



AASW

Australian Association
of Social Workers

*Submission to Close the Gap
Refresh*

April 2018

[Redacted text block]

[Redacted text block]

Introduction

Who we are

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 10,000 social workers throughout Australia.

We set the benchmarks for professional education and practice in social work. We have an important voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact upon the quality of life of all Australians. We seek a close and collaborative relationship with educational institutions, industry, government, client associations, and the community.

The AASW acknowledges the critical importance of the contribution made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members.

The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally that supports individuals, families, groups and communities to improve their wellbeing. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledge.

Social workers practice in a diverse range of settings and fields, including but not limited to mental health, family violence, health, family supports, disability and child protection. Social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they impact on a person's health, wellbeing and development. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that may have a negative impact, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social workers are well placed to consider and respond to the issues raised in this consultation and therefore the AASW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this submission to this inquiry.

Key recommendations

- Establish a new Close the Gap target to reduce the over- representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, groups and communities must be involved at all stages of the Closing the Gap process, including consultation, implementation and evaluation.
- That a long-term commitment and resources to address identified gaps in service provision between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians be provided, with a focus on early intervention and preventative supports led by Indigenous groups.
- The Close the Gap refresh campaign leads to a comprehensive and systematic approach that explores the social, historical, economic and cultural factors that entrench and perpetuate these injustices.
- We strongly encourage the government to listen to Indigenous voices with a commitment towards taking meaningful action.

Our submission

Social workers are committed to advocating on matters of social inclusion, social justice and human rights. Through our collective actions, including our Reconciliation Action Plan ¹, the AASW demonstrates our commitment to our core values and objectives as they apply to addressing past and continuing disadvantages imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is driven by a particular focus on learning from the past ², and building meaningful relationships in order to work together for a more just Australia.

The AASW strongly supports the review of the Close the Gap campaign. The lack of progress in achieving the outcomes highlights that not only is a review needed, but that there needs to be a significant reconceptualisation of the targets and the processes. Closing the gap is possible, but this needs to start by working towards meaningful relationships with Indigenous leaders and communities built on recognition, respect and trust

The latest Close the Gap progress report has highlighted how after twelve years, only three of the seven targets are on track to being met. Year after year the reports continue to demonstrate the staggering levels of inequality for Indigenous people across many areas including health, education and employment outcomes.

Every day, social workers witness the devastating impacts that this has on the children, families and communities they work with. The figures are confronting, especially when you take into consideration that there have been no significant changes in life expectancy or child mortality rates since 2008 ³. This is evidence of the failure of consecutive governments to not only address inequality, but to also understand it.

Governments need to begin by working with Indigenous communities in partnership and collaboration, drawing upon their knowledge and expertise. It also means a commitment from all levels of government to better supporting and resourcing Indigenous services to achieve far better outcomes. This is a national crisis that requires a comprehensive and systematic approach that explores the social, historical, economic and cultural factors that entrench and perpetuate these injustices. Including a greater investment in early intervention and family support services.

In our submission we will focus on the need for the Close the Gap targets to focus on the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

This is just one issue, and we strongly encourage Australian governments to listen to Indigenous voices with a commitment towards taking substantial action.

New target: Reduce the over- representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care.

Indigenous children are 9.8 times more likely to be removed from their family than non-Indigenous children ⁴. This is a national crisis and the Close the Gap efforts need to address these shocking statistics. State and territory governments spend only 17 per cent of total child protection funding (\$700 million a year) on family support services for children and their families, compared with 83 per cent (\$3.5 billion) on child protection services ⁵. The system is punitive and intervenes when it is too

¹ <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/9889>

² <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/618>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/feb/14/closing-the-gap-report-shows-life-expectancy-and-child-mortality-targets-are-not-being-met>

⁴ <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/child-protection-and-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-children>

⁵ <http://www.snaicc.org.au/inaugural-family-matters-report-warns-population-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-children-removed-child-protection-system-will-triple-2035/>

late.

The AASW believes there is a need for a long-term commitment and approach to addressing the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across Australia. Indigenous communities need a major commitment of funding to redress the current gaps in services, especially early intervention family supports that build community capacity. There is no single solution to addressing this issue, but any action must begin by working with Indigenous communities in partnership and collaboration,

Given the enormity of the issue, reducing the over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care needs to be a new Closing the Gap target.

The AASW strongly supports the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care's (SNAICC) work in this space and their advocacy in relation to eliminating the over-representation through their Family Matters – Strong Communities, Strong Culture, Stronger Children campaign.⁶

We would like to draw the government's attention to their work in this space, especially their submission to this inquiry ⁷, which highlights:

More than one in every three children in out-of-home care is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care is projected to triple by 2035 if today's conditions remain the same and significant reform is not undertaken immediately.

This significant over-representation has widespread social and economic consequences.

The removal of a child doesn't just result in removal from the family – it also often leads to disconnection from community, culture and country, and further contributes to the intergenerational trauma experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This disconnection is a major cause of poor outcomes and experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all facets of life, both in the immediate and long-term. Given the impacts of experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the out-of-home care system, this creates a major long-term burden for all Australian governments through expenditure on the welfare system, the criminal justice system and issues such as family violence.

In addition, AASW endorses SNAICC's recommendation for an additional target for the elimination of over-representation in out-of-home care. We know that progress against such a target will only occur with action to address the factors that lead to intervention from child protection authorities. Therefore, we also endorse SNAICC's proposal that the target be accompanied by two sub-targets.

SNAICC has also pointed out that progress in meeting these new goals requires a meaningful commitment from government.

An additional Closing the Gap target to eliminate over-representation in out-of-home care must also be underpinned by the development of a comprehensive national strategy that is both adequately resourced and developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This strategy must target improved wellbeing for our children and address the key drivers of child protection intervention across issues including inter-generational trauma, poverty, family

⁶ <http://www.familymatters.org.au/>

⁷ SNAICC - Closing the Gap 'Refresh' Brief

violence, mental health and substance misuse. The strategy must drive culturally safe prevention and early intervention responses that support families to stay safely together.

The AASW endorses these recommendations and believes they present an important step towards reconciliation and social justice.

Conclusion

The AASW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and would welcome the opportunity to discuss these points further.



AASW

.....
**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

█ [REDACTED]
█ [REDACTED]
█ [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Incorporated in the ACT
ACN 008 576 010 / ABN 93 008 576 010