

**Submission
No 31**

**IMPROVING ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT
CHECKS**

Organisation: SNAICC

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Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services
Parliament of New South Wales
6 Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000
E: communityservices@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Re: Inquiry into improving access to early childhood health and development checks

Dear Committee Members,

SNAICC welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on Community Services Inquiry into improving access to early childhood health and development checks (the Inquiry). We are the national non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and work for the fulfillment of the rights of our children, to ensure their safety, development and wellbeing.

Since 1981, SNAICC has been a passionate national voice representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. At the heart of our work is championing the principles of community control and self-determination as the means for sustained improvements for children and families – whether in child protection and wellbeing or early childhood education and development.

As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, SNAICC consults with its member organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to ensure the experiences, needs and aspirations of our leaders, our sector and ultimately our children and families are the foundation for our submission and recommendations.

SNAICC advocates for the full enactment of self-determination in all legislation, policies, and strategies. Self-determination describes the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to autonomy and self-governance.¹ The United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People under UNDRIP connects the capacity of Indigenous peoples to meet their children's needs with their ability to exercise self-determination².

¹ SNAICC 2022, 'The Family Matters Report 2022: Measuring trends to turn the tide on the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care'. Retrieved from: <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/20221123-Family-Matters-Report-2022-1.pdf> pg. 90.

² United Nations Human Rights Council 2021, 'Rights of the Indigenous child under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples'. Retrieved from: [G2121979.pdf \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/ruhr/g2121979.pdf), pg. 2

For too long, governments have decided what works and what doesn't for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities without delivering meaningful and tangible positive change for our children and families. Enacting self-determination is critical to designing and implementing effective policies that achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In July 2020, the Australian Government, all state and territory governments, and the Coalition of Peaks signed the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement). The National Agreement seeks to overcome the entrenched inequalities faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, pushing for equality in life outcomes for all Australians.

The National Agreement is built around four Priority Reforms to change the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations, and people across the country:

1. Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
2. Building the Community Controlled Sector
3. Transforming Government Organisations
4. Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level³

The Priority Reforms must inform all government action including legislation, policy, and practice, whether these actions are targeted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or impact them as part of the general population.

As such, SNAICC highlights the need for any policies and practice intended to improve access to early childhood health and development checks to be designed and implemented in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations.

Changes needed to address gaps and overcome barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including those in rural and remote communities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain underrepresented in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), with 26.5 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children between the ages of zero to four accessing ECEC, compared to 40.8 per cent of non-Indigenous children.⁴ Additionally, Target 4 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are developmentally on track against all 5 domains, is significantly off-track and worsening since the 2018 baseline year.⁵

³ Australian Government, 'Closing the Gap Priority Reforms'. Retrieved from: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia Department of the Senate, 'The Senate Select Committee on Work and Care: Interim Report October 2022'. Retrieved from: https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024963/toc_pdf/InterimReport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf pg. 45.

⁵ Productivity Commission, 'Closing the Gap Information Repository', retrieved from: <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/socioeconomic/outcome-area4>

We know that engagement in ECEC provides an opportunity for children and families to connect with health services and access development checks, which sets them up to thrive. These supports and checks are protective factors against contact with tertiary systems like child protection and youth justice. Therefore, improving access to ECEC services creates the pathway for improving access to early childhood health and development checks.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) play a critical role in providing high quality, culturally responsive integrated early years services. The connection and accountability that ACCOs have to community makes them uniquely placed to identify the services and supports that are most needed or wanted on a local level.⁶ When a need in the community is identified, ACCOs respond by connecting services together to provide wraparound support for families that prioritises cultural care and connection. This care extends to the health and wellbeing needs of both the child and their family.

ACCO early years services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) address access barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in numerous ways. These barriers also affect access to routine health and development checks.

- ACCOs and ACCHOs address practical obstacles that get in the way of accessing services, such as a lack of time and access to transport, lack of confidence, fear of experiencing discrimination, reluctance to separate from children and poor physical or mental health.
- ACCOs and ACCHOs provide the time and space to engage with people experiencing multiple and/or complex issues. By being relationships-focused and culturally responsive these services also reduce social isolation and support the development of informal support networks across the community.
- ACCOs and ACCHOs overcome traditional program and service level barriers such as accessibility of program (fees, waitlists, locations, program format, timing), complex enrolment requirements, lack of translators and culturally unsafe content/approaches with an ongoing focus on ensuring program alignment with community need.

ACCOs and ACCHOs are well placed to improve the access of parents and families to routine health and development checks by creating stronger, culturally safe referrals pathways for developmental checks and screening, such as ASQ-TRAK and also to services, supports and enablers in response to need.

Despite playing a vital role in early intervention, prevention and holistic supports, ACCO early years services are limited by the funding and resources available to them. Most ACCO early years services are funded through a piecemeal combination of Commonwealth, State/Territory and local government funding sources, creating an unsustainable, uncertain and administratively burdensome operating environment.

⁶ SNAICC, 'Stronger ACCOs, Stronger Families'. Retrieved from: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SNAICC-Stronger-ACCOs-Stronger-Families-report-2022.pdf>

ACCO early years services require a sustainable block- and needs- based funding model that reflects the full cost of the holistic supports provided to children and families within their communities. This funding will support ACCOs to deliver wraparound early years services, strengthen referral pathways and better enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to access child health and development checks in their communities.

Connected Beginnings

In addition to appropriately funding ACCOs to deliver these services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, there is a need for joined up, collaborative approaches to address gaps and overcome barriers.

Connected Beginnings is a grants program jointly funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Aged Care, that aims to integrate local support services to improve access to services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families across a range of sectors.

Connected Beginnings supports children from birth to school age, and pregnant women, with school readiness and educational outcomes to close the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and non-Indigenous children. This is achieved by sharing knowledge and improving outcomes for children and facilitating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement with integrated early childhood education, health and family support services across the country.

Connected Beginnings projects have been established in every state and territory of Australia – currently supporting 40+ sites across Australia with 50 to be established by 2025. Jointly funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Aged Care, the program is comprised of a network of ACCOs that provide culturally safe support services for children and families in their area.

The programs are developed and run by ‘backbone organisations’, which are teams that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and organisations to codesign goals and solutions to support children. This ensures the sites:

- are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- fund meaningful activities delivered in place and on Country
- fund solutions that meet the unique needs of each community.

Since SNAICC was engaged as Community Partner in in 2022, the number of ACCOs funded to deliver backbone support under Connected Beginnings has increased from 2 to more than 20. By leveraging the resources and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the program improves access to early childhood, maternal and child health and family support services. This is a model that can be grown and tailored to address gaps and overcome barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in accessing early childhood health and development checks.

Recruitment and retention of health professionals

The recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals requires focused strategic planning, action and implementation plans, through co-design and partnership with the New South Wales Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (CAPO).

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy* identifies barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families face when accessing health services, and states ‘Ongoing access to holistic, integrated and culturally safe supports and services are crucial to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families’.⁷ A strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector workforce is key to the provision of culturally safe health supports and services. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health sector therefore has an important role in early childhood development through the delivery of culturally safe and accessible health and support services and in building a strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector workforce.⁸

SNAICC recommends the Inquiry directly consult with the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) and the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales (AH&MRC) to better understand the current and future needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professional sector.

Funding for early intervention programs and screening

Standalone early intervention programs and screening are likely to have little impact on improving early childhood health checks and development checks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Underpinning all the barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in engaging with early childhood services is the siloed approach to services and program delivery. Holistic and integrated services and support are needed.

Long before terms like ‘integrated hubs’ were coined, ACCOs were providing integrated early years services tailored to the needs of children and families in their communities. ACCOs inherently focus on working across silos to provide holistic, wraparound services that place children and family at the centre. ACCOs understand the complexities Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families face in raising children that have the knowledge, skills and confidence to succeed across mainstream and cultural frameworks and also support families through these challenges. This includes supporting the interface for families with service systems including, but not limited to, justice, health, social and community services. Many ACCOs deliver wraparound support within their communities regardless of whether they are funded to operate this way.

The complexity of multiple funding streams and limited funding availability for specific needs of community are why SNAICC advocates for a new funding model designed by and for ACCOs. An ACCO funding model which facilitates block- and needs-based funding will enable ACCOs to

⁷ Australian Government and SNAICC, ‘National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy’. Retrieved from: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/niaa-early-years-strategy-5.pdf> pgs. 11-12.

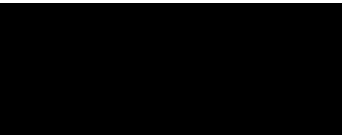
⁸ Joint Council, ‘Sector Strengthening Plan: Early Childhood Care and Development’. Retrieved from: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-03/sector-strengthening-plan-early-childhood-care-development.pdf> pgs. 4-5 and 18-19.

provide early intervention programs through holistic service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. As highlighted by the Productivity Commission in their review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, a number of ACCOs reported they 'are treated as passive recipients of government funding and that governments do not recognise that ACCOs are critical partners in delivering government services tailored to the priorities of their communities'.⁹ Any funding and delivery of programs or support recommended by the Inquiry must be designed and implemented in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and community, as required by the Priority Reforms under the National Agreement.

SNAICC notes that the NSW Government has recognised ACCO excellence in this space. In line with the NSW Closing the Gap first implementation plan, NSW has announced increases to the number of Aboriginal Child and Family Centres across the state by six and resourcing to improve governance and strengthen the ACCO sector.¹⁰ Further consideration should be given to the mechanism of this funding.

SNAICC is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry and is available to be contacted and provide the Committee with additional information on the points raised in this submission and in relation to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC sector more broadly, if required.

Warm regards,



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⁹ Productivity Commission, 'Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap'. Retrieved from: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report/closing-the-gap-review-report.pdf>

¹⁰ NSW Government Communities and Justice, 'Aboriginal and Child Family Centres'. Retrieved from: <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/support-programs/aboriginal-families/aboriginal-child-and-family-centres>; NSW Government, 'NSW Budget 2022-23 Media Release Tuesday 21 June 2022 \$716 Million to Empower Aboriginal Communities and Delivery Outcomes'. Retrieved from: https://www.budget.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/20220621_02_FRANKLIN-716-million-to-empower-Aboriginal-communities-and-deliver-outcomes.pdf