



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Darwin forum brings together child welfare sector to search for answers on out-of-home care crisis**

A forum in Darwin this Thursday (14 November) will bring together key players in the NT's child welfare sector to look at local solutions to address the soaring number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

The forum at Charles Darwin University is part of a national initiative, titled *Family Matters — Kids Safe in Culture, not in Care*, being undertaken by SNAICC in partnership with several other major child welfare agencies across Australia.

SNAICC Chairperson Sharron Williams said the forum would look at the factors that contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the NT being placed in out-of-home care at six times the rate of other children.

"The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care has grown at an alarming rate in the past decade across Australia. In the Northern Territory, the number of our children in care has tripled since 2003," Ms Williams said.

"This is a totally unacceptable situation. We need to take urgent action and consider different approaches — based on greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation — to arrest this worrying escalation in numbers.

"The Darwin forum will explore local community-driven solutions and ways in which Aboriginal organisations can be empowered to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and provide more support to vulnerable children and families."

Ms Williams said governments across Australia were spending a large percentage of funds on out-of-home care services and much less on boosting parenting, early intervention and intensive family support programs — an imbalance that needed to be addressed to keep more families together.

"As the Bath inquiry into NT child protection found, the current child protection system is expensive and under stress, is not meeting the needs of children in care — many of whom face a life of uncertainty and reduced job prospects once they leave care," Ms Williams said.

"Surely the priority should be to work much harder to keep children safe within families and communities, in order to avert the tragic consequences of the past."

**SNAICC: The national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and family services**

Ms Williams said ensuring children in out-of-home care remain connected to family, community and culture was another critical issue to be explored at the Darwin forum.

Almost two-thirds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the NT are currently placed with non-Indigenous carers — the highest rate of non-preferred placement in Australia — and only one third have Cultural Care Plans.

“As the NT peak body for Aboriginal children and families, SAFT, observed in 2012, hundreds of Aboriginal children are effectively lost in the system without identity, without family and without a voice,” Ms Williams said.

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## **Background information**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented across the child protection system compared with other children in Australia.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, in 2011-12 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were:

- almost 8 times as likely to be the subject of substantiated abuse or neglect
- almost 10 times as likely to be on a care and protection order
- just over 10 times as likely to be in out-of-home care.

At 30 June 2012, there were 13,299 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in out-of-home care in Australia, accounting for over one-third of all children in care.

In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (aged 0-17) make up 44 per cent of the child population yet comprise 82 per cent of all children on care and protection orders.

As at 30 June 2012, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the territory were six times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children.

The most common type of substantiated notification for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is neglect. Whilst neglect is not well defined, it is strongly associated with disadvantage and poverty.

The NT forum on 14 November is the first in a series of state-territory meetings under *Family Matters — Kids Safe in Culture, not in Care*, a national initiative that aims to address the dramatic over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Islander children in care.

SNAICC is undertaking the initiative in partnership with a number of agencies, namely:

- the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation
- Families Australia

- Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)
- the NSW peak body Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec), and
- Queensland Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP).