

Joint Media Release

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Plea for PM to step in and fix Indigenous Affairs policy and funding chaos

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders are calling upon Prime Minister Tony Abbott to personally step in to address the federal Indigenous Affairs policy and funding environment, which they say is descending into chaos.

Representatives of the elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative body National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (Congress), National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS), National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (NFVPLS), National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), and the Healing Foundation – supported by the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) – met in Canberra today to discuss the detrimental impact of the 2014 Federal Budget on key organisations and frontline services.

The group said that, despite Government assurances to the contrary, Budget cuts to Indigenous Affairs were impairing the ability of community-controlled organisations to deliver frontline services in critical areas such as legal assistance, family violence, children, youth and women, drug and alcohol misuse, and health.

“This threatens long term damage to outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and prospects for a reconciled nation,” the group said.

“There is virtually no evidence of coordination between government agencies responsible for funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and programs. Buck-passing appears to be the norm.

“This environment is one of confusion and this is causing instability, anxiety and uncertainty. Despite requests for information from many of our organisations, there are few answers. We're simply told to 'put it in writing'. Then, when we do, we get no response.

The group said there was a disconnect between the Government's stated narrowly-focused priorities of jobs, school attendance, and community safety and its actions.

Under the new Indigenous Affairs arrangements:

- Funding for 38 Children and Family Centres throughout the country ceased on 30 June this year. These centres have been vital hubs in our communities.
- Funding for Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services, which support thousands of Indigenous women and children every year, is currently due to cease on 30 June 2015. There is no recognition of the national program under the strategy or any other form of commitment to extending these essential and specialised frontline services.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services around the country are yet to learn how \$13.1 million in cuts to their operations will be applied to frontline services, and their national advocacy and reform body NATSILS has been defunded. Due to this uncertainty, legal services are being forced to close offices, staff are leaving, positions are going unfilled and services such as duty solicitors reduced.

“How is community safety advanced when important building blocks such as crucial support for women and children experiencing family violence, and access to legal representation, are stepped away from?” the group said.

They called for:

- Emergency talks between Mr Abbott – who declared himself ‘Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs’ – and national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leaders beyond the Indigenous Advisory Council and other individual advisors.
- Immediate extension of transitional funding arrangements under the Government’s new *Indigenous Advancement Strategy* (IAS) from six months and a year to a minimum of 18 months and two years. The IAS open grant and tender process due to commence on 8 September should be deferred while the Government urgently clarifies eligibility criteria and other areas of concern.
- Government assurance that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, service providers and advocacy bodies will be respected and supported to undertake community development and service delivery to their constituents.
- A Parliamentary Inquiry into the recommendations of the Forrest Review into Indigenous employment and economic development. The group expressed serious concern that the review dramatically overstepped its original terms of reference, denying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities an opportunity to make submissions on the range of issues it went on to cover and now seeks to limit and rush responses to recommendations contained in its ‘Creating Parity’ report.

“We call on the Government to start talking to the leadership that is backed by our communities, to stop the confusion, instability and chaos, and to provide much needed clarity and certainty,” the group said.

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