

## JOINT STATEMENT

# Urgent Mental Health Support Needed for First Nations Children in State Care

In response to the tragic death of a 10-year-old Indigenous boy by suicide while in state care last week, leading Indigenous mental health organisations are today calling on Federal and State Governments to urgently invest in social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and mental health supports for Indigenous children in state care.

“The death of any child by suicide is a tragedy. The death of a child by suicide while in state care, is a national disgrace and an inditement on Australia’s child protection system,” says Tania Brown, Interim Chief Executive Officer of Thirrili.

“Our hearts go out to the child’s family and community. As Indigenous people, our hearts are broken and continue to break every time we lose one of our young ones to suicide, especially when they are in the care of a system that’s supposed to protect them,” says Professor Helen Milroy AM, Chair of Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia.

Suicide is the leading cause of death for Indigenous children and young people. Indigenous people in Australia have the highest suicide rate out of any population globally.

Evidence shows that children removed from families are at a higher risk of suicide, and have an increased likelihood of contact with the criminal legal system.

In the 16 years since Rudd’s Apology, removals of Indigenous children have tripled. First Nations children now represent more than 40% of the total population of all children who have been removed from their parents – a staggering 23,000 children – but represent only 6% of the total population of children in Australia.

“We don’t need another inquiry or Royal Commission; what we need is action. We need to break the cycle of injustice, and that starts with providing Indigenous children with the wellbeing support they need to live well in their communities,” says Donna Murray, Chief Executive Officer, Indigenous Allied Health Australia.

While Government spending on child protection has increased over the last five years, the proportion of expenditure spent on family support and wellbeing has decreased and the proportion of spending given to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) to deliver this support continues to sit between 0.6%-21%, depending on the state or territory.

“To prevent similar tragedies in the future, we need to be investing more into support services to help children and their families stay well and connected within their communities. These services should be led and operated by First Nations communities, not external contractors,” says Dr Clinton Shultz, Director of First Nations Partnership and Strategy at the Black Dog Institute.

As leading Indigenous SEWB, mental health, and workforce organisations, we call on Federal and State Governments to implement the recommendations from the more than 40 Government reports into Indigenous child protection since the ‘Bringing Them Home’ report in 1997, including:

1. Increased investment and access to culturally-responsive, community-led support services;
2. Increased cultural responsiveness training for child protection and mental health workers;
3. Increased investment to build a more sustainable Indigenous SEWB and mental health workforce.



THIRRILI

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**Available for interview:** Dr Clinton Shultz, Gamilaroi/Gomeri man and Director of First Nations Partnership and Strategy at Black Dog Institute.

## About the partner organisations

**Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA)** is the representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychologists in Australia. We aim to improve the social and emotional well-being and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by leading change required to deliver equitable, accessible, responsive and culturally sensitive psychological care which respects and promotes their cultural integrity. We advocate for increasing the number of Indigenous psychologists in Australia, to reach population parity and provide leadership on issues related to the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

**Black Dog Institute** is a global leader in mental health research and the only Medical Research Institute (MRI) in Australia to investigate mental health across the lifespan. Areas of strength include suicide prevention, digital mental health, workplace mental health, new treatments, and prevention in young people. We join the dots, connecting research answers, expert knowledge and the voices of lived experience to deliver solutions that work across the healthcare system for patients and practitioners alike.

**Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia** is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention. As a community controlled organisation, it is governed and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and peak bodies, working in these areas to promote collective excellence in mental health care.

**Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA)** is a national, member-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander allied health organisation. IAHA leads sector workforce development and support to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. IAHA also supports the broader allied health workforce and its associate membership of individuals and organisations with expertise, interest and commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our membership is diverse and works across sectors including but not limited to health, mental health, disability, aged care, education, justice, community services, academia and policy.

**Thirrili** is a not-for-profit organisation which aims to contribute to the broader social wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: reducing the high rates of suicide through the delivery of a critical response service to support individuals and families affected by a suicide or other traumatic incidents; providing social support, practical assistance and advocacy support to affected individuals and families; building the capacity of local communities and service providers to care for and respond to social disadvantage, including suicides and traumatic incidents in their community strengthening individual, family and community resilience and social wellbeing, and contribute to addressing the social disadvantage needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities

## Supplementary data

**Table 1:** State and territory government investment in family support and intensive family support services (IFSS) as a percentage of total child protection government expenditure.

Jurisdiction	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	Expenditure change between 2017-18 to 2021-22 (% and \$ '000)
NEW SOUTH WALES	13.7%	13.2%	12.9%	12.4%	12.1%	▲ 7.7% (\$24,110)
VICTORIA	27.1%	25.2%	25.9%	27.3%	28.1%	▲ 41.0 (\$154,730)
QUEENSLAND	16.4%	16.3%	15.9%	14.2%	12.3%	▲ 12.5% (\$23,583)
WESTERN AUSTRALIA	4.8%	5.3%	5.7%	5.6%	5.0%	▲ 29.2% (\$7,447)
SOUTH AUSTRALIA	8.1%	8.9%	8.8%	9.8%	9.8%	▲ 45.7 (\$21,535)
TASMANIA	13.1%	12.8%	18.5%	25.2%	27.8%	▲ 164.5% (\$26,060)
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY	12.6%	12.0%	12.3%	11.1%	12.0%	▲ 23.8% (\$2,078)
NORTHERN TERRITORY <sup>(a)</sup>	23.8%	24.8%	23.8%	26.5%	29.4%	▲ 19.1% (\$10,450)
NATIONAL	16.2%	15.9%	15.8%	16.1%	15.8%	▲ 26.2% (\$269,992)

Data source: SCRGSP [2023], Table 16A.8.

(a) The Commonwealth government provides funding to the Northern Territory for IFSS. In 2021-22, this was 5% of all child protection expenditure in the Northern Territory.

KEY



**Table 2: Real recurrent child protection expenditure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services, 2021-22, by state and territory**

Jurisdiction	Type of service	% of all children who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children	Total expenditure (\$'000)	Direct funding to ACCOs (\$'000)	% of total expenditure on ACCOs
New South Wales	Family support and intensive family support services	Substantiated: 33.4%	337,511	25,867[a]	7.67%[b]
	Care services	Out-of-home care: 42.3%	1,713,317	126,894	7.41%
Victoria	Family support and intensive family support services	Substantiated: 13.3%	532,023	61,693	11.59%
	Care services	Out-of-home care: 23.8%	958,362	51,221	5.34%
Queensland	Family support and intensive family support services	Substantiated: 36.4%	212,293	50,088	20.3%
	Care services	Out-of-home care: 45.3%	1,211,558	7,175	0.6%
Western Australia	Family support and intensive family support services	Substantiated: 44.1%	34,689[c]	7,323	21.11%
	Care services	Out-of-home care: 57.3%	386,122	7,530	1.95%
South Australia	Family support and intensive family support services	Substantiated: 36.9%	69,723[d]	4,807	6.89%
	Care services	Out-of-home care: 37.2%	564,400	29,607	5.1%
Tasmania	Family support and intensive family support services	Substantiated: 34.0%	41,902	Not available	Not available
	Care services	Out-of-home care: 36.4%	78,090	Not available	Not available
Australian Capital Territory	Family support and intensive family support services	Substantiated: 28.3%	10,826	1,893	17.5%
	Care services	Out-of-home care: 31%	58,895	0	0
Northern Territory	Family support and intensive family support services	Substantiated: 84.6%	65,136	Not provided	14%[h]
	Care services	Out-of-home care: 91.1%	132,526[e]	Not provided	4%[f]

[a] Grants expenditure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Services.

[b] Total expenditure includes services directly provided by DCJ and grants provided to non-government organisations.

[c] Total provided by WA Government. Does not match ROGS total. No explanation given by WA Government for this difference.

[d] Provided by SA Government. Does not match ROGS total. No explanation given by SA Government for this difference.

[e] Provided by NT Government. Does not match ROGS data. No explanation given by NT Government for this difference.

[f] Percentages provided by NT Government, although dollar amounts of expenditure were not provided.

Data source: SCRGSP (2023b), Table 16A.8; data provided by governments for the Family Matters Report.

## List of reports on the Indigenous child protection:

1. ["Bringing Them Home" \(1997\)](#)
2. [1999 Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland](#)
3. [Child Sexual Abuse in Rural and Remote Australian Indigenous Communities: A preliminary investigation – Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse - 2001](#)
4. [2002 Inquiry into response by government agencies to complaints of family violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities \(WA\) \("Gordon Report"\)](#)
5. [Child abuse and family violence in Aboriginal communities | Australian Institute of Family Studies \(aifs.gov.au\) - 2002](#)
6. [2003 Review of Child Protection in South Australia \(Layton Review\)](#)
7. [2004 Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care \("Forgotten Australians"\)](#)
8. [2004 Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commissioner inquiry into abuse of children in foster care](#)
9. [2004 The Territory as a parent: a review of the safety of children in care in the ACT and of ACT child protection management \(Commissioner for Public Administration\)](#)
10. [2006 Listen to the Children: Ombudsman Report \(Tasmania\)](#)
11. [2006 Report on Allegations Concerning the Treatment of Children and Young People in Residential Care, Ombudsman Western Australia](#)
12. [2007 NT Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse \("Little Children are Sacred"\)](#)
13. [2007 Review of the Department of Community Development WA \(Ford Report\)](#)
14. [2008 SA Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry \(Mullighan Inquiry\)](#)
15. [2008 Children on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara \(APA\) lands Commission of Inquiry \(SA\)](#)
16. [2008 NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services](#)
17. [2010 Board of Inquiry into the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory](#)
18. [2010 Own Motion Investigation into Child Protection – Out of Home Care, Victorian Ombudsman](#)
19. [2011 Select Committee on Child Protection Inquiry \(Tasmania\)](#)
20. [2012 WA Special Inquiry Allegations of sexual abuse in hostels](#)
21. [2012 Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry](#)
22. [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2013](#)
23. [2013 Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry](#)
24. [Indigenous Child Safety 2014](#)
25. [2014 NSW Ombudsman Review of the NSW Child Protection System](#)

26. [2015 Inquiry into compliance with the intent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle in Victoria](#)
27. [Stronger Safer Together Report 2016](#)
28. [2016 Child Protection Systems Royal Commission \(SA\)](#)
29. [2016 Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria](#)
30. ["Changing the Picture: A National Resource to Support the Prevention of Child Sexual Assault and Sexual Exploitation of Children" \(2016\)](#)
31. [2017 Royal Commission and Board of Inquiry into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory](#)
32. [2017 Royal Commissioner into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#)
33. [2017 Safe and Wanted: Inquiry into the implementation of amendments to the Children Youth and Families \(Permanent Care and Other Matters\) Act 2014 \(Victoria\)](#)
34. ["Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Family Wellbeing Services: Review of Service Delivery" \(2018\)](#)
35. [2018 House of Representatives Inquiry into Local Adoption](#)
36. [2019 Our Booris, Our Way Inquiry into the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in contact with child protection in the ACT](#)
37. [2019 Family is Culture, independent review of children and young people in OOHC in NSW](#)
38. [2022 SA Independent Inquiry into Foster and Kinship Care](#)
39. [2022 Inquiry into the effectiveness of the NSW child protection and social services system](#)
40. [2022 The extent of violence inflicted on adolescent Aboriginal girls in the Northern Territory](#)
41. [2023 SA Inquiry into Aboriginal children removal and placements](#)
42. [2023 Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings](#)