



20 October 2014

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Secretary

**Re: Out of Home Care Inquiry**

The Healing Foundation is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation with a focus on community led healing solutions. Building culturally strong, community designed and delivered pathways to healing the Healing Foundation:

- funds and supports healing programs targeted at individuals, families and communities
- builds the evidence and knowledge base for best practice in Indigenous healing
- builds leadership and the capacity of communities and workers to respond to trauma through education and training

In the past two years the Healing Foundation has contributed to a number of inquiries and in collaboration with SNAICC and QATSCIPP produced a discussion paper aimed at stemming the shocking rates of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system, including out of home care.

The Healing Foundation has also been leading the national development of Intergenerational Trauma healing projects that have resulted in evidence based healing practice being provided to support our children and families heal and prevent their entry into the child protection system.

We thus welcome the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into Out of Home Care and urge a focus on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Colonisation and the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families have caused profound trauma in many individuals, families and communities, often resulting in disconnection from family, community, language, culture and land. This disconnection continues to effect the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today (Atkinson, Nelson and Atkinson in Purdie, Dudgeon and Walker, 2010).

It is clear to us that in considering the range of factors impacting the safety and wellbeing of our children, that the abuse and neglect of children is a symptom and that the links between

trauma caused by colonisation and the forcible removal of children from their families, coupled with the underlying social and economic disadvantage, is not widely understood.

Children and their families need to be supported from the very beginning to prevent abuse and neglect and eliminate the need to separate children from their families and culture. Despite this being acknowledged by most service providers and government departments, expenditure on out-of home care continues to increase. It is vital for a shift to occur from expenditure on reactive child protection services to a focus on expenditure of family support services and child and family wellbeing.

*Family is the cornerstone of Indigenous culture. The maintenance of connections to family and community forms the basis of a child's identity as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, their cultural connectedness and the emergence of their spirituality. Family provides valuable social capital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. (Achieving Stable and Strong Out of Home Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, SNAICC, 2005).*

In our experience where families are disempowered and effectively excluded from decision making processes it means that there is little recognition of family as social capital or as strength more broadly. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families benefit from the breadth of their connections and the commitment of kin to raising and growing their children up within a community context.

This is particularly important for our children in out of home care as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a collective identity and thus their kin and relationship to culture is a central part of building strong spiritual and mental health. Many services providing out of home care nationally do not fully understand this as central to the children's health and as such many of our children are in distress. Many families have now experienced five generations of removal and the continued trauma that this results in is not recognised nor addressed by child protection systems.

Our kinship carers are offered little professional training and support and are not valued for the central role they play in connecting our children to their family and culture and the importance of this for our children's survival. This cannot be addressed without the sustained support of a thriving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and family sector. To date only two States, New South Wales and Victoria have placed any emphasis on this process.

Furthermore, in our opinion the impact of trauma for our people has been underplayed in service delivery design and we continue to see the poor outcomes for our people. Trauma informed services need to be central to creating a shift in the overwhelming disadvantage that our people experience. Trauma-informed services have a deep understanding of trauma and the impact trauma has on individuals, families and communities. All aspects of their operations are seen through a trauma lens. Responding to trauma and providing opportunities for healing and recovery is critical to their success.

To assist you in your deliberations we have attached the following three papers that outline our evidence and knowledge:

1. Our Children Our Dreaming – A call for a more just approach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

2. Our submission into the Queensland Child Protection Inquiry
3. Growing our Children up Strong and Deadly – healing for children and young people

In summary we urge the Committee to consider the following when looking at how to stem the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out of home care system.

- a focus on healing for children, young people, families and communities
- the development of a trauma informed system and organisations able to meet effectively the widespread distress our people suffer
- holistic service provision that is designed, developed and delivered from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview and is driven and provided by our people
- an effective community engagement strategy that enables communities to truly take responsibility for their children and a supportive environment to assist them to achieve this.

Yours sincerely

Richard Weston  
CEO