



# VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY SERVICES ASSOCIATION LIMITED

A.B.N. 27 596 610 528

## PROTECTING VICTORIA'S VULNERABLE CHILDREN INQUIRY

**"The child is central to Aboriginal society, represents the present and the future, is a link to spirituality and ancestry of Aboriginal culture and is responsible for the continuity of cultural identity "(Zubrick, Lawrence et al. 2004).**

Dear Panel members,

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd (VACSAL) applauds the Government for launching this inquiry to investigate systemic problems in the Victorian child protection system.

Our organisation believes that real outcomes that will address the needs of the most vulnerable families and their children are the key to improving and strengthening those families, which will have a flow on effect to their children.

We believe that programs and services that provide strength-based approaches that recognises the underlying issues of the social and economic disadvantages in the Aboriginal community is a step in the right direction.

The framework for our submission is that we firstly give you an insight into background of VACSAL and programs that operate from our organisation. Secondly, We will then touch on relevant data and Alf Bamblett's 'supply and demand' theory which will give you a snapshot of the current status of the Victorian Aboriginal community and concluding with the best way forward where we will outline a number of recommendations in terms of family services and Government.

### **VACSAL'S VISION STATEMENT.**

VACSAL's philosophy is to empower the Victorian Aboriginal community to achieve social, political and economic equity, whilst maintaining and strengthening identity, culture, pride and social purpose.

## **BACKGROUND OF VACSAL**

VACSAL was established in 1984 and is a recognised state-wide peak advisory body on Aboriginal Community issues that embraces community based, community controlled responses to issues that affect our community. Our network comprises of representatives from Aboriginal organisations across the State. We see our role in shaping policies and programs that reflects the commitment of the organisation to culturally strong service delivery that targets Koorie youth, families and communities. The ultimate goal is to ensure that policies when delivered capture the essence of Aboriginality with successful outcomes that will empower our families.

VACSAL delivers a number of programs with local Aboriginal communities such as:

- Aboriginal men and women programs that focuses on looks at change especially in the context of family violence. Appropriate tools will be designed to empower men and women with a view 'stop the violence' towards their partners. We believe that this will have a flow on effect in their household.
- Gambling programs that work with local Aboriginal communities to develop strategies that educates and how to, effectively respond to problem gambling in their community.
- Aboriginal Best Start program that works in partnerships with a range of Government, Non Government Sectors, Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal parents targeting 0-5 years of age with targeted identified outcomes that addresses early years issues. The partnerships consist of health, education and Aboriginal community sectors at a local level.
- Youth programs that targets vulnerable youth in Melbourne Northern Metropolitan area. The program links vulnerable young Aboriginal people into appropriate services.

VACSAL works on community development principle and maintains that working and supporting our community to walk between the 'two-worlds' is seen as strength-based community capacity building.

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## **CURRENT STATUS.**

It is evident that Aboriginal communities are still impacted by invasion and colonisation of Australia and the subsequent dispossession and dispersal of our peoples. Trans-generational violence, grief and trauma are still issues that prohibit Aboriginal people, families and communities from overcoming economic and social disadvantage.

The Inquiry report '*Bringing them Home*' found that the policies and practices of removal "had multiple and profoundly disabling effects on individuals, families and communities, including across generations. This report highlighted that children removed from families were:

- More likely to come to the attention of the police as they grew into adolescence;

- More likely to suffer low self-esteem, depression and mental illness;
- More vulnerable to physical, emotional and sexual abuse;
- Almost always taught to reject their Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture;
- Unable to retain links to their land;
- Unable to take a role in the cultural and spiritual life of their former communities;
- Unlikely to be able to establish their right to native title."

*(The state of Victoria's children 2009)*

There is a plethora of evidence available to indicate social and cultural disadvantage for Aboriginal people. In particular, demographics clearly highlight the profoundly dire straits that our children and families are currently in.

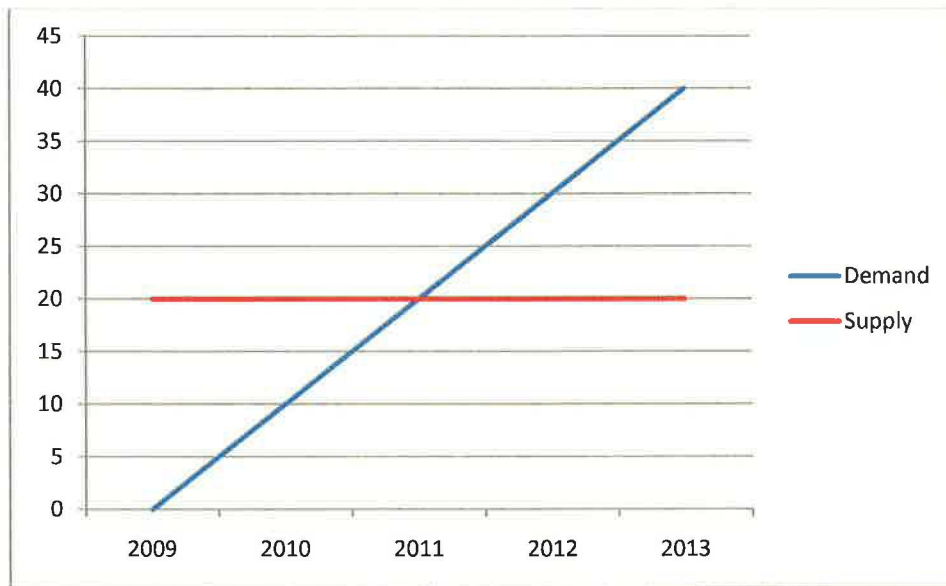
Although we make up about 0.6 per cent of the total Victorian population; half of our Aboriginal people live outside of Melbourne and that the highest concentration live in Loddon Mallee, Hume and Gippsland regions. Almost 2 of every three households are on low incomes and that unemployment rates for young people are double that of the non-Aboriginal population. Our young people are 16 times more likely to be in juvenile justice and adults are 12 times more likely to be incarcerated.

It is evident that there is clear transition from out of home care to youth justice to Adult prison.

Homelessness is also an indicator that Aboriginal people are highly visible in. Other social determinants such as poor health, drug & alcohol problems also characterise highly within our community. It is little wonder that the Aboriginal child is markedly disadvantaged from conception.

We acknowledge how disempowered some individuals are in our community, that they do not have the mastery over their destiny but the dilemma is that the Aboriginal community controlled organisations must be resourced to invest in a sound social marketing tools that will empower individuals to be able to make the right lifestyle choices.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996 indicates that the Aboriginal population is markedly young with fifty percent being under the age of 25.



This image is not to scale but will give you a visual indication of how the demand will increase over time while the supply stays the same.

The projected population growth for Aboriginal youth is 2.5 % per annum between 2006-2013.

As is indicated in the project visual graph that Aboriginal organisations are and continue to be extremely under resourced and struggle to meet current service demand. Unless critical interventions are implemented, Aboriginal disadvantage will heighten.



## THE BEST WAY FORWARD:

The Chief Executive Officer of VACSAL, Alf Bamblett statement in 'Vision for the Future, 2010' that **"We need to be participants not recipients in determining our own destinies."**

VACSAL believes that the best way forward is that:

GOVERNMENT:	Aboriginal organisations to be funded to develop effective partnerships.
	Need to acknowledge that Aboriginal people must play an integral role in addressing Aboriginal disadvantage.
	Must initiate systemic changes that will accommodate true partnership approaches that are transparent and measurable between Government and Aboriginal community.
	Recognise that 'true' consultations is premised on active listening, respecting and acknowledging Aboriginal professionalism is paramount.
	Consider a Permanent Care plans for Aboriginal children must include their siblings (gaps in reunification - parents have younger children in their care but their older children are of out their custody in permanent care.)
	Child Protection key performance indicators do not match with Community Service Organisations key performance indicators. Case management must incorporate the community expertise in the development of Care Plans.

<b>ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY CONTROLLED ORGANISATIONS (ACCO)</b>	Effective community capacity building principles should include local leadership.
	Implementation of Section 18 by Aboriginal organisations, require proper investment in their organisation to meet the needs.
	Workforce building is a positive and necessary investment.
	Acknowledging Aboriginal professionalism in the existing workforce.
	Training and professional development.
	Perspectives from Aboriginal Drug & Alcohol Services and Gambling Programs are to be highlighted as it is seen as a key service in protecting vulnerable children.
	Investment in culturally designed wrap-around therapeutic models.
	Linking and engaging young Aboriginal homeless people who have dual orders with multiple and complex needs is a priority. Services and training to be designed and delivered to meet their needs.
	ACCOs to implement strategies for generalist services who do not comply to implement or follow up on Cultural Support Plans for children in care.
	Look at 80% of Aboriginal families that are functioning well so that we can develop best practice models for building resilience.
	Coalition of Victorian Aboriginal peak and Lead agencies to be established to provide a holistic response.

<b>FAMILIES</b>	
	To break the cycle of intergenerational involvement in the child protection sector there need to be increased funding of early intervention programs that strengthen families.
	Early intervention programs must be family based.
	Expand Aboriginal Family Decision Making Programs.
	We recognise that child safety is paramount but family reunification must be the prime objective for the development of care plans.
	Rather than focusing on the deficits in Aboriginal families it would be more productive and empowering to focus on "best practices" as a solution.
	Increase the numbers of Aboriginal Family Centres to be established across the State.
	Develop Family health and wellbeing programs that include children, men and women.
	Invest Family Resilience programs such as Koorie FACES, Family Cultural healing programs/camps.

### **AN INNOVATIVE RESPONSE:**

We are continually involved in the political merry-go-round where advice is sought and given regarding the needs of Aboriginal community. This advice is sieved, sifted and manipulated so that it then becomes a very watered down version reshaped to fit government agenda or policy of the day. Research confirms our belief that the key protective factor to bring about change is premised on Aboriginal culture. Therefore we need to bring about an innovative response that incorporates Aboriginal Lore/Law practice.

VACSAL believes that a way to achieve this is to establish a Family Lore Council comprised of respected Aboriginal representatives. The Family Lore Council would be responsible to provide expert advice to The Secretary on:

- Endorse ACCO's capacity to take on guardianship responsibility.
- Recommending that children be removed from dangerous environments. (This would defray community angst and ill that will be directed at ACCOs.)
- Hear appeals and reviews.
- Monitor adherence to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles by individuals and agencies.
- Foster goodwill between the Department of Human Services and the Aboriginal community.
- The Family Lore Council aim is to shift the responsibility of positive childrearing practices back with the community, it takes a village to raise a child concept, which will then place the importance of the role of mum, dad and/or family carers in providing a safe home for their children.

### **CONCLUSION:**

VACSAL is pleased to be able to participate in this process. We welcome the opportunity to further elaborate on our submission should the Panel so desire.

Yours sincerely,



**DR ALF BAMBLETT**  
Chief Executive Officer  
VACSAL.