

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation  
27 Budd Street  
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Friday 2 September 2022

Select Committee on Work and Care  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
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### **SNAICC submission to the Select Committee on Work and Care**

SNAICC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the enquiry into the impact that combining work and care responsibilities has on the wellbeing of workers, carers, and those they care for. SNAICC is the national non-governmental peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We work for the fulfilment of the rights of our children, in particular to ensure their safety, development and well-being. We have a dynamic membership base of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based providers of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. This submission will address aspects of the Enquiry focused on the adequacy of work and care supports, and the particular impacts of these on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The scope of this enquiry necessarily encompasses the relationship between workforce participation and a range of caring responsibilities including care of Elders, care for family and friends with disability and care of children. In this submission, however, SNAICC will focus on ECEC, including care for young children who experience developmental delay and disability. We also note that the goals of ECEC focus on both workforce participation and supporting the education and development of children. Our advocacy for improvement in the availability, affordability and navigability of ECEC which enables workforce participation occurs in the context of continued efforts to support ECEC services to provide a base entitlement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of 30 hours per week culturally safe, quality education which enables our children to meet their full potential.

### **The adequacy of current work and care supports, systems, legislation and other relevant policies across Australian workplaces and society;**

Market forces have shaped the availability of ECEC services, to the detriment of families living in remote, regional and socially disadvantaged metropolitan areas. The Victoria University's Mitchell Institute undertook research on the availability of centre-based daycare, the most common form of care used by families. They noted that areas which have the highest fees also have greater accessibility to childcare places, hypothesizing that:

“This suggests that providers are not only establishing services where there are greater levels of demand, but where they are likely to make greater profits”<sup>i</sup>.

In addition, this research demonstrated that many Australian families live in ‘childcare deserts’ defined as populated areas where there are three or more children for every available child care place. Limitations related to available places and proximity are most severe in remote areas where up to 85% of families live in childcare deserts, but are also evident in metropolitan areas, particularly those locations experiencing greater levels of social disadvantage, where more than a quarter of families are likely to live in a childcare desert. The current funding model does not address the thin market for ECEC services experienced by families living in these areas, despite government efforts to direct childcare subsidies to low and middle income earners<sup>ii</sup>. This is not an isolated phenomenon. In total, one million Australians have no access to childcare. Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander families are affected by thin markets for ECEC services in rural, regional areas and are more likely to live in socially disadvantaged metropolitan areas where childcare deserts exist<sup>iii</sup>. In addition, Aboriginal families are likely to experience thin markets for culturally safe ECEC services which meet their needs for holistic care. A policy roundtable of key ECEC industry stakeholders hosted by the Department of Education suggested the need for a separate funding model to support the viability services such as those ECEC services which provide holistic supports to families and/or which provide these supports in regional and remote areas<sup>iv</sup>. SNAICC supports this measure, and calls for development of additional ECEC services in areas of high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, to address the thin market for culturally safe ECEC provision.

Staff shortages also constrain attempts to expand ECEC service provision. Factors which affect the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators include:

- Low status of the profession
- Inadequate investment in professional development for ECEC educators and teachers.
- Low pay and lack of equity in pay and conditions between ECEC workers and teachers
- Lack of clear pathways for career progression<sup>v</sup>

For community- controlled services seeking Indigenous staff to provide culturally safe education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, these factors are compounded by a range of issues including but not limited to:

- Institutional and systemic barriers in education e.g. University entrance requirements for English, maths, numeracy without options for transition programs
- Uneven, inadequate or culturally unsafe support from further and higher education institutions
- Lack of familiarity with technologies used for blended or online learning
- Lack of role-models for tertiary study in home communities<sup>vi</sup>

### **Greater support needed by families caring for children with a disability.**

As noted above, Aboriginal families face a number of challenges in accessing ECEC services to meet their and their children’s needs. These difficulties are greatly exacerbated for parents whose child has developmental delay or disability. Aboriginal children aged 0 – 14 years are twice as likely to have a disability as non-Indigenous children<sup>vii</sup> but have limited access to culturally appropriate assessment and early intervention services. Research has demonstrated that standard, mainstream assessment tools are culturally biased, however the availability of culturally appropriate assessment tools is also limited. In addition, the assessment process and the development of the child’s treatment plan needs to take into



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account potential experiences of trauma. Often, assessments are carried out by mainstream service providers who do not employ a trauma-informed cultural focus<sup>viii</sup>. This has major ramifications for families in seeking support for their children as paediatric assessment is often a prerequisite for accessing disability supports and is used as evidence by National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) in considering a child's access to the NDIS. Other factors which impact Aboriginal families to access appropriate supports for a child or children with developmental delay or disability include but are not limited to:

- Language barriers
- Perceptions by families of negative attitudes of providers towards them
- Poor coordination between services and levels of government
- Workforce issues
- Racism amongst services providers
- Socioeconomic disadvantage including housing and limited access to transport<sup>ix</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families living in regional or remote areas who need early intervention or disability support for their child(ren) compound the difficulty of accessing scarce or in some cases non-existent ECEC supports with the difficulty of accessing scarce or non-existent disability supports.

### **Consideration of gendered, regional and socio-economic differences in experience and in potential responses including for First Nations working carers, and potential workers**

The link between available, affordable childcare and women's workforce participation is well established. The Michell Institute's recent research clearly illustrated the relationship between ECEC availability and workforce participation, providing evidence of lower workforce participation amongst women who live in childcare desert and have a child(ren) under five years<sup>x</sup>.

As previously noted, there is a thin market for ECEC services in regional and remote areas, "where there are higher proportions of children and families on lower income or below the poverty line"<sup>xi</sup>. The impacts that the absence of ECEC support has on the lives of working families are many and profound. The outback town of Ti Tree, 200 km north of Alice Springs is a case in point (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot8Z0rWl0&t=18s>)

### **The activity test: a key barrier to childcare affordability and workforce participation**

Affordability is another key determinant of ECEC access. Families reliant on precarious, casual or short term employment face particular barriers to accessing the subsidized Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) that would make it possible for them to take on extra work.

Changes introduced as part of the previous Government's 'Jobs for Families' package restricted access to subsidized child care to 24 hours per fortnight for families who failed the activity test. The requirements of the activity test are themselves difficult to navigate for some families who are unsure as to which activities satisfy the test's guidelines. Consequently, those whose working hours are unpredictable cannot commit to additional hours of work without a guaranteed childcare, but neither can they commit to more than the minimum subsidized hours of childcare if they are at risk of failing the activity test and incurring unsubsidized childcare costs they can't afford.

SNAICC calls for the removal of the activity test. Evaluation of the (CCCS) funding package highlighted the disproportionate impact of the activity test on ECEC participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families<sup>xii</sup>.

In addition, measures intended to ameliorate the negative impacts of the activity test (e.g. Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS - wellbeing)) require individual children to be labelled as 'vulnerable' and are culturally unsafe as they exacerbate intergenerational trauma inflicted by colonial policies which forced the removal of children. SNAICC's membership have provided numerous examples of families who refuse to take up this payment because of the stigma and the implied risk of intervention from child protective services.

Removal of the activity test would provide major benefits for the most vulnerable families, providing them with greater opportunities to access additional work and/or necessary training.

SNAICC is fully cognizant of the vital support the ECEC sector provides in enabling the workforce participation of our families and contributing to the development of our children. We commend the work of the Senate Select Committee into Select Committee on Work and Care and would be very interested to engage with you to discuss the ways in which ECEC sector can be strengthened to better serve the needs of working parents and their children. Should you wish to discuss our response please contact (John Burton

Yours sincerely

Catherine Liddle  
CEO, SNAICC – the National Voice for our children

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<sup>i</sup> Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare?* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University. p8

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> Walter M (2008) *Lives of Diversity: Indigenous Australia* Occasional paper 4/2008 The academy of the social sciences in Australia, Canberra

<sup>iv</sup> Systems Thinking in Early Childhood Education and Care: Department of Education Policy Roundtable 29 June 2022, Canberra

<sup>v</sup> Ibid

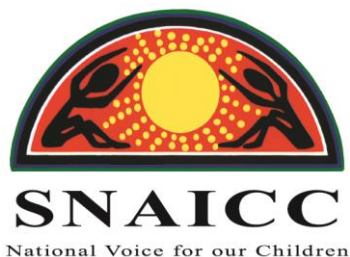
<sup>vi</sup> SNAICC (July 2022) *Early Childhood Early Education Needs Analysis*, SNAICC Melbourne

<sup>vii</sup> SNAICC, (2019) *The Family Matters Report* SNAICC Melbourne

<sup>viii</sup> Commission for Children and Young People, 'Always was, always will be Koori children': *Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria* 2016, pg. 95

<sup>ix</sup> DiGiacomo, M., Davidson, P.M., Abbott, P. et al. *Childhood disability in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: a literature review. Int J Equity Health* 12, 7 (2013).

<sup>x</sup> Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare?* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.



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<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xii</sup> Bray, J. R., Baxter, J., Hand, K., Gray, M., Carroll, M., Webster, R., Phillips, B., Budinski, M., Warren, D., Katz, I., Jones, A. (2021). *Child Care Package Evaluation: Final Report*. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies)