

**MISSION
AUSTRALIA**

Closing the Gap Refresh

Submission



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About Mission Australia

Mission Australia (MA) is a national non-denominational Christian organisation, with more than 155 years' experience in standing together with Australians in need on their journey to independence. Our evidence-based, client-centred community services are focused on reducing homelessness and strengthening communities across Australia. In the 2016-17 financial year we supported over 140,000 people through 470 programs and services across Australia. Of these clients, nearly 25,000 or 17.5% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

We are currently implementing an Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan with commitments that include: adopting measurable and meaningful steps to improve and increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment outcomes within the workplace; staff training across all levels of the organisation on cultural awareness, collaborating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander supplier diversity.¹

In addition to the Reconciliation Action Plan, Mission Australia is a signatory to the 'Principles for a Partnership-centred Approach' developed by Australian Council of Social Services. These Principles are designed to guide the development of a partnership-centred approach between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and mainstream NGOs in tendering for program funds and engaging in the delivery of services or development initiatives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

Refreshing the Closing the Gap Approach

Ten years on from the establishment of the Closing the Gap framework stark inequities in the health and wellbeing outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people remain. While the bipartisan commitment and monitoring of achievements remain important and progress has been made towards some targets, much more work needs to be done.

The latest data indicates that three of the seven Closing the Gap targets, namely, the target to halve the gap in child mortality by 2018, have 95% of all Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025 and halve the gap in Year 12 attainment by 2020 are on track to be met.² Although, this is an encouraging development, more coordinated action is needed to understand the barriers to achieving the targets. This Closing the Gap Refresh process therefore presents an important opportunity to re-set the agenda.

¹ Mission Australia, *Reconciliation Action Plan*, July 2017 – June 2019, accessible at:

<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/policy-development-advocacy/reconciliation-action-plan>

² Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap, Prime Minister's Report 2018*, 2018, p. 8- 9.

Colonisation, dispossession and continued discrimination have marginalised and disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and this history needs to be acknowledged. Policies must be made with and not for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Governments must engage with and adequately resource Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. Approaches also need to be long-term and recognise the substantive disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is imperative that all these measures are supported by a capacity building and a strengths-based approach that will produce sustainable positive outcomes.

Outcomes across health, education, housing, safety and inclusiveness are connected and achieving improvements in one area requires improvement in the others. Social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing such as poverty, poor education, poor housing, lack of nutrition, lack of meaningful employment and racism have a significant detrimental impact on the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³ In order to close the gap in relation to health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is vital that the strategies and frameworks address the social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing.

Mission Australia believes that outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across health, education, employment and inclusiveness will only improve if there is ‘a different way of doing business’ with a concerted effort across governments, non-government organisations and the community sector to provide services that recognise the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities, acknowledging their traditional governance mechanisms, and ensuring these approaches are consultative and tailored to meet their needs.

In light of this understanding and approach, Mission Australia’s submission on the Closing the Gap Refresh process seeks to support the important recommendations made by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations as set out below.

With respect to the general approach, we support the following recommendations of the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee in relation to a co-design approach and improved architecture⁴:

- The ‘refreshed’ Closing the Gap Strategy is co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders and includes community consultations. This requires a tripartite negotiation process with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders, and the Federal and State and Territory governments. Time must be allowed for this process. Further, Australian governments must be accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for its effective implementation.
- To underpin the *Closing the Gap Strategy* refresh, Australian governments should reinvigorate the ‘architecture’ required for a national approach to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality. This architecture includes: a national agreement, Federal leadership, and national funding agreements that require the development of jurisdictional implementation

³ Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, *Input into the ‘Close the Gap Refresh’ Process*, 2018, accessible at: <https://www.caac.org.au/uploads/pdfs/Congress-input-to-CtG-Refresh-Process-FINAL-24-January-2018.pdf>

⁴ Ibid p. 4 - 6

plans and clear accountability for implementation. This includes by reporting against national and state/territory targets.

Education

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are underrepresented in early childhood education and care services across Australia.⁵ Considering the importance of early learning in later life health and wellbeing, it is imperative that the Closing the Gap Refresh process considers the measures necessary to strengthen targets in relation to early learning into the next iteration of the Close the Gap framework.

The target to have 95% of all Indigenous four-year-old children enrolled in early childhood education by 2025 is currently on track. SNAICC as the national non-governmental peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, has recommended that the existing targets on education should be expanded to include the following:

- Fostering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s wellbeing and development by strengthening the current target on education to eliminate the under-representation of our 0 to 5-year-old children in early childhood education and care services by 2040.⁶

Closing the gap in early childhood, education and care for 0-5 year olds is likely to contribute to other targets including reading and numeracy, school attendance and over the long-term to employment.

Evidence shows that two years of preschool has more impact than one, especially for the children most likely to be developmentally vulnerable. Further, the children who are missing out are often the ones who would benefit most from access to a preschool program, and not all children are receiving the amount of high quality early education needed to maximise their potential.⁷

Mission Australia urges the Government to consider expanding the scope of the current early education target to Close the Gap in early learning for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5 years.

Health

While many of the Closing the Gap targets already focus on addressing health inequalities there is more that can be done to strengthen these efforts. We support the following recommendations of the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee that:⁸

⁵ Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), *Closing the Gap ‘Refresh’ Brief*, 2018.

⁶ Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), *Closing the Gap ‘Refresh’ Brief*, 2018.

⁷ Stacey Fox and Myra Geddes, *Preschool – Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation*, 2016, accessible at: <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Two-Years-are-Better-than-One.pdf>

⁸ Chris Holland, *A ten-year review: the Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset*, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, 2018, p.7

- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan Implementation Plan is costed and fully funded by the Federal government, and future iterations are more directly linked to the commitments of the *Close the Gap Statement of Intent*; and, an implementation plan for the complementary *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023* is developed, costed and implemented by the end of 2018 in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders and communities.
- The *Closing the Gap Strategy* elements such as maternal and infant health programs and the focus on chronic disease (including the Tackling Indigenous Smoking program) are maintained and expanded in a refreshed *Closing the Gap Strategy*.
- A priority focus of the 'refreshed' *Closing the Gap Strategy* should be on delivering equality of opportunity in relation to health goods and services and in relation to health infrastructure (housing, food, water). The social determinants of health inequality (income, education, racism) must also be addressed at a far more fundamental level than before.
- The current *Closing the Gap Strategy* health targets are maintained, but complemented by targets or reporting on the inputs to those health targets. These input targets or measures should be agreed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders and Australian governments as a part of the *Closing the Gap Strategy* refresh process and include:
 - Expenditure, including aggregate amounts and in relation to specific underlying factors as below;
 - Primary health care services, with preference given to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services, and a guarantee across all health services of culturally safe care;
 - The identified elements that address institutional racism in the health system;
 - Health workforce, particularly the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people trained and employed at all levels, including senior levels, of the health workforce; and
 - Health enabling infrastructure, particularly housing.
- The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan Implementation Plan* is costed and fully funded by the Federal government, and future iterations are more directly linked to the commitments of the *Close the Gap Statement of Intent*; and, an implementation plan for the complementary *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023* is developed, costed and implemented by the end of 2018 in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders and communities. This will include:
 - (a) A five-year national plan to identify and fill health service gaps funded from the 2018-2019 Federal budget onwards and with a service provider preference for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs). This includes provision for the greater development of ACCHS's satellite and outreach services.

(b) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leadership, Federal, State and Territory agreements clarifying roles, responsibilities and funding commitments at the jurisdictional level.

(c) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leadership, Primary Health Network and Federal agreements clarifying roles, responsibilities and funding commitments at the regional level.

- An overarching health infrastructure and housing plan to secure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples equality in these areas, to support the attainment of life expectancy and health equality by 2030, is developed, costed and implemented by the end of 2018.

Housing and Homelessness

As indicated by the 2016 census data, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accounted for 20% of all people experiencing homelessness.⁹ They also represented close to a quarter of the people who received services from Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in 2016/17 financial year.¹⁰

Housing has been identified as health enabling infrastructure. Homelessness and its manifestations such as overcrowding, rough sleeping or living transient lives can impact on people's physical and mental health, education, employment and wellbeing.¹¹ Evidence also suggest that secure housing will not only improve health outcomes, but will have positive impacts on education and employment, and reduce contact with the justice and out of home care systems.¹²

Some inroads have been made by the increase in housing delivered through National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) and National Partnership on Remote Housing (NPRH) to address overcrowding in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.¹³ Over the years, programs that aimed at reducing overcrowding and increasing housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been subjected to frequent changes and redesign processes irrespective of the positive evaluations.¹⁴ A long-term sustainable funding approach is required to increase housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Key Findings, 2049.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016, 2018, accessible at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2049.0>

¹⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services annual Report, 2016/17, accessible at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/client-groups-of-interest/indigenous-clients>

¹¹ Mental Health Council of Australia, *Home Truths: Mental Health, Housing and Homelessness in Australia*, 2009.

¹² Ibid

¹³ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, NACCHO Urges Federal Government to Invest in Remote Indigenous Housing, Media Release 1, 8 January 2018, accessible at: <https://nacchocommunique.com/2018/01/08/naccho-aboriginal-health-housing-and-socialdeterminants-debate-nacchochair-urges-federal-government-to-invest-in-remote-housing/>

¹⁴ Commonwealth of Australia (2017), *Remote Housing Review: A review of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing and the Remote Housing Strategy (2008-2018)*, Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, p. 23.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities have identified the need to develop an overarching housing plan.¹⁵ It was recommended that this plan is developed, costed and implemented by the end of 2018.¹⁶

The Remote Housing Review identified that 5,500 more houses are needed in the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia to address the housing issues of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing issues.¹⁷ The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) has also recently underlined the importance of the Federal government to continuously invest in remote Indigenous housing.¹⁸

Considering the importance of housing in relation to all other closing the gap targets, Mission Australia recommends adoption of these measures in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Justice

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience the highest rate of incarceration by percentage of their population in the world.¹⁹ The recent Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) report confirms that the forms of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples are deeply interrelated with incarceration²⁰. For example, a large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in prison awaiting sentencing or are in remand prisons as they are unable to meet the high cost of bail.²¹ The intersectionality between health, disability and the justice system has also been identified by First Peoples Disability Justice Consortium in 2016.²²

¹⁵ Chris Holland, *A ten-year review: the Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset*, The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, 2018, p. 6.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Remote Housing Review: A review of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing and the Remote Housing Strategy (2008-2018)*, 2017, p. 24.

¹⁸ National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, NACCHO Urges Federal Government to Invest in Remote Indigenous Housing, Media Release 1, 8 January 2018, accessible at:

<https://nacchocommunique.com/2018/01/08/naccho-aboriginal-health-housing-and-socialdeterminants-debate-nacchochair-urges-federal-government-to-invest-in-remote-housing/>

¹⁹ According to Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2,346 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people per 100,000 are incarcerated. See further, ABS, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Prisoner Characteristics, 4517.0 - Prisoners in Australia, 2016*, accessible at:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4517.0~2016~Main%20Features~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20prisoner%20characteristics~5>

²⁰ Australian Law Reform Commission, *Pathways to Justice—Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (ALRC Report 133), 2018, p.494-496.

²¹ The Law Council of Australia, *Submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission on Incarceration Rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, 2017, accessible at:

https://www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/subs/108_law_council_of_australia.pdf

²² First Peoples Disability Justice Consortium, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives on the Recurrent and Indefinite Detention of People with Cognitive and Psychiatric Impairment*, 2016, accessible at:

http://fpdn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FPDN-Senate-Inquiry-Indefinite-Detention-Submission_Final.pdf

Access to adequate housing for those involved in the justice system is a growing and serious issue in Australia. Numerous reports have identified the intrinsic and complex links between housing issues and the justice system. In 2015, 27% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prison entrants reported being homeless in the four weeks prior to imprisonment.²³ Furthermore, Aboriginal women exiting prison who have children face extreme difficulty in establishing a home where they can live with their children post-release.²⁴ Children of imprisoned parents are also at a higher risk of homelessness and disrupted childhoods than other young people.²⁵

Bail conditions such as the availability of suitable or adequate accommodation tend to disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in remote locations.²⁶ Homelessness or lack of adequate housing should not limit the opportunity for community correction orders such as 'home detention orders'²⁷ or 'intensive correction orders' (ICOs)²⁸, which require people to have appropriate housing. Measures are therefore required to address housing related issues of people engaged in the justice system and justice and housing as well as other targets are closely inter-related.

The *Change the Record* campaign organised by a coalition of peak legal and community organisations have identified justice targets that should be in place as part of Closing the Gap efforts including to:

- Close the gap in the rates of imprisonment between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by 2040.²⁹

The ALRC has also suggested that the Government focus on developing targets to reduce incarceration and victimisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³⁰ Mission Australia urges the Government to adopt justice targets and implement requisite legislative and policy changes through all levels of the government.

²³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *The Health of Australia's Prisoners 2015* (2015) 28.

²⁴ The Law Council of Australia, *Submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission on Incarceration Rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, 2017, accessible at: https://www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/subs/108._law_council_of_australia.pdf

²⁵ Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues, *Children of Imprisoned Parents Report* (NSW Parliament, 1998); Rosemary Woodward 'Families of prisoners: Literature review on issues and difficulties', *Occasional Paper No 10* (Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, 2003).

²⁶ The Law Council of Australia, *Submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission on Incarceration Rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, 2017, accessible at: https://www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/subs/108._law_council_of_australia.pdf

²⁷ NSW Justice, *Fact Sheet - Home Detention Sentencing Information Sheet*, accessible at: <http://www.correctiveservices.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/community-corrections/home-detention-factsheet.pdf>

²⁸ NSW Justice, *Intensive Correction Orders*, accessible at: <http://www.correctiveservices.justice.nsw.gov.au/Pages/CorrectiveServices/Community%20Corrections/offender-management-in-the-community/intensive-correction-order.aspx>

²⁹ *Change the Record, Briefing paper: Addressing justice and community safety in the Closing the Gap Strategy*, 2018.

³⁰ *Ibid*

Domestic and Family Violence

Domestic and family violence disproportionately impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.³¹ The impact and the intersectionality of domestic and family violence on health, education and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children has not been directly addressed under the current targets. The refresh process provides the opportunity to implement appropriate strategies and investment to address domestic and family violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

The National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS) have recommended adopting targets with a specific focus on family violence.³² FVPLS further recommends that these targets as well as the implementation strategies should be designed, developed and implemented with participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Change the Record campaign has also called on the government to,

- Cut the disproportionate rates of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to at least close the gap by 2040; with priority strategies for women and children, including specific family violence targets.³³

Mission Australia believes that adoption of these targets with clearly identified responsibilities for Federal, state and territory governments and other stakeholders is imperative to address the impact of family and domestic violence as well as improve social, economic and educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Children in out of home care

During 2016-17 financial year, 20, 974 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people had at least one out of home care (OOHC) placement.³⁴ In other words, almost 1 in 3 children or young people in OOHC come from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family.³⁵ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers are less likely to have finished school, are less likely to go on to further education and training, and are disproportionately represented in the youth criminal justice system.³⁶

³¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised and Our Watch, and 10 times more likely to be killed due to violent assault. See further: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) and VicHealth, *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, 2015, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia, p. 69.

³² National Family Violence Prevention Legal Service, *Briefing Paper: Closing the Gap Strategy – Adoption of justice targets with a specific focus on family violence*, 2018.

³³ Change the Record, *Briefing paper: Addressing justice and community safety in the Closing the Gap Strategy*, 2018.

³⁴ Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2017*, Report F, Chapter 16, Table 16A.2.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care*, CFCA PAPER NO. 41 2016, p. 6 accessible at: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/sites/default/files/cfca41-leaving-care.pdf>

Aboriginal young people have been found to be more likely to experience negative aspects of leaving care, including homelessness.³⁷ Strengthening early intervention to prevent young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people entering OOH, and measures to prevent young people leaving care from becoming homeless are urgently required.

To address these issues, SNAICC have called on the government to expand the current targets to:

- ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s safety by including an additional target to eliminate the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 2040, and sub-targets that address the underlying causes of child protection intervention.³⁸

Mission Australia supports the inclusion of such a target both in relation to child safety and to reduce risks of homelessness later in life.

Disability

The intersectionality between health, disability and the justice system was identified by First Peoples Disability Justice Consortium in 2016.³⁹ Considering the shift towards a social model of disability supports and a move away from a medical model of supports, First Peoples Disability Network is recommending the following measures,⁴⁰

- Incorporating a stand-alone disability target, including a target to ensure at minimum, 90% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with severe and profound disability are approved and accessing the NDIS.
- Disaggregated reporting of data on disability in relation to all closing the gap targets.⁴¹

Mission Australia supports these recommendations.

Conclusion

Addressing the disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be a national priority. There have been repeated calls for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations to lead the required changes. This is the essential paradigm shift required for closing

³⁷ Council to the Homeless Persons, *Preventing homelessness for young people leaving out of home care*, 2014, p.1 accessible at: <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CHP-leaving-care-proposal.pdf>

³⁸ Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), *Closing the Gap ‘Refresh’ Brief*, 2018.

³⁹ First Peoples Disability Justice Consortium, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives on the Recurrent and Indefinite Detention of People with Cognitive and Psychiatric Impairment*, April 2016, accessible at: http://fpdn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Senate-Inquiry-Indefinite-Detention-Submission_Final.pdf

⁴⁰ First peoples Disability Network, *Submission to Closing the Gap Refresh framework*, 2018.

⁴¹ Current statistics demonstrate that disability is a factor that has significant impact on all current targets, thus, it is important to monitor the impact of these specific factors on health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. First peoples Disability Network, *Submission to Closing the Gap Refresh framework*, 2018.

the gap in outcomes and re-setting the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians.

The recommendations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander organisations as set out above must be closely considered by governments to expand the reach to underlying social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing. Further, the Closing the Gap Strategy should be co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and peak organisations and include community consultations.