



13 December 2021

9TH SNAICC NATIONAL CONFERENCE COMMUNIQUÉ

Our children matter: Innovative approaches to new world challenges

It has been 40 years since SNAICC's journey first began. At that point in time, no one could imagine that in 2021 we would host more than 900 delegates from around the country in a virtual conference. This year's theme was, *Our children matter: Innovative approaches to new world challenges*, and our conference was an example of this.

Our ninth conference was different in many different ways. We dearly missed the opportunity to connect in-person with our friends, our communities, and our colleagues. While COVID-19 kept us physically apart, we joined from rooms all over the country.

While our sector was learning to work with the challenges of the pandemic, government was learning to work with us in new ways. At our last conference in Adelaide in 2019, we called for dedicated national strategies and a target to address the over-representation of our children in out-of-home care. Since then, a strong target has been taken up through the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

At this conference we launched a new *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy* developed in partnership with us. We also heard about the new *Safe and Supported: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*, that has promised to transform the systems that impact our children in line with self-determination. Both of these landmark strategies were developed under the framework of the new *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* and its four priority reforms. By embedding First Nations perspectives and aspirations, these priority reforms will forever change the way policies, programs and outcomes are developed, delivered and measured.

Sadly, we also heard that despite the high-level policy commitments, change is slow to hit the ground. Conference delegates told us that our children cannot wait any longer for these commitments to be put into action. We have had enough of talking and not being heard. Our children and families require a radically different approach that acknowledges our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and political status.

Some of the best news is that where change is happening, it is being led by our communities and by our incredible culturally strong community-controlled child and family services. We heard the call for policy commitments to become a reality that sees our community-controlled services grow – a reality that is felt, seen and heard by our children and families who must have more of a say in the systems that impact their lives.

We heard incredible stories of innovation that our communities are leading in family support, child protection and early years services. To name just a few examples:

- we heard about the expansion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific child protection courts that get better outcomes through culturally safe and family-inclusive court processes
- we heard about new ways of commissioning in New South Wales where our communities decide where the dollars need to go and how they are spent to improve the futures of our children
- we heard about new targeted funding for community-controlled organisations to deliver kinship care and family support services designed by Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory
- we heard about the journey being taken in Queensland and Victoria to create greater accountability through delegated authority to our community-controlled organisations, and

- we heard about SNAICC's *Thryve NSW*, the first emerging state peak for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years services that is bringing together the collective voice of New South Wales services and providing critical workforce, policy and program support to build the community-controlled early education and care sector.

Our collective voice was as strong as ever in these virtual rooms. The more of us in these rooms, the stronger we are.

Together, the SNAICC National Conference calls for urgent and transformative change to the systems that impact our children. We call on all governments to work with us to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have every opportunity to grow up safe and cared for in their family, community, and culture, and on Country. We call on governments and non-government organisations to:

1. Transfer authority in child protection to our families and communities through delegated statutory authority and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family-led decision-making

Our conference delegates told us that we are seeing better outcomes when our families have the opportunity to lead decision-making for the care and protection of children through our own independent processes. Where authority is delegated to our organisations for child protection decisions, the power that child protection has held over our communities is interrupted. When we have control, we are achieving better outcomes that reunify our children and keep them safely connected to family, community and culture.

2. Invest to build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce that we need for our culturally strong community-controlled services

Our delegates told us that one of the most significant barriers they face to building their services is developing, training and retaining a skilled local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. Efforts are required to scope the workforce needs of our services now, and for the future. Governments must invest in training and tertiary education initiatives that acknowledge cultural strengths and skillsets, and that provide support and scaffolding for up-skilling our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family workforce.

3. Set ambitious targets to invest in and build our community-controlled child protection and family support services, including transfer of resources from mainstream organisations

The Closing the Gap agreement requires funding prioritisation policies that give our community-controlled organisations the front-running for providing services to our families. QATSICPP CEO Garth Morgan told us that to achieve this we need to be talking about commissioning reform. We heard from our delegates that the barriers to accessing funding remain enormous. Non-Indigenous organisations continue to leverage historical wealth and power to access funds while lacking the capacity to engage our families in culturally safe ways. Some governments and non-government organisations have set targets to hand over the resources our communities need.

4. Scrap the child care activity test and develop a dedicated funding model to support and grow our community-controlled integrated early years services

We heard from our delegates that the majority of funding for early education in Australia goes to support families with two working parents. Access to early education is heavily restricted for our most vulnerable families who stand to benefit most. For decades our culturally strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services have led the way, providing holistic and integrated supports to children and their families in the early years.

Our international conference guest, Arapera Card from New Zealand, spoke about how early education systems in New Zealand are being shaped with excellence and equitable outcomes for Māori learners at their heart. In Australia, the system keeps putting barriers in the way. Government must scrap the child care activity test that limits child care access for our families that aren't working or studying. And we need a long-term program and funding model to invest in integrated community-controlled early education, child development and family support services.

5. Establish a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's commissioner, and equivalent roles in each state and territory

We have been inspired by the leadership of our Aboriginal commissioners for children and families who spoke to us during the conference, including Commissioner April Lawrie in South Australia who recently received strong legislated powers for her role, and Commissioner Natalie Lewis who is leading work to create accountability for protecting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Queensland. The systems failing our children desperately need increased accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A national commissioner for our children can help to drive accountability and reform. The role must be independent, properly resourced, and have strong powers to investigate the systems that are failing our children.

6. Provide opportunities to build our own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evidence base for best practice and control our own data

SNAICC Chair Muriel Bamblett, and many other delegates spoke to us about the importance of building our own evidence base for the culturally strong approaches led by our communities and organisations. Too often, international and Western models that do not work for our children and families are imposed on us, despite thousands of years of evidence of our successful nurturing care systems for children. We need to challenge the status quo and challenge the literature. Governments must invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research and evaluation so that our evidence, becomes **the** evidence.

There are many other critical reforms that our delegates have called for. Tweaking the systems that have failed our children for decades will not work. It is time to listen to us and make the fundamental changes that embed self-determination. It is time to make the changes that provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with the opportunity to take the lead in keeping our children safe and connected to their families, communities and cultures.

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See more information, including Conference presentations, visit: www.snaicc.org.au/conference

About SNAICC – National Voice for our Children:

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children is the national non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. SNAICC works for the fulfilment of the rights of our children to ensure their safety, development and wellbeing.

Founded in 1981, SNAICC was called Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care until it was changed to SNAICC – National Voice for our Children.

Over the past 40 years SNAICC has achieved key milestones in policy development at state, territory and federal levels and developed innovative and useful resources for the sector.

SNAICC is governed by an influential Board of Directors made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled children and family services.

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