



SNAICC
National Voice for our Children
(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation)
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SNAICC CALLS ON THE NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT TO TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN IN CARE

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children urges the Northern Territory Government to take swift action to address the systematic failures that have led to the continued abuse of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

The recent investigative report released by the Office of the Children's Commissioner Northern Territory reveals 12 Aboriginal children placed with carers over the period of 2004 to 2018 were subject to abuse. Of these, eight children were under investigation, and four of these suffered emotional harm at the hands of their carers. An additional four children were subject to harm while in care, which did not proceed to investigation due to failings within the child protection system.

SNAICC CEO Richard Weston said,

“The Commissioner’s report highlights the question – who is accountable to ensure our children are not vulnerable to abuse, and are kept safe?”

“For a government agency to place a child in an environment that is unsafe for their emotional and physical wellbeing is unacceptable, and until these failings are addressed it will continue to happen to our children.”

SNAICC is gravely concerned that despite the number of issues raised around the carers under investigation, they continue to be authorised Territory Families foster carers, posing a threat to the safety and wellbeing of the children placed in their care.

The investigation exposed failings by the Departments and agencies, which included poor record-keeping; failure to report to the Police and investigate allegations of sexual harm, and the failure of Police to report an alleged sexual assault; failure to assess standards of care, even when raised as a concern; as well as the failure to investigate physical and emotional harm, and insufficient monitoring of children in care.

All of the children in the report are Aboriginal and have family and cultural connections in remote Aboriginal communities, predominately in Central Australia.

The reports of carers subjecting children to discriminate racial and physical abuse from hitting and padlocking children in their bedrooms, and preventing visits with families, is deeply distressing.

Mr Weston continued,

“SNAICC has long called on governments to adhere to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle that places priority on keeping a child connected to their kin and culture.

“Too often, our children are treated as a number, with limited training by case workers and insufficient efforts to ensure they are placed in the best possible care.”

In the Northern Territory, only 36.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care were placed with family, kin or other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers as at 30 June 2019. This is well below the national average of 63.6%.

The result of a placement away from kin or family can be permanent disconnection from community and culture.

SNAICC commends Territory Families for their more recent partnership with Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation in implementing an Aboriginal-led kin care program that provides a comprehensive approach to identify, recruit and support Aboriginal family and kin carers across five years. Programs such as *Child Safe, Family Together* have shown an increase of children being placed with kinship carers of 18% from 2018 to 2019.

By continuing to support these kinds of programs, our children have a greater chance of growing up strong in their community and culture.

SNAICC urges the Northern Territory Government to take swift action to implement the full recommendations outlined by the Northern Territory Children’s Commissioner to address the systematic failings within and across agencies in child protection.

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory was established in 2016 and exposed systemic failings of the child protection and youth justice systems. The \$54 million inquiry delivered a report with 227 recommendations to pave the way for a new system that delivers better outcomes for children in the Northern Territory. Many of the findings and recommendations in the report mirrored those of other inquiries such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report released in 1992.

Mr Weston commented,

“It is concerning that despite the numerous recommendations of inquiries and reports over multiple decades in Australia, the system continues to fail to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from harm.”

SNAICC and the Family Matters campaign has long called for an independent national commissioner of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to uphold the rights of our children.

“With more than 30 years since Australia ratified the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the recent Black Lives Matter movement, the Australian Government must act now to implement a national strategy and national commissioner to ensure our children’s rights are protected.”

– SNAICC CEO and Family Matters Co-Chair, Richard Weston

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