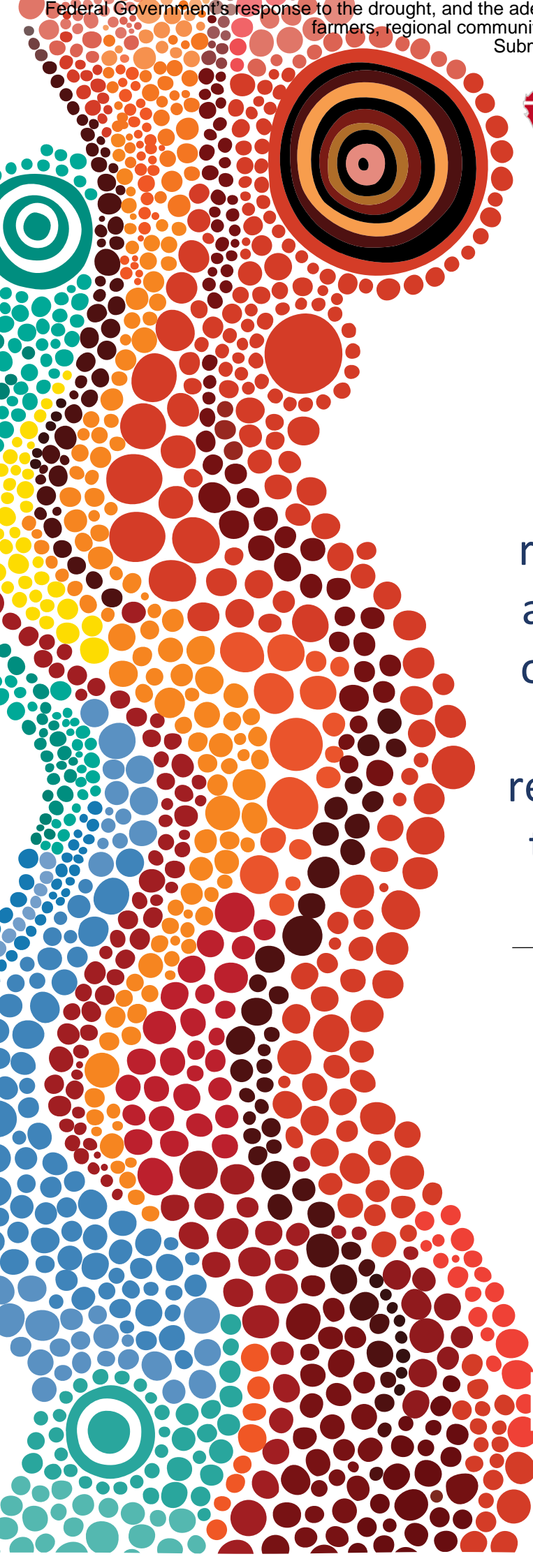




NACCHO

National Aboriginal Community
Controlled Health Organisation
Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands

www.naccho.org.au



Senate Inquiry into the
Federal Government's
response to the drought,
and the appropriateness
of policies and measures
to support farmers,
regional communities and
the Australian economy

SUBMISSION

February 2020

About NACCHO

NACCHO is the national peak body representing 143 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) Australia wide on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing issues. NACCHO's work is focused on liaising with governments, its membership, and other organisations on health and wellbeing policy and planning issues and advocacy relating to health service delivery, health information, research, public health, health financing and health programs. Our members provide about three million episodes of care per year for about 350,000 people across Australia, including about one million episodes of care in very remote regions.

Sector Support Organisations, also known as NACCHO affiliates, represent and support the ACCHOs in their state of territory. ACCHOs range from large multi-functional services employing several medical practitioners and providing a wide range of services, to small services which rely on Aboriginal Health Practitioners, Aboriginal Health Workers and/or nurses to provide the bulk of primary health care services, often with a preventive, health education focus. ACCHOs contribute to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through the provision of comprehensive holistic primary health care, and by integrating and coordinating care and services. Many provide home and site visits; provision of medical, public health and health promotion services; allied health; nursing services; assistance with making appointments and transport; help accessing childcare or dealing with the justice system; drug and alcohol services; and providing help with income support.

Collectively, the ACCHO sector employs about 6,000 staff, 56 per cent of whom are Indigenous, making us the single largest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country.

Any enquiries about this submission should be directed to:

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Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. Our submission, with valued input from the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council (AH&MRC), focuses on ongoing issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional communities that are compounded by the impact of drought. Short term policies to address drought (and other extreme weather events) will have no impact within regional communities without addressing long term, structural issues. In addressing these issues, we specifically focus on:

- mitigating the impacts of drought (and other impacts of climate change);
- enhancing outcomes in industry, employment and income; and
- strengthening regional community infrastructure.

We present a full list of recommendations and we welcome the opportunity to discuss these with you.

Why this inquiry is important to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

- Mitigating the impacts of drought is imperative to optimising the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional communities. Addressing these effects includes structural change in employment, income and community infrastructure.
- Employment and income are critical social determinants of health; by creating jobs and expanding industry opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across regional Australia, health and wellbeing are improved and communities become more resilient to extreme weather events.
- Improved housing and community infrastructure in regional Australia are essential to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being able to safely live, be educated, work and contribute to the life of their communities in all weather conditions.

Recommendations

We recommend:

1. That, via negotiation and co-production with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, existing regional development initiatives place greater focus on expanding industry and creating jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including in environmental health and other ecological services like land and water management.
2. That, in co-production with and ongoing involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, the federal government establish and fund a program that supports the construction of low-cost social housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas that meets engineering standards and can withstand the impacts of drought and climate change.
3. That there be greater federal, state, territory and local government investment in community infrastructure and systems, including:
 - the regular maintenance of housing and community infrastructure;
 - reviewing and updating town planning and development standards;
 - rectifying the backlog of housing and infrastructure management and maintenance;
 - upgrading footpaths, roads, gutters, drains and other community infrastructure;
 - ensuring food security and potable water sources and systems.

4. That additional funding be allocated to ACCHOs in regional areas to:
 - employ Environment Health Workers to deliver environmental health services; and
 - extend social and emotional health and wellbeing programs in urban, rural, regional and remote communities, with a focus on building resilience against the impact of climate change, including drought.

5. That the federal government address the specific vulnerabilities of income support recipients to drought by:
 - increasing Newstart Assistance, Rent Assistance and other income support payments;
 - periodically reviewing an increase and apply indexation to all income support payments to ensure recipients experience an acceptable standard of living;
 - introducing a 'Relocation Allowance' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people looking to move for employment opportunities;
 - providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with "rent to buy" social housing programs.

6. That CDP be reviewed and revamped with a view to optimise the income and wellbeing of participants.

7. That there be greater investment in regional communities in:
 - a. innovative services in the education and training sector;
 - b. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified traineeships and apprenticeships; and
 - c. free or subsidised training and higher education opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Mitigating the impact of drought and climate change generally

In 2019-20 in NSW, and elsewhere across the nation, we saw the devastating the impact of drought on the increasing severity of bushfires.

Dry and large volumes of built up flora and hot, dry and windy conditions fuel the outbreak of bushfires. The fire danger and associated air quality issues put many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at greater risk of poor health and wellbeing.

Climate change and its drying impact on flora not only expedites bushfires but adversely affects water quality in regional areas—and, in turn the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹ Access to potable water is a significant problem in rural and remote communities in Western Australia, New South Wales and other jurisdictions, with each community's water supply impacted differently. For example, in the Kimberley poor water quality is caused by contaminants such as arsenic and geology due to passive water quality standards. High salinity and the use of shallow aquifers are problematic in many communities. Poor water quality creates food insecurity issues and water-related diseases, which compounds poor health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Poor health outcomes include high rates of diseases (including respiratory diseases), infections and adverse mental health conditions or illness. Notifications remain high of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having bloodborne, gastrointestinal, vaccine preventable and vector borne diseases, and bacterial and sexually transmissible infections.² The rates of suicide has also increased for

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/may/06/remote-indigenous-communities-in-western-australia-fail-water-safety-tests>

² Department of Health, 2019, National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System: Numbers of notifications of all diseases

Aboriginal people living in regional areas, and there is an increased risk of suicide of Aboriginal people living in drought affected areas.

Existing and future measures intended to address the current drought crisis would benefit from the traditional expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in land and water management. This can include the greater employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land management services and workers.

Prevention and early response

Strategies for mitigating the health and social impacts of climate change must centre on the prevention and early intervention of diseases and infections, the provision of relief, support and mental health services and the strengthening protective factors—including adequate housing and community infrastructure (discussed later in this submission). More investment is required in bolstering prevention and early response services delivered, not only by ACCHOs but other Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs). Services delivered by organisations that are Aboriginal community controlled (with boards comprising local Aboriginal people elected by the community) have been found to have greater rapport with community and effectiveness in delivering needed services.

Family and community support services

Specific to drought, ACCHOs deliver specific services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in response to its devastating impact, including mental health and counselling services, essential medicines (including Ventolin), and relief and survival packages. The AH&RMC has overseen a lot of drought response social and emotional wellbeing (including suicide prevention) services delivered by ACCHOs across NSW in light of the particularly harmful effects of the long-lasting NSW 2019 drought.

Housing to optimise health and wellbeing

Better housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remains a critical issue. Housing issues are amplified in extreme weather. It is vital that state and territory governments, with leadership and assistance from the federal government, play a greater role in developing, administering and enforcing design standards for housing - to not only meet household needs and predicted drought and other climate change conditions, but to allow for heightened flexible and locally responsive housing design approaches.³

A number of recommendations we have previously made to the federal government are particularly pertinent in light of the impacts of drought and climate change in general:

- expand the funding and timeframe of the current National Partnership on Remote Housing to match at least that of the former National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing;
- establish and fund a program that supports healthy living environments in urban, regional, rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, similar to the Fixing Houses for Better Health program. This must ensure that rigorous data collection and program evaluation structures are developed and built in, to provide the federal government with information to enable analysis of how housing improvements impact on health indicators; and
- update and promote the National Indigenous Housing Guide⁴, which is a best practice resource for the design, construction and maintenance of housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

ACCHOs mitigating the impacts of drought and climate change

ACCHOs in urban, rural, regional and remote regions mitigate their contribution to climate change in a number of ways. These initiatives are often highly innovative within restricted funding.

³ AIHW, Housing strategies that improve indigenous health outcomes, 2012/2013

⁴ National Indigenous Housing Guide: <http://web.archive.org/web/20140213221536/>

ACCHOs are highly pro-active in utilising renewable resources and mitigating their environmental impact. For example, Paupiyala Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation (aka Spinifex Health Service) which is 650 kilometres east of Kalgoorlie in the Goldfields-Esperance region recently committed significant funds to installing and connecting solar panels to the grid. Puntukurnu Aboriginal Medical Service (PAMS) is currently seeking funds to install solar panels at its Newman clinic.

ACCHOs are open to making further contributions to reducing their environmental footprint, but require additional, allocated funding to do so.

Greater assistance for ACCHOs is required in response to the impacts of drought. Additional funding to build new and to improve existing staff housing and infrastructure is needed, to ensure buildings meet engineering and World Health Organisation's standards and can withstand extreme weather. This improved staff housing would greatly assist in recruiting and retaining qualified Aboriginal Health Practitioners and Workers, nurses and other staff to best ensure the health, wellbeing, safety and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional communities.

Enhancing outcomes in industry, employment and income

Despite the desire to work, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas face limited employment opportunities, adding to fiscal and social inequalities.⁵ The creation of new industries, and new jobs, in regional areas would bolster the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians and help communities become more resilient to climate change, including drought.

Much more can be done in creating jobs and expanding industry opportunities, in co-production between government and ACCHOs and other ACCOs, including in relation to ACCHO services, ecological services, traditional medicine and land management, disability services, tourism and clean energy.

ACCHO services

The ACCHO sector is the largest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia.⁶ Collectively, we employ about 6,000 staff, 56 per cent of whom are Indigenous, making us the single largest employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the country. These staff provide about three million episodes of care per year for about 350,000 people across Australia, including about one million episodes of care in very remote regions.

This needs to include more funding to deliver social and emotional wellbeing services and to employ more Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Environmental Health Workers who can provide services to people in regional communities impacted by drought and other effects of climate change.

Environmental services

While there are some jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas in the delivery of ecological services, there is scope for a lot more—including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers and Environmental Health Workers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rangers draw upon traditional skills and their connection and knowledge of land.^{7 8} One particular function of Rangers is clearing the land and engaging in back burning to prevent the damage of bushfires. More than 700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed as Rangers around Australia, but there is a need for more.⁹

⁵ Koori Mail, 2019, How red tape is killing job hope, 457 p. 8

⁶ ABS, 2016, <https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/2016>

⁷ https://www.countryneedspeople.org.au/improving_health

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/indigenous-rangers-dont-receive-the-funding-they-deserve-heres-why-115916>

⁹ <https://www.countryneedspeople.org.au/>

Disability services

An informal disability workforce already exists in many regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and there is great potential for NDIS-related Aboriginal-identified employment and training opportunities to be created, including in relation to Community Health Workers, Support Coordinators and Interpreters (which require disability support qualifications). Such opportunities could be created in partnership between ACCHOs, Registered Training Organisations and local clinical schools and universities. Federal and/or state government funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to undertake TAFE courses to gain the required qualifications to become Disability Community Workers would not only create more employment opportunities but also optimise the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas.

Clean energy

Clean energy and energy efficient technology is an emerging industry in regional Australia. At present a very low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed in this industry.

Bush tucker

Australia's bush food industry is growing, with produce such as finger limes, lemon myrtle and wattle seed in demand. This is good news in regards to increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to traditional, sustainable and healthy foods, but unfortunately only one per cent is produced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Initiatives are underway in regards to training up young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with an interest in bush regeneration and horticulture to extend the production of traditional foods. Such initiatives look to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's connection to culture, community and country, and build an innate sense of identity.¹⁰

Income

With the introduction of new jobs and industry must come fair pay and work conditions. Australia has a history of denying such rights to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with many not being able to access meaningful work as well as inadequate working hours and income. This leads to a high reliance in regional areas on grossly inadequate income support payments. Income support payments and job wages must be reviewed to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people access fair pay and experience an acceptable standard of living.

Compared to other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have higher unemployment rates, earn lower household incomes and are more likely to receive a government allowance as their main source of income. In 2015, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with incomes in the bottom 20 per cent of weekly household incomes was 37 per cent (twice as high as other Australians).¹¹

Inadequate income results in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people missing meals, sleeping rough and struggling through winter without heating and summer without cooling. Adequate housing is often overly expensive or unavailable which can lead to overcrowding, while more affordable (but still expensive) housing is inadequate in terms of health, safety and cultural appropriateness. In addition, many recipients are unable to access mainstream healthcare and other services due to cost and distance, particularly in rural and remote communities. All these factors have a significant impact on physical, social and emotional health and wellbeing.¹²

Low income, often associated with reliance on income support payments, creates a range of large, complex and intertwined issues. Some of the issues include:

¹⁰ ABC News, 2019, *Bush food industry booms, but only 1 per cent is produced by Indigenous people*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2019-01-19/low-indigenous-representation-in-bush-food-industry/10701986>

¹¹ AIHW, 2019, *Australia's Welfare 2017: in brief*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/>

¹² Rosenberg, 2019, *Implementation not recommendation the key to Productivity Commission success in mental health*, <https://croakey.org>

- long term reliance on income support payments;
- significant challenges meeting employment obligations and keeping a job due to transportation, communication and other costs, and family, cultural, land and other responsibilities/obligations;
- complications engaging with and meeting Community Development Program (CDP) obligations, resulting in penalties being issued (further reducing the low payments);
- intergenerational trauma as a result of working with faith-based organisations (often involved in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families/running missions) that run CDP and job search services;
- worsening health conditions and inequities associated with social determinants of health (housing, education, social relationships, etc.);
- the disincentive of accepting extra employment shifts/hours when the additional income exceeds Centrelink income limits.

Measures outlined by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), including loans and other forms of financial support for farmers, should be extended to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities adversely impacted by drought, bushfire and other impacts of climate change.

Environmental health services

Environmental health services delivered by ACCHOs can help achieve better health outcomes for local communities, particularly during times of drought and extreme weather. Local communities have confidence in ACCHOs and their culturally competent, community-controlled health service models. As well as additional, allocated federal funding, capacity building and training of staff is a key priority to remedy the current shortage of Aboriginal Environmental Health Workers to deliver environmental health services to local communities.

Unemployment and under-employment experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas is considerably high (the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines employment as someone engaged in one or more hours of work a week^{13 14}). In addition, there are high levels of people classified as not in the labour force (NILF) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in remote areas, with estimates as high as 60 per cent amongst the 16–24 age group in some parts of the Northern Territory.¹⁵

There are a range of complex and interconnected issues pertaining to unemployment and under-employment experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in regional communities that must be taken into consideration, including:^{16 17 18 19 20}

- reliance on income support payments;
- difficulty affording costs associated with searching for employment, including the purchase of suitable clothing for an interview, education re interview skills, safety clothing and equipment, as well as transportation and communication costs;
- transport issues associated with not holding a drivers' license; and
- short-term, unsustainable contracts.

It is vitally important to create jobs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in regional and remote areas, as the impact of unemployment and/or under-employment include: ²¹

- inadequate income to cover living expenses, which is compounded by high numbers of dependents and people with vulnerabilities living under the same roof—including children and youth, people with a disability, people with a burden of disease and/or other health

¹³ Creative Spirits, 2019, Aboriginal employment, jobs and careers

¹⁴ ABS, 2016, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject>

¹⁵ Havnen, O. 2012. Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services Report, pp. 175–177

¹⁶ Creative Spirits, 2019, Aboriginal employment, jobs and careers

¹⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

¹⁸ Koori Mail, 2019, GenOne in push for job debate, 502 p. 40

¹⁹ Koori Mail, 2019, Insights provided in report, 459 p. 39

²⁰ Koori Mail, 2019, Inept Govt policy denying Indigenous jobs - report, 471 p. 36

²¹ Creative Spirits, 2019, Aboriginal employment, jobs and careers

condition/s, the elderly (due to high costs and lack of culturally safe and/or local aged care services) and people who do not speak English as a first language;

- frustration, anxiety and depression, generally affecting physical and mental health; and
- the amplification of family/domestic conflict and violence, and thefts and assaults around the introduction of the welfare card.²²

This chain of issues often impacts on sleep, school attendance and performance, which further impacts health and wellbeing outcomes.

A range of complex and interconnected issues pertaining to unemployment and under-employment experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and exacerbated by drought and other extreme weather, particularly in regional communities, must be taken into consideration, including:^{23 24 25 26 27}

- poor health conditions and inequities in social determinants of health (including housing, education, social relationships, income, incarceration rates and poverty), which compounds challenges in finding and keeping a job;
- the lack of jobs and market opportunities;
- lower levels of job retention due to a range of factors, including (but not limited to) limited access to and high costs of transportation and communication, not having a driver's license and family, cultural, land and other responsibilities/obligations;
- racial bias on the job and/or in recruitment processes, with employers and employment agencies not having undertaken cultural awareness training;
- carer responsibilities, and
- inadequate and inappropriate education and training opportunities.

Specific industries for growth

Construction/housing

There is a significant need for new and improved housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas (discussed elsewhere in this submission). In NSW, approximately 56% of Aboriginal people are renting compared to 32% of other Australians.²⁸ New, improved and affordable housing would not only substantially help improve health and wellbeing (particularly in times of drought and extreme weather) but also expand employment opportunities in the construction and housing maintenance sector. The NSW Government's Housing for Health project outlines the need for more housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and for the housing to be safe and accommodate healthy living practices.²⁹ A recommendation in NACCHO's Federal Election 2019 goals that remains relevant, was for the federal government to:

Establish and fund a program that supports low cost social housing and healthy living environments in urban, rural, regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

New housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be built and existing housing stock upgraded to meet engineering standards and to endure the impacts of climate change impacting regional areas.

²² The Guardian, 2017, Aboriginal leader withdraws support for cashless welfare card, <https://www.theguardian.com/>

²³ Creative Spirits, 2019, Aboriginal employment, jobs and careers

²⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

²⁵ Koori Mail, 2019, GenOne in push for job debate, 502 p. 40

²⁶ Koori Mail, 2019, Insights provided in report, 459 p. 39

²⁷ Koori Mail, 2019, Inept Govt policy denying Indigenous jobs - report, 471 p. 36

²⁸ AIHW Housing circumstances of Indigenous households: tenure and overcrowding, 2014

²⁹ NSW Government, 2019, Housing for Health project, <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/aboriginal/>

Routine maintenance remains the key to improving environmental health for Aboriginal communities. Housing for Health in NSW reviewed 20 years of data for over 4,000 homes and found that routine maintenance was the most reported reason that houses in Aboriginal communities needed attention, while only 5% was due to damage caused by tenants.

Income support

Current income support arrangements require review, to find ways to better support those experiencing underemployment and insecure employment, particularly in regional areas. Disincentives to recipients accepting additional employment shifts/hours when the extra income would exceed additional income limits and reduce payments is one area that needs to be reviewed.

Despite large increases in living costs over the last 25 years, there has been no increase to Newstart Assistance and other forms of income support. When Newstart Assistance was introduced in 1997, it was not intended for long-term income reliance, but for short-term assistance while a recipient looked for work. An alternative pension was provided for long-term assistance, which was only slightly higher to Newstart Assistance. A Senate Committee Inquiry in 2012 deemed Newstart Assistance to be inadequate.³⁰

Today, more than ever due to increased living costs, the payment does not provide recipients with the capacity to purchase basic essentials, let alone provide an adequate safety net.³¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise a large proportion of those impacted, particularly those in rural and remote communities where unemployment and the costs of goods and services are much higher.³²

Rent Assistance

Rent Assistance also falls far short of meeting the high rental costs in regional areas. As with Newstart Assistance, Rent Assistance over the years has not increased despite rent and other living expenses increasing substantially. According to the Grattan Institute, a 40 per cent increase in the maximum rate of Rent Assistance would provide the same real level of assistance to low-income earners as it did 15 years ago.³³ Other than increasing Rent Assistance, it is also important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional areas are given more options to buy the home they are renting, and 'Relocation Assistance' to assist families to move for employment, education and other opportunities, if they choose to do so.

Periodical increases and indexation

While increasing the rate of Newstart Assistance, Rent Assistance and other income support payments must be initial measures, ongoing increases are essential to ensure recipients continue to enjoy an appropriate standard of living into the future.³⁴ This should involve periodically reviewing the payments against community living standards and costs of goods and services. As recommended by ACOSS,³⁵ payments should be indexed to annual increases in wages (rather than CPI alone) and Rent Assistance should be set at a proportion of actual rental costs.

Community Development Program (CDP)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise more than 80 per cent of CDP participants across Australia. There are significant issues with this program, including:

- Fines for missing a session, with no consideration to the complexities of the social determinants and cultural obligations facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, that can greatly impact on program attendance.

³⁰ Parliament of Australia, 2019, The adequacy of the allowance payment system, <https://www.aph.gov.au/>

³¹ UNSW, 2019, Budget Standards: A new healthy living minimum income standard, <https://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/>

³² ACOSS, 2019, Raise the Rate, <https://raisetherate.org.au/>

³³ The Grattan Institute, 2019, The inadequacy of income support payments, <https://grattan.edu.au/?s=Newstart>

³⁴ McClure Review, 2019, https://www.aph.gov.au/about_parliament/parliamentary_departments/parliamentary

³⁵ ACOSS, 2019, Raise the Rate, <https://raisetherate.org.au/>

- Despite working more than 25 hours of work per week, CDP participants are not considered to be employees and are hence excluded from the Fair Work Act 2009 legislation, do not receive superannuation and are excluded from occupational health and safety laws.

CDP fines

Already low income support payments attached to CDP are further reduced by \$50 a week (from \$244.85 to \$194.85) when recipients are unable to participate in mandatory CDP activities. Due to high costs, ill health, mental health conditions, homelessness, disability, remoteness, family, community, country and cultural obligations and language barriers, participants sometimes cannot avoid missing or being late for CDP activities, and are often unable to notify activity organisers in advance. Communities with high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants were issued with the highest number of these fines in 2018, with participants in one Aboriginal community fined an average of 15 times. Various aspects of the former CDEP program worked better for participants and communities than the current CDP, including the employment of Environmental Health Workers.

Determining payments based on specific vulnerabilities

Greater support needs to be given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to access the income support payments for which they are eligible. Assistance also needs to be extended to help with filling out forms, attending Centrelink appointments and understanding and fulfilling payment obligations. Forms need to be written in easy to understand English, with more visual cues and, where possible, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Translators and translation services would also assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to understand lodgement requirements and submits successful applications.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability

Specific consideration needs to be given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are twice as likely to have a disability than other Australians, with 9 per cent (compared to 4 per cent) having a severe condition. Around 60,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a significant disability that could make them eligible for NDIS support, which represents 13 per cent of the potential 460,000 NDIS participants. However, they comprise only 5 per cent of current NDIS participants. While many of this 5 per cent have NDIS plans, they do not receive assistance due to appropriate services not being available where they live.

Strengthening regional community infrastructure

To prevent and respond early to health and wellbeing problems experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities, greater investment needs to be made into a range of social determinants—including housing and community infrastructure. Investment must also be placed in reducing and responding to the impacts of climate change, including drought.

Housing

Unemployment, under-employment, lack of social housing and inadequate income prevents recipients from purchasing a home and/or from maintaining their mortgage repayments. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often stereotyped and discriminated against when purchasing and renting private housing, and Aboriginal housing and other public housing is limited or inadequate, and private housing often unavailable or overly expensive to rent. More housing that meets engineering standards and takes into consideration Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family systems, sizes of households and related infrastructure needs is required.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face substantial barriers to accessing all levels of government support. Once a family has been allocated a house there are a multitude of issues associated with the poor quality of the house and constant need to engage further with services to ensure that necessary heating, cooling, water and waste services are in place.

Housing shortages in rural and remote communities result in overcrowding, homelessness and the expedience of poor health. Living in overcrowded housing increases the likelihood of health problems, from ear and eye infections, blood borne viruses to mental health issues. The impact of deteriorating housing on occupants, and also the lack of air-conditioning and heating, is made more severe where there is overcrowding and an inability to maintain hygiene. The effects of climate change are likely to necessitate some occupants spending longer periods of time within the house, including the aged, disabled and chronically ill, which can increase the psychosocial stress and risk of infectious disease transmission.

There are also considerable problems with the quality of existing houses. Aboriginal housing and public housing used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is often not constructed from high quality materials, and older houses (over 10 years old) often do not adhere to building codes. Extreme weather events increase the speed and extent of deterioration of this low quality housing, resulting in the formation of mould, rusting of pipes and damage to doors and windows, which adversely effects occupants' health, wellbeing and safety. Consequently, occupants' physical health, economic productivity, psychological wellbeing, social vigour and protection from health hazards and security (from break-ins) is compromised. Not only do existing structures need to be upgraded, but future developments need to be designed and engineered to appropriate standards (including environmentally sound cooling, heating and ventilation systems). In addition, maintenance and repairs need to be carried out effectively by a transparent and accountable process³⁶, in accordance to the changing environmental conditions.

Community infrastructure

There is an increasing need to upgrade aged and deteriorated community infrastructure. In many rural and remote communities there are no footpaths, limited sealed roads, curbing and guttering, and unsafe recreational areas. Inadequate town planning and development standards are not uncommon, and local councils often face a backlog in infrastructure repair and maintenance requests.

³⁶ WA Auditor General Report, 2015, https://audit.wa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/report2015_08-AbServices.pdf