

9th SNAICC CONFERENCE

7 DECEMBER 2021

**CLOSING THE GAP NATIONAL AGREEMENT – A FRAMEWORK FOR OUR CHILDREN'S
FUTURES**

PAT TURNER KEYNOTE PRESENTATION

Hello everyone, thank you for inviting me here today.

My name is Pat Turner. I am the CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and the Lead Convener of the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Peaks Organisations.

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands you are all joining from today and pay my respects to all our Elders and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait and Islander peoples online.

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands I am joining from today.

Canberra is Ngunnawal country. The Ngunnawal are the Aboriginal people of this region and its first inhabitants.

The Ngunnawal peoples, like my family and all First Nations peoples, were protectors and carers of our families, our country and our cultures, and worked to ensure our children and future generations thrived.

We have been protecting and caring for our families and our children for more than 60,000 years.

Before I am the CEO of any organisation, I am foremost an Aboriginal woman, the daughter of an Arrente man and a Gurdanji woman.

I am part of a kinship structure where I have many reciprocal obligations and caring responsibilities to my family.

I say this as it is important that when we are talking now about supporting our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families to thrive and addressing the rates of out of home care of our children, that we always remember the strength that is in our peoples, our culture and our own ways.

And that we remember that it is not our culture that is the problem, as our culture is our strength and the way forward.

It is a privilege to speak to you today.

A privilege because we are all here as we seek to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up strong and well.

But I am also here with sadness and fury in my heart.

Sadness because the current approach to supporting our children and addressing rates of our children in the child protection system and in out of home care is largely failing and has been for far too long.

Sadness because the consequences of this failure has detrimental outcomes for our children and peoples. It impacts on our future generations and the survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as distinct and proud First Nations peoples, who are strong in their identify and culture.

And fury. Fury in my heart because, despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples voicing their concerns and proposing solutions for years, we are only now starting to be heard.

To go forward, governments and non-Indigenous organisations must set aside their own ideas that they know best and truly see us and hear us; and then to act on the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.

Today, I want to talk to you about the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are saying about the reasons why there are so many of our children in the child protection system and what is needed by governments and non-Indigenous organisations and those working to improve the situation.

As part of this, I will talk about how the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap provides a framework to design and implement national and local responses to support our children.

Understanding why so many of our children are not thriving

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over represented in the child protection system and out of home care services compared to non-Indigenous children.

Our children also do not have the same access as other Australian children to housing, essential services, supports and early childhood education. They are more likely to suffer poor health and education outcomes and be in environments where there is drug and alcohol abuse and violence.

These statistics are not unknown to governments and those that care to look. What is less known, understood and accepted are the causes.

To understand and design a way forward, it is important that we understand the causes.

As with all children that are not growing up strong and have contact with the child protection system, it's the result of a complicated interplay of social, structural and individual factors.

But for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, it is also racialised.

The status of our children has its roots in the colonisation of our communities and peoples.

Our children and families are suffering the fallout of centuries of racist government policies and systems, including the continued displacement of our peoples from our traditional

lands, the loss of our economic independence, the breakdown of our culture, kinship structures and laws, the explicit policies of removal of our children from our families and the continued social and political exclusion leading to poverty and marginalisation.

Not only are these factors that are consequences of colonisation, but they are also significant factors that contribute to ongoing experiences of our children and families.

We also have a child protection system in Australia which also shows systemic discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families where there is a penal response to those that need support, and one that privileges white, western ideals of family and notions of parenting.

Colonisation then, must be understood as an ongoing process and not an event that has occurred in the past.

Calls from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations

Due to the legacy and continuing colonisation, the causes of our children not thriving and being subjected to the child protection system must be understood as being very different to the experiences of non-Indigenous children and families.

Our children and families then require a radically different response – a response that addresses our root causes and adopts an intersectional approach that acknowledges our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and our political status within the settler state.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been calling for our voices to be front and centre in the design and delivery of policies and programs to support our children.

With the release of the last Family Matters Report, Sue Hunter said,

“What we need to do is invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. We need to get to our families before the system does.

We know best. We need to make sure that legislation and polices, that we are part of the decision making, that we're not just left to be told what to do."

Catherine Liddle, the CEO of SNIACC, has also said,

"Our families and communities know best how to keep our children safe and cared for in connection with their cultures, but best practice models of Aboriginal family led decision making is not being used in most cases."

These points are made on the back of so many of our leaders, organisations and families calling for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led response.

For decades we have been calling for a response that centres our knowledge, experiences and expertise and our own community organisations.

We have long said that that an Aboriginal led response is the only way to support our children to thrive and address holes in the approaches to address the rates of out of home care that currently fail to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, cause them harm, and do not properly address our unique circumstances and dynamics.

Whilst there has been growing recognition over the last couple of years that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' voices must be at the centre of any policy and program response, on the whole, we continue to struggle with the way forward.

I am choosing to remain optimistic though and believe that governments and non-Indigenous organisations do not know how to practically respond to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples and our community-controlled organisations. That is difficult for someone from the dominant culture to suspend what they know and truly listen, to be informed by and respond to our voices, our expertise and our knowledge.

To imagine that the lack of progress is wilful response from governments and non-Indigenous Australia is too much to bear.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap and our community-controlled health organisations provides a way forward

The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which came into effect in July 2020, charts a way forward for governments, its institutions and organisations and other non-Indigenous organisations to fundamentally change the way it works with our peoples.

It is the first intergovernmental agreement designed to improve the lives of our people that has been negotiated and agreed between all Australian governments and representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, through the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Peak Organisations.

It commits this country to a new direction and is a pledge from all governments to work in full partnership with our peoples through shared decision making on policies and programs that have a significant impact on our lives.

The Coalition of Peaks is made up of nearly sixty-five national and state/territory community controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, including the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and SNIACC – a National Voice for our Children.

The Coalition of Peaks formed as an act of self-determination and came together because collectively we have had enough, enough of not being heard.

Efforts over decades to close the gap and improve life outcomes for our peoples, including addressing our children's wellbeing and the rates of out of home care, have been limp at best, and at worst, have completely failed us.

This is the first time that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Peaks have joined together across the country in this way.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have historically been excluded from decision-making on the policies and programs that directly affect them and the communities in which they live.

This is despite evidence which demonstrates that the only way to improve our people's health and wellbeing is with our full participation. And despite our collective, repeated calls over many years for full participation in decisions that impact on our lives.

As part of having our voices heard, the National Agreement has put addressing the rates of our children in out of home care and supporting our children squarely on the national agenda.

Led by the hard work of SNAICC, the Coalition of Peaks negotiated hard for an expanded focus on our children under Closing the Gap.

The Agreement includes several socio-economic targets that relate to our children's wellbeing, covering healthy birth weight, development, and early education.

SNAICC, through the Coalition of Peaks, also pushed for agreement by governments to a target to reduce the rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care.

These targets set the nation a clear focus by which governments will be held to account as they report publicly on progress each year.

Importantly, the National Agreement also sets a practical path forward for the nation on how to achieve these targets – through four Priority Reforms.

The Priority Reforms were taken to governments by the Coalition of Peaks and were developed after extensive consultation with our communities and memberships and from decades of combined experience and expertise.

They also respond to the calls from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families on how best to support our children and families to thrive – as I said at the beginning, we have been growing our children strong for thousands and thousands of years, using our way.

Whilst I have been through the Priority Reforms with many of you before, it is very important that we not only understand what they are, but also understand how to use them and the commitments made by governments.

We need to be using the Priority Reforms, taking them to governments, and working to apply the commitments governments have made to our own organisations and communities.

Priority Reform One – shared decision making

Priority Reform One is about shared decision making between our peoples and organisations and governments to ensure the full involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the national, state and local or regional level and embedding our ownership, responsibility and expertise to close the gap.

It is a commitment to establish formal partnership structures, particularly agreements, which are negotiated and agreed to by governments and representatives of our peoples, on policy and program issues important to our peoples and Closing the Gap.

Priority Reform One takes us beyond the notion that governments know best.

It positions our knowledge as central to any policy and program response to the issues that we face and says we must be heard.

This is crucial if we are to support our children to grow strong and address rates of out of home care where the root causes are embedded in our experiences as a colonised peoples and where it is us that have the responses to the issues we face.

Priority Reform One also takes us beyond governments setting up their own structures to consult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples including appointing advisers.

We need to make sure that our people have the right to choose which of our organisations and which of our people should be included in these structures.

Priority Reform One makes it clear that the development of a national plan to support our children must be done through a formal partnership arrangement between our representatives and governments.

And where the final plan is agreed by all parties.

Priority Reform One also applies at the community level.

We need formalised community partnerships between our organisations and representatives, governments and service providers, where again our knowledge and expertise are at the centre of designing and implementing localised responses.

These partnerships need to be integrated into every aspect of decision making, not just where governments and non-Indigenous organisations think it should apply.

Anything less is a failure to meet their commitments in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Priority Reform Two – strengthening the capacity and the role of our community-controlled organisations

Priority Reform Two is a commitment to strengthen and place our community-controlled services at the heart of delivering programs and services to our people.

Community control is an act of self-determination for our peoples. No other way of delivering and governing services, or providing us with a say in government policy, guarantees Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander empowerment and protects our identity and culture for the long term.

There is strong evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services are better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, achieve better results and help make sure we get the support we need.

Through their involvement in policy and political advocacy, our organisations also provide a voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Without them, the accountability of governments would be far weaker.

In this context, I want to share with you the important role of community-controlled health services, or ACCHOs, have in supporting our children to thrive, provide family support and reduce the rates in children in out of home care.

Not only do ACCHOs have a role in addressing immediate healthcare needs of our children, but our organisations invest in driving change in the more entrenched structural determinants of health and wellbeing.

This includes supporting our peoples to address their housing, education and employment needs, as well as help them navigate the child protection and justice system when called upon.

Our community-controlled health organisations also work to support the exclusion of our peoples from political structures.

ACCHOs consistently advocate for our peoples for better policies and programs that address the social determinants of health and promote our cultural and societal values towards greater understanding, acceptance and inclusion of our peoples.

These are the important actions that our ACCHOs play that have an accumulative positive effect in closing the gap, supporting our children to thrive and addressing the rates of children in out of home care.

This is just one example of our community-controlled organisations, and I have spoken to the role our health organisations play so that you can see the breadth of the community-controlled impact and importance.

SNAICC and the many early childhood and education community-controlled organisations are supporting our children and families in similar and very important ways.

Importantly, what you can see is that our involvement is critical if we are to address the rates of out of home care and support our children to grow up strong.

The National Agreement acknowledges the role of our community-controlled organisations and commits governments to preference our organisations in the delivery of programs and services that support our peoples.

In developing the responses to the Closing the Gap targets, we would expect to see a priority emphasis on the role of our community-controlled organisations.

We would also expect this to be backed by significant and long-term funding.

For those that work in non-Indigenous community organisations, Priority Reform Two is a call for you to partner with our community-controlled organisations and to be led by us in your support and responses to our children and families.

As I stated at the outset, we have been protecting and looking after our children for generations upon generations – we are the solution.

Priority Reform Three – confronting racism in governments and mainstream organisations

Priority Reform Three is a commitment by governments to ensure that mainstream government agencies and institutions that deliver services and programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertake systemic and structural transformation to contribute to Closing the Gap.

Although the priority must be on building our community-controlled services sector to deliver the services our peoples need, not all the services, at this stage, are able to be provided by a community-controlled organisation.

In addressing the rates of out of home care, this is particularly relevant for our interactions with the child protection system.

Systemic racism proliferates all the facets of the child protection system; from the “care” workers who remove our children, to the police and teachers who make the calls to child protection to notify of alleged abuse and neglect.

The racism also infects the mainstream organisations that intended to educate and care for our children and families.

It is no wonder then that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families do not see the those working in and around the safety and wellbeing of our children as a place to go to for support they may need.

Priority Reform Three demands that the child protection system and family and children health and wellbeing services and those that work within them recognise the damage that the current approach has had on our culture, our identities, and our corresponding wellbeing and experiences of harm.

Importantly, Priority Reform Three also commits governments and those working in the child protection system to takes steps to heal the past, and take an active de-colonising approach, to the extent that it is even possible within a white, coercive system.

Other non-Indigenous organisations providing services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are also captured under Priority Reform Three.

Non-Indigenous organisations have also had and continue to have a significant colonising impact on our children and families by not always providing a safe place for our children, not listening to our voices and not working in partnership with our community-controlled organisations.

Priority Reform Four – using data our way, to support shared decisions

Priority Reform Four is a commitment to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to, and the capability to use, locally relevant data and information to

monitor the implementation of the first three Priority Reforms, the closing the gap targets, and drive our own development.

Better access to data means that we can make better decisions for our futures and hold governments to account.

Priority Reform Four means that data on our children and families is not used for coercive control.

Where data is not being used by others to judge and assess us by western ideals and to continue to perpetuate racialised stereotypes that justifies removal of our children.

Priority Reform Four is about jointly deciding, in partnerships between our community-controlled representatives, governments and other organisations, what data is important to capture that tells the story of children’s experiences, based on what is important to us.

And then using that data together to make more informed decisions about the policies and programs that are designed to support us.

The Priority Reforms reflect what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been saying for decades is needed to change our life trajectory and improve our outcomes and experiences.

Through the National Agreement, and taken together, the Priority Reforms provide a comprehensive practical framework to support our children and the national and local levels to grow up strong and confident in their own culture and identity.

There is no longer an excuse to not hear us and to not take forward arrangements for policy and program design and implementation that positions us and our own community-controlled organisations and solutions at the centre.

Taking responsibility and action

Everyone in this room is responsible for supporting our children and addressing the rates of out of home care.

We all collectively hold the power to make a difference to the next generation of First Nations peoples in this country.

Your responsibility from here is to know, understand and take action on the Priority Reforms in the National Agreement.

For governments and non-Indigenous organisations, the National Agreement calls on you to relinquish that power – the power that says you know best – to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities and organisations who actually do know best.

For our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities, the National Agreement is there for you as a starting position for your discussions with governments and other organisations.

The commitment to work differently has already been made by governments – it is now open to you to use the National Agreement to hold governments to account.

SNAICC have done this extremely well. They are taking the National Agreement to all governments and negotiating new policies and programs to support our children in line with the Priority Reforms.

This is what we all need to be doing, not just the members of the Coalition of Peaks, but all our community-controlled organisations across the country.

This will bring the Priority Reforms to life and hold governments to account for their commitments.

Get yourself a copy of the National Agreement, go through each of the Priority Reforms and highlight what commitments are most important to your organisations and the communities you are working for.

Take this with you in your discussions with governments and mainstream organisations, and then, working as equal partners, you can build new policies, programs and strategies to support our children around the Priority Reforms.

And in doing so, always remember, the solutions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are within us and in our culture.

Thank you.
