



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

The national peak body for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander children and families
www.snaicc.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

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Statement by SNAICC Chairperson Sharron Williams

Closing the Gap statements becoming a disappointing and frustrating ritual

Unless there is a new approach to the delivery of programs and services for Indigenous Australians — that retargets government funding to early years education and health and improves Indigenous participation — the Prime Minister's Closing the Gap statement will continue to be an annual ritual in disappointment and frustration.

We share the Prime Minister's profound disappointment, but the latest results should not come as a surprise. Indigenous Affairs in the past 12 months has been marked by severe funding cuts and uncertainty — hardly the platform for sustained improvements under Closing the Gap targets.

Today hundreds of Indigenous organisations across Australia, including SNAICC, are still waiting to see if they have been successful in securing funding under the Government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

Clearly there is a contradiction between aiming for Closing the Gap targets and reducing funding on Indigenous programs intended to close the gap on disadvantage.

It is a contradiction to aim for greater access to early childhood education while at the same time turning your back, as the Australian Government has done, on funding the 38 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Family Centres across Australia.

The latest Closing the Gap report shows disappointing progress in the areas of life expectancy, access to early childhood education, literacy and numeracy, and employment.

Governments simply must invest more in Indigenous early childhood and family support services to stop the gap from widening in the first place. If we get this platform right, it will lead to better outcomes across all Closing the Gap targets.

Greater long-term investment in integrated early childhood education, care and health will set our children on the path to better school attendance and attainment, and greater employment opportunities. Improved health and education outcomes will help veer them away from contact with juvenile detention and criminal justice systems.

Greater investment in intensive family support and family violence services will keep more vulnerable families together, reduce their contact with the child protection system and stem the tide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being placed in out-of-home care. Funds taken away from family violence prevention services in the last Federal budget need to be restored in the next.

But funding is only part of the issue. Our community organisations must be empowered and encouraged to design and deliver programs and services at the local level.

In his Closing the Gap statement last year, Mr Abbott acknowledged that past policy failures in Indigenous affairs could be attributed to doing things “for” Indigenous Australians rather than “with” them.

But according to a recent Productivity Commission report on government expenditure, of the 6.1 per cent of all government spending on Indigenous-specific programs, 81 per cent (\$24.7 billion) in 2012–13 was provided to mainstream services while only 19 per cent (5.6 billion) was targeted to Indigenous specific services.

Unless there is a new approach to the delivery of services, which redresses this imbalance and strengthens the capacity of Indigenous organisations, we will not achieve sustained improvements in the lives of Indigenous Australians.

There is a wealth of national and international evidence that effective community governance and meaningful participation are essential to advance issues impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

We note that the one target that is on track is the mortality rate for Indigenous children under five. SNAICC welcomes this as great news that can be directly attributed to the work of Indigenous community-controlled health services.

The Australian Government has made encouraging remarks about delivering more flexible funding to make sure it meets the aspirations and priorities of communities. Let’s hope the reality matches the rhetoric when the funding allocations are announced under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy in March.

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