



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

MEDIA RELEASE

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Time to reflect on progress as National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day turns 25

On the 25th anniversary of National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day, SNAICC has called on Australian governments to take heed of embarrassing international criticism of Australia's efforts to protect the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

"NAICD has been held on 4 August each year since 1988 to honour our children and celebrate their achievements and acknowledge the hard work of parents, families and communities in raising healthy and resilient children," SNAICC Chairperson Dawn Wallam said.

"It's a day we celebrate the family and cultural connections that are nurtured and maintained every day of the year, and the rich diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and practices across Australia."

But since its inception, Ms Wallam said, the day had also been a time to reflect on progress in improving the quality of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

"The reality is, after 25 years, our children and young people remain the most vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians," Ms Wallam said.

"As the recent United Nations (Geneva) report on Australia found, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children still face serious and widespread discrimination in accessing health, education and housing services.

"The report also expressed deep concern about a number of issues that should make uncomfortable reading for leaders of an affluent country such as Australia — and inspire some urgent action.

"These issues included inadequate standards of living, higher suicide deaths, homelessness, high levels of family violence and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out-of-home care and criminal justice systems."

Ms Wallam said the Australian Government's latest Closing the Gap report had provided encouraging news on Indigenous child mortality rates, access to early childhood and education outcomes.

"It's pleasing that there has been some progress in these areas. And we welcome the Government's decision to establish a National Children's Commissioner. They throw a glimmer of light on an otherwise grim picture," Ms Wallam said.

**SNAICC: The national non-government peak body for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

She said child protection was one area that required bold and urgent action, as highlighted by the Geneva report.

“In June 2011 there were 12,358 of our children in out-of-home care, representing almost one third of all children in out-of-home care,” Ms Wallam said.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have unacceptably high rates of contact with child protection systems and, if placed in care, a precarious chance of remaining connected with their families and culture.

“Solutions lay in tackling the underlying causes that lead to the dramatic number of children in out-home-care, improving the delivery of preventative and early intervention programs and empowering Indigenous organisations to play a more pivotal role in delivering out-of-home care services.

“We also need to strengthen the way the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is applied in the various states and territories — and ensure that it always works in the best interests of the child — as well as improve support for carers.”

In the early childhood education and care sector, Ms Wallam said the push to mainstream services had served to “disconnect our children from culture and community, and impact negatively on their sense of identity and wellbeing”.

“On the other hand, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s services provide flexible, holistic and affordable programs that meet the needs of children and families — and foster cultural identity and pride,” Ms Wallam said.

“Services such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS) provide a link for children between home, community life and the transition to school. They are fundamentally important for the development of our children at a crucial stage of their lives — and are entitled to better support from government than they currently receive.”

Ms Wallam said SNAICC had consistently argued that the key to sustained improvements in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was supporting Indigenous people and organisations to design, develop and deliver services for their own communities.

“We need a greater say over government policies and programs that impact on our lives so that funding is better tailored to meet the specific needs of communities.

“For this to happen governments must genuinely engage and partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.”

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