

Secretariat National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

MEDIA RELEASE

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families not hard to reach — but adequate support services are hard to find

SNAICC National Executive member Lisa Coulson has told a major conference there is an urgent need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family support services that are holistic and culturally appropriate to help build a stronger future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Speaking at the *Honouring the Child, Honouring Equity Conference* at the University of Melbourne, Ms Coulson said that despite the significant and multiple disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, they continued to have low access to family support services across the country.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children have been regularly identified as being hard to reach when it comes to support services and program engagement...(but) it is vitally important that we do not place the blame on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families for being hard to reach," Ms Coulson said.

Ms Coulson, a palawa woman and Director of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Child Care Association, said Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families faced multiple barriers in accessing support services.

"The barriers are historical, cultural, social and practical," she said.

"They include: a lack of cultural awareness in the provision of services and as a result, services that are not culturally appropriate; the history of mainstream services in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and resulting distrust of the service provider; a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed by the service provider and; language and communication barriers.

"Significant practical barriers include low income; remote or regional location and lack of transport.

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"These barriers may present as an unwillingness to engage with the service, but should rather be recognised as barriers that services must address in order to respond appropriately to the needs of our communities."

Ms Coulson said community-controlled services such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) continued to be inadequately funded, despite providing "the most effective and appropriate means for supporting our children, families and communities".

While the main function of MACS centres was child care, Ms Coulson said they provided a holistic service that included mobile outreach programs, wellbeing programs for families and children, cultural awareness programs and parenting programs.

"The holistic model employed by MACS services is: child centred; family-centred; collaborative; culturally inclusive; focussed on the needs of whole community; and strong in partnerships."

Ms Coulson emphasised the centrality of culture in the provision of services to Aboriginal and Torres Islander children.

"To ensure that our children grow up strong in their culture and identity, we need to create early childhood education environments which celebrate, nurture and affirm their cultural identity," she said.

Ms Coulson said the under-resourcing of community-controlled services meant that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families had no choice but to access mainstream services.

She said important opportunities existed for "improving the quality and choice of services for our families" through the development of respectful and genuine partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and mainstream organisations.

Ms Coulson's speech is available at: www.snaicc.asn.au/policy-advocacy

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