



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**25 July 2013**

Statement by Sharron Williams, Chairperson of SNAICC

### **Poverty, not Aboriginal culture, is the real issue**

SNAICC is concerned with some recent negative media coverage about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, including articles quoting the NT Chief Magistrate Hilary Hannam.

According to these media items, application of the child placement principle is forcing child welfare authorities to favour cultural factors above the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Even more disturbing have been the headlines and arguments that accuse — not for the first time — Aboriginal *culture* of placing children at risk.

These claims are misleading, insulting and undermine our people as well as efforts towards reconciliation.

Aboriginal culture does not expose children, or anyone else, to risk. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' connections to culture, country and community nurture and support their wellbeing, spirituality and identity.

The issues that are placing our children and families in vulnerable situations are not related to culture, but to inter-generational disadvantage.

They include inadequate housing, poor health and education opportunities, unemployment and a chronic lack of support services for families.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle is enshrined in legislation and policy in all states and territories.

The principle recognises the importance of keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children placed in out-of-home care connected to their family, community, culture and country.

The Child Placement Principle has been developed, over the past 30 years, from an understanding of the devastating impacts of past practices of forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

It seeks to learn from the lessons of the past by promoting the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in child protection processes (not just

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placements), on the basis that we have the knowledge and experience to make the best decisions concerning our children.

However — and this crucial point is absent in the recent media coverage — the cardinal rule in all child protection legislation in the states and territories is that decisions must be made in the best interests of the child. Maintaining cultural connection is one factor to consider in this assessment. Safety of the child is always paramount.

The other important point overlooked is the fact that across Australia many of our children in out-of-home care — almost one third — are placed with non-Indigenous care givers. In the Northern Territory, over 60 per cent of children were placed with non-Aboriginal care givers in 2011-12.

No doubt serious mistakes have been made in the placement of our children — be it with Indigenous or non-Indigenous care givers.

These mistakes point to child protection systems under severe stress. Child welfare workers lack the resources and at times the cultural competence to deal with the alarmingly high number of our children that come into contact with the system, and there is a lack of Aboriginal carers.

So the real issue isn't the Child Placement Principle — it is the barriers that are preventing it from being implemented properly.

This is an important time for SNAICC to again stress that sustainable solutions in child protection must focus on prevention — on invest more time, resources and services in supporting vulnerable children and families.

This has been reinforced in the multiple state and territory child protection inquiries held in the past decade, including in *Growing them Strong, Together: Promoting the Safety and Wellbeing of the Northern Territory's Children* (2010) and *Taking Responsibility: A Roadmap for Child Protection* (Queensland, June 2013).

The question is: why are the recommendations in these reports not supported and resourced?

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