

LINK-UP (QLD)
NATIONAL APOLOGY ANNIVERSARY 2022
14 February
Pat Turner

Hello everyone. Thank you for inviting me to speak on this important day.

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 am foremost an Aboriginal woman, the daughter of an Arrente man and a Gurdanji woman. I am part of a kinship structure where I am a sister, a cousin, an aunty and a grandma, all with cultural and caring obligations.

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands we are standing – the Turrbal peoples from the northside of the river and the Jagera peoples of the south side – and pay my respects to the Elders past and present.

The Turrbal and Jagera peoples, like my family and all First Nations peoples, were, and still are, 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.

I say this so that when we reflect on the past that brings us together today as well as the future we are seeking, we always remember the strength that is in our peoples, our culture and our own ways.

Since colonisation, numerous government laws, policies and practices resulted in the forced removal of generations of our children.

During the 1910s and the 1970s, thousands of our children were forcibly removed by governments, churches and welfare bodies to be raised in institutions, fostered out or adopted by non-Indigenous families, nationally and internationally. These children are known as the Stolen Generations.

The exact number of children who were removed may never be known but there are very few families who have been left unaffected — in some families, children from three or more generations were taken.

The removal of children broke our cultural, spiritual and family ties and we have been left with a lasting and intergenerational impact on the lives and wellbeing of our peoples and communities.

Affecting anywhere from 1 in 10 to 1 in 3 children, there is not a single Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who has not been forever altered.

It is important that we understand how widespread the impact is for us as First Nations peoples, when we both look back and seek to heal our past; and when we look forward and re-claim our future.

The National Apology was an important step forward in our healing journey for our peoples and families and our relationship as First peoples with the settler-state. But this was just one step.

The Commonwealth government's announcement to provide compensation to survivors of the Stolen Generations who were removed in the federal jurisdictions of the Northern Territory, the Australian Capital Territory, and Jervis Bay was another welcome step.

A step that came off the back of decades of campaigning and storytelling from survivors and descendants, including a class action lawsuit, since the landmark Bringing Them Home report in 1997.

Although, it was a step too late for my mother, and for many others.

In healing from the past, there are more steps to take. All jurisdictions need to take the step of redress and compensation. This includes the Queensland government who have so far failed to take any meaningful step to compensate for the harm to our children and families caused by their policies of removal.

In re-claiming our future, we need to urgently address the current rates of removal of our children from our families and communities.

The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service

Provision recently released new figures showing that 22,297

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were separated from

their families in out-of-home care and other supported care at 30 June 2021.

These figures are the legacy of the Stolen Generations and continue to shed light on one of the most shameful impacts of colonisation.

In overcoming the legacy and re-claiming our future, we need to remember the strength and power of our own cultures, kinship structures and families and chart a new future for our children.

In 2019, a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peak organisations came together as part of a movement across the country to share in decisions with governments about policies and programs that impact on our peoples' lives.

The Coalition of Peaks negotiated and agreed with all governments a new National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The National Agreement is a commitment from governments and our own organisations to a new future and a new way of working between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and governments.

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 – National Voice for our Children, the Coalition of Peaks negotiated hard for an expanded focus on our children under Closing the Gap.

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

We also pushed governments to agree 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.

Priority Reform One is about shared decision making between our peoples and our organisations and governments to ensure the full involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the national, state, regional and local level on policies and programs that impact on us.

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 the 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 solutions to the issues we face.

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

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.

Our community-controlled early education, family support and health services are vital to support our families and children, maintain and strengthen our cultures and ensure our peoples feel safe to access the support they need.

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.

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.

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 take steps to heal the past and take an active de-colonising approach.

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 and provide a comprehensive practical framework to support our children to grow up strong and confident in our own cultures and identities.

Today, as we look back and continue to seek reparations to heal the past, we must also look forward and claim our futures, for our children and for the survival of our peoples as First Nations peoples with strong cultural identities.

We have a way forward, let's seize it together.