



NACCHO

National Aboriginal Community
Controlled Health Organisation
Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands

www.naccho.org.au

A Path Forward:
Developing the Western
Australian Government's
Aboriginal Empowerment
Strategy

SUBMISSION

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About NACCHO

NACCHO is the national peak body representing 143 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) Australia wide on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing issues. NACCHO's work is focussed on liaising with governments, its membership, and other organisations on health and wellbeing policy and planning issues and advocacy relating to health service delivery, health information, research, public health, health financing and health programs. Our members provide about three million episodes of care per year for about 350,000 people across Australia, which includes about one million episodes of care in very remote regions.

Sector Support Organisations, also known as affiliates, are State based and also represent ACCHOs offering a wide range of support services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs to their members including advocacy, governance and the delivery of State, Territory and national primary health care policies.

ACCHOs range from large multi-functional services employing several medical practitioners and providing a wide range of services, to small services which rely on Aboriginal Health Workers/Practitioners and/or nurses to provide the bulk of primary care services, often with a preventive, health education focus. ACCHOs contribute to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through the provision of comprehensive holistic primary health care, and by integrating and coordinating care and services. Many provide home and site visits; provision of medical, public health and health promotion services; allied health; nursing services; assistance with making appointments and transport; help accessing childcare or dealing with the justice system; drug and alcohol services; and providing help with income support.

Collectively, we employ about 6,000 staff, 56 per cent who are Indigenous, which makes us the single largest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country.

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Introduction

We welcome a whole-of-government Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy (the Strategy) for ensuring greater transparency and accountability in the delivery of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Western Australia.

While we agree that the Strategy's focus must span future generations and achieve sustained changes, we stress that all that can be done to swiftly close gaps in inequalities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians must not be delayed. Generally speaking, the proposed strategy is good, but needs to be implemented / actioned via on-the-ground service delivery.

It is essential that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across WA are central in the co-production of the strategy—from co-design to co-implementation to co-evaluation. This can most effectively be achieved through ACCHOs and other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) which are governed by boards comprising local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

With valued input from the Aboriginal and Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA), this response focuses on the three questions that are presented in the discussion paper:

1. Are the main ideas right?
2. Are we using the right words?
3. What else should we be thinking about?

1. Are the main ideas right?

Principles

Empowerment and self-determination

We agree that government systems, structures, policies and programs must contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's empowerment and self-determination (p10), but also that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should work genuinely and closely with federal, state and local governments to develop and implement the policies and programs that affect them..

For it to be owned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to avoid tokenism, the very definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination itself must be decided by and agreed to by Aboriginal communities.

The components of the *Empowerment: Foundations and Futures* tree figure on page 9 could be clearer, which would make it more meaningful and useful. The figure would be strengthened by identifying what the branches represent and what the roots represent—that is, differentiating the branch concepts from the root concepts. Do the roots represent the 'foundations' and the branches the 'outcomes'? By using labels to better distinguish the roots from the branches, the empowerment/wellbeing aspects would be more comprehensively captured. The concepts represented by the tree may be better illustrated using an Aboriginal design to show their circular and interactive nature.

The finalisation in the coming months of the new Closing the Gap National Agreement, including its targets, measures and indicators, may assist in fully capturing all concepts pertaining to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing.

Evidence

We agree that innovation and flexibility are critical to success, and we stress that evidence-informed policy does not necessitate replicating what has been previously proven to work. Innovation and flexibility in service delivery when drawing upon what has been proven to work is

critical, which differentiates ‘evidence-informed’ from ‘evidence-based’. That is, we support flexible, innovative, evidence informed approaches to service delivery. For the most part ACCHOs take such approaches, in response to local needs and issues, and the availability of resources.

We support collaborations and partnerships between service providers in which smaller providers can expand their competence and governance in delivering a greater range of services with the support of a larger organisation. For ACCHOs, such partnerships are best delivered by larger ACCHOs or ACCOs that also value and have experience in ‘putting Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands.’ Smaller ACCHOs or ACCOs should be upskilled as quickly as possible so they can oversee, determine and administrate their own service delivery as soon as possible.

Racism

We support the acknowledgement in the discussion paper regarding the ongoing reality and impact of racial bias and discrimination, including within government and broader society, and the need to address it and reduce its impact. The fact the WA government is acknowledging the ongoing presence and impact of racism in government and broader societal structures is encouraging. However, more specific strategies for addressing racism in government policies and services and reducing the impact of racism on individuals and their communities is required.

Place-based

Greater emphasis should be given to considering local factors in place-based approaches to service delivery. On page 10 the dot point that place-based should be ‘flexible, taking into account the interconnected nature of social, economic and health issues’ should include the word ‘local’—that is: ‘flexible, taking into account the interconnected nature of local social, economic and health issues.’

Strategic elements

1. Putting culture at the centre

We agree it is imperative to put and keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (plural) at the centre of service delivery—across the Strategy and the service delivery system. As stated below under the second part of this position (*2. Are we using the right words?*), concepts pertaining to Aboriginal cultures need to encompass their diversity across all of Australia and pertain to the holistic identity and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—both collectively and individually.

2. Bringing decisions closer to communities through empowered engagement

The discussion paper elects to use the words ‘empowered agreement making’ instead of ‘shared decision making’. ‘Shared decision making’ should be used as it better incorporates the essential principles of collaboration, co-design and co-production.

Best outcomes will be achieved for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities—from the designing to the implementation to the evaluation of the Strategy and its outcomes—via co-production with ACCHOs and other ACCOs. Co-production commences at genuine needs identification, planning, consultation and co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and continues into to co-implementation and co-evaluation.

3. Enabling Aboriginal-led solutions through improved service commissioning and grant-making

We agree that services for / utilised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people should be designed, funded and procured to significantly increase the involvement of ACCHOs and other ACCOs, and their capacity to deliver services to their communities be better supported. This is often best done by larger ACCHOs (and other ACCOs) working in partnership with smaller ACCHOs (and other ACCOs) to build their capacity to deliver a wider range of services into more communities. Federal and state funding of mainstream service providers to provide services in Aboriginal communities should be reallocated to ACCHOs and ACCOs.

We support the sentiments presented in the discussion paper that:

The greater effectiveness of ACCOs is clearest for services that depend on voluntary engagement – such as maternal health check-ups, play groups, etc – and services that support clients to make personal changes in their lives – such as healthy lifestyles, youth mentoring, family and domestic violence behaviour change, etc. These services are most effective when clients see the service provider as trusted, legitimate, and culturally safe, and believe the service provider understands them and where they are coming from. ACCOs have unique strengths in these areas.

The concept of relationships with community and innovative approaches to information sharing and service delivery would add greater weight to this description. For instance, ACCHOS regularly hold family and community activities — including barbecues and school and sporting activities, that bring community together and enable information about health and wellbeing issues to be effectively shared. Such engagement has been found to increase community participation in health checks and programs. This is fostered by ACCHOs and other ACCOs being governed by boards comprising local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who represent the needs of their local community.

4. Investing more in preventative and early-intervention initiatives

Adequate, affordable, safe and secure housing is a key protective factor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. A greater investment needs to be made into the construction of new housing and the repairs and maintenance of existing housing available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. By reducing overcrowding and making housing adequate, affordable, safe and secure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including against the impacts of climate change and other environmental health issues, diseases, psychological distress and other health conditions can be better prevented and remedied, and all members in households better supported.

As part of fostering a positive, strengths-based discourse throughout the Strategy (as opposed to a deficit discourse), it should be emphasised that the Strategy and all ensuing outcomes should be about building stronger families and keeping children with their biological families. We acknowledge that some smaller ACCHOs and other ACCOs may need to build their capacity to better deliver preventive and early-intervention services. This is best done via a transition period in which larger ACCHOs and other ACCOs partner with them to increase this capacity—with specified timeframes attached.

5. Boosting economic opportunities across all areas of Government activity

Extending greater education and training opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a key way to boost their economic opportunities and should be more strongly emphasised in the Strategy. We also suggest greater emphasis be given to the critical importance of a focus on remote areas facing considerable economic challenges as well as environmental health and food security issues. The impressive strengths of rural and remote communities and their potential for economic growth, including in cultural heritage and environmental enterprises, should also be highlighted.

Some mention could be given to mitigating the harmful impacts of climate change when progressing new and existing economic opportunities.

We suggest a slight wording change to this strategic element to emphasise that economic opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be broader than government activity (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned and controlled cultural and tourism ventures). Accordingly, the word ‘including’ could be added to this strategic element, changing it to: ‘Boosting economic opportunities including across all areas of Government activity.’

6. Building cultural understanding and respect

It is critical that all public sector employees not only actively engage in cultural awareness training at the commencement of their employment but also attend refresher courses on an ongoing basis.

Framework

To optimise outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we argue that not only must the state government as a whole (i.e. all departments and agencies) work together, but also ACCHOs and other ACCOs across WA—from co-designing the Strategy to its co-evaluation. This is imperative for keeping the government accountable to actual outcomes achieved, as determined (evaluated) by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in WA. The discussion paper does not detail how such collaboration with community identified leaders would take place, nor which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities would be involved.

It is good the WA government has established a range of targets, including a 23% reduction in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults in prison, but we would suggest targets align with the new 2020-2030 Closing the Gap targets currently being finalised. This includes consistently setting the targets to 2030. The refreshed 2020-2030 Closing the Gap targets could also inform/shape the WA government's targets in relation to: job creation; building stronger regional economies; improving the health and wellbeing of children in the early years, student reading and numeracy and participation in STEM; increasing conservation for future generations; and reducing youth reoffending and illicit drug use (page 26).

In evaluating the impact of the Strategy—i.e. how effectively it is changing outcomes on the ground for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, it is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a central voice. On page 27 the discussion paper states it is 'proposing to establish a statutory office of accountability and advocacy in Aboriginal affairs', and we argue that this statutory body must not only comprise governmental staff who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, but also comprise strong representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across WA. ACCHOs and other ACCOs should be involved in co-developing this statutory office and determining who is on it.

Similarly, where the discussion paper refers to the WA government reporting annually on indicators identified in partnership with Aboriginal people on page 27, our position is that ACCHOs and other ACCOs must assist in selecting these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We assume that their involvement would not be limited to simply identifying the indicators, but also comprise ongoing evaluation of progress against these indicators.

2. Are we using the right words?

Including Torres Strait Islander people in WA

It is NACCHO's position that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' be used instead of 'Aboriginal people'. Although Torres Strait Islander communities are located in Queensland there are many Torres Strait Islander people living in WA, and they and their cultures should be recognised.

Drawing upon the Closing the Gap refresh

It would be effective if the language and concepts presented in the Strategy align with the new 2020-30 Closing the Gap targets, measures and indicators.

Avoiding deficit language

Generally speaking, the Strategy is written from a positive, strengths-based approach. In a few places, however, the language reverts to a deficit orientation. While the reality of issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must not be shied away from (because issues must first

be identified before they can be addressed and remedied), there are many times that a deficit discourse can and should be avoided by switching the narrative. For instance, on page 10, the sentence ‘the government’s primary role is to support Aboriginal people, families and communities to solve their own problems’ could be reworded to ‘the government’s primary role is to support Aboriginal people, families and communities to optimise their wellbeing.’

Families

We like the simple and direct language of ‘safe families, clever families, working families and healthy families’, and support the use of such language throughout the strategy.

Culture

The principle ‘culture’ is central to Aboriginal people’s wellbeing’ under ‘Culture and country’ could capture concepts of ‘holistic’ wellbeing – e.g. ‘culture is central to Aboriginal people’s holistic wellbeing.’ It is good it has been identified that ‘Aboriginal cultures across the State have important differences, as well as similarities.’ Another useful way of saying this, here (under Principles) or elsewhere in the document, is ‘each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons’ culture should be identified and respected in the delivery of services.’

3. What else should we be thinking about?

It is essential that the Federal and WA Governments provide adequate funding to ensure the concepts and initiatives contained in this Strategy are actioned on the ground. While a Strategy is important, it is meaningless without funding to implement actions and drive change.

Specifically, ACCHOs and other ACCOs need to be directly funded to ensure they can continue and extend their innovative service delivery—that embodies many of the concepts and initiatives described in this Strategy, into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Larger ACCHOs and other ACCOs can work in partnership with smaller ACCHOs and other ACCOs to build their service delivery capacity and receive greater funding that is currently allocated to mainstream, non-Aboriginal service providers.