



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

MEDIA RELEASE

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

A forum in Perth this Friday (13 June) will bring together key players in Western Australia's child welfare sector and Noongar community representatives 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 The University Club in Nedlands 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 (see background information at the end of this release).

SNAICC Chairperson Sharron Williams said the Perth forum would look at the factors that contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Western Australia representing a staggering 49 per cent of all children in out-of-home care, while comprising only 5 per cent of the state's child population.

"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 Western Australia, 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.

"We have a modern-day version of the Stolen Generations unfolding — the motives of authorities in removing children may be different, but the impact on children, families and communities is devastating all the same," Ms Williams said.

She said the Perth forum would 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 redressed to keep more families together.

"Surely the priority should be to work much harder to keep children safe within families and communities, to heal and strengthen those families and communities, in order to avert the tragic consequences of history repeating," Ms Williams said.

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

“A number of inquiries in recent years at the state–territory level have found that child protection systems across Australia are expensive and under stress, and 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 ensuring children in out-of-home care remain connected to family, community and culture was another critical issue to be explored at the Perth forum.

In Western Australia, 57 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care are placed with their Indigenous relatives/kin or another Indigenous carer.

Like all other states and territories, Western Australia is guided by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle when making decisions on child removals.

The principle — which lists a preferred order for placing children and promotes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in decision making — is embedded in the state’s *Children and Community Services Act (2004)*.

However, in Western Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency involvement is not required in placement decisions or judicial decision making.

“We need to look at ways to strengthen the principle to ensure the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in making what are often complex decisions on the best interests of vulnerable children,” Ms Williams said.

“Application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle is inconsistent across Australian jurisdictions, and there have been inadequate efforts to address barriers to implementation.

“Across the nation, thousands of Aboriginal children are effectively lost in the system without identity, without family and without a voice. “

The Perth forum at The University Club will commence at 8:30 am. SNAICC is partnered in the forum by Yorganop Association and WA Council of Social Service.

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Background information: *Family Matters —kids in culture, not in care*

At 30 June 2013, there were 13,914 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in out-of-home care in Australia, accounting for over one-third of all children in care.

The number represents a 400 per cent increase since 1997, when the *Bringing them Home* report on the Stolen Generations was released.

The report made 54 recommendations that looked to heal the physical, emotional and psychological damage to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children forcibly removed from their families across several generations last century — and to ensure it never happens again.

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

Family Matters — Kids Safe in Culture, not in Care is a national initiative that aims to address this dramatic and disproportionate representation.

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).

The WA forum on 13 June is the second in a series of state-territory meetings under *Family Matters — Kids Safe in Culture, not in Care*, and follows a highly successful NT forum in Darwin in November 2013.

SNAICC has prepared an Issues Paper on out-of-home care issues in Western Australia. The paper is available on the SNAICC website:
http://www.snaicc.org.au/_uploads/rsfil/03301.pdf