

Submission to Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan Engagement

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Aboriginal Medical Services
Alliance Northern Territory

Policy & Research

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About AMSANT

The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT (AMSANT) is the peak body for Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) in the Northern Territory (NT). AMSANT has been established for 30 years and has a major policy and advocacy role, both within the NT and at national levels.

Our 26 members are located across the NT from Darwin to the most remote areas. The ACCHSs sector is the largest provider of primary health care to Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. ACCHSs deliver comprehensive primary health care in an integrated, holistic, culturally secure framework which combines a population health approach with primary health care service delivery; in addition, ACCHSs are also involved in diverse health research activities.

AMSANT aims to grow a strong Aboriginal community controlled comprehensive primary health care (CPHC) sector by supporting our members to deliver culturally safe, high quality CPHC that supports action on the social determinants of health; and representing our members' views and aspirations through advocacy, policy, planning and research.

AMSANT provides guidance and advocacy on a wide range of research, public health issues, education, workforce, continual quality improvement programs, social and emotional wellbeing, housing and other determinants of health that affect NT Aboriginal people. AMSANT has high level collaborations with the NT and Commonwealth Governments on these issues.

Introduction

AMSANT recognises the contributions of its member services, specialist family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) who deliver, the broader Aboriginal community controlled sector, the community service sector, national partners, and individuals to the ongoing work on establishing a stand-alone National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan (Family Safety Plan). AMSANT acknowledges the Steering Committee's role in overseeing the Family Safety Plan's development. AMSANT acknowledges the work of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council on FDSV and its role in establishing *the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023-25* (Action Plan) under the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* (National Plan).¹

¹ Australian Government, Department of Social Services, 2023, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023-2025, viewed November 2024, accessible at <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-action-plan-2023-2025>

The Action Plan addresses current community needs and lays the foundation for long-term change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, guided by the Advisory Council’s vision that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, wherever they live, are culturally safe, strong, and free from violence.

The Action Plan and Family Safety Plan are key to addressing Target 13 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – reducing family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children by at least 50% by 2031, progressing toward zero.²

The National Plan aims to end gender-based violence in one generation, a goal outlined in the First Action Plan before the release of the Action Plan and the start of consultations for the Family Safety Plan.³

AMSANT’s recommendations highlight that the process has not adequately centred the experiences and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who face the highest and most severe levels of domestic, family, and sexual violence and homicide, particularly in the Northern Territory.⁴

Delays in starting the reform agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people alongside the National Plan, despite the Action Plan’s release, have impacted consultation, data collection, and evaluation efforts.

AMSANT acknowledges input from individuals and communities in the Northern Territory and nationally, including submissions to inquiries on FDSV and Missing and Murdered First Nations Women, participation in the National Women’s Safety Summit, and other forums and consultations related to the National Plan, Action Plan, and Family Safety Plan.

In reflection of the need for cultural and lived experience to guide reform, AMSANT provides high-level recommendations for consideration, with further expertise and input to be gathered by SNAICC through additional consultations.⁵

² National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes, viewed November 2024, accessible at <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

³ Australian Government, Department of Social Services, 2022, National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032, accessible at <https://www.dss.gov.au/ending-violence>

⁴ Northern Territory Government, Department of Families and Children, 2024, Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction, viewed November 2024, accessible at <https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/domestic-family-and-sexual-violence-reduction/domestic-and-family-violence-reduction-strategy>

⁵ As set out by SNAICC on the Our Ways- Strong Ways – Our Voices consultation summary , accessible at <https://www.snaicc.org.au/our-work/our-ways-strong-ways-our-voices/>

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1 - Funding and resourcing needs for FDSV responses

AMSANT recommends that the strategic environment, as set out in the *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan Engagement - Public Submissions Discussion Paper* (Discussion Paper) be expanded to include acknowledgement and assessment of resourcing and funding needs.

The Aboriginal community controlled sector, particularly ACCO specialist FDSV services and broader specialist FDSV service providers in the NT, has faced underfunding and resourcing issues. This issue is not limited to one jurisdiction and continues to impact providers' and governments' ability to meet the aims of the national reform agenda for FDSV and future reforms, including the Family Safety Plan.

Calls for equitable and sustainable funding models that address community needs in the NT have been consistently advocated across housing, education, health, and FDSV service provision.

Funding models are inconsistent and often default to a per capita approach with a remote allowance. When this approach is not applied, there is no clear methodology for determining funding allocations.

The coronial inquiry into the family violence-related deaths of Kumanjayi Haywood, Ngeygo Ragurk, Miss Yunupinju, and Kumarn Rubuntja revealed chronic underfunding of FDSV services in the NT, far exceeding initial estimates. This highlights generations of neglect and underfunding in the Territory.⁶

The strategic policy and legislative environment outlined in the Discussion Paper does not address how chronic underfunding affects governments' and providers' ability to meet targets within these policies. It is recommended that the strategic environment include acknowledgment and assessment of resourcing and funding needs.

Recommendation 2 - Embed cultural and lived experience within the reform agenda

The Family Safety Plan must consider in its approach the varied needs, cultural and lived experiences of different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country and take a nuanced approach to its recommendations that allows for better representation of these lived experiences, values and needs on an ongoing basis.

Self-determination is recognised as central to preventing and responding to domestic, family, and sexual violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, the implementation of self-determination models at national and jurisdictional levels remains inconsistent. This is further affected by shifting government agendas linked to election cycles.

⁶ ABC News, November 2023, NT Coroner Elisabeth Armitage wraps up domestic violence inquiry after six-months', viewed November 2024, accessible at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-10/nt-coroner-domestic-violence-inquest-closes/103089156>

Embedding models and systems that support self-determination, community-led decision-making, and the outcomes sought under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap within long-term reforms is critical. While AMSANT acknowledges the efforts of the Australian Government and Department of Social Services to establish advisory councils and steering committees, the design and appointment processes, particularly through ministerial appointments, limit access for geographically dispersed communities with diverse cultural and lived experiences. Moreover, it cannot provide for full, transparent and genuine partnership approaches that embed shared decision-making, a commitment under the National Agreement

Recommendation 3 – Service access and impacts on reform

Geographical remoteness, service access issues and infrastructure needs must be considered within the context of developing the Family Safety Plan, in acknowledgement that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in remote and very remote locations, experience multiple barriers to service access that impact outcomes.

Seventy-five percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT live in remote and very remote areas,⁷ which are some of the most disadvantaged in the country according to the Social-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA).⁸ Providing effective service responses for FDSV in these areas is a complex challenge, with undersupply of responses a constant risk.

Service delivery and access are further affected by workforce development and recruitment issues. Investment in systems to develop local workforces, address service gaps, and ensure programs enact the priority reforms of Closing the Gap and Aboriginal self-determination is a focus for many Aboriginal community controlled services and communities in the NT.

Inadequate infrastructure, including schools, clinics, safe houses, and cultural spaces, remains a widespread issue in the NT, exacerbated by structural inequity and poverty.

The National Aboriginal and Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) has noted that high poverty rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people result from structural barriers to full participation in the economy.⁹ Poverty is reinforced by structural and interpersonal racism, discrimination, dispossession of culture, land, and language, and intergenerational trauma.¹⁰

⁷ Northern Territory Government, Department of Treasury and Finance, 2024, Northern Territory Economy, viewed November 2024, accessible at <https://nteconomy.nt.gov.au/population#characteristics>

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, Social-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, viewed November 2024, accessible at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/socio-economic-indexes-areas-seifa-australia/latest-release>

⁹ Department of Social Services, 2023, NACCHO Submission to the Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia, viewed November 2024, accessible at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia/Interim_Report/Chapter_2_-_The_extent_of_poverty_in_Australia#_ftn5

¹⁰ Ibid.

The Family Safety Plan should assess these factors affecting access inequity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in remote areas. This assessment should be part of the broader FDSV reform agenda at the national level and must include equitable funding and resourcing considerations.

Recommendation 4 – Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles must be embedded

Collection and sharing processes for data regarding FDSV and the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must include Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles and access for relevant Aboriginal community controlled services.

In May 2024, the Australian Government published the *Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data – Practical guidance for the Australian Public Service*,¹¹ to guide improved practices in the Australian Public Service, including legislative reform related to Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS). This is aligned with existing Government commitments under Priority Reform Four of the National Agreement.

Given the role of the Commonwealth Department of Social Services, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, and Federal Ministers in leading the FDSV reform agenda, the Family Safety Plan should include the use of this Framework to guide government actions as a minimum. The Framework should also remain a ‘live’ document that evolves over time to keep pace with IDS aspirations at the community level, as well as those related to reform of Government-held data.

Resourcing should be provided for Aboriginal community controlled research bodies, organisations, and communities to ensure IDS Principles are embedded in reforms and practices, including the proposed Indigenous data bureau, a recommendation from the Productivity Commission review released in January 2024.¹² Additional resources are needed to support appropriate data sharing, enable services to capture and contribute data, and ensure effective use of collected data.

Conclusion

Achieving meaningful reform in this space requires a long-term, sustainable approach centred on self-determination, equitable resourcing, and culturally informed practices. This should include addressing chronic underfunding, ensuring infrastructure and workforce development align with the needs of remote communities and contexts, embedding Indigenous Data

¹¹ Australian Government, 2024, Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data – Practice guidance for the Australian Public Service, viewed November 2024, accessible at

<https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2024-05/framework-governance-indigenous-data.pdf>

¹² Australian Government, Productivity Commission, 2024, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – Study report – Volume 1, accessible at <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report/closing-the-gap-review-report.pdf>

Sovereignty Principles, and incorporating the voices and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all aspects of policy and program design.

A commitment to these principles is essential for achieving the targets under Closing the Gap and fostering a future where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live free from violence, with access to the resources and systems necessary to thrive.

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