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Pitjantjatjara
Yankunytjatjara
Women's Council

Select Committee on Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities
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Submission for Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities

The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council ('NPYWC') writes a submission in response to the Select Committee on **Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities**.

Who are we?

NPYWC is an Aboriginal Corporation that advocates for Anangu in the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, and Yankunytjatjara (NPY) region and is a major provider of human services for the NPY Lands. The NPY Lands span the tri-state Central Desert region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, covering 350,000sq km and encompassing 26 remote communities and homelands, with an overall population of around 6,000 Anangu (Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people). **Annexed and labelled "A"** is a map of the region. NPY Women's Council's core purpose is to work with women and their families of the NPY region to increase their capacity to lead safe and healthy lives with improved life choices. The Council provides health, cultural and community service projects, and are often the only service provider responding to a particular need in these 26 communities.

NPYWC holds a deep legacy for the advocacy of human rights for women and children. Embedded in NPYWC's history is the gathering and strategic organisation of Anangu women who wanted to be seen and heard during the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights movement. **Annexed and labelled "B"** is a painting by M.W (deceased) that tells the story of the time Anangu women came together to form their own Women's Council.

NPYWC's theory of change and service provision is deeply rooted in strengths-based practices and localised processes. In essence – Anangu are best placed to determine what is best for Anangu. This is the catalyst for transforming communities with the intention of every person fulfilling their right to full emotional, social, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Our Submission

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission regarding the regression of Closing the Gap (CTG) targets on suicide rates, children in out-of-home care, adult incarceration, and school readiness, with a specific focus on the cross-border region of the NPY Lands. This submission will address key issues related to funding, measurements, data, cultural strengths, wellness, and potential reforms within the CTG framework as they pertain to the unique challenges and opportunities in the NPY Lands.

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Closing the Gap

NPYWC would like to highlight several organisational priorities that are crucial for considering systemic issues related to targets addressed, as well as other CTG targets, and for ensuring that communities are not hindered by structural barriers in their efforts to create meaningful change:

- **Target 4: Children thrive in early years**
 - o By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent.
- **Target 10: Adults are not overly represented in the criminal justice system**
 - o By 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults held in incarceration by at least 15 per cent.
- **Target 12: Children are not overrepresented in the child protection system**
 - o By 2031, reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent.
- **Target 13: Families and Households are Safe**
 - o By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced at least by 50%, as progress towards zero.
- **Target 14: People enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing**
 - o Significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.

Regional Needs & Cross Border Support

Any national initiatives, frameworks or recommendations must consider regions in accordance with the communities they service, such as the NPY lands. Framing solutions by Western defined state and territory boundaries disenfranchises the pursuit of Anangu living well in their home communities. Additionally, applying Western territorial boundaries often creates division amongst Anangu, particularly when there is a greater investment in one state and/or territory over another. National roadmaps must understand that the needs of ACCOs, who operate from localised solutions, vary and are distinct to urban areas. The journey to closing the gap in the NPY region will look starkly different to other places in Australia – this is why a one-size-fits-all approach will not work and localised solutions led by ACCOs are best fit to contribute to how and what is needed for change. Utilising cross-jurisdictional collaboration and establishing a joint committee to monitor and hold states and territories accountable for the implementation of the priority reforms will be necessary in meeting the diverse needs of our context.

Basic Unmet Needs

The five targets listed above have underlying drivers that are of a structural nature. The capacity of Anangu to curb adult incarceration rates, for example, is severely impeded by the experience of entrenched disadvantage. A genuine commitment must be made from government to address systemic, structural violence such as poverty. Efforts in prevention, intervention, and healing are restricted when basic needs remain unmet. Significant publications indicate that Job Seeker payments are insufficient to meet basic living standards according to the Henderson poverty line. NPYWC observed how poverty can act as a reinforcing factor to community unrest. Insight on the societal impact of increased payments during COVID-19 supports this view. Minimum amounts need to be above this threshold, considering the additional expenses of rural and remote areas. For example, NPYWC often sees women engaging more frequently with our Domestic & Family Violence (DFV) service when they face a lack of food and money. Safety as a basic need is deeply neglected in CTG measurements relating to DFV. The data for Target 13 is outdated, unreliable and inconsistent across jurisdictions which undermines the entire CTG framework when DFV is one of the key determinants in measuring success in other targets.

Funding Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs)

Despite Government Parties agreeing to implement measures to increase the proportion of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations¹, particularly community-controlled organisations, not enough long-term funding is allocated to organisations such as NPYWC to meaningfully contribute to change and transformation in our communities. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese recently pledged \$840 million towards CTG² however NPYWC will not be a recipient of that funding as it isn't distributed evenly across the NT. Also, the majority of the funding is renewed funding for municipal service only. When these funding decisions are made, they are often made without consultation with communities and remain episodic in their delivery, further undermining the strength of ACCOs and their ability to enhance their expertise and positive outcomes on the ground. This reflects a deep failure on behalf of government to meaningfully commit to funding ACCOs and CTG.

Terms of Reference

Below are responses to the ToRs with reference to targets. We have combined some key areas.

1. Funding the Targets funded;

Funding for CTG targets should be needs-based and community-led, ensuring that resources are directed towards culturally appropriate services designed by and for First Nations communities. The NPY Lands face jurisdictional challenges that impact service delivery and funding streams. Greater intergovernmental coordination and long-term funding commitments are essential to overcoming these barriers. According to the Productivity Commission (2023), only 6% of federal Indigenous funding is directed to Indigenous-led organisations, highlighting a significant gap in resourcing.

There has been a shift over the years regarding the investment and resourcing of ACCOs. The shift has caused a culture of creating passive and disempowering funding relationships with Government. There has also been a growing reach of placing ACCOs within generalist and mainstream funding pools, streams and roadmaps. Two specific NPYWC programs help demonstrate the innovation of the ACCO and the lack of prioritised funding to expand these services to meet the needs of community. The Walytjapiti program is a voluntary service supporting families with children aged up to 18 years that integrates Anangu world views and child-rearing practices, and the Iwara program which is a 12-week internship for young people from the NPY region to participate in training, work experience and build network connections in different industries. These are elaborated upon further in this submission. ACCOs need to be funded and supported to sustain corporate growth and service excellence. Investing in the community-controlled sector needs to include flexible funding for building and strengthening corporate services. An investment in corporate services for ACCOs is an acknowledgment of the critical role they play in CTG and as industry experts.

In addition, it has been the experience of NPYWC that there is not just an Indigenous data gap but a data chasm, at a state and federal level, and this contributes to a lack of needs-based funding. One of the biggest blind spots is the allocation of funding for the NPY region. It is difficult to advocate for greater funding when there is no clear information about the current level of investment in the region across all governments. Transparency is also lost when funding for programs in the region go to generalist not-for-profit organisations, or if there is a transfer of services to ACCOs. NPYWC support any recommendations that centre a commitment to shared data around funding – national, regional and localised data that reflect service provision areas.

Funding inequality links with the target of lowering adult incarceration (target 10) rates and how it intersects with DFV, education and employment for example. Department of Corrections data indicates

there is an increasing surge of people in custody in the NT, consistently reaching new records of incarceration. Since the Country Liberal Party (CLP) government has come to power in August 2024 and rolled out a suite of new criminal offences and tougher bail laws³, it is likely that the number of prisoners will continue to increase. A critical shortage of staff and funding for NT Legal Aid organisations has also decreased criminal defence representation in the NT.⁴

The current imprisonment rate for First Nations adults is around 2,266 per 100,000, compared to 149 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous Australians.⁵ In addition to this, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has estimated that First Nations children make up approximately 60% of the prison population nationally⁶ which will likely increase due to the draconian laws passed in October 2024 lowering the age of criminal responsibility in the NT to 10 years old: "The laws, passed in the first parliamentary sitting week of the new government, will take the Northern Territory backwards and set a dangerous precedent for children's rights and safety nationwide."⁷ There is substantial evidence that children who enter the criminal justice system are more likely to re-offend as they get older, contributing to ongoing recidivism. Linked to Target 4 of aiming to reduce the rates of suicide for First Nations communities, the increased child and adult incarceration rates will statistically intersect with increased deaths in custody.⁸

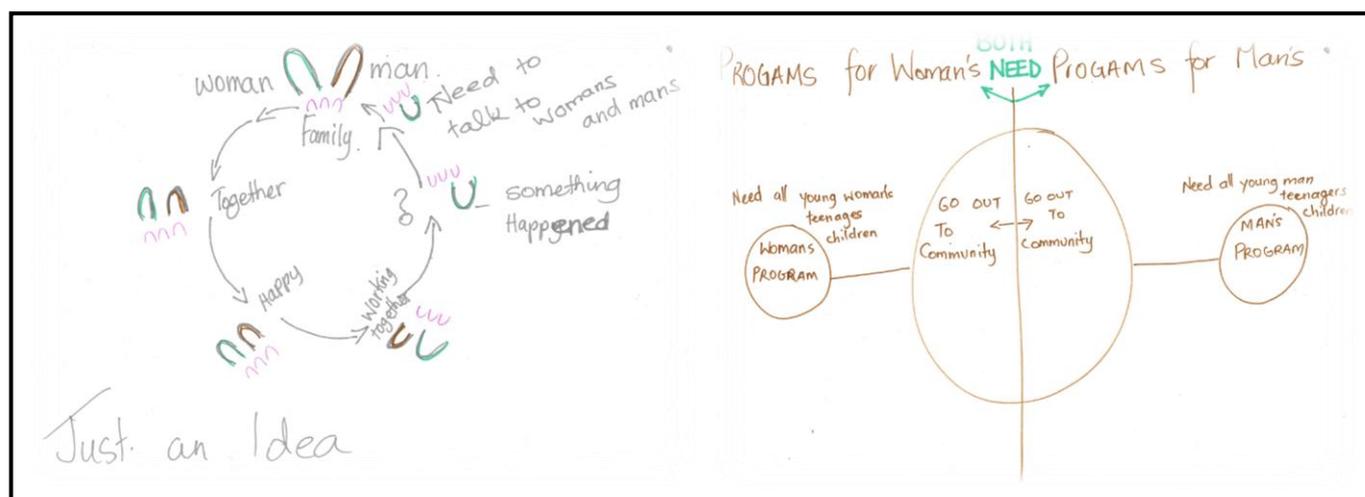
Recommendations around underlying social determinants such as DFV, education and employment as they relate to adult incarceration are listed below. For example, there are very few structured pathways that have prioritised community consultation when supporting school to work transition across the tri-state region, and yet there are over 250 employers on the lands. This is incredibly disillusioning considering Government departments declare commitments to this in strategic planning. A firm commitment from Government for structured transition from school to work pathways and better resourcing for vocational pathways for young people across the tri-state region is required. NYPWC's Iwara Pathway program and the Anangu Support Worker model should be further developed to share learnings and look at broader implementation across other organisations. Equally, resourcing funding for the NPYWC Boarding School project⁹ should be extended to support more young people to undertake educational opportunities that are not available in their own communities.

It is important to note here that given the lack of structured education pathways, and therefore the dearth in meaningful data into employment, it is hard to gauge the exact issues that affect young people as they embark on pathways to employment. However, there is anecdotal feedback and informal pathways in which feedback about these issues is gathered at NPYWC. The ongoing feedback we receive from Anangu include:

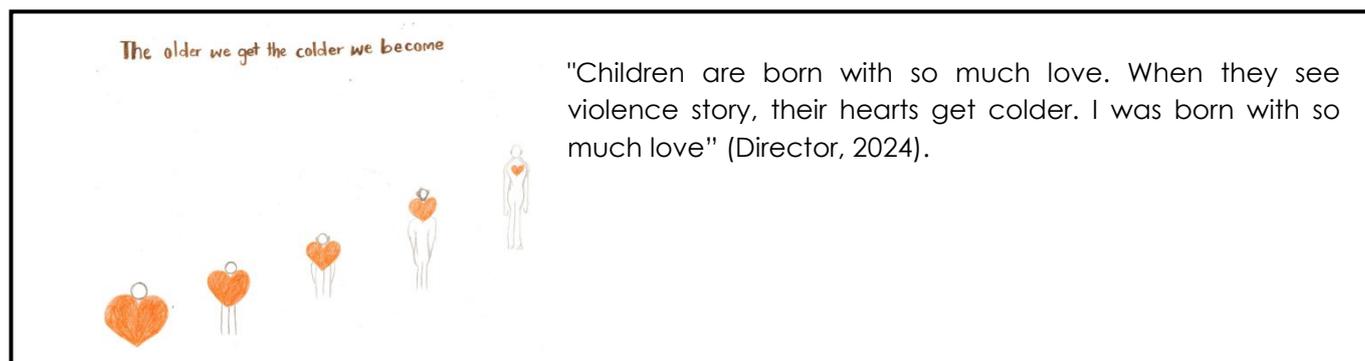
- A lack of funding to support learning & professional development
- Lack of English literacy particularly with computers, administration
- Difficulties with working two ways; both Anangu and non-Indigenous ways
- Lack of access to resources
- Prevalence of Sorry business (deaths in community) that prevent people from consistently working
- Geographic isolation and lack of opportunities in remote areas to promote aspiration
- Domestic & Family Violence affecting ability to work
- Lack of Indigenous mentoring programs
- Money management and not understanding how to manage money, along with an acknowledgement that people in many of the communities live in genuine poverty, so there is a level of expectation that earnings are shared
- A lack of work readiness and life skills i.e. confidence to manage oneself in the workplace, with English not being a first language, talking to the boss, attending meetings and how to conduct yourself is very difficult

- The impacts of trauma on brain health in the absence of culturally responsive and contextualised approaches to managing workplace relationships, duties and responsibilities

As outlined in the summary data above, many barriers continue to exist that impact Anangu in living well and avoiding the criminal justice system. In addition to addressing education and employment pathways, DFV continues to contribute to adult incarceration. Feedback from our Directors reinforces the importance of funding for men and women's violence prevention programs in communities, "we can't just look at the women's side. We have got to look at the men's side too.... They need help."¹⁰ The Cross Border Indigenous Family Violence Program, operated by Port Augusta Community Corrections, is a positive existing initiative that provides support and intervention specifically for men. Existing NPYWC groups such as the lived experience group (Malparara-Malparara) and the Uti Kulintjaku Watiku Project are highlighted as positive models to support a women and men's violence program as well. This is visually represented below by an NPYWC Director in 2024, who states, "Women and Men together, happy family, working together happily. What happened here? Something happened. We need to talk to the man and the woman. To sort out what happened. We need a programme."



This direction signifies a pivotal shift towards a community-based approach in the conversations that affect Anangu. Another NPYWC Director (2024) noted that early intervention and early childhood learning and support affects how the cycle of violence and crime continues. We need to "make sure you get everyone in the community. Those who want to come, listen." This insight is further illustrated by an NPYWC Director living in the NPY lands, through her drawing.



NPY Women's Council members, Directors and other key community members, including young people consistently raise their concerns with us about violence, a lack of educational outcomes and employment opportunities. We hear this through our AGM's, community meetings, case management activities, and interagency meetings as well as by young people themselves through the course of our day-to-day work. Anangu youth in particular need their voice heard. These conversations have sparked

hope and ignited new discussions about the potential for Anangu to collaborate on primary prevention. These grassroots discussions are vital, and funding to support this collaboration is essential.

2. Measurement and Evaluation of the Targets

Measurement of CTG targets relies heavily on deficit-based indicators that fail to capture the complexity of Anangu way of life. Evaluation frameworks should not be co-designed but co-created with Indigenous communities to ensure data sovereignty and to incorporate qualitative and culturally relevant measures. Furthermore, data collection and reporting must be disaggregated to better reflect local contexts such as the NPY Lands.

Drawing on the work of the Australian Childhood Foundation (ACF) and NPYWC, the Strengthening Community Capacity to End Violence (SCCTEV) Framework points to the principle that for any program to be effective for Anangu, "it must be grounded in the resources that emanate from cultural ways of living and relating."¹¹ The SCCTEV framework continues:

"Strategies [...] will not work if they are imposed in the community [...] Working alongside the community will facilitate dialogue which unearths the changes that communities are already making and indeed wanting to make more of. Such acts of resistance for Aboriginal communities are sourced in their experiences of their culture and its expression in forms of ceremony, origin stories, healing practices, spiritual beliefs and values. It is the strength of connection to these community and cultural qualities that have been identified as pivotal."¹²

An example of this is reflected in target 12 - children in out of home care. According to AIHW data, the rates of out-of-home care are consistently highest in remote and very remote categories across WA, SA and NT. This data although not a specific reflection of the NPY lands, reveals the impact of child protection intervention in our communities.¹³ When working with Anangu facing the child protection system, intersectional issues such as housing, health, transportation, healing, and cross-border complexities are inherently intertwined with each engagement. Also, DFV is a significant factor contributing to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in interactions with the child protection system and in out-of-home care¹⁴. Often women find themselves in a precarious position, where child protection services can opt to remove children if there is a violent relationship present. However, without security – housing, money, familial support nearby – this leaves her with very little choice, agency and safety. NPYWC's Child & Family Wellbeing (CFWS) funding and service delivery models are designed to assist children and families by addressing their needs holistically. Integrating Anangu world views and child-rearing practices, we build on the family strengths to keep children safe, happy and protected within their communities and culture. We deliver this support through trauma-informed, therapeutic case management alongside ongoing child advocacy. This work reflects the importance of addressing intersectional needs within a multidisciplinary response.

A critical barrier affecting Anangu in the child protection system is the major challenge of cross-border bureaucracy. Since the creation of the National Framework for the Protection of Australia's Children we have been advocating for a tri-state agreement on child protection matters. Currently there exists cross-border justice legislation for the tri-state area that gives sworn police cross jurisdictional powers and also enables magistrates to operate under different state/territory law: "If this can be done for Justice Departments involving police, why can't it be done for Child Protection Departments, which also involves courts and child protection officers?"¹⁵ The impact of trauma on children and families is not fully understood or made relevant within child protection bodies. As a result, children experiencing trauma are often subjected to multiple placements because carers can't manage the complex behaviour.

There is overwhelming evidence that supports the argument that children are better off within a family or kinship network within communities than in child protection.

NPYWC is not suggesting ACCOs take on more of a statutory role but rather become prioritised and more involved in the investigation and placement of children with kinship carers. This would allow children to be returned to community faster and mitigate the risk of children entering the criminal justice system and increasing the rates of adult incarceration. Department of Children & Families (DCF) often say they ask families about options for placement and are unable to find one, however NPYWC has found when we conduct our own inquiry, we can find multiple options for safe placement of a child, due in large part to the intricate, binding and healthy family connections communities have out bush. Many families for instance self-refer to NPYWC with problems, but not to DCF because of the lack of trust held towards statutory bodies.

To enhance an alternative approach, NPYWC secured funding for the Improving Multidisciplinary Responses (IMR) program in October 2023. This grant initiative is designed to support the reimagining of multidisciplinary service delivery for First Nations communities across Australia, emphasising cultural knowledge, frameworks, and response strategies. In May 2024, the NPYWC's IMR program was renamed the Palyawanungku Palyantjaku Project, symbolising an approach that is practical, impactful, and rooted in best practices for positive outcomes. Palyawanungku means 'going about doing something practical and real, in a good way (best practice) that will affect the recipient positively.' This project's objectives include fostering an Anangu-led design process, streamlining care for children and families facing multiple and complex needs through a coordinated multidisciplinary response, and offering the wider service system in the NPY region an opportunity to better meet these needs and adapt evaluation and measurement capabilities.

3. Priority of the Targets in the National Partnership Agreement and Progress under the National Priority Reforms

While the National Partnership Agreement outlines commitments to reduce disparities, some targets have not received adequate prioritisation in implementation. There is a need for greater accountability and alignment between federal, state, and territory governments to ensure sustained and collaborative efforts. Often "there is little to no coordination between Commonwealth and State and Territory governments who often consult on the same or similar things."¹⁶ The NPY region faces additional challenges due to cross-border complexities, where differing jurisdictional approaches to child protection and incarceration, for example, create inconsistent outcomes. As depicted through the SCCTEV Framework, it is community-led initiatives, such as NPYWCs Child & Family Wellbeing program and Youth Program that continues to provide valuable models for culturally responsive care for young people, their families and communities.

For Anangu children, it starts with opportunities in early childcare and education centres (ECEC). However, consistent availability of ECECs in communities is not guaranteed. SNAICC CEO, Catherine Liddle states, ECEC's play an important role assisting "families and kin to access support services if and when necessary. They can make all the difference to setting children up for a successful transition to formal education, and close the gaps across a range of social and economic targets."

SNAICC's Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services Final Report (2024) sets out seven recommendations to ensure universal access to early childhood education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Such a funding model should "provide long-term certainty for sustainable service provision alongside flexibility to adjust funding regularly to account for changes in community needs and costs of inflation over time."¹⁷ For example, early childhood centres are affected by staff

shortages, English only speaking teachers, insufficient resources (including technological and digital resources) as well as infrastructure issues.

In 2022, a day care in Apatula (Finke, NT) community was closed for several months due to asbestos. Similarly in Kaltukatjara (Docker River, NT), an ECEC was closed for extended periods of time due to staff shortages. With no other appropriate space in the community to gather, these young children were without early learning and support. It is insufficient to collect and measure data about children commencing school who are developmentally on track (target 4) when we are not also collecting data on the schools and early childhood centres in community, their resources, the environment governing the schools and the supports or lack thereof that teachers have to critically and meaningfully support the complex needs of children and their families. How useful is aggregated data in the absence of individualised or contextualised data on the social and cultural circumstances of a child and family's community and the wider social-cultural environment in which they live? The answer is simple: "Not very."¹⁸ For example, CTG data inadequately represents children with a disability or special needs. Determined as either "children with special needs status" and "children needing further assessments" does not capture the range of disabilities or development needs - including trauma - that First Nations children experience, nor does it capture the socio-economic determinants that underpin these needs such as access to, and affordability of, nearby diagnostic or specialist services. If this is not captured, then funding and policy won't adequately support outcomes.

When early childhood education is culturally relevant, it empowers children by nurturing their confidence and security. This empowerment is linked directly to their health and wellbeing, creating a solid foundation for their future academic and social success. "It is critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to have opportunities for cultural education alongside mainstream education, beginning with early years education. The development of a strong cultural identity supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in school readiness."¹⁹

The second evaluation report of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground) in Central Australia for example, provides strong evidence of growth and development in almost all key areas of the CG Approach - addressing the key social, cultural and economic determinants of life-long opportunity and wellbeing starting with children, growing with them and their families from birth through to adulthood.²⁰

4. Approach to Measurements and Targets that reflect the strengths of First Nations cultures, as opposed to an emphasis on deficits, through providing alternative and complementary measures

Current CTG measures are largely deficit-based, focusing on what is lacking rather than recognising the resilience, knowledge, strengths and importantly, diversity, of First Nations communities. A more strengths-based, remote specific approach should include measures that capture community-led initiatives, cultural participation, language preservation, and positive social determinants of health.

It is critical here to highlight issues relating to Indigenous data. Dr Maggie Walter writes about the Indigenous data paradox²¹ where "we have both too much and too little data". On the 'too little' side, there is in fact "a data desert":

"There are no data that engage more than cursorily with our lifeworlds – that is, the embodied experience of the social, political, historical and cultural realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives as Indigenous people. Nor do the data address our development needs. The little data available [is] locked behind data walls such as with NATSISS data at the Australian Bureau of Statistics, or they are in aggregate format only at national or state level."

This is in direct contradiction to Australia being a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which makes clear in Articles 3, 23, 32 and 118 the right to data and development self-determination.

This reflects a deep failure, where on the 'too much' side is the labelling of Indigenous peoples against 'normal' Australians, which implies "cultural and geographic homogeneity". This reinforces simplistic and decontextualised narratives about communities that are ultimately "designed to capture deficits and service government priorities". The impact of this is severe, where policy, funding and indeed social attitudes continue to disenfranchise communities like ours.

In the context of CTG, it is frustrating that the statistics which give life to the framework are in fact part of the 'problem', "reproducing on a seemingly endless repeat the trope of Indigenous deficit." We need data that is "meaningful and useful, informing a comprehensive, nuanced narrative of who we are as peoples, of our culture, our communities, our resilience, goals and successes."

As reflected in conversation with one of NPYWC's Directors in 2025, "no information is free" which relates to the fact that data should not be extracted from or about communities without meaningful contribution back to communities. NPYWC's recommendation is to institute a national Bureau of Indigenous Data that could report on specific community programs and ACCO initiatives such as NPYWC's Iwara and Walytjapiti programs. Some further information about these programs below identifies the important link in funding, measuring and collecting data on programs that operate in culturally safe, remote contexts. It is clear from these examples that the work and ingenuity of ACCOs create practices and guidelines that not only benefit the families they serve but also add value to wider non-Indigenous communities.

NPYWC Walytjapiti (Family) Program

Approximately ten years ago the program received Government funding to deliver 'intensive family support services'. Attached to the funding was the mandatory use of two assessment tools when working with families. Both assessment tools were mainstream designed, punitive and lacked cultural understanding for ways Anangu raise their children. The assessment tools did not capture nor recognise how poverty and structural restrictions limit parental capacity. NPYWC were not consulted about the appropriateness of the assessment tools or for how best to work with families to increase child safety. NPYWC were able to maintain the allocated funding but self-resourced and self-invested into the program to create a more appropriate and strengths-based family assessment tool that was underpinned by trauma-informed practice. This tool has since been incorporated into funding requirements for intensive family support services nationally and has been recognised for its advancement of utilising family strengths and culture.

Although the outcome is positive for this program, ACCOs are frequently tasked with needing to advocate for the importance of their knowledge and practice when working with families. ACCOs are not automatically seen as the "go-to" experts nor consulted for how funding and guidelines should look. The onus continues to sit with ACCOs to argue and justify their role in decision making for what is best for the very communities and families they serve. This takes time, money and resources that could be better supported and placed with direct practice with families.

NPYWC Iwara (Pathway) Program

The NPYWC's Iwara Program came out of a community concern for the job pathways available for young people. Although there is a growing rate for the completion of secondary education, there is little to show that this is creating better post-schooling outcomes and job security for young people. NPYWC has been able to place 97% of the Iwara graduates into jobs. The program is a direct investment into growing and sustaining an Anangu workforce for the organisation and the region. Unlike other programs, the Iwara program is responsive to the needs of young people and supports sustainable workforce development for young people with a clear and tangible pathway for employment. NPYWC has evaluated and advocated the effectiveness of the program but there is still no interest from Government to invest and financially support this program.

5. The possibility of incorporating broad ideas about wellness into measurements, with a view to promoting mental, physical, and spiritual health and wellbeing

Beyond existing quantitative indicators, alternative qualitative measures such as community wellbeing assessments, Indigenous cultural audits, and local success stories should be integrated into CTG reporting. Metrics such as community connection and social cohesion, cultural identity, community Elders' engagement, language retention rates, and community-driven solutions provide a more comprehensive picture of transformation. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Indigenous Australians who frequently engage in cultural activities report higher levels of wellbeing and mental health outcomes. In the NPY Lands, where Anangu cultural practices remain strong, embedding cultural indicators—such as the intergenerational sharing of cultural knowledge, connection to Country, and community leadership—into CTG measurement frameworks will pave the way for improved outcomes. Engaging Indigenous researchers and knowledge holders in designing these alternative measurements will enhance their relevance and applicability.

This can also be achieved by integrating traditional healing practices, land-based programs, and Indigenous-led mental health services into policy frameworks. Evidence from the Lowitja Institute suggests that programs incorporating cultural healing approaches lead to improved mental health outcomes among First Nations populations.²² In the NPY region, models such as traditional healing practices and on-Country education and recreational initiatives assist in improving health and wellbeing outcomes. NPYWC's ability to leverage existing community knowledge and governance structures to design localised measurement tools will better reflect the lived experience and realities of Anangu communities. This requires a dedicated commitment to increased funding for ACCOs however. An example of this is reflected in the bush trips and camps undertaken by the Uti Kulintjaku (UK) Watiku ('Men') Project and evaluation²³:

"Just as I've learned from my grandfather, [the Uti Kulintjaku Watiku Project] enables me to educate my grandsons in a really good way... young men are listening and understanding and really taking on board the things that they need to survive well into the future, to live." (Senior Uti Kulintjaku Watiku team member, 2021)

Other NPYWC projects that are central to harm reduction and healing are underpinned by a whole of community approach. This includes the Malparara-Malparara Project, the UK Project working with women, as well as young people being supported through Kulintja Palyaringkunyjtaku ('KP') Project Officers regarding their health and wellbeing. It is a critical point to understand that to operate in a culturally safe way and to lead to meaningful change, a project's process must be understood as an outcome. This is the Malparara-Malparara and UK way – culturally appropriate and holistic. A quote from one of our Directors points to the value of these models: "Uti Kulintjaku is a new way, using the old way, and bringing it into the new world."

Indeed, target 14 of significantly and sustainably reducing the rate of suicide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (toward zero), categorised through the outcome of "People enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing", fails to capture the knowledge of varying communities about what "social and emotional wellbeing" actually means.

At NPYWC, we have anecdotally heard from staff working in remote communities that a significant challenge they see in the mental health landscape is the polarity between being 'well' and being 'suicidal'. As mental-health literacy is primarily articulated through Western-hegemonic discourse only available in the English language, it's important that culturally relevant programs that support wellbeing and healing are prioritised and in language. The language of social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing needs to account for the varying modalities that they may be expressed through. Language tools at present do not relay the complex mental health story for Anangu and therefore are poorly reflected in the data and measurements impacting suicide in our communities.

An alternative and culturally considerate way of looking at suicide and suicidality is reflected in the writings of Canadian researcher and academic Jeffrey Ansloos. Ansloos is Cree and English, and a citizen of Fisher River Cree Nation (Ochekwi-Sipi; Treaty 5). There is an emerging discourse in critical suicidology that is relevant for CTG as it challenges assumptions about best practice approaches to suicide prevention.²⁴ Ansloos frames this discussion through a health justice lens and resists narrow definitions of health and justice in order to recentre “Indigenous communities’ fights to address the structures that thwart life.” This consideration can be interpreted meaningfully when thinking about suicide in our communities, as we too continue to experience neocolonial violence.²⁵ For example, UK was initially funded as a suicide prevention program, however has evolved to be a holistic, wellbeing and healing program over the years which reflects the actual needs and wants of Anangu.

Connecting to the earlier discussion around data, the aggregated data around suicide for First Nations communities fails to capture the variation of rates across remote communities. As NPYWC has long upheld the belief that a one-size fits all approach does not satisfy the diverse and dynamic needs of individual communities, this is still true for addressing rates of suicide. A realistic, culturally informed, harm-reduction approach should be anchored in the “social and material concerns of communities” and evidence-based research around it should be “ecological, contextually reflective, structurally-attuned and politically active.”²⁶ Meaningful approaches would ideally focus on life promotion (rather than suicide prevention) and “foreground Indigenous resiliency and sociopolitical alternatives to colonialism and racism.”²⁷ An Anangu centred voice to this issue for example, would instruct policies that are unique to the needs of each community, where existing knowledge and strategies that resist suicidality would be acknowledged, amplified and funded in order to continue stewarding a way forward. If this target within CTG critically focused on “addressing the complex forms of violence which make life unliveable”²⁸, opportunities for significant change and transformation would actualise:

“We need to do more than merely close the gap, we need to develop an approach to suicide prevention research which can nourish vitality, thriving, and wholeness of spirit in our communities.”²⁹

This shift away from dominant views about suicide, profits from interrogating what life affirming actions can be addressed that pave way for self-determinism in a “world of constant colonial encroachment.”³⁰ In order to support mental health in our diverse and dynamic communities, governments need to understand how it connects with spirituality and relationality which “is at the core of Indigenous young peoples’ conceptions of mental health and wellbeing.”³¹ For Anangu, a deep interconnectedness with wellbeing exists in relation to wellbeing of land which “highlights the need for land-based healing interventions.”³² This may be “not only instrumental to coping, but as inspiring and nourishing [the] desire for living” and offer “a type of future orientation that is vital for health promotion.”³³

In Australia, innovative and culturally attuned research led by The University of Melbourne’s ALIVE consortium reveal how culturally responsive practice can transform the impacts of WEIRD (Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic) health interventions, specifically related to mental health, wellbeing and spirituality. In line with narrative inquiry, their work reflects an “Aboriginal-led approach to centring Indigenous modalities, so that forms such as ‘yarning’, storytelling, and structured physical activity in cultural contexts can also provide modes of engaging in health and wellbeing conversations, in connection with Country and culture”.³⁴

This approach aligns with Anangu ways of knowing, being and doing in that “It privileges the lived experience of Indigenous people and people experiencing mental ill-health and suicidality (as it might be termed) in dominant culture service settings, who have consistently called for more experiential, connected, and holistic systems of care.”³⁵ This shift is a powerful reminder that culturally responsive, Indigenous created and led programs in the field of mental health, wellbeing and spirituality offer deep and meaningful alternatives to promoting life and reducing suicide.

6. Opportunities for building on and expanding the current Closing the Gap framework; and any other related matters.

To improve outcomes, the CTG framework must evolve to better reflect disaggregated data, be more inclusive of Indigenous governance models and prioritise self-determined data collection. In addition, we reiterate and highlight the critical priority of addressing fundamental basic needs in our communities in order to combat the underlying social determinants of the targets:

- **Target 4: Children thrive in early years**
- **Target 10: Adults are not overly represented in the criminal justice system**
- **Target 12: Children are not overrepresented in the child protection system**
- **Target 13: Families and households are safe**
- **Target 14: People enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing**

This includes improved domestic and family violence prevention programs and addressing the costs of poverty. A better commitment from mainstream services in partnering with ACCOs, as well improving funding for ACCOs to deliver culturally safe services and combat significant workforce vacancies is also desperately required.

Addressing the regression of key CTG targets, particularly within the NPY Lands, requires a fundamental shift towards Indigenous-led solutions, strengths-based measurements and holistic wellness frameworks. I urge the Select Committee to prioritise these recommendations in its deliberations.

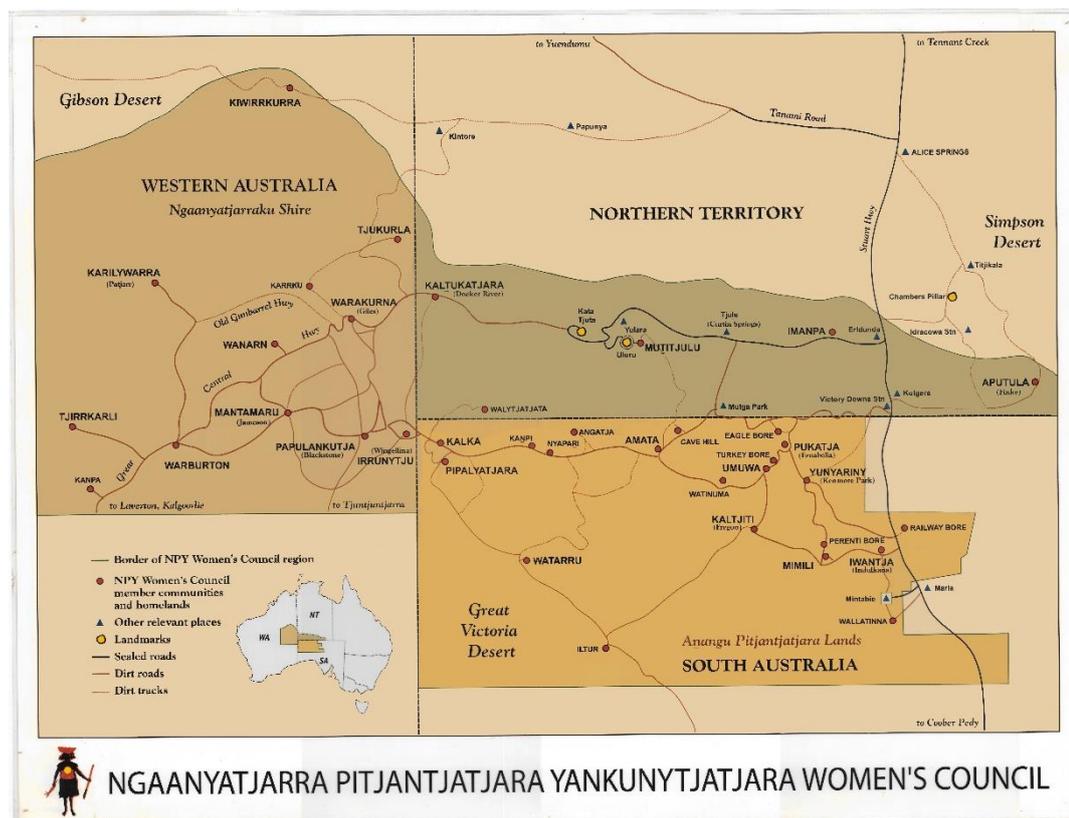
This concludes NPYWC submission for the Measuring Outcomes for first Nations Communities. Thank you for providing NPYWC with the opportunity to comment on this important work, and please do not hesitate to contact us if there are any further questions about what we have raised in this submission.

Kind Regards,

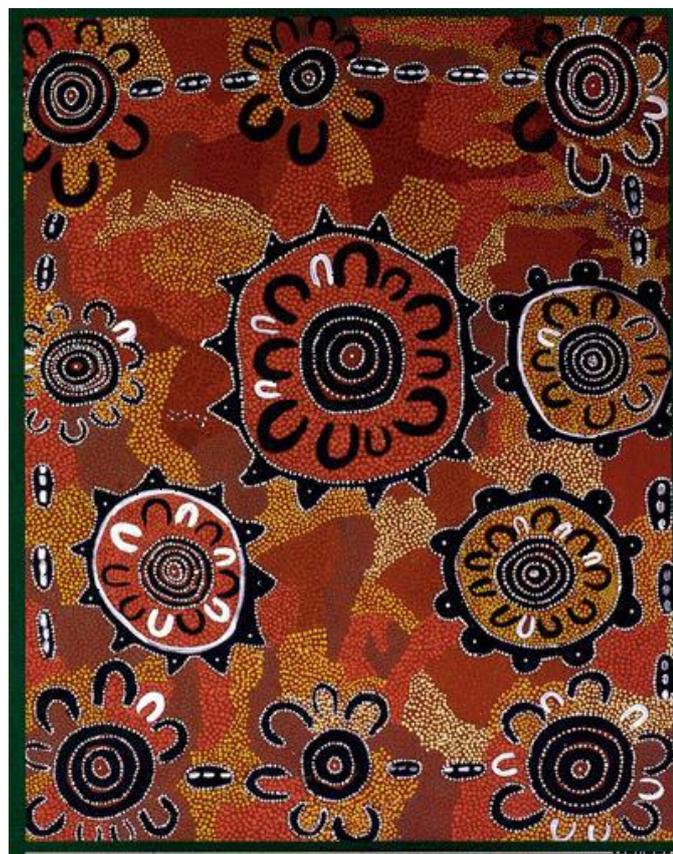
Liza Balmer
Chief Executive Officer
21 February 2025

[NPYWC Annual Report 2023-24](#)
[NPYWC Strategic Plan 2024-2029](#)

Annexure A:



Annexure B:



"This painting tells the story of how the NPY Women's Council was started in 1980. I made a cassette tape and sent it around to all the communities for women to listen to. The black line going around the painting with the white marks is the cassette travelling around to all the women in communities.

All the women listened to that cassette about the idea of starting up a Women's Council. They sat down and talked together. Then we all came together at Kanpi to have our first meeting together. That is the big circle in the middle with all us women sitting around. This was the first time we came together, all us Pitjantjatjara, Ngaanyatjarra, Yankunytjatjara women." - Mantatjara Wilson (deceased)

- ¹ <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/6-priority-reform-areas/two#55b>
- ² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-06/federal-government-live-842-million-nt-remote-communities/104905750>
- ³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-10-15/nt-clp-government-to-bring-law-and-order-agenda-to-parliament/104442022>
- ⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-02-19/nt-legal-crisis-how-naaja-alice-springs-lawyer-shortage-happened/103472878> and <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-10-02/legal-aid-nt-to-cut-critical-legal-services-over-funding-fallout/104422638>
- ⁵ <https://nit.com.au/17-01-2025/15684/human-rights-watch-australia-indigenous-justice-children-rights-first-nations>
- ⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/australia>
- ⁷ <https://www.hrlc.org.au/news/nt-jails-10-year-olds>
- ⁸ Miles H, McAlister M & Bricknell S 2024. *Deaths in custody in Australia 2023–24*. Statistical Report no. 49. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/sr77772>
- ⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-02/joyleen-butler-high-school-graduate-kaltukatjara-remote-nt/104691270>
- ¹⁰ Adangu NPYWC Director, 2024
- ¹¹ <https://www.npywc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Strengthening-Community-Capacity-to-End-Violence-26June18.pdf>. Page 15.
- ¹² <https://www.npywc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Strengthening-Community-Capacity-to-End-Violence-26June18.pdf>. Page 23.
- ¹³ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-insights/contents/insights/supporting-children>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Public-Submissions-Discussion-Paper-National-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Family-Safety-Plan-Engagement.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Liza Balmer, NPYWC CEO, for the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory 2017.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/information-sheet-reflection-engagement-outcomes.pdf>. Page 7.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/240507-ACCO-Funding-Report.pdf>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/voice-indigenous-data-beyond-disadvantage/>
- ¹⁹ https://assets.nationbuilder.com/theparenthood/pages/1999/attachments/original/1725929722/IMPACTFUL_FINAL_DOUBLE_PAGES-compressed.pdf?1725929722
- ²⁰ https://childrenground.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CG_CA-Evaluation-Report_20-22_DIGITAL.pdf
- ²¹ <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/voice-indigenous-data-beyond-disadvantage/>
- ²² https://www.lowitja.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Lowitja_CultDetReport_210421_D14_WEB.pdf
- ²³ https://www.npywc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/UK-Watiku-Project_Executive-Summary_Evaluation-Report_Dec-2022.pdf
- ²⁴ Ansloos, J. (2018). Rethinking Indigenous Suicide. *IJIH*, 13(2),8-28. DOI 10.18357/ijih.v13i2.32061 <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijih/article/view/32061>. Page 10.
- ²⁵ Zantingh, D., Hey, B., Ansloos, J. (2024). Unsettling Settler-Colonial Suicidology: Indigenous Theories of Justice in Indigenous Suicide Research. In: Dueck, A., Sundararajan, L. (eds) *Values and Indigenous Psychology in the Age of the Machine and Market*. Palgrave Studies in Indigenous Psychology. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-53196-5_6. Abstract.
- ²⁶ Ansloos, J. (2018). Rethinking Indigenous Suicide. *IJIH*, 13(2),8-28. DOI 10.18357/ijih.v13i2.32061 <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijih/article/view/32061>. Page 19.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid. Page 23.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ansloos, J. (2018). Rethinking Indigenous Suicide. *IJIH*, 13(2),8-28. DOI 10.18357/ijih.v13i2.32061 <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/ijih/article/view/32061>. Page 22.
- ³¹ Ansloos, Jeffrey, and Elissa Dent. "Our Spirit Is like a Fire": Conceptualizing Intersections of Mental Health, Wellness, and Spirituality with Indigenous Youth Leaders across Canada." *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2 Nov. 2021, <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/jisd/article/view/72562/55257>. Page 43.
- ³² Ibid. Page 45.
- ³³ Ibid. Page 46.
- ³⁴ Orcher, P., Palmer, V. J., & Yunkaporta, T. (2025). Danger Is a Signal, Not a State: Bigaagarri—An Indigenous Protocol for Dancing Around Threats to Wellbeing. *Social Sciences*, 14(1), 27. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14010027>. Page 14.
- ³⁵ Ibid. Page 2.