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## A ROADMAP FOR FIRST NATIONS DIGITAL INCLUSION

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### ORYGEN SUBMISSION

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Orygen welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Roadmap for First Nations digital inclusion. This submission is focused upon how digital inclusion would support improved access to youth mental health services.

### ABOUT ORYGEN

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

This submission was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

### HOW DIGITAL INCLUSION WOULD SUPPORT IMPROVED ACCESS TO YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Young people and young adults access digital mental health services at substantially higher rates than other age populations, with 70 per cent of digital mental health services used by those aged between 18-34.(1) However, the ability for First Nations young people to access digital mental health services that meet their needs is impacted by a range of issues related to the suitability and accessibility of digital mental health services, including cultural appropriateness, language, access to technology and infrastructure.(2)

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index highlights the disparities in digital access between First Nations communities and other Australian communities. The most recent index report found that the digital gap between First Nations people and non-indigenous people currently sits at 7.5 index points. This disparity increases with remoteness, with a gap of 24.5 for remote communities and 25.4 for very remote communities.(3) This means that for young First Nations people living outside of capital cities, there is significantly less opportunity to access digital support services or utilise them to their full potential. The inability to access mental health support can result in missed opportunities for early-intervention and the potential exacerbation of existing disparities in wellbeing outcomes.

The First Nations digital support hub announced in the 2024-25 Federal budget may face challenges relating to digital inclusion issues, particularly for First Nations young people living outside of capital cities. In response to this, innovative technology solutions combined with youth co-design are key to increasing digital support access for First Nations young people. The Digital Mental Health Framework

### REVOLUTION IN MIND

report has identified that digital access can be improved in regional, rural and remote settings through the implementation of physical access hubs. Physical access hubs provide young people with opportunities to access the technology and space required to meaningfully engage with mental health supports.(4) This recommendation is echoed by the Australian Government’s 2022 ‘*Independent Evaluation of Supported Digital Mental Health Services*’, which identified the potential for on-site spaces to expand access to digital mental health services.(1)

Access hubs should be located within spaces that are culturally safe to First Nations young people, such as existing local drop-in youth services or community-controlled organisations. These spaces must be co-designed with First Nations young people to ensure they are suitable and culturally-appropriate. First Nations young people should be supported to access these spaces by youth workers, peer workers or caregivers.

**Recommendation**

Orygen recommends that the First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap consider the implementation of access hubs within First Nations communities. These hubs will provide First Nations young people and their communities with the privacy, physical space and technology required to meaningfully engage with youth mental health supports.

**REFERENCE HEADING**

1. University of Melbourne. Independent evaluation of supported digital mental health services: Phase 2 final report. 2022.
2. Dingwall KM, Povey J, Friel J, Nagel T, Sweet M, Shand F, et al. Feasibility and Acceptability of the Aboriginal and Islander Mental Health Initiative for Youth App: Nonrandomized Pilot With First Nations Young People. *JMIR Human Factors*. 2023;10.
3. Thomas J, McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023. Melbourne ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.; 2023.
4. Department of Health and Aged Care. National Digital Mental Health Framework. Canberra; 2022.