

# Investing in an Aboriginal Better Futures Model



Victorian Aboriginal  
Children & Young  
People's Alliance

*“We hope to see an Aboriginal model developed and implemented across our members with the \$10.3 million expansion of Better Futures, a program to wrap support around a young person transitioning out of care. By doing so, we can make a difference in the trajectory of future generations entering care.”*

- Raylene Harradine, Chairperson Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) welcomes the Victorian Governments \$10.3 million investment in the expansion of the Better Futures Program. We, however, strongly advocate for a portion of that funding to be allocated to an Aboriginal Better Futures model with extended care until young people reach 21 years of age.

All young people in out-of-home require support to navigate the daunting transition to independence— but like many other areas of the system Aboriginal young people are overrepresented and underprivileged to these services. In 2019, 24 per cent of young people who exited care between the ages of 16 and 18 were Aboriginal. This has increased significantly in recent years, with Aboriginal care leavers facing significant disadvantage and numerous barriers in their transition from care<sup>1</sup>. As a result, upon exiting care Aboriginal young people are more likely to transition to Youth Justice, experience housing instability, poor mental health and poor education and employment outcomes<sup>2</sup>.

A recent inquiry into the experience of care leavers conducted by the Commission for Children and Young People found that most Aboriginal young people leave care without a culturally informed transition plan to ensure

their connection to Community and culture, despite this being a known protective factor in the transition process<sup>3</sup>. Comparatively, the review found that Aboriginal young people case managed by an ACCO were more likely to be receiving multiple cultural supports and least likely when managed by Child Protection<sup>4</sup>.

The Better Futures program currently delivered by ACCOs across Victoria provides young people with a culturally grounded and community-oriented service. ACCO staff work intensively alongside young people to ensure they are holistically supported, strong in their culture, connected to their community and kin and appropriately prepared for independent living.

Investing in a Better Futures model where Aboriginal culture is prioritised and young people are strongly connected to their Community and Country will provide them a life-long support system of Elders, family and Community. It encourages a strong sense of identity and belonging, building self-esteem and confidence and enabling access to cultural ceremonies and events. Delivering this service through the holistic ACCO model ensures young people know where to access support through all stages of their life. A healthy relationship with the local ACCO will ensure young people can access culturally safe health services, housing support, family violence programs, mental health support and more.

There are currently 13 Alliance members delivering some form of care service to Aboriginal young people across Victoria (appendix 1). However only seven of our members receive funding to deliver Better Futures alongside VACCA (appendix 2). This leaves considerable gaps across the state with a quarter of eligible Aboriginal young people



without the opportunity to access an ACCO run Better Futures program<sup>5</sup>.

COVID-19 has had a considerable impact on our young people, with ACCOs reporting a spike in Better Futures service demand and increase in the complexity of challenges facing young people. There has been an overwhelming increase in mental health concerns, drug and alcohol addiction, housing insecurity and financial stress. The daunting process of leaving care is made even more precarious for Aboriginal young people by a “post-pandemic economy” with fewer opportunities and more pronounced barriers for those already experiencing disadvantage<sup>6</sup>.

The rise in service demand has seen some ACCOs managing up to 30 young people per Better Futures case manager. Funding that does not match demand, has resulted in under-resourcing and an increased burden on ACCO staff, which is unsustainable. It prevents young people from receiving the intensive wrap-around support they normally would from an ACCO. It is therefore critical that the investment in an Aboriginal Better Futures model matches demand and ensures consistent state-wide coverage, proportionate to the number of Aboriginal care leavers in the area.

In line with the Victorian Governments self-determination policy, ACCOs must be the drivers and creators of an Aboriginal Better Futures model. The Alliance recommends resourcing and supporting more ACCOs to deliver Better Futures and ensure funding meets service demand and enables a holistic and culturally robust Aboriginal model of care. Included in this must be funding to continue to build the Aboriginal evidence base and capture the effectiveness of Aboriginal practice and service delivery. To ensure an Aboriginal Better Futures model is effective and sustainable it must be matched by investment in early intervention supports, wrap around cultural supports (such as mentoring programs, cultural camps and family finding) as well as adequate

housing and support to gain independent living skills.

The Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency (VACCA) is undertaking work in building the Aboriginal evidence base and alongside the Alliance, has developed a detailed Program Logic for the Aboriginal Better Futures model. This work is vital in capturing the unique and cultural ways ACCOs are effecting positive changes in the lives of young people. It will be a vital indication of the funding and resources required to adequately and sustainably expand the Aboriginal Better Futures model.

An Aboriginal Better Futures model would compliment and strengthen the investment and expansion of Section 18 and Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC). The continuity of service enables greater self-determination for Victoria’s Aboriginal communities and builds on the successful outcomes ACCOs are achieving as they take on the care and case management of Aboriginal children and young people<sup>7</sup>.

Appropriately funding ACCOs to enhance Aboriginal practice and models of service delivery will not only strengthen the Better Futures program, it will strengthen the future trajectories of our young people leaving the care system. As legal guardian to many of our children and signatory to *Wungurilwil Gaggapduir* and the *National Partnership on Closing the Gap*, it is the responsibility of the Victorian Government to ensure our young people have every opportunity to thrive; informed, proud and connected to their Aboriginal culture.



## Appendix 1

Alliance members currently funded to deliver care services:

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

## Appendix 2

Alliance members currently funded to deliver Better Futures:

- Ballarat & District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative
- Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
- Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Njernda Aboriginal Corporation
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Commission for Children and Young People. Keep Caring Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. 2020 p. 44

<sup>2</sup> Commission for Children and Young People. Keep Caring Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. 2020 p. 117

<sup>3</sup> Commission for Children and Young People. Keep Caring Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. 2020 p. 4

<sup>4</sup> Commission for Children and Young People. Keep Caring Systemic inquiry into services for young

people transitioning from out-of-home care. 2020 p. 118

<sup>5</sup> Commission for Children and Young People. Keep Caring Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. 2020 p. 117

<sup>6</sup> Commission for Children and Young People. Keep Caring Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care. 2020 p. 5

<sup>7</sup> Inside Policy. Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care and Transitioning Aboriginal Children to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations Research and Evaluation: Phase one – Lapsing Evaluation Report. 2019

