



## INSIGHTS & UPDATES FROM SNAICC

### 7th SNAICC National Conference Communiqué

**The 7<sup>th</sup> SNAICC National Conference brought together over 1100 delegates from across the country who shared and reaffirmed their commitment to improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Delegates called for urgent action to ensure our children grow up safe, healthy and strong in their families and communities.**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the *Bringing them Home* report, Professor Mick Dodson opened the conference calling on conference delegates to look back and reflect on the tragic history and deeply heartbreaking stories of the Stolen Generations. He reminded us of the important calls from that inquiry to make reparations – and that making reparations means that we must all do everything in our power to make sure the hurt of the past is healed and the removal of children does not continue.

While 20 years ago the *Bringing them Home Report* called for National Standards Legislation and extensive reforms to secure the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, conference delegates reflected that its comprehensive vision for reform is still sadly so far from being realised. As Professor Dodson told the conference, “the gravity of the findings demanded action and action hasn’t been taken.” A plenary panel of prominent Aboriginal Elders and activists called on delegates to draw on the strength and resilience of members of the Stolen Generations to chart the path ahead. Commissioner Helen Milroy reminded us that life is relationships and that abuse in institutions has fragmented those relationships. We need to heal past and present trauma to ensure the safe cultural embrace of all of our children.

All keynote speakers called for increased focus and investment in early intervention to address the drivers of child removal, including through justice reinvestment approaches and a well resourced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early years education and care sector. They also reiterated calls heard across the conference and many of its concurrent sessions, that genuinely enabling self-determination is core to improving outcomes for our children.

A deep sense of frustration was expressed by conference delegates that we continue to see outcomes for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children decline. Our children remain almost 10 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than other Australian children and their number in care is set to triple by 2035 if we fail to act. Adjunct Professor Muriel Bamblett told the conference that the best interests of our children for their wellbeing and safety are to be with their families and communities, and to determine their own futures. Yet, our children continue to be separated from their families and cultures at an alarming rate. In response, the conference delegates called for renewed efforts and a national commitment to finally see through the *Bringing them Home* reform agenda that remains relevant 20 years on.

International keynote speaker, Dr Sarah Kastelic, CEO of the Indian Child Welfare Association in the United States, shared recent gains through regulations under the Indian Child Welfare Act that give clear legal definition to requirements to support the safety and wellbeing of Native children. These regulations define “active efforts” that must be taken and demonstrated to support a family to stay together or to reunify. Dr Kastelic spoke of the importance of the federal legislation in establishing the jurisdiction of tribal courts and the role of tribal authorities to participate in child welfare matters. These reforms struck a chord with delegates who saw many parallels in the experiences of Indigenous children in the United States and shared their deep frustration at the persistent poor implementation and lack of accountability for applying the five holistic elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in Australia.

SNAICC Deputy Chairperson Geraldine Atkinson called on conference delegates and all Australian governments, organisations and individuals to stand alongside the many who have already committed to the Family Matters – Strong Communities, Strong Culture, Stronger Children campaign and to contribute to implement its comprehensive roadmap for reform to eliminate the

over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

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**Delegates at the conference made the following calls to action:**

That all governments fully implement the recommendations of the *Bringing Them Home Report* in this, the 20th anniversary year of the tabling of the report. A national dialogue is needed on creating sustainable structures to monitor the implementation of recommendations from this and other systemic inquiries into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, and must centrally include members of the Stolen Generations.

That all governments mark the tenth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by committing to the principles of self-determination and demonstrating that commitment through the Redfern Statement Alliance process.

That through COAG all governments agree on a coordinated strategy, co-designed with the relevant national and jurisdictional peaks and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare organisations, to eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 2040.

That the elimination of the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care be identified as a specific new national target through the refresh of the Closing the Gap Agenda.

That learning from the experience of the United States, all Australian governments come together to regulate national minimum standards for the care and protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through national legislation or consistent state and territory legislation, including:

- Requirements to demonstrate that “active efforts” to support families to stay together and to reunify have been taken in any proceedings seeking child protection orders or the termination of parental rights; and

- National standards for the implementation of each of the five holistic elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

That all jurisdictions commit to an increased investment in targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early intervention, family preservation and family reunification services. In particular, we note the importance of justice reinvestment and also the recent announcement of Community Services Ministers in their August 2017 Communiqué of new joint investment in intensive family support services and call for these and other prevention supports to be delivered through community-controlled organisations.

That the Federal Government recognises the unique role of, and provide sustainable funding for, a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled early years sector. This must include supporting and growing existing Aboriginal Children and Family Centres, Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services and other critical early years supports, as well as developing new community-controlled services to address the gap in service access for our children.

That a new target and accompanying strategy is identified to address the 15,000 place gap in early childhood education and care service participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through the Closing the Gap refresh.

That all jurisdictions recognise that the key to stability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is growing up in culture and community. Rather than pursuing legal permanent care orders, jurisdictions focus their efforts on improving compliance with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, supporting families and building connections for children to their kin and culture to ensure children's emotional, physical and cultural safety and stability.

That all governments commit to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities in decisions about the care and protection of their

children as early as possible by enabling family-led decision making processes – led by independent community-controlled agencies – before decisions are made about child removal or placement.

That an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner for our children is established in every Australian jurisdiction with powers to undertake own motion inquiries and hold governments and service sectors accountable to their obligations to secure the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

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