



Victorian Aboriginal
Children & Young
People's Alliance

Investing in Aboriginal-led solutions to support ACCOs delivering child and family services to heal and recovery from COVID-19

5 November 2020

Recommendation: That the Victorian Government provide a social recovery investment directly to Aboriginal communities through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), with the distribution of these funds to be determined at a local level.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions have had a considerable impact on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities across Victoria. ACCOs have been at the forefront, responding to the rapidly changing needs of their communities with agility and innovation. The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) calls on the Victorian Government to support ACCOs during the pandemic recovery process through a social recovery investment. This needs to be provided directly to Aboriginal communities through ACCOs, with spending prioritised and determined at a local level. As we know, and as clearly stated in the *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework*, ACCOs are best placed to recognise, understand and respond to the often-complex needs of their communities¹. The Alliance recognises the Victorian Government's commitment to Aboriginal self-

determination and urges this be engrained in the process of recovery.

The Alliance commends the Victorian Government's investment in the *Recovery Workforce* and the *Aboriginal Community Response and Recovery Fund*². In doing so we highlight the criticality of funding ACCOs who are authorized to provide child and family services, to ensure the COVID-19 pandemic does not contribute to an increase in the numbers of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care. Baseline data on *Closing the Gap* Targets for all jurisdictions shows that Victoria's removal rate for Indigenous children is now the highest in Australia. Priority recovery issues identified by ACCOs, such as family violence, mental health and poor school attendance are significant risk factors, which lead to child protection involvement and subsequent placement in out-of-home care.³ It is a necessity that the Victorian Government act swiftly to invest in locally-driven solutions to prevent a surge in Aboriginal children and young people entering the care system. This funding alone will not be sufficient to meet the vast recovery needs of ACCOs and their communities, with a long term social recovery investment we will reduce the trauma and impact of COVID-19 for Aboriginal communities.

It is important to acknowledge, the risk of COVID-19 is far from over for Victorian Aboriginal communities and the situation will remain precarious for some time. It is therefore critical that ACCOs be resourced to remain vigilant and prepared through flexible and sustainable funding. Continuing arrangements regarding the flexible use of funding will reduce the burden of reporting for ACCOs and promote a sustainable and viable community-led recovery process.

ACCO Priorities

In the last 12 months the children and family's sector has seen dramatic shifts in service-user



needs and ways of working. For ACCOs these changes will continue for some time as communities recover from the events of 2020; bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the October ACCO Children and Families Forum the following issues were identified as priorities for Alliance members and VACCA in pandemic recovery:

1. Mental health
2. Family violence
3. Youth engagement
4. Return to school and educational progress
5. Housing and homelessness

A recent survey was conducted by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) of their membership, which includes the 15 Alliance members. This survey found 100% of members are very concerned about family violence and social isolation, increased AOD usage and SEWB supports. Additionally, 85% of members are very concerned with access to mental health services.

While these issues are not new to Aboriginal communities, they have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions. The nuances of these issues differ across communities, particularly metro and regional Victoria. In order to respond appropriately, swiftly and effectively to these issues and the needs of the workforce, ACCOs and Aboriginal communities require additional funding that is flexible and in line with Aboriginal self-determination. This funding should recognise the different needs of urban and regional Aboriginal communities.

The issues ACCOs have identified as priorities are of increased concern as they elevate the risk of Aboriginal children and young people entering out-of-home care. The Victorian Government's commitment to reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the care system through *Wungurilwil Gappagpuir*

highlights the obligation to act in order to mitigate these issues, support recovery and avoid an increase in the numbers of Aboriginal children entering the system⁴. Many of these issues are multisystemic and permeate various government departments, requiring a whole of government response and continued engagement with Aboriginal communities.

The Alliance urges the Victorian Government to invest in early intervention and prevention as well as recovery. Stimulus is merely providing a band-aid solution to these issues and supporting ACCOs to respond to the immediate needs of Community. Long-term investment in early intervention and prevention will promote sustained and lasting change. Funding for recovery and early intervention simultaneously, will result in better outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and families in the immediate and long-term.

Aboriginal Self-determination

Evidence has repeatedly shown that ACCOs are best placed to respond to the needs of their communities, with this policy approach repeatedly producing "effective and sustainable" outcomes for Aboriginal people⁵. The Victorian Governments commitment to Aboriginal self-determination has enabled a platform for this success to be evidenced and captured. Continuing to invest in ACCOs and Aboriginal-led solutions, particularly in a crisis will only lead to better outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and communities. Therefore, it is imperative that the distribution of any social recovery investment be determined by ACCOs at a local level, to respond directly to the needs of their communities.

For ACCOs and their communities the recovery period is a time of healing and re-connection as we navigate adapting to a new 'COVID normal'. Connecting to culture, Community and Country is an integral part of healing for Aboriginal people⁶. The recent VACCHO survey found 71% of members are very concerned about connection to kinship and culture. Therefore,



funding ACCOs to facilitate community engagement activities for families and young people will be a critical component of recovery. ACCOs, as cultural hubs, will be able to reduce the isolation felt by many and facilitate a process of reconnection and healing. The holistic model of care by which ACCOs operate, mean community engagement activities provide an important opportunity to engage families and connect them with ACCO services such as mental health, family violence, medical and family services. Funding for community and youth engagement activities, in line with Aboriginal self-determination will be a crucial aspect of a social recovery investment.

Workforce

The Alliance welcomes the Victorian Government's investment in a *Recovery Workforce*⁷. This is an important starting point to support ACCO recovery, and to ensure the use of this funding is effective and viable careful consideration and co-design with ACCOs is required. We encourage a flexible approach, engrained in self-determination and one that considers the unique needs of the ACCO workforce.

The workforce will play a critical role in how ACCOs are able to recover from COVID-19, meet growing service demands and respond to community needs. Ensuring a strong and supported workforce will be a priority for organisations as they navigate the recovery process. Throughout 2020 the ACCO workforce, like many others has contended with new ways of working, changing service demands and chronic fatigue and burnout. The VACCHO survey revealed 85% of members are worried about leadership, management and staff burnout. It is the reality of this crisis that many ACCO staff have endured similar hardships as their clients and will at times require the same levels of support. There is a significant responsibility on organisations to provide their staff with the care and support they need, as

well as the flexibility to respond to their competing work/life needs. Anecdotal evidence from Alliance members suggests the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a shift, where there is an increase in service demand and a decrease in staff capacity as a result of burnout, leave and challenges recruiting in regional areas. This shift in supply and demand poses a significant risk to organisations without additional financial support from the Victorian Government.

ACCOs will need flexible social recovery investment to ensure their workforces have the capacity and are prepared and supported to adapt to a 'COVID normal'. This includes additional provisions for culturally appropriate debriefing and supervision structures and flexible working arrangements with comprehensive IT infrastructure to support this. It is essential to consider the back of house needs of organisations such as disaster management, recruitment, grant writing, infrastructure, industrial-level cleaning, PPE and many more. Each of these essential measures come at an additional cost to ACCOs, already operating on limited budgets and will require a social recovery investment in order to be sustained and viable. A strong, supported and thriving ACCO workforce is critical to reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the out-of-home care system and supporting Aboriginal communities through pandemic recovery.

Evidence and Evaluation

It is essential, that any funding to support ACCOs in their recovery from COVID-19, include budget to support evaluation and the collection of Aboriginal evidence. Throughout 2020 ACCO child and family services teams have been resourceful and innovative in the ways they have supported their communities. Services, teams and resources have pivoted, and new creative ways of working have been imbedded to great success. ACCO services such as playgroups have shifted to an online platform



and seen an increase in participation, similarly engagement with youth and families over the phone and via Facetime has led to increased participation in the pandemic. It is essential that these positive changes and those in the future be captured and evaluated to inform the sectors future landscape and service delivery.

Summary

As a collective voice for 15 ACCOs across Victoria, the Alliance is calling on the Victorian Government to support ACCOs through the COVID-19 recovery process. We have identified the urgency for a social recovery investment that is developed and determined by ACCOs at the local level and meets their needs and

¹ State Government of Victoria. Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018 – 2023. P 22.

² State Government of Victoria. More Coronavirus Support for Aboriginal Groups, Media Release, 4th November 2020

³ Commission for Children and Young People. Always was, Always will be, Koori Children Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria. October 2016. P. 46

priorities. Financial support is imperative to ensure the pandemic does not contribute to an increase in the number of Aboriginal children and young people entering out-of-home care.

It is imperative the funding include resources to support the existing ACCO workforce to recover with consideration to any future ACCO child and family services workforce strategy. Any new investment should provide provisions to collect and collate evidence of modified ways of working during COVID-19 and support evaluative capacity in ACCOs to build the Aboriginal evidence base.

Endnotes

⁴ Department of Health and Human Services. Wungurilwil Gagapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement. 2018

⁵ State Government of Victoria. Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018 – 2023. P 22.

⁶ State Government of Victoria. Korin Korin Balit-Djak Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017-2027. P. 36

⁷ State Government of Victoria. Building our Recovery Workforce to Support our State, Media Release 11th November 2020

