community arts engagement**

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The stigma around mental health has been identified as a key barrier to people seeking help for a mental health issue or stepping up to help a friend, colleague or family member. In rural and regional settings, this is exacerbated by social isolation, lack of access to services and other factors.

The effects are of concern. According to the Mental Health Commission, the suicide rate in Western Australia stands at one person per day. High-risk populations include Aboriginal people, FIFO workers and their families, people living in rural and remote regions, and young people.

Using a community arts and cultural development model, the arts project FIVE aims to break down this stigma by using participatory arts to promote dialogue around wellbeing and to facilitate social connection within a community.

Established in 2013 and having worked in five regional communities around WA—Busselton, Geraldton, Paraburdoo, Derby and Esperance—FIVE has engaged more than 7,000 participants in arts activities and much broader audiences through its public events, art exhibitions and online presence.

A project-wide evaluation shows, to date, that the whole-of-community projects, as well as smaller projects targeting specific at-risk demographics within a community, have delivered strong impacts around 'belonging' and 'connectedness.'

In August 2013, FIVE won a silver award at the national Mental Health Services annual awards ceremony in the category of 'Mental Health Promotion or Mental Illness Prevention.'

This paper will present the FIVE project, arguing for its model of working and highlighting the most innovative elements and noteworthy outcomes from the project. One example will highlight the engagement of mine workers in the creation of a large, permanent sculpture for the Pilbara town of Paraburdoo that used blasting techniques to create sculptural forms for the work, and reactivated the Paraburdoo Men's Shed to complete the work.

FIVE is a partnership between DADAA and Rio Tinto, with funding from Australia Council from the Arts. It was designed in collaboration with the WA Mental Health Commission whose 2020 strategy calls for specific actions around early intervention, suicide prevention, building a sustainable workforce and addressing the needs of specific populations.

Given pressure on health systems, ongoing FIFO arrangements and the rising mental health burden across Australia, policy makers might more seriously consider the role that meaningful participatory arts can play as prevention and intervention strategy at the level of both individual wellbeing and community resilience.