



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

MEDIA RELEASE

13 February 2012

A long road ahead as National Apology milestone comes around

Two reports leading up to the fourth anniversary of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations serve as a stark reminder that much remains to be done to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, according to SNAICC Chairperson Dawn Wallam.

Ms Wallam said recent publication of the alarmingly high and increasing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-home-care — as revealed in a new Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report— confirmed that the removal of children from their families remains an issue of great concern.

The report found that in June 2011, there were 12,358 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home-care — an increase of 890 since June 2010. In June 1997 — just after the *Bringing them Home* report into Stolen Generations was released — 2,785 Indigenous children were in out-of-home care.

“The latest figures show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 10 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than other children” Ms Wallam said.

The AIHW report noted the reasons for this overrepresentation are complex and include “the legacy of past policies of forced removal, intergenerational effects of previous separations from family and culture, poor socio-economic status and perceptions arising from cultural differences in child-rearing practices”.

“The grief, dislocation and despair experienced by stolen children has passed from one generation to the next and remains unhealed,” Ms Wallam said.

“More must be done to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to care for our children. This support needs to recognise and build on the strengths of our culture, our communities, and our unique child-rearing practices.

“Support for families can prevent children entering the child protection system and minimise the need for removal of children from their families.”

Ms Wallam said more also needed to be done to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children coming into contact with the child protection system remain connected with their family, community and culture.

Suite 8, Level 1, 252 – 260 St. Georges Rd. North Fitzroy VIC 3068

PO Box 1445, North Fitzroy VIC 3068

Ph: 03 9489 8099 Fax: 03 9489 8044 snaicc@vicnet.net.au www.snaicc.asn.au

ABN 42 513 562 148

“Since 2001, the number of our children not placed with relatives or another Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander care giver has more than tripled,” she said.

“The battle to prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being taken away from their families is far from over.”

Ms Wallam said SNAICC strongly advocated the need for states and territory authorities to comply with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle .

The principle directs child protection workers and courts to consider the child’s cultural needs and need for family and community connection as part of their decision making.

Under the principle, a child should only be placed with a non-Aboriginal carer if no other safe placement can be identified.

Aboriginal Child Placement Principle legislation is embedded in all state and territories, but its definition and compliance requirements need to be strengthened to ensure connection to family and culture.

For example, a report last month by the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian in Queensland revealed that a consideration of the hierarchy of placement options, as required in legislation, could only be shown in 26 per cent of cases.

Ms Wallam said: “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in decisions about the care and protection of our children is an important aspect of our right to self-determination and a requirement under the National Standards for Out of Home Care.

“Despite this, participation in decision-making remains low nationally. For example, there is no requirement for child protection decision-makers to consult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals or organisations in the Northern Territory.

“There must be a focus on building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services so that they can play a greater role in child protection decision-making and supporting our children in care.

“There also needs to be a focus on ensuring that children placed with non-Aboriginal carers are appropriately supported to maintain connections to family, community and culture through the development and implementation of cultural care plans.”

Ms Wallam said the other report that should make people stop and reflect on progress since the National Apology was an article in *The Age* newspaper on the suicide rates of young Aboriginal people in Northern Territory communities.

“Anyone who read Russell Skelton’s harrowing report will have cause to wonder if the Australian Government’s intervention in the Northern Territory is having any sort of positive impact,” Ms Wallam said.

“The report painted a grim picture of despair and loss of hope among young people in NT Aboriginal communities and we note *The Age* has now called for the intervention to be scrapped, having initially given it qualified support.

“Just a few days ago, SNAICC called on the Australian Government to reconsider its Stronger Futures legislation which, if passed, will guide its policies and programs in NT communities from July 2012.

“We believe that the Government’s measures should be based more in accordance with international human rights laws to which Australia is bound and a true partnership approach with communities.

“*The Age* article is further proof that a vastly different approach is needed to redress the serious and complex issues around child abuse, and underlying problems of alcoholism, violence and trauma.”

For more information: Frank Hytten, SNAICC CEO, on (0432) 345 652;
Emma Sydenham, SNAICC Policy and Research
Manager, on (0415) 188 990