



Victorian Aboriginal
Children & Young
People's Alliance

Achieving Better Health and Wellbeing Outcomes for Aboriginal Children and Young People in OOHC

Submission to developing a Victorian state-wide OOHC Health Strategy

Executive Summary:

Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care are one of the most vulnerable population groups in Victoria to experience poor health and social and emotional wellbeing early in life and well into adulthood. The current health system for children is built around the premise that children have a consistent, able and willing parent/carer to be a knowledge bank of the child's health history, navigate complex and siloed set of health systems and advocate on the child's behalf. In lieu of a consistent parent/carer with the knowledge and authority to act, children in out of home care are falling through the gaps and are not receiving their basic human right of universal healthcare.

Recommendations:

The Alliance welcomes the opportunity to input into the development of a Victorian state-wide strategy for children in out-of-home care and makes the following recommendations:

Any strategy developed which aims to improve the health and wellbeing

of Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care needs to recognise an Aboriginal understanding of health and wellbeing and be holistic and trauma-informed.

Given that Aboriginal children and young people represent 20 percent of the out of home care population, an OOHC health strategy needs to be inclusive of Aboriginal children and young people. This strategy needs to be holistic and trauma-informed to meet the complex needs of children removed from their homes. It should include Aboriginal-specific actions which address the cultural determinants of health as recognised in *Balit Murrup*: Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing framework.

Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care with non-Aboriginal carers must attend Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

ACCOs in Victoria incorporate an Aboriginal understanding of health and wellbeing and are quickly becoming one-stop-shops with multidisciplinary teams to deliver coordinated care for complex health and wellbeing issues in Aboriginal communities. Recognising the healing and protective role of culture for better health and wellbeing outcomes, ACCOs are best placed to provide health services for Aboriginal children, ensuring they remain connected to culture and community. The Alliance recommends an introduction of a policy to see that all Aboriginal children and young people with non-Aboriginal carers enroll in health services at ACCOs.

Number and nature of therapeutic and psychological appointments under the Mental Health Plans should be flexible to respond to a child's social and emotional wellbeing.

The alarming poor mental health of children in OOHC requires urgent attention, with

Looking After Children (LAC) data revealing that 42 percent of children and young people in OOHC displayed significantly higher emotional and behavioural difficulties compared to 10 percent in the general population.

Research shows that people who experience trauma during childhood or adolescence have double the risk of experiencing a range of mental health disorders with one in four developing PTSD.

At present, the number of initial appointments under a GP approved Mental Health Plan is 10 psychological appointments per calendar year which is inadequate to social and emotional support to children with trauma backgrounds, attachment or behavioral issues commonly found in children in out of home care.

The Alliance recommends psychological and other wellbeing services be set in line with a child's needs and not capped at 10 appointments.

The Alliance also recommends that there be flexibility in service options. It is also important that the range of social and emotional wellbeing supports under the mental health plan are trauma-informed, culturally sensitive and age-appropriate.

Information sharing to benefit the best interests of the child

In the absence of a consistent carer/parent/guardian to oversee the consistency and cohesion of child protection, health, wellbeing, education, cultural and community engagement, information sharing needs to be improved and centralised to benefit the child in the same way a parent would. At present children in out of home care can have numerous educational, cultural, health and mental health and case plans that fail to align and provide coordinated care.

Recognising the role of genetics in health outcomes, information sharing schemes should also aim to capture a comprehensive

family medical history to ensure children removed from their homes are receiving the appropriate health screening and medical supports.

Prioritise specialist services at ACCOs

Aboriginal children and young people in care often have a range complex health issues and concerns and need to see a range of specialists. In line with ACCOs developing into a one-stop-shop for community health, specialists need to be available within ACCOs to ensure cultural safety, convenience and consistency of care. The average wait times for specialists services within ACCOs is 6-8 weeks and often ACCOs need to refer out for most specialists.

Efforts need to be made to reduce wait times and make specialist services more readily available at ACCOs. The Alliance recommends that an OOHC Health strategy implement provisions to attract and retain specialists to ACCOs, especially in regional areas.

Invest in research and evaluation into improving the health outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people in care

While there exists a wide breadth of study into improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing and improving the health and wellbeing of children from traumatized backgrounds, there is little research combining the intersectionality of Aboriginality and OOHC, despite Aboriginal children and young people's overrepresentation in the system.

Without an extensive and thorough look at the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people who come into contact with child protection, there is no way to know the specific issues and vulnerabilities facing Aboriginal children in OOHC, and plan supports and interventions as required.

About Us:

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) is an alliance of 14 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) registered to deliver child and family services through the Human Services Standards under the Child, Youth and Families Act (2005).

We are for Community, by Community: our members have been delivering health, wellbeing and safety services for more than 45 years to Aboriginal communities across Victoria. We are informed by the Aboriginal definition of health and wellbeing, and we have incorporated this holistic approach into our service design and delivery to see the whole being, not the sum of the parts. To varying degrees our organisations have become cultural and community hubs, offering wrap-around services to close the gap in health and wellbeing inequalities in Aboriginal communities. In addition to providing primary health services some of our Member organisations offer:

- Family Support Services: including early intervention & parenting supports Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) services
- Early learning and early years programs
- Family Violence prevention programs
- Drug & Alcohol Services
- Maternal and Child Health
- Women's Groups and Men's Groups
- Youth Groups
- Justice Programs
- Social and emotional wellbeing support

In 2014, we formed the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance, with the belief that together we are stronger and with one unified voice we can positively influence the future for Aboriginal children and young people living in Victoria. Together with the Victorian Aboriginal Child

Care Agency (VACCA), we will be responsible for overseeing the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC through their care and case management. By 2021, all Aboriginal children and young people will be in the care of ACCOs. The Alliance has a crucial role in driving change to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

Our members are:

- Ballarat & District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Bendigo & District Aboriginal Cooperative
- Dandenong & District Aboriginal Cooperative
- Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative
- Goolam Goolam Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd
- Mallee District Aboriginal Services
- Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation
- Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative
- Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
- Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative
- Winda-Mara Aboriginal Co-operative