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NATIONAL LEADERS CALL FOR URGENT AMENDMENT OF THE *JOBS FOR FAMILIES CHILD CARE PACKAGE* TO ENSURE A FAIR START FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN

Melbourne, Australia: Yesterday *SNAICC – National Voice for our Children* held a landmark forum on the importance of quality early years education and care (ECEC) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. National leaders delivered a powerful message to an audience of over 200 people that urgent amendments are required to prevent the Australian Government’s proposed *Jobs for Families Child Care Package* reducing access to quality early learning for our most vulnerable children and diminishing their hopes of equality.

The package is expected to come before parliament at its sitting at the end of August.

Professor Muriel Bamblett AM, CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency ([VACCA](#)); Professor Fiona Stanley AC, Founding Director of the [Telethon Kids Institute](#); and Geraldine Atkinson, Chair of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association ([VAEAI](#)) and Director of SNAICC, were hosted by [SNAICC](#) CEO, Gerry Moore, and Michael Williams, Director of the [Wheeler Centre](#).

Geraldine Atkinson confirmed: “This research and analysis clearly shows that the *Jobs for Families Child Care Package* will reduce access for our children and threaten viability of early years services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.” This is due to:

- The closure of the Budget Based Funding (BBF) program, which supports 19,000 children, and a shift of all services to the mainstream (user pays) Child Care Subsidy model;
- The halving of hours of subsidised access to early learning where parents do not meet an ‘activity test’; and
- The limited funding within, and short-term nature of, the Community Child Care Fund, which will not resolve the funding crisis Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC services will face under the package.

Professor Fiona Stanley reminded us that: “Significant international and national evidence tells us that investing in intensive, quality early learning that involves parents is the most cost effective strategy for productive and healthy lives – it should be a huge priority for Australia to enhance the capacity of Aboriginal children as they grow into adults. High-quality, Aboriginal-controlled early childhood interventions not only mean more children ready and capable for school, but more being likely to be trained and employed as adults, be good parents themselves and to participate wholly in society.

“The trajectory of the youth in Don Dale may have been very different if they had participated in quality early childhood programs.”

Furthermore, effective early childhood services will reduce the huge budget drain for health, remedial education, child protection, mental health and corrective services, all of which are *too little, too late* to manage these problems.

Professor Muriel Bamblett drew on recent Victorian developments that highlighted how good leadership, Aboriginal decision-making and an understanding of culture as a protective factor are essential for success: “With mainstream services so badly failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Aboriginal services were established to fulfil a unique need. Aboriginal control has been shown to be essential as Aboriginal families trust and use these services and they become hubs of positive Aboriginal cultural experiences; very powerful for preventing kids going off the rails.

“A system that does not recognise that Aboriginal community-controlled services are the most capable and effective organisations to deliver early years services to our most vulnerable children is antiquated, does not respond to the evidence and has no place today.”

Investing in quality early childhood learning is the best way the government can support lifelong equality for our most vulnerable children – very minor amendments in the *Jobs for Families Child Care Package* now can make all the difference to the lives of our children.

Panelists called on state and federal governments to:

- Consistently and meaningfully involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the decisions and policies that affect outcomes for our children and families; and
- To all take responsibility for, and commit to, access to quality early childhood development for all Australian children – particularly our most disadvantaged. Supporting the needs of our children is the responsibility of all levels of government.

Panelists also called on the Australian Government to:

- Establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific program within the Child Care Safety Net to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to continue to provide subsidies to the most disadvantaged children within their communities.
- Commit to increasing places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early years education by 5000 in the first three years of the package to redress the current 15,000 place gap.
- Provide at least two full days (20 hours) of subsidised quality early learning to all children, regardless of their parents’ activities.
- Guarantee that playgroups, mobiles and other unique services supported within the BBF program continue to be funded through another program.

“Our communities and families have the knowledge and skills to care for our children. It is time to respect and trust this knowledge, and work with our people and services to provide quality of life for our children,” concluded Geraldine Atkinson.