



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

MEDIA RELEASE

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Statement by Sharron Williams, Chairperson of SNAICC — the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and family services

Cuts to Aboriginal Legal Services will further disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The proposed defunding of the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services would undermine the Abbott Government's stated intention to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Defunding National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) and the Law Reform and Policy Officer positions based in each state and territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service would lead to more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people going to prison and undermine efforts to improve Aboriginal community life and safety.

More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people going to prison would have a detrimental impact on more of our children and families, adding to an already increasing number of children and their families facing poverty, marginalisation and dysfunction.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners has increased sharply over the last 10 years — women by 59 per cent and men by 35 per cent. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over 18 times more likely to be imprisoned than other Australians — meaning that a disproportionate number of our people are prevented from participating in the life of their community, the workforce and their family.

The complex causes behind high incarceration, including poverty and intergenerational trauma, and the high levels of imprisonment for victimless crimes, such as not paying fines, make the role of research, policy development and evidence based advice so vital.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are 31 times more likely to be incarcerated than other Australian youth, making a good education near impossible and further reducing their life opportunities, health and security.

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

www.snaicc.org.au

Preventative work with communities and very early intervention strategies, including community education, is a proven effective long term strategy to support genuine change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities; to cut the already minimal funding to such vital services, in this context, is to go backwards.

Further, the money saved will be nothing compared to the extent of damage to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families — damage that undermines very clear Government policy objectives.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities need more supportive action from Government to make the long-term changes so desperately needed. We need to develop sound, evidence-based policies and long-term, bipartisan strategies to make sustainable improvements. The proposed cuts directly and significantly reduce the capacity for this to happen.

In recent years the leadership of NATSILS had significantly improved the professionalism and effectiveness of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal sector. These gains would be lost if the NATSILS was defunded.

There appears to have been no consultation on the proposed cuts within the Government, the sector or even the Prime Minister's own Indigenous Advisory Council, whose Chairman is on record as opposing any such decision.

SNAICC urges the Government to reconsider this proposed action.

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