



**Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care**

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Less daunting and more culturally responsive child protection systems will lessen the trauma on our vulnerable children and families**

SNAICC has called on state and territory governments to make child protection systems less daunting, more collaborative and more culturally responsive to the needs of vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families as part of a new approach to improve child protection outcomes.

Governments must also invest much more in prevention and intensive family support services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, as well as ensure meaningful Indigenous participation, to reduce the contact of Indigenous families with child protection systems — contact that is reaching crisis levels across Australia.

SNAICC's call for a new way comes on the eve of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day, held on 4 August each year to celebrate the sacred place of our children within family and community and raise awareness of important issues impacting on their lives.

This year's theme is: *Kids in Culture: Strong. Proud. Resilient.*

The theme aims to draw attention to issues around the wellbeing and protection of our children and highlight the crucial role that culture and cultural connection plays in their development and in keeping them safe.

SNAICC Deputy Chairperson Geraldine Atkinson observed that in the past 15 years, every jurisdiction in Australia has conducted a major review of their child protection system — and each inquiry had made a compelling case for urgent reforms and the need for a new approach.

“The broad findings are of expensive, increasingly over-burdened systems that are failing dismally to meet the multiple needs of vulnerable children and families — including Indigenous children and families, who comprise a worrying and disproportionate number,” Ms Atkinson said.

Ms Atkinson said the last decade had seen an explosion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families coming into contact with the child protection system.

**SNAICC: The national peak body for Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander children and family services**  
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“Today, there are almost 14,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, representing over one third of all children in care,” Ms Atkinson said.

“We are seeing a modern version of the Stolen Generations unfolding, in terms of the devastating impact the removals is having on children, their families and communities; and also in the powerlessness many of our families are feeling when dealing with the child protection system.

“When we consider that many of our families and communities are still reeling from the impact of the Stolen Generations, we must do all we can to provide children today with a safe and nurturing home environment, to reduce abuse and neglect and stem the flood of children being removed from their families.”

Ms Atkinson said that consultations held as part of SNAICC’s current national campaign to reduce the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care had revealed a number of major findings.

“So far, we have heard that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families feel powerless in dealing with the system, they are fearful of it, it doesn’t listen to their needs and it doesn’t understand cultural differences, including traditional child rearing practices, which at times is leading to children being wrongly removed from their families,” she said.

Ms Atkinson said there were a number of measures that state and territory governments could take to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and organisations more of a voice on decisions affecting children at risk and reduce their contact with the protection system.

These measures included:

- giving Indigenous people more responsibility for the design and delivery of family support and out-of-home-care services, as is happening in NSW
- redressing the funding imbalance between the huge investment in child protection and out-of-home care — which totalled \$3.2 billion in 2013 — and the gross under investment in prevention and early intervention programs to support families, totalling \$664m in 2013
- improving the cultural competence of all those working in the child protection sector, including child protection officers, family support workers, police and courts
- recruiting more Indigenous workers across all levels of the sector and boosting recruitment and support for Indigenous carers, and
- ensuring greater compliance by authorities with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle, including having cultural care plans for all children in care.

Ms Atkinson said tackling the underlying factors that led to children being removed from their families — factors such as intergenerational poverty, poor and overcrowded housing, low education and employment participation, family violence and drug and

alcohol misuse — remained great challenges that needed greater participation of Indigenous people to see sustained improvements.

She said culture and cultural connections were crucial to improving early education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children — the core importance of culture needs greater recognition from governments in terms of program and service delivery and funding support.

Ensuring access to culturally-appropriate early childhood education would improve Indigenous school attendance rates and pave the way for sustained progress under other Closing the Gap targets.

“Our community-controlled early years services are doing a great job in helping to raise healthy, resilient children proud in their culture and getting children them ready for school,” Ms Atkinson said.

“Our early years services immerse children in daily cultural activities and serve as focal community hubs. They provide community and cultural connections that are vital for a child’s learning, self-esteem, identity and sense of belonging.

“And yet our early childhood services have been under-funded for years and the newest of these services — the 38 Aboriginal Child and Family Centres across Australia — are fighting for their survival barely months after opening their doors.

“Our children and families, as well as workers in those centres — located in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Australia — have been left to wonder what the future holds for them. And the rest of us are left to wonder about the real commitment of governments to Close the Gap on disadvantage.”

Ms Atkinson said SNAICC called on governments at the federal and state-territory level to provide long-term and sustainable funding to all community-controlled early childhood services to give them a frontline role in getting Indigenous children ready for school.

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