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Senate Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

National Sorry Day Committee Submission

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

Dear Committee Secretary,

Please find attached our submission to the Senate Inquiry into the funding and administration of mental health services. The National Sorry Day Committee (NSDC) advocates on behalf of members of the Stolen Generations across Australia, who were removed and separated from their families on the basis of their Aboriginal heritage. We are grateful for this opportunity to impress upon the Committee the distinct and urgent needs of Stolen Generations members in terms of social and emotional well-being and appropriate services. We consent to this submission being uploaded to the Committee website.

Yours sincerely

Helen Moran and Sally Fitzpatrick
Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Co-chairs

29 July 2011

Senate Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services

National Sorry Day Committee Submission

1. Background

The National Sorry Day Committee (NSDC) advocates on behalf of members of the Stolen Generations across Australia. Its work includes coordinating events around National Sorry Day (May 26) and the Anniversary of the National Apology (February 13) every year. It also campaigns for a comprehensive Government response to the recommendations of *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (HREOC, 1997).

The issue of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing is of key concern to Stolen Generations survivors and their descendants and families. In 2010, the NSDC entered into a Working Partnership¹ with the Australian Government recognizing the need to improve services and support healing initiatives driven by the Stolen Generations. On National Sorry Day 2011, the NSDC released the Stolen Generations Working Partnership Scorecard² to measure progress across a range of policy and program areas for Stolen Generations, which included recommendations focusing on mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

2. Establishing Stolen Generations as a special needs group in public policy

This submission will focus explicitly on the needs of the Stolen Generations, who have unique mental health and social and emotional wellbeing needs in addition to those needs that characterize the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The NSDC acknowledges and supports the views put forward by the Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association in its submission to this Senate Inquiry. Their comments and recommendations relate to Indigenous mental health more generally.

The *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* collected data on 5,289 Indigenous children between 0-17 years. The survey “was conducted in 2002 and enables reliable population estimates of Western Australian Aboriginal children and young people living in households where one or more parents/carers and/or grandparents were forcibly separated from family or forcibly relocated away from traditional lands. ... [It also] allowed systematic comparisons to be made of the associated health and wellbeing outcomes for the survey children and their parents/carers in households affected by forced separation or forced relocation in contrast to outcomes observed in households not affected by these experiences.” (Kulungu Research Network, 2008).

Of that sample, carers of Aboriginal children who had been forcibly separated from their natural families fared less well than those not forcibly removed on a number of indicators including being “1.61 times more likely to report the overuse of alcohol caused problems in the household” and being “1.50 times more likely to have had contact with Mental Health Services in Western Australia” (Kulungu Research Network, 2008). The impacts of separation are also transmitted across and between generations; i.e., “children of Indigenous carers who had been forcibly separated from their families were more than twice as likely to be at high risk of incurring clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties, and had twice the rates of alcohol and other drug use” (Zubrick et al., 2005 as cited in Thomson et al., 2010).

¹ <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/stolengenerations/Pages/StolenGenerationsWorkingPartnership.aspx>

² <http://www.nsd.org.au/images/stories/pdf/StolenGenerationsWorkingPartnershipScorecard2011.pdf>

In 2004, a small Northern Territory study of nine adult Stolen Generations survivors reported that: “The clinical picture shared by all interviewees was consistent with a contemporary understanding of the harmful impact of chronic trauma on the developing self.” Despite the small sample, it found “universally high abnormal scores” on the *Goldberg Short (18 item) Anxiety and Depression Questionnaire* (mean total score 16.4, Depression 7.8, Anxiety 8.6) support degree of distress. “Specific issues of cultural identity conflict were also painfully salient” (Petchkovsky, San Roque, Jurra, & Butler, 2004).

Other research demonstrates that an Indigenous child removed before the age of 10 is almost twice as likely as other Aboriginal people to be imprisoned on more than five occasions and to have attempted suicide. Of a representative sample of 789 inmates in NSW correctional centres in 1996, 235 were identified as Indigenous. Information on removal from parents was available for 84 per cent of the Indigenous inmates, with 34 per cent (68) reporting they had been removed as children. Findings on the health and wellbeing of those removed as a child were compared with those not removed. “In terms of the long-term social and mental health indicators, the removed prisoners were significantly more likely to have been imprisoned on more than 5 previous occasions (35.8% vs. 17.1%), to have been subject to child sexual assault (30.9% vs. 11.5%), and to have attempted suicide in the past (38.2% vs. 20.8%)” (Egger & Butler, 2000, p. 454).

In 1991, the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* identified that of the 99 people who died in custody “forty-three of them experienced childhood separation from their natural families through intervention by the State authorities, mission or other institutions” (RCIADIC, 1991, s 1.2.17). It also sent a strong message of the obligation on all governments to address these effects comprehensively.

In 2003 the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs [MCATSIA] moved to create a direct link between the *Bringing them home* report recommendations and “the COAG reconciliation agenda and thereby to the OID [Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage] framework”. According to the 2006 MCATSIA report, which was based on the OID framework and selected NATSISS³ and NATSIHS⁴ data, there is “evidence to suggest that those people who were removed⁵ suffered poorer outcomes across a range of discrete, albeit disparate, socioeconomic indicators” (MCATSIA, 2006).

This held for nine of the comparisons, and the report notes that a high measurement error in the removed population indicator statistics “was the main cause for the failure of the remaining thirteen comparisons to report any difference between the removed and non-removed populations”. The report was also unable to provide jurisdictional breakdown. It should also be noted that there is an inherent disjunction/tension between the social economic focus of the OID indicator framework and the recommendations of the *Bringing them home* report, which were to “achieve social justice, strengthen cultural identity and raise community awareness” (MCATSIA, 2006).

Unfortunately MCATSIA’s focus then shifted and recognition of Stolen Generations as a special needs group within the Indigenous population quietly disappeared from public focus. National data regarding Stolen Generations is notoriously difficult to ascertain, anecdotally due to the multiple jurisdictions and agencies involved, and possibly also because people choose not to or find it difficult to make their histories known. The *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* identified that around 12.3 percent (or 1,280) of primary carers and 12.3 per cent (or 670) of secondary carers reported they had been subject to being “‘taken away’ from their natural family by ‘a mission, the government or welfare agency’” (Kulungu Research Network, 2008). Whilst not a representative sample, Wave 2 of *Footprints in Time, the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous*

³ NATSISS is the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*.

⁴ NATSIHS is the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey*.

⁵ Described later in the report as those “impacted upon by the policies of forcible removal”.

Children, showed that of the approximately 1,460 families interviewed: “Over a third (34 per cent) of *Footprints in Time* families said that either they or their relatives had been taken away from their families” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p. 18).

The Australian Parliament’s Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008 brought their specific issues back to the fore. The latest enunciation of the Australian Government’s commitment is seen through the *Stolen Generations Working Partnership*⁶ (launched in May 2010).

Recommendations:

1. *That Stolen Generations be recognised as a distinct special needs group within the broader Indigenous population within the new National Mental Health Road Map and any new policy/program frameworks concerning Indigenous mental health, and social and emotional well-being.*
2. *That Stolen Generations be recognised as a distinct special needs group within the next COAG Closing the Gap package, to be renegotiated in 2012 – including specific indicators and performance measurements to encourage attention towards this vulnerable group.*
3. *That Stolen Generations representatives be included in consultations being conducted by DOHA on priorities for new research funding by the National Health and Medical Research Council.*
4. *That the National Mental Health Commission collect and collate specific Stolen Generations data, in addition to Indigenous data more generally (ToR (g)).*

3. Comments re Specific Terms of Reference

The adequacy of mental health funding and services for disadvantaged groups (ToR (f)(ii))

Adequacy of Services and Funding to the Stolen Generations

In 1997, Part 5 of the *Bringing them home* report identified that governments have been “slow to respond” to the effects of forcible removal on Indigenous people and that services must “at least operate in a fair and timely way without imposing additional harm on clients or potential clients. This requires that services take account of the variety of life circumstances and the extent and duration of the need for assistance in the Indigenous community”.⁷ The HREOC report suggested over 54 actions to take concerning the Stolen Generations, which include restitution and rehabilitation.

The *Bringing them home* report described at length the mental health impact of past policies of removal and its continuing effects on thousands of Stolen Generations survivors today. Mental disorders have been found to be the second highest cause of the burden of disease in the Indigenous population (Vos et al., 2007), and a strong contributing factor to the gap in Indigenous life expectancy (10%). Real rates of mental disorders would be higher than reported because Indigenous people, as the Government puts it, are “under-serviced” in all parts of Australia.

Stolen Generations survivors can be legitimately concerned about having their grief or trauma treated as a ‘mental illness’ or turned into an individual pathology, when they see it more as a rational and human reaction to unjust and tragic life events. This underlines the importance of healing models that are specifically designed by members of the Stolen Generations.

⁶ Available at

<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/indigenous/pubs/stolengenerations/Pages/StolenGenerationsWorkingPartnership.aspx>

⁷ See also <http://www.gwb.com.au/gwb/news/sorry/part5.rtf>

While the Australian Government funded the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation in 2009, which would have “a strong focus on the needs of the Stolen Generations” – this focus has not yet transpired into reality. NSDC is seeking a new partnership with the Foundation to achieve greater outcomes for the Stolen Generations.

Stolen Generations survivors and their families urgently need support but their needs⁸ are often compromised due to under-resourcing across the whole Indigenous mental health sector. This is illustrated below using the example of the Bringing Them Home Counsellors.

Bringing Them Home Counsellors

The Australian Government’s response to the *Bringing them home* report involved allocation of funding for new Bringing Them Home (BTH) Counsellors and Link-Up family reunification services.

BTH Counsellors provide counselling to individuals and families affected by past practices of forced removal and where possible integrate them into Link-Up Services, which support Stolen Generations members to trace their family history and potentially reunite with their families.

However as the BTH Counsellor funding was not accompanied by significant additional funding for social and emotional well-being amongst the wider Indigenous population, these Counsellors have often been drawn upon to service the broader community. Support for the Stolen Generations has been diluted as a result.

In the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Hunter (2002) commented on the Bringing Them Home Counsellor positions, stating that “often with little training or support, and confronted by enormous mental health needs, their impact is often questionable”.

Link-Up Coordinators have expressed, during previous national forums, the difficulty and frustration of engaging BTH Counsellors (especially in rural and remote locales).

The National Sorry Day Committee agrees that BTH Counsellors need to continue to be available to Stolen Generations, their families and descendants; however, meeting existing need for appropriate clinical care will require additional resources. Also, the limited salary structure and lack of career paths for BTH Counsellors continues to be raised as an issue and should be addressed as part of any changes. This is related to what the National Sorry Day Committee believes are the discriminatory lower rates of pay experienced by health professionals within the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector generally.

There are other concerns with the delivery of the Bringing Them Home Counsellor positions – many of which were highlighted in a 2007 review by Urbis Keys Young.⁹ A biennial review in 2010-11 is currently under consideration by the Department of Health and Ageing. Stakeholders like the National Sorry Day Committee would like to see the contents of that review.

The Government’s 2011-12 Budget changes relating to mental health (ToR (a))

The NSDC notes this year’s budget commitment of recurrent funding for the positions of BTH and Link Up Counsellors, for which the government is to be commended.

⁸ <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/stolen-generations-effects.html>

⁹ <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-oatsih-pubs-bth-eval>

The 2011 Budget also announced a consolidation of Social and Emotional Wellbeing initiatives, including Stolen Generations programs into one new program – the Social and Emotional Wellbeing program.

While funding has been continued for Indigenous Social and Emotional Well-being programs, family reunification and counselling services for the Stolen Generations, there is a risk that Stolen Generations' resources will be spread even more thinly across the community unless they are clearly underlined as a top funding priority.

The Stolen Generations population has some of the most complex mental health needs of any group in Australia and there remains a significant lack of mental health services appropriate to this group.

NSDC would like to ensure that the consolidation of these programs does not result in Stolen Generations measures being diluted or subsumed into a homogenous Indigenous client group. For example, the NSDC been instructed that Bringing Them Home Counsellors are to be referred to as Social and Emotional Well-being Counsellors, which over time could result in little or no focus provided to Stolen Generations survivors. The NSDC feels this is moving in the wrong direction and that any changes should strengthen the focus on Bringing Them Home.

There was also a commitment in the Budget to consult with stakeholders on the design of a new Social and Emotional Well-being framework. The last Social and Emotional Well-being Framework expired in 2009 and was never accompanied by new funding. The NSDC understands that the Australian Government intends to consult with stakeholders soon on how it will approach the development of the new framework. The NSDC strongly believes that the new framework needs to be different from the former one by being:

- accompanied by a serious funding package
- linked to an equity framework with targets in specific timeframes
- integrated into Closing the Gap and the 10 year Road Map for national mental health reform.

The last COAG Closing the Gap package expires in 2012 and negotiations will start soon on a new package. Mental health and social and emotional well-being should not be left out this time. Similarly the 10 year Road Map cannot be silent on Aboriginal mental health, and social and emotional well-being.

Recommendations:

5. *That the Australian Government agree to:*
 - i. *develop an Aboriginal mental health package as part of the next Closing the Gap agreement to start from 2013, and*
 - ii. *develop the package in partnership with Indigenous stakeholders, including Stolen Generations representatives.*
6. *That additional funding be directed to the newly consolidated Social and Emotional Wellbeing program (mentioned in the 2011 Budget) to ensure that funding increases for Stolen Generations' initiatives rather than being more thinly spread across the broader Indigenous population.*
7. *That any changes to the Bringing Them Home and Link-Up Counsellor program further advance the interests of Stolen Generations and are supported by Stolen Generations representatives.*
8. *That the Australian Government make available the latest review of the Bringing Them Home & Link-Up Caseworkers and Counsellor manuals by Urbis Keys Young and enable stakeholders like NSDC to effectively participate in future reform discussions.*
9. *That funding be provided to healing models, such as talking circles, that are designed by members of the Stolen Generations for Stolen Generations.*

Workforce shortage issues (ToR (e)(iii))

The National Sorry Day Committee notes that there continues to be a high level of burn out amongst BTH Counsellors and Link-Up Caseworkers and Counsellors. Workforce capacity is limited by challenges in recruiting to these positions. Whilst there are informal and formal networks in a number of jurisdictions there is no professional association supporting all Indigenous mental health/social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) counsellors at the national level. There are 700 Social and Emotional Well-being workers funded by OATSIH.

Since 2007, the Australian Government has funded some initiatives aimed at addressing the skills shortage amongst workers whose remit includes grief and loss. The creation of Workforce Support Units by the Department of Health and Ageing was an important step; despite difficulties in implementation. As part of this initiative, accredited training will be delivered by RTOs to mental health workers, Drug and Alcohol Workers and Family Reunion caseworkers. A Stolen Generations education module that is developed in partnership with Stolen Generations should be included in all of this training. Aunty Lorraine Peeters' learning modules on the Stolen Generations could be considered in this context.

Workforce development initiatives also need to continue. For several years a community controlled Bringing Them Home Counsellor Group Forum has operated in NSW. Forum members are counsellors and other SEWB support workers who serve Stolen Generations clients and families within their communities; for the most part members are employed in the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service sector.

Led by Uncle Dennis Dunn from the AMS Western Sydney, a need identified by the Forum was that the Aboriginal population, recognized as mobile, would be well served by an informal network the members that could assist each other in referring on clients and better support clients' continuity of care. Peer support and additional training opportunities for the cohort has also been highly valued. Regular Forum gatherings have allowed this networking and learning to take place. Support for the Forum has come from a number of sources including OATSIH and the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council.

Immediate term objectives agreed by Forum members have been to strengthen the Forum's structure, maintain morale, develop networking and peer-support, promote consistency of approach through core job description, advance understanding of role, co-facilitate short education, as well as ongoing training and capacity building. The NSDC believes this initiative should be supported, and examined with a view to growing similar support structures in other states and territories within the new arrangements.

Recommendations:

- 10. That consideration be given to funding and establishing a peak body in Indigenous mental health that can support the growth of a much needed workforce.*
- 11. That consideration be given to supporting more regional initiatives like the NSW Bringing Them Home Counsellor Group Forum to strengthen the quality of support provided to Counsellors and enhance their work.*
- 12. That a Stolen Generations education module be included in training for all professionals helping Indigenous people to deal with complex trauma and grief and loss – whether it be Drug and Alcohol Workers, mental health workers and counsellors, psychologists and family reunion caseworkers.*
- 13. That cultural competence training be provided to non-Indigenous mental health professionals, and Indigenous professionals as required, which includes a compulsory component on the history and ongoing consequences of the Stolen Generations.*

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