



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

MEDIA RELEASE

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Government cuts a major blow to the territory's vulnerable children and families

The NT Government's decision to halve the budget of the peak body SAF,T (Strong Aboriginal Families, Together) — set up only a year ago — is a backward step and a major blow for the territory's vulnerable Aboriginal children and families.

The cuts to SAF,T are part of the Government's decision to reduce funding in the community sector by nearly \$5m, including the NT Council of Social Service and NAPCAN NT. SNAICC shares the deep concerns of the Australian Council of Social Service that these measures will severely impact on the lives of the most vulnerable territorians.

SAF,T represents something the Northern Territory has never had before: an Aboriginal voice to advocate on behalf of our children, families and communities.

In slashing SAF,T's budget, the NT Government has weakened that voice, at the same time weakening an important link between Aboriginal communities and government and greatly reducing the agency's capacity to deliver much-needed and culturally-appropriate family support services.

SNAICC believes the new Government has acted in great haste and not given the peak body a chance to take the lead in developing solutions and tackling the many serious and entrenched issues faced by Aboriginal children and families — the Territory's most disadvantaged citizens.

The setting up of SAF,T was one of the far-reaching reforms following the inquiry into the NT's child protection system carried out by Howard Bath, Muriel Bamblett and Rob Roseby.

In their report, the heads of the inquiry found a child protection system unable to cope: children in the NT, and particularly Aboriginal children, were "significantly disadvantaged and exposed to more harm than their counterparts in other jurisdictions."

"Children in the Northern Territory are more likely to be raised in unsatisfactory environments and to be exposed to various forms of harm such as exposure to family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse and neglect," they wrote.

The authors called for immediate action, including a greater investment in staffing resources for statutory child protection and out-of-home care services.

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

And they called for a new collaborative approach across government, NGOs and Aboriginal communities to deliver integrated support services dealing with both the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect.

Crucially, their recommendations to improve the safety and wellbeing of children were also based on the need for a bipartisan commitment to long-term change.

In other words, the issues facing Aboriginal children and families are so serious and entrenched that they must be elevated beyond the realm of party politics and ideologies.

Unfortunately, it seems the new NT Government is intent on dismantling some of the most important reforms emanating from the Bath inquiry.

As well as making cuts to SAF,T which threaten the viability of the organisation, the Government has devolved the stand-alone Department for Children and Families, set up only 18 months ago, into the Office of Children and Families and formed a new department which includes education.

It has also abolished the External Review and Monitoring Committee set up to oversee the inquiry's recommendations, which were accepted in full by the previous government.

In a separate decision, but with serious consequences for all Aboriginal citizens — including children and families — the Government has abolished the Office of the NT Coordinator General, whose first report found an urgent need to review the way government services are delivered in communities.

The Government has said that new priorities and the need for budget cuts are at the heart of its recent actions. On the second issue, SNAICC is in vehement agreement with the former Coordinator General and NGOs in the child welfare factor: these cuts are a 'false economy' that may relieve budget pressures in the short-term, but will lead to immense human and financial costs down the track.

In SNAICC's view, the NT Government's actions will stall the progress the reforms to child protection have made in the past 12 months and will lead to a loss of confidence in Aboriginal families and organisations, who have a central role to play in implementing the reforms.

The territory's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens — who were instrumental in the CLP gaining office — deserve much better from this government.

To begin with, they are entitled to an explanation, including what alternative policies and plans the Government has in mind to improve the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and to support families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and organisations should have the right to expect that the NT Government will genuinely consult with them in the design and delivery of programs that impact on their lives.

The actions of this Government so far fall far short on the principles of fairness and consultation.

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