

SNAICC Family Matters Report 2023

Northern Territory community voices – comments coordinated by Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory.

Building Block 1 - Quality and culturally safe universal and targeted services.

“Black money with Black people – It’s time to give back and reinvest after many years and no accountability.”¹ Governments and mainstream NGOs have had the lead on service delivery for a long-time and the monetisation of Aboriginal people as an industry needs to stop.

In 2021-2022, over \$223 million was invested into children and families’ services, and despite the continued over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care (OOHC) and youth prisons, only 7% went to ACCOs.

ACCOs provide the best support for Aboriginal families and ACCO-led family support services have seen an increase in self-referrals from families when challenges first arise. The same services report referrals from Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC) remain low and families often sit with open child protection cases, receiving limited support.

The sector calls for needs based funding for ACCOs to provide early intervention and prevention services and transparency from the NTG on how they will meet commitments made in the *10-Year Generational Strategy*, *Safe and Supported National Framework* and *National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Priority Reform 2*, to build the ACCO sector and transfer services to community control.

Building Block 2 – Participation, control and Self-Determination.

“There should be no discussion about family, without family.”² The NTGs unmet commitment to establish independent models of Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making (AFLDM) must be urgently addressed.

The sector strongly rejects TFHCs view that the Signs of Safety (SOS) framework is AFLDM; SOS reinforces unequal power dynamics between TFHC and families, does not create a culturally safe space for families to lead decision making and does not provide for an independent facilitator to support families through the process.

We heard success for families occurs when TFHC forms strong local partnerships with ACCOs and empowers them to lead work with families. Unfortunately, these partnerships are based largely on individuals within TFHC showing initiative rather than signs of broader systemic reform.

TFHC must listen to Aboriginal people and ACCOs – the system is not working and Aboriginal people must be empowered to lead the change. With the upcoming release of the 1st Action Plan for the *10-Year Generational Strategy*, the sector welcomes details on how the transfer of authority in child protection to ACCOs will be resourced and undertaken.

Building Block 3 – Culturally safe and responsive systems.

“They can call it welfare, child protection, Territory Families... but if they don’t follow the child placement principles it is just stealing children.”³ In the NT, 64% of Aboriginal children in care are not placed in accordance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles (ATSICPP) – this statistic is getting worse and there is no accountability for TFHCs non-compliance with their own legislation.

¹ Darwin participant

² Darwin participant

³ Katherine participant.

The best way to improve adherence to the ATSI CPP is through strong partnerships between TFHC and ACCOs and resourcing ACCOs to do the work. Genuine partnerships matter because they create an environment in which Aboriginal people and communities achieve self-determination.

Services highlighted that reunification policies and procedures are setting families up to fail as the supports put in place for children in care often don't follow when they are reunited with family. TFHCs responsibilities to children they remove should not end once reunification occurs and supports must continue until families find stability and locally available alternatives are in place. This is particularly important for children removed from remote communities and homelands and placed in urban centres, as the supports available in town are often prohibitively expensive or not available in remote communities.

Access to suitable and safe housing continues to be the area of most critical need for vulnerable families. Family support services have limited reach if housing needs are not met; vulnerable families need access to a spectrum of housing and accommodation options including supported accommodation, hostels and emergency accommodation. Services noted that lack of housing is often the direct causal factor for risk of contact with the child protection system.

Additional concerns relate to the limited support for parents to navigate the legal system and the low number of referrals from TFHC to Aboriginal legal services; the sector strongly advocates for the establishment of a notification system for children entering care so a suitable Aboriginal legal service can connect and ensure the family is offered culturally appropriate legal support.

Building block 4 – Accountability

It is positive that the overall number of Aboriginal children in care has decreased, however, further analysis of this data is needed to understand how current practices support improved outcomes. The number of substantiated child protection reports is rising, and consultations suggest increased use of Temporary Protection Orders (TPO) and informal family way placements. TFHC must acknowledge that children on TPOs are still removed from their families and communities and the number of TPOs should be counted in the overall OOHC statistics.

While in many cases, preventing children from entering OOHC care is the preferred outcome, noting the level of risk present in some regions, services expressed concern regarding the rigour of assessments, lack of transparency and the types of supports informal carers receive, given TFHC argue a formal order is needed for the department to provide financial support.

APO NT has continued to work in good faith with the NT and Commonwealth governments on the 1st Action Plan for the *10-Year Generational Strategy* and believe that if fully implemented, it will lay strong foundations to reform the system. However, we remain concerned about the significant delays and the absence of resourcing for implementation and question the government partners commitment.

To increase accountability and drive reform, ACCOs advocate for:

- Adequate funding to implement the 1st Action Plan for the *10-Year Generational Strategy*.
- Immediate funding to establish an independent Aboriginal Children and Families Peak Body.
- The establishment of an NT Aboriginal Children's Commissioner.