



Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

The national peak body for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander children and families
www.snaicc.org.au

MEDIA RELEASE

18 August 2014

Statement by SNAICC Chairperson, Sharron Williams

Time to reconsider Budget cuts if we are going to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage

The Australian Government has a great opportunity to reconsider measures in the May Budget, which if implemented, will place even more pressure on some of the most disadvantaged citizens in Australia — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families — and reduce their access to some crucial services.

SNAICC believes the cuts to Indigenous early childhood education and care, health and legal services seriously compromise the Abbott Government's Closing the Gap efforts to improve education, employment and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens.

The Cabinet meeting in Melbourne tomorrow represents a priceless opportunity to revisit these measures and bring much-needed relief to stressed and vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

SNAICC expressed its disappointment after the Budget confirmed that the Australian Government would not fund the 38 Aboriginal Children and Family Centres beyond June 2014, when the COAG national partnership agreement on early childhood ended.

These new centres — established in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Australia to provide a range of integrated services, including early childhood education and care, family support and specialist health programs — have been locked in urgent negotiations over their future with state and territory governments.

Many of the centres are facing cuts to staff and services and some even face the prospect of closing their doors. SNAICC again asserts that the Australian Government's decision to turn its back on the centres is a serious setback for our children, families and communities — and its efforts to improve Indigenous school attendance.

Cuts to the Aboriginal Child and Family Centres and other early childhood services also fly in the face of Andrew Forrest's recent review, which highlighted the importance of getting childhood development and school education right. "Nothing must stand in the way of any Australian child's fair chance at life," Mr Forrest wrote.

The 38 Aboriginal Child and Family Centres and 270 other Indigenous community-controlled services are improving the access and participation of our children and families to crucial early childhood services — and overcoming the barriers presented by mainstream services — and should be supported by government with adequate, long-term funding.

Other Budget measures under early education and care that will have a detrimental impact on our children and families include:

- A \$3.7m cut to the Budget Based Funded program, which funds the vast majority of Indigenous community-controlled early childhood services. The cuts will affect staff who are working with the most disadvantaged, high-needs children — often in rural or remote areas where finding experienced staff is a constant challenge.
- \$450m cut from Outside School Hours care, which provide vital services and are often the only programs available for children after school and during holidays.
- Axing the Universal Access to Preschool (\$500m per annum), which will disadvantage Indigenous children in the critical year before formal schooling starts.

SNAICC is concerned that the \$549m the Government has identified in savings in Indigenous Affairs over the next four years — the result of rationalising 150 Indigenous programs and replacing them with five streamlined programs — will also lead to a reduction of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens.

Budget measures aimed at the wider community, such as changes to family tax benefits, unemployment benefits for young people, the fuel levy and the \$7 GP co-payment will also inflict considerable pain on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

For example, the fuel levy will make the cost of fuel and other items, such as food, even more exorbitant in remote communities; the reduction in unemployment benefits for young people will be severely felt in our communities, where youth unemployment is extremely high; while the \$7 GP co-payment will result in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people delaying in going to the doctor, which may have serious consequences for their health and impose greater costs on the health system down the track.

While the Abbott Government warned that Indigenous Australians would not be quarantined from cuts, SNAICC is alarmed that the measures will inflict a disproportionate amount of stress on already vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Reversing the tough Budget measures would bring much-needed relief to our children and families. And the Australian Government has much to gain in the long-term — including better education, employment and health outcomes for its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander constituents.

Media inquiries: **SNAICC: Frank Hytten, SNAICC CEO, on (0432) 345 652;**
John Burton, SNAICC Policy Manager,
(0401) 878063; Giuseppe Stramandinoli, SNAICC Media Officer,
(0419) 508 125