

31 July 2024

Statement by OzHelp Foundation

OzHelp Foundation Board Chair Leanne Wells

After almost 25 years of raising community awareness about suicide prevention, and providing personalised counselling, mental health and wellbeing services across the country, the OzHelp Foundation was today placed into the hands of Voluntary Administrators, RSM Australia Partners.

This was an incredibly difficult decision for the Board to make, but was the only responsible option left open to us in the face of the Foundation's long-term deteriorating financial position - a position that had been exacerbated by a range of factors including; 'mission creep', the impact of COVID, an unsustainable and costly service delivery model, the challenges of staying contemporary in a rapidly changing mental health and suicide prevention service delivery landscape, and increased competition for government, corporate and community support for charities.

We are deeply saddened and disappointed that the Foundation is unable to continue its important and impactful work supporting hard-to-reach people in industries with a heightened risk of suicide, such as construction, transport and logistics. However, we are also immensely proud of the Foundation's legacy of helping hundreds of thousands of vulnerable Australians, creating healthier workplaces and raising public awareness about suicide prevention and mental health.

We thank OzHelp Foundation Chief Executive Officer Caroline Walsh for leading our organisation through this very challenging period with compassion and an unwavering commitment to the health and wellbeing of those connected with our Foundation.

OzHelp Foundation Chief Executive Officer Caroline Walsh

I understand today's announcement will be upsetting for the many committed and dedicated staff who have served the Foundation over the past two and a half decades, and the countless individuals, volunteers and organisations who have supported OzHelp and our flagship Health in Trades (construction) and Health in Gear (transport) programs.

The decision to put the Foundation into voluntary administration has been a deeply painful one and comes after months of exploring options to increase revenue and reduce costs. These included scaling back services and offering redundancy packages to our deeply dedicated, committed and caring staff (who numbered 28 in 2022-23), which was incredibly tough – they were the beating heart of our Foundation. However, it wasn't enough to continue our services.

On Friday 26 July, we reluctantly released our nine remaining staff, paying out their wages, superannuation and redundancy entitlements in full, and closed the Foundation's counselling and wellbeing services and programs.

Ahead of this, we implemented transition plans, in accordance with expert clinical guidance, for approximately 80 OzHelp clients who had been receiving individualised counselling and wellbeing support, to ensure continuity of care for those in need of ongoing support.

We have advised key stakeholders of our situation and provided contact details for alternative mental health and wellbeing providers to employers and organisations who relied upon our services.

This is an incredibly challenging day. Since its inception in 2001, OzHelp has been a leader in raising awareness and proactively delivering "boots-on-the-ground" mental health and suicide prevention services, such as health screens, toolbox talks and on-site barbecues, to building sites, truck stops and other workplaces across the country.

OzHelp was a leader in suicide prevention supports. For almost 25 years, OzHelp, including its staff, Clinical Advisory Committee, Reference Group and Ambassadors, have played a leading role in opening up conversations and changing mindsets about suicide and mental health. Importantly, for vulnerable Australians, there are now a wide range of organisations and services available to support them, including Lifeline, Beyond Blue and StandBy - Support After Suicide.

We are immensely proud of the Foundation's legacy and impact and also deeply grateful to the Commonwealth Government, particularly the Department of Health and Aged Care and the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator, and the ACT Government, particularly the Health Directorate, for their ongoing support of OzHelp and our programs. Immense thanks must also go to the Master Builders



Association (MBA) of the ACT, who is a founding member of OzHelp and has been with us at every stage of our journey.

In our absence, we encourage the Commonwealth and State Governments to continue to fund essential mental health and wellbeing services for the most vulnerable, at-risk, and hard-to-reach members of our community.

We urge any individuals in need of mental health or wellbeing support, to contact Lifeline's confidential 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services on 13 11 14.

Background

OzHelp was established in 2001 after a young building apprentice from Canberra took his own life. That same year, three others, who were connected to the ACT building and construction industry, died by suicide within a three-month period.

Passionate community members along with the MBA ACT, the CFMEU and the ACT Government collaborated to form OzHelp. The MBA ACT has continued to remain a founding member of OzHelp.

Over the past two and a half decades, OzHelp has provided services to people in every state and territory in Australia, supporting the mental health of workers in a wide range of settings. In 2022-23, 280,000 individuals connected with OzHelp's services, information tools and awareness campaigns.