



Victorian Aboriginal
Children & Young
People's Alliance

Investing in Infrastructure: Building a Better Future for Aboriginal Children & Young People

14 October 2019

Executive Summary:

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) is calling for the prioritisation of investment in infrastructure in Victorian Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in the future.

Through Section 18 of the Child Youth and Families Act, and ongoing Victorian Government commitments, our Members -along with Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency- are leading the nation in self-determination and are preparing to take on the care and guardianship of all Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) by 2021.

Recognising the cultural rights and protective factors of Aboriginal children to be raised in Aboriginal families and communities, the reform space and advancement towards Aboriginal self-determination in Victoria is unprecedented but it is not without its roadblocks.

The rapid rate of removal of Aboriginal children and young people from their homes continues to grow at an alarming rate. Since Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, the

rate of removal in Victoria has increased by 217 per cent from 660 in 2008 to 2,091 in 2017¹.

In Victoria, the rate of Aboriginal children removed from their homes is expected to triple by 2037 unless immediate and urgent action is taken.

As an alliance tasked with the future care and case management of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC with few resources on the ground, little infrastructure, and a scarce workforce, we are determined—but deeply concerned—about fulfilling our responsibility to meet this growing need and demand for our services.

About Us:

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) is an alliance of 14 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. The Alliance has a crucial role in driving change to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

Policy Reform in Victoria:

The Alliance wishes to commend the Victorian government in the advancement of Aboriginal self-determination and recognition that self-determination is a prerequisite in closing the gap for all health and wellbeing outcomes. This recognition is supported by irrefutable evidence that Aboriginal self-determination delivers the best outcomes for Aboriginal people 30. Nowhere is this truer than in the OOHC space, where Victoria is leading the way in self-determination, with Aboriginal communities taking legal guardianship of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC. One of the major milestones for Aboriginal self-determination was in 2005, when the Victorian government passed Section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act, legislating that ACCOs could see legal guardianship of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC. The move recognised that Aboriginal communities were best placed to make decisions for and look after Aboriginal Children and that ACCOs could provide many protective factors to achieve the best life outcomes for at risk Aboriginal children, young people, families and carers.

In 2018 *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir* (meaning strong families in Latji Latji) formalised a commitment to “transfer and transform” the care of Aboriginal children and young people from government and mainstream services, and became the first tripartite agreement of its kind in Australia.

Underpinning *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*, a framework with a yearly commitment to an Aboriginal-led implementation plan, is the overarching principle of self-determination, defined as “government and mainstream organisations relinquishing power, control and resources to Aboriginal organisations” so that Community can deliver the best outcomes for Aboriginal people.

Self-determination requires a life-line:

Self-determination is now entrenched in several Victorian government frameworks and strategies aimed at improving Aboriginal health, wellbeing and life outcomes. The Alliance encourages Infrastructure Victoria to review how the following frameworks, led by Aboriginal self-determination, correlates to the aims, objectives and responsibilities of Infrastructure Victoria including:

Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (2018-2023) is an overarching framework for how government (and public bodies) should work with Aboriginal communities, people and organisations which, “sets out the whole of government self-determination enablers and principles, and commits government to significant structural and systemic transformation.”

Korin Korin Balit-Djak Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan (2017-2027) means ‘Growing very strong’ in the Woiwurrung language. It provides an overarching framework for action to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of Aboriginal Victorians now and over the next 10 years. It includes five domains:

- Aboriginal community leadership
- Prioritising Aboriginal culture and community
- System reform across the health and human services sector
- Safe, secure, strong families and individuals
- Physically, socially and emotionally healthy Aboriginal communities.

Operationalising Wungurilwil Gapgapduir:

The Alliance hopes to work with Infrastructure Victoria to operationalise the government's commitments under *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir* specifically:

"Prioritising spending as a long-term investment The continuous expansion of Aboriginal organisations, functions requires increased capacity, infrastructure, funding, capability and self-management to ensure that services are equipped to meet the needs of all Victorian Aboriginal children, young people and families."

To date the lack of investment into long-term infrastructure to meet the demands of Aboriginal children and families has:

1. Significantly reduced the number of Aboriginal children able to enroll in full attendance of early years and educational support at ACCOS
2. Impacted on the Alliance members' ability to rollout vital services and recruit staff due to lack of infrastructure
3. Compromised the health and wellbeing of existing staff at ACCOs having to make do with makeshift-offices.
4. Affected the productivity and efficiency of the ACCO workforce due to insufficient information-technology infrastructure.

Evidence collected through site visits have found staff working from cupboards, no mobile phone reception on sites, and staff housed in portables and residential homes, without sufficient heating and cooling. Consistent services outages have meant staff lose hours of productivity.

Child and family services, including early years centres and kindergartens have had to turn away Aboriginal children or reduce their attendance to the centre due to being at full capacity.

Aboriginal children in out of home care have been separated from their non-Aboriginal siblings because the services do not have the space to accommodate them, despite regular contact with siblings being in the child's best interest.

Community members are left standing at community meals through a lack of room in the building.

There are times where Aboriginal people are left waiting for periods of 6-8 weeks for vital health and wellbeing services, not through lack of specialists' availability but through a lack of consulting rooms.

Despite recent infrastructure investments in some of our member's sites, the investment is not keeping up with the demand, and there is nothing more devastating than turning away our community when they are in need.

In 2012 a report was commissioned by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria in the Department of Planning and Community Development to look at the infrastructure needs of ACCOs through a review of 50 Aboriginal organisations across Victoria.

The resulting report, *Assessment of the current and future infrastructure requirements of Key Indigenous Organisations in Victoria*, found:

- ACCOs operating in premises which have limited their capacity to provide essential services such as health checks, mental health and family services;
- organisations whose services had expanded their functions well beyond the capacity of their primary service site;
- significant overcrowding and occupational health and safety issues, where ACCOs have been forced to accommodate additional staff in existing facilities.

Six years after the tabling of the report, there has been little significant coordinated long-term

investments into ACCOs despite numerous calls from Victoria's ACCO sector.

Recommendations:

The update of Infrastructure Victoria's 30 year infrastructure strategy represents an unparalleled opportunity to devise the whole-of-government approach to further operationalise Aboriginal self-determination across Victoria and prepare Aboriginal organisations for the rapid growth of service demands.

In addition to meeting the commitments of the Victorian government to Aboriginal self-determination, a long-term investment into ACCO'S infrastructure will also address Infrastructure Victoria's top priorities of reducing disadvantage and fostering healthy safe, inclusive communities.

It is recommended that Infrastructure Victoria:

- Action all current government commitments to infrastructure investment in ACCOs made in Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework and all Aboriginal-specific strategies.

- Review and build upon the work of *Assessment of the current and future infrastructure requirements of Key Indigenous Organisations in Victoria*.
- Engage with Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations regarding present and future infrastructure needs to address expected Aboriginal population growth and anticipated service demands.
- Prioritise the infrastructure needs of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as a continuum of the existing government commitments to advancing self-determination and improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities in Victoria.
- Engage with the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency regarding the infrastructure needs of the Aboriginal child and family services sector.

ⁱ Productivity Commission, Report of Government Services, Chapter 16 Child Protection, 2018 in RMIT ABC Fact Check, "Have removal rates of Indigenous children increased 400 per cent since 2008?",

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-12/factcheck-removal-rates-of-indigenouschildren/10566014> accessed 21 Jun