

Question on Notice
No. 39
Asked on 12 February 2014

MR KATTER asked the Minister for Health (MR SPRINGBORG)-

QUESTION:

With academic research at Griffith University indicating that suicides among agricultural workers in Queensland were over twice the rate of the general employed population—

Will the Minister supply figures on the suicide rate among Queensland's agricultural workers over the last nine months, with comparable figures for the previous year?

ANSWER:

I thank the Honourable Member for Mount Isa for his question.

I am pleased to supply the following figures based on preliminary data of 'suspected suicides'. These figures are drawn from Queensland Police Service (QPS) 'Form 1' reports, where QPS identify a death as a 'suspected suicide'. It is important to acknowledge that this preliminary data does not necessarily contain detailed information about a person's occupation at the time of their death.

This is one reason the government is committed to supporting rigorous systems such as the Queensland Suicide Register maintained by the Australian Institute of Suicide Research and Prevention. This enables us to have a comprehensive and accurate view of suicide over time based on thorough recoding and analysis.

It is also important to have a more timely understanding which although it may not have the same level of accuracy and completeness will assist our current understanding of what is happening across our communities.

Given the concerns expressed recently by community members and the media of perceived high numbers of suicide among agricultural workers, particularly farmers and farm workers in Queensland, I can confirm that the preliminary data shows that the number of deaths by suspected suicide among Queensland agricultural workers over the two time periods identified is:

- May 2012 to January 2013 – 5 recorded deaths
- May 2013 to January 2014 – 5 recorded deaths.

The preliminary figures do not support reports of unusually high numbers of farmers or farm worker suicides over these periods. Given the reasons cited above these figures may not provide a full picture and we must continue to monitor the situation.

Irrespective of the figures we can all agree that any single death is a tragic loss that is felt not only by the person's family and loved ones, but that reverberates across friends, workplaces and communities.

In addressing suicide, we must acknowledge that this is an extremely complex issue with many factors interacting including those to do with individual, social, financial, community and broader issues. This is one reason that there is no easy solution or one size fits all. Targeted responses at the state and local levels are required that address the range of factors at play.

With almost 80% of Queensland currently drought declared, there are significant concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of landholders, primary producers and broader local communities. The government is taking a comprehensive approach to dealing with this issue in rural and remote Queensland.

On 13 March, I held a roundtable discussion in Charleville along with the Hon. Dr John McVeigh MP, Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, with representatives from state, federal and local governments, non-government organisations, doctors groups and the agricultural industry to assist with ensuring essential mental health services are coordinated across local communities.

Additionally, as part of the Queensland Government's Drought Assistance Package, Queensland Health has invested \$300,000 to facilitate the delivery by Uniting Community Care of 60 mental health support workshops in 2013 and 2014 across 27 drought declared shires. The workshops aim to build community capacity to support the emotional and social wellbeing of community members and to increase community resilience.

The workshops are a tailored one day program aimed at meeting the needs of the drought declared communities, combining elements of both the nationally accredited Psychological First Aid course and SuicideAAA course.

Further, an innovative program titled *Mates Who Open Gates (Volunteer Program)* is being piloted within the Darling Downs Hospital and Health Service. The six month pilot program will establish a volunteer network to deliver personal pastoral support, tailored resources and a referral pathway to professional assistance where required to primary producers.

The government will continue to work to ensure all the important sectors and stakeholders at national, state and local levels are contributing to ensuring the health, wellbeing and importantly sense of future and hope of rural communities and agricultural workers across Queensland.