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Yarrabah 'shows Indigenous voice to parliament works'

EXCLUSIVE

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Suzanne Andrews says Yarrabah, her Aboriginal community of around 3000 people, is a living, breathing, working testament as to why Australians should vote yes in [the voice](#) referendum.

For years, the seaside township about an hour's drive from Cairns had the highest suicide rate in the nation, along with myriad chronic health problems that have long plagued Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Now, almost a decade after a hard-won fight to take control of some services, particularly the health clinic, the tide of suicides is gone and the community is healthier, happier and increasingly in work. Ms Andrews, chief executive of Yarrabah's Gurriny Yealamucka Health Services, said the community was now "exceeding or meeting all 24 health KPIs" in the Closing The Gap agreement.

"Our elders, our leaders were saying we know how to attack these problems, and it fell on deaf ears for years but we kept knocking on doors," she said. "We knew we could improve health if it was in Aboriginal hands.

"When we eventually took over the health service in 2014, for example, the immunisation rate under Queensland Health was about 15 to 20 per cent, and within a few years we got it to where it is now, at 99 per cent."

Ms Andrews, and husband Ross, the second-term Mayor of Yarrabah, believe the majority of their friends and neighbours [support the idea of the voice](#), although there are some against it or on the fence. Both say communities like Yarrabah across the country need a permanent structure, a voice that government will have to listen to on their ideas about what works.

Mr Andrews said the voice won't be run by the "Canberra elites", as some in [the No camp](#) claim. "That is a misconception, it has simple principles, it doesn't allocate funds, it advises – and that advice, that knowledge will come from the community," he said.

Mr Andrews said he hoped Australians would join Indigenous people in their journey like they did in the country's most successful referendum in 1967.

It was local Indigenous activists and elders such as Alfred Neal, who died earlier this year at 100 years of age, who are credited with helping agitate for the 1967 referendum, then drove the campaign to its overwhelming success.

Back then, 90.77 per cent of Australian voters said yes to constitutional changes that meant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would be counted as part of the population and the commonwealth would be able to make laws for them.

The Yarrabah community is also where Aboriginal leaders, including Pat Anderson, Megan Davis and Noel Pearson, joined local elders and traditional owners in April last year to issue the "Yarrabah Affirmation", declaring the voice referendum a matter of urgency and pushing it into the middle of the political agenda ahead of the federal election, a month later.

Now Mr Andrews says the urgency lies in getting people to actually have their say.

While the last census put Yarrabah's population at 2950, the general belief is that about 3500 to 4000 people live in the community.

There were 768 people who cast their vote in local booths at the 2022 federal election, but some locals estimated there could be more than 2000 eligible voters.

"There is a lot of work to do with getting people out to vote," Mr Andrews said.

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