

To Whom It May Concern

North West Regional Action Group Chair's Submission to the Child Protection Inquiry.

Family Violence and the Impact on Aboriginal children.

Family Violence was not, is not and has never been a part of Aboriginal culture. Our community defines family violence in a broader, more holistic way. We define family violence as *"an issue focused around a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. It extends to one on one fighting, abuse of Indigenous community workers as well as self harm, injury and suicide."*

Family Violence in Aboriginal communities is a significant issue that we as a community continue to address. It is important that when addressing family violence within the Aboriginal community due consideration is paid to intergenerational impacts of disconnection, caused by the devastating effects of colonisation. The majority of Aboriginal Victorians are directly related to someone who was a member of the Stolen Generations or a descendant of the Stolen Generations. This has undeniably interrupted the transmission of good safe parenting and cultural connection for Aboriginal people.

Mainstream perspectives of family violence are usually informed by a gendered analysis where men are considered to be in a position of privilege and power. This is clearly not relevant to Aboriginal men as within Australian society Aboriginal men are not in a position of authority or influence.

From an Aboriginal perspective, the prevalence of family violence is attributed to a number of factors, many of which relate to the impact of colonisation and the subsequent impacts on Aboriginal culture. These include:

- dispossession of land
- disconnection from traditional culture
- breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal lore
- racism and vilification
- economic exclusion and entrenched poverty
- alcohol and drug misuse
- the effects of institutionalism and child removal policies including the White Australia Policy
- collective inherited grief and trauma, and
- the loss of traditional Aboriginal male roles, female roles and status.

The Aboriginal community does not excuse the unacceptable levels of family violence perpetrated by Aboriginal men. All perpetrators of family violence must be held accountable for their actions but also be supported effectively to stop the behaviour and be given the chance to become the man they can be; a warrior, free of anger and disconnection, culturally strong and proud.

As a community we believe Aboriginal men must be part of the solution. Men make up 50% of relationships, 90% of the problem and also we believe that 80% of the 90% are asking for help they don't want to hurt their loved ones so they need to be involved in the process. To quote VACCA "healing is journey not a destination".

The current levels of family violence in our community are unacceptable and negatively impact on our children. Responses to family violence must prioritise the needs of children above all else. There is considerable evidence about the impact of trauma on brain development. Aboriginal children experience significantly higher levels of trauma due to family violence than non-Aboriginal

children. This is in part due to the intergenerational trauma that exists, which exacerbates the impacts of more recent traumatic events in a child's life.

There are a range of responses required that will aid the process of recovery and change. It is all of our responsibility to stop the cycle of violence and give children every opportunity to reach their full potential.

Prevention is better than cure in relation to family violence. In order to prevent further harm to our children we need develop resources that assist our families in understanding the impact of trauma, without the need of making all Aboriginal parents undertake a psychology degree.

A challenge for us is how to ensure parents and those at the grass roots are supported to learn about the impact of trauma on their children. This knowledge is fairly new in professional and academic circles, and it is critical that we develop user friendly techniques to educate parents about the damage family violence causes to children. This must be done in a manner that addresses the fear that too many Aboriginal families still have. Families must be supported to understand that that if they reach out for help, they will not lose their children to "welfare" which risks the cycle continuing.

In addition, the availability of culturally inclusive therapeutic responses for our children and families who have already experienced family violence is essential. It is well documented that the reporting of family violence in our community is lower than the occurrence. When services are in contact with women and children reporting family violence, we can be confident that this is not the first incident so ensuring culturally relevant therapy for the child and family is imperative.

In developing culturally inclusive service responses it is useful to understand some of the barriers for women to report family violence.

Primarily the reluctance to report family violence stems from Aboriginal people's fear of authority and lack of trust in the system that responds to this issue. Past policies and practices often saw high levels of violence perpetrated against Aboriginal people which are vivid in memory today. Aboriginal men still die in custody at unacceptable rates and consequently we are not confident that they will be responded to respectfully and with the cultural support required. Concern that our children will get the supports they need not just be removed is another significant barrier to reporting.

Aboriginal parents are ill informed about the impacts of trauma that family violence can have on children. They do not realise that family violence can result in children mimicking these behaviours in adulthood. Parents that have grown up with systemic abuse need to be educated that family violence is not normal and is not acceptable.

There are a number of examples of people not being responded to fairly or equitably. These experiences are commonplace across a range of services, and deter Aboriginal people from accessing supports that are available to us. Our community shares its experiences of services, and once there has been one negative experience, that will be the common story of that particular service. Changing that story takes significant effort and requires many examples of a good experience to counter act one bad one.

Aboriginal people often feel undervalued and negatively judged by non-Aboriginal people, particularly statutory authorities whose collective lack of understanding about Aboriginal culture and history impacts the way they respond to Aboriginal people. The current inability of the system to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal people affected by family violence is a challenge that requires flexible and creative responses. The points referred to above all contribute to the reluctance of Aboriginal women to report to authorities until

the violence is so bad that they see no alternatives. By this time the impact on all members of the family and community are very apparent.

Aboriginal communities suffer today with the intergenerational effects of colonisation, dispossession and disconnection which require culturally sensitive and respectful responses that have a focus on healing if they are to be effective. The vast majority of responses to family violence are delivered by mainstream services, and almost all of these services are not in a position to provide the cultural reconnection that is integral to real healing.

It is not surprising that the most effective family violence strategies are those that are community driven and take a holistic approach. In other words they respond to the needs of the whole family; men, women and children. This will often require a number of programs to counsel and support women and children as well as services to heal perpetrators and prevent re-offending.

Colonisation and the subsequent removal policies that saw up to 1 in 3 Aboriginal children being disconnected from their families, communities and cultures has led to many people growing up in abusive institutional environments where there were few positive role models on which to base their own parenting. Many were not provided with the opportunity to learn how to raise their children in a constructive, culturally connected way. As a result many do not know what "healthy child development" looks like. Stolen Generations members and descendants of Stolen Generations experience difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships, and feel and fear the lack of ability to express their love for their partners and children. Disrupted attachment and traumatic experiences in childhood have made it difficult for parents to be close to their loved ones and be physically affectionate. Many people struggle to survive from day to day and far less take on the myriad of so called supports to help them address their anger, substance misuse and parenting programs that they are so often required to do to in order to keep their children.

A real opportunity to heal, in a culturally safe and connected environment is what the majority of parents need before they can effectively make use of the supports listed above.

It is important to understand that even for those Aboriginal people who were not removed, or are not descendants of removed people, the ongoing pain and trauma that the Aboriginal community experiences in terms of high suicide rates, incarceration rates, all the Close the Gap outcomes and probably the most misunderstood or acknowledged issue; that of the continued racism, bullying and stereotyping of Aboriginal people today. It is shameful that in 2011, despite the Federal Government's Apology to the Stolen Generations, and the bipartisan agreements of government in relation to the Close the Gap targets, Aboriginal people continue to feel humiliated, fearful and hopeless about their future.

What this Inquiry can do to impact better outcomes for Aboriginal children where family violence is an issue:

1. Ensure sufficient recognition of the need for culturally inclusive services that focus on healing and reconnection to culture as priority components of the any service response to family violence.
2. Listen and support the ideas of Aboriginal people as these are the only ones that will achieve long term effective change.
3. Change the current process of all police family violence reports going through the mainstream service providers who then determine whether they will refer to an Aboriginal service or not.

Police should be able to refer directly to an Aboriginal family violence service provider.

4. *Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families*, a Ten-year plan to address Aboriginal family violence needs to be given the long term financial commitment it requires to achieve all its actions. Short term 'quick fix' government approaches do not work and this issue, which has been generations in the making, will require time and real commitment to effectively be changed.

5. There is currently no systematic recording of notifications made to Child Protection due to family violence. It is essential to understand the full extent of the issue, so ensuring this is recorded as a part of the Child protection process is strongly recommended.

Finally it is important to acknowledge the significant work of VACCA in protecting Aboriginal children and reiterate the points they have developed, specifically when considering the needs of children.

The historical processes of devaluing the rights of Aboriginal people and the removal of children have greatly affected the:

- development of the cultural identity of a number of Aboriginal children today,
- flow of knowledge and understanding of an Aboriginal child's development and
- capacity of our families to pass down cultural models of parenting.

As a consequence, many Aboriginal families are vulnerable and require extra support. This support should be in terms of Therapeutic Care.

Aboriginal Therapeutic Care to include the following key cultural elements or principles:

- *Cultural safety*
- *Cultural Rights*
- *Cultural Responsibilities*
- *Aboriginal understandings of Trauma*
- *Aboriginal Understandings of Culture as resilience*
- *Adherence to the Best Interest Principle*
- *Adherence with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle*

Regards

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I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land I work and live on as the first people of this country.