

**Submission
Queensland Child
Protection Commission of
Inquiry
March 2013**



HealingFoundation

Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation is an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that focuses on healing our community.

The Healing Foundation was established in 2009 on the first anniversary of the Apology to Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It addresses the profound legacy of pain and hurt in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives caused by colonisation and other past government policies, including removing children from their families. To date we have funded 94 healing programs across Australia. Emerging data generated from these programs is contributing to building an evidence base for effective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing strategies.

Both 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 well being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today (Atkinson, Nelson and Atkinson in Purdie, Dudgeon and Walker, 2010).

The Healing Foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Queensland Inquiry into the Child Protection system. 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.

The Healing Foundation has been undertaking significant mapping of the extent of disruption caused by the forced removal of children from their families in our county. Currently we know of over 100 institutions across the country where children were removed to. Many of these environments were harsh and distressing. Further to this from our work we know that many children were also housed in dormitories on missions whilst their families were sent to work. Many of these men and women and their families are deeply scarred from this experience.

The *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Wilson, 1997) was the first time our nation documented the continuing devastating impact of the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. People removed from their families under these circumstances are now commonly referred to as the 'The Stolen Generation'. More recently, the results of the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) found:

- 8% (26,900 people) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over had been removed from their family
- a further 38% of people had relatives who had been removed from their family.

- of those who had experienced removal from their family, 35% assessed their own health as poor and 39% experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress, compared with 21% and 30% of those not removed.

The Western Australian Aboriginal Health Survey (2005) found a link between adverse life outcomes and the forced separation of Aboriginal people from their families and intergenerational effects caused by policies of forced separation and removal. In terms of adverse outcomes, the survey found that in comparison to carers who had not been forcibly separated from their families, carers who had been forcibly separated from their families were:

- about twice as likely to have been arrested or charged with an offence
- about one and a half times more likely to report that the overuse of alcohol caused problems in the household
- a little over twice as likely to report that betting or gambling caused problems in the household
- about half as likely to have someone they could talk to about their problems
- one and a half times more likely to have had contact with mental health services.

In terms of the intergenerational effects of forced separations and removals, the survey found that children cared for by a primary carer who was forcibly separated from their family were more than twice as likely to be at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties when compared to children living with Aboriginal primary carers who were not forcibly separated. More generally, the survey found that children whose primary carers were forcibly separated experience many negative life outcomes when compared with children whose carers were not forcibly separated.

The forcible removal of children from their families continues to have a devastating impact on many of those people who were forcibly removed and their children. The impact of forcible removal is cumulative. Most forcibly removed children were denied the experience of being parented and cared for by kin and the institutional abuse many suffered deeply affected people's wellbeing and health. They therefore often lacked the experiences necessary to become 'successful' parents themselves (Wilson, 1997). This is a significant, but not well understood, factor in why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be removed from the care of their families today.

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families further recognised that the needs of Indigenous families and communities were being neglected while Indigenous children continued to be disproportionately involved in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. "Evidence to the Inquiry repeatedly indicated a community perception that the problems which result in removals need to be addressed in terms of community development. However, the inquiry found that welfare departments continue to pathologise and individualise protection needs of Indigenous children." (1997)

The Inquiry in recognising the devastating impact that forcible removals had on the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the interruption to the strengths of family and community life made specific resolutions to address these issues through Recommendation 36:

That the Council of Australian Governments ensures the provision of adequate funding to relevant Indigenous organisations in each region to establish parenting and family well-being programs.

Whilst many jurisdictions including Queensland have implemented significant policy and practice changes to better respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children since 1997, none of this policy has halted the alarming numbers of Indigenous children coming into contact with the child protection system.

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. Unfortunately child protection resourcing and western frameworks have resulted in kinship being regarded as immediate family with limited focus on investigating kinship lines to source strength not in only in relation to care options for children, but support for families. Often, in fact, family is more likely viewed in the context of risk and therefore the opportunity to draw upon connectedness to kin, culture and country as a protective factor is often minimised or lost completely by a child protection focus.

In the evidence from the work funded by the Healing Foundation cultural connectedness and building positive cultural identity are emerging as central to healing and improving social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In the evaluation of our work the quantitative and qualitative data indicates:

Strengthening culture, strengthening identity, improving wellbeing

Increased connection to culture seems directly related to a strengthened sense of positive identity, self-confidence and hope for the future. This was particularly true for young people and the descendants of members of the Stolen Generations who reported feeling lost before participating in healing camps, bush trips or cultural programs. Participants gained a sense of who they were and where they belonged. Many projects incorporated celebrations of culture into their activities, instilling pride in our people again. Strong cultural identity creates wellbeing and empowers people to make positive choices for themselves and their families. This approach to wellbeing is uniquely Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. It is founded on the understanding that health and wellbeing is wider than physical illness or social disadvantage; it encompasses the physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural aspects. The promotion of more holistic approaches to healing will lead to improved wellbeing amongst our people (pg 9, Our Healing Our Solutions Volume 3)

The failure to acknowledge culture as integral to the safety and wellbeing of a child is further demonstrated through child protection practice in Queensland that continues to view culture and as an add on. The use of cultural care plans are seen as the primary way to effectively respond to cultural needs of children but fail to understand the holistic nature of this within the context of not just identity but wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The Healing Foundation strongly supports the use of evidence and driving innovation in service design. However we would urge the Queensland Commission to explore new models of child protection and family support rather than continuing to deliver just 'more of the same'. Little work has been implemented that is driven from an Indigenous world view that draws on Indigenous knowledge systems. A greater emphasis on achieving this goal needs to occur in partnership with QATSCIPP and communities.

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.

The Healing Foundation believes that interventions that aim to address the social disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders face without first addressing the healing needs of individuals, families and communities are likely to be limited in their effectiveness. Healing programs and services address the root cause of the imbalance and disharmony in our communities, rather than just the symptoms. The Healing Foundation has been working in partnership with many organisations including SNAICC and QATSCIPP in developing healing work across Australia. It would be our intent to continue to partner with QATSCIPP to ensure any future program development and service delivery design processes are trauma informed, responsive to the healing needs of Queensland children and families and are contributing to building evidence and enabling best practice across our nation.

According to Caruana (2010) the idea of 'healing' as an approach to Indigenous disadvantage is not a concept that is always well understood. Healing programs encompass a range of practices (traditional and western), cover a range of issues or problems being experienced by individuals, groups of individuals (e.g. youth, men, and women), families, and sometimes whole communities, and have as their core a focus on spirituality and culture. They span the areas of mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, family violence, child protection, addictive behaviour (alcohol, drugs, gambling etc.), sexual abuse, youth development, justice and corrections. There is also a growing emphasis on the need for preventative and restorative approaches in addition to those which are based on therapeutic intervention (Healing Foundation, 2012).

Critical to healing programs is an emphasis on restoring, reaffirming, and renewing a sense of pride in cultural identity, connection to country and participation in, and contribution to, community. Cultural identity and connection to country are seen as crucial elements of everyday life for Indigenous people.

Cultivating a sense of this cultural distinctiveness is inextricably linked with spiritual, emotional, social health and wellbeing and is also an important part of strengthening communities (Healing Foundation, 2012). When communities are strong they are able to develop their own solutions, negotiate more effectively and ultimately achieve a more equitable share in the wealth of the nation.

The Healing Foundation believes that building strong cultural identity in communities provides a powerful protective environment for intervention/prevention. The sense of efficacy that emanates from individuals and communities having real control over what happens to them provides strong sense of purpose and future.

In May 2010, the Healing Foundation announced its first funding initiative aimed at acknowledging and addressing the pain and hurt caused by colonisation, forced removals and other past government policies. The primary purpose of the healing initiatives was to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous people and communities, focusing on the wellbeing of body, mind, spirit and culture.

In October 2010, following an open-tender funding process, the Healing Foundation awarded funds to 21 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled agencies to deliver healing initiatives. Projects ranged from one-off events to large-scale three-year projects. Projects received funding of between \$56 000 and \$400 000 for development and implementation.

The funded projects support work in urban, regional and remote areas of Australia. The Healing Foundation is supporting healing across our community for men, women, families and communities, children and young people and Stolen Generations.

Project activities include:

- development of local healing centres
- healing camps on country
- cultural renewal and revitalisation activities including traditional dance, song, arts and crafts, ritual and ceremony, kinship structures and bush trips
- the use of both western and traditional healing practices including Ngangkari treatments, bush medicine, wild flower essences, meditation, massage and bush tucker
- men's and women's gatherings
- individual and group counselling
- leadership and/or mentoring projects focusing on trauma prevention
- life skills programs focusing on prevention, resilience and recovery from trauma
- development of resources to heal trauma, grief and loss
- increasing skills and knowledge sharing between organisations and individuals involved in providing healing services.

The projects continue to demonstrate that much can be achieved when we are given the opportunity to work in our way, with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldview.

Key achievements in the most recent reporting period included:

- 137 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in 17 projects
- 100 per cent of projects designed, developed and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ensuring contextually appropriate healing services for participants
- 2465 children, young people, families, men, women and Elders participated in healing activities, demonstrating the need for and importance of healing work
- almost 650 cultural activities provided, helping people reconnect with culture and support, strengthening cultural identity and pride
- 99 per cent of participants reported improved physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural wellbeing as a result of participation in the healing projects
- development of strong organisational partnerships and linked-up service delivery allowing for holistic services and interventions
- significant contributions to the Closing the Gap agenda in the areas of health, economic participation, safe communities and governance and leadership.
- Almost two thirds of projects have provided support to parents and extended family members to help them better engage in parenting and growing their children strong.
- 354 individual health and wellbeing activities have been provided nationally

Building cultural strengths was a focus of all 21 healing programs funded by the Healing Foundation. In the last 6 months these programs have collectively successfully conducted 569 cultural revitalisation events and 592 events aimed at increasing cultural pride.

As one young fella completing one program said

“Joining this program opened my eyes to everything about my culture, spirit and the ways of Aboriginal people. We have been through a lot but we are still here. The Healing Camp is a great way for the youth to get together and open their eyes that there is a better life for you. I have learnt to not be ‘shame’. I have learnt where I came from and why I am here. I have learnt to be a powerful blackfella who can have a say. I am stronger”.

In the Healing Foundation’s experience many projects for Indigenous people have taken a mainstream program and attempted to overlay a cultural knowledge base. Unfortunately many of these processes have met with limited success. Projects need to use an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander world view to design, develop and implement effective strategies in engaging communities. Emerging evidence in the Healing Foundation is that utilising the strength of our culture to build strong programmatic design is enabling communities to begin the complex and difficult process of healing.

All Healing Foundation work is driven by a philosophy of local knowledge local context. It is clear that to be able to explore the present challenges of trauma for communities consideration needs to be given to the local experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Service provision and responses therefore need to be provided at a localised level, to be able to explore the specific needs and experiences of communities. Changes to ensuring the wellbeing of our children would have to reflect and enable this. Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders must be seen, as experts in their own healing. Models proposed must build on the local resources and look to support an engagement strategy that builds partnerships and is inclusive assisting communities to transcend old ways and create positive processes for the future.

Over the past 12 months, the Healing Foundation has facilitated successful healing forums in Central Australia and the Torres Strait. These forums focused on helping communities to identify the issues that are causing disharmony and imbalance in their lives. The forums have allowed communities to understand the impacts of colonisation in their local context, and to design and develop solutions that will restore balance and harmony to their people.

The inclusion of community processes within the development of new systems and responses would provide an opportunity for communities to utilise an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander framework to identify the key issues preventing their children and young people from growing up strong in their community.

The inclusion of engagement strategies in the planning and implementation phases of these initiatives is congruent with the Australian Government Department of Finance and Deregulation’s Strategic Review of Indigenous Expenditure (2010). In this report, ‘engagement’ was listed as a key principle for the design of all new initiatives. The report commented that: *“effective engagement with the people to be assisted should be an essential part of the design and operation of any Indigenous-specific program ... engagement needs to go beyond mere consultation, providing Indigenous people with a genuine opportunity to influence both the design of the program and the ways in which services are delivered.”*

The Healing Foundation actively promotes the principles of partnership and collaboration, and support a continued holistic approach being taken for our children's social, emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing. However we believe that child and family wellbeing services need to address the stigma and fear associated with seeking help amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Past government policies related to the treatment of children have resulted in pervasive mistrust of child protection and family support services. Many vulnerable families fear that putting their hand up to access services would have punitive ramifications and put them at risk of having their children removed. This is compounded by the lived experience of vulnerable families who have found that accessing intervention services remains inextricably linked to notifications. It is important that child and family support services are holistic and not contingent on contact with statutory services as a means to access support.

To respond to many of these issues the Healing Foundation in July 2011 announced a funding initiative aimed at acknowledging and addressing the devastating impact intergenerational trauma has had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. The Healing Foundation recognises that our children and young people are hurting. They have been witness to and experienced first-hand the trauma that past government policies have had on their families and communities. For many of our children and young people they display their own hurts through negative behaviours, including use of drugs and alcohol, self-harm and failing to reach their full potential.

The aim of the intergenerational trauma funded projects is to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to heal from their distress and prevent the intergenerational transmission of trauma. The projects are doing this by supporting the well-being of young people and families in a holistic way, including supporting young people build skills in managing loss and grief and positive connections to their culture.

In deciding where the three pilot sites should be, the Healing Foundation undertook a significant scoping exercise. We met with state and federal government representatives to map the current funded responses and analysed a range of data that often suggests communities are experiencing high levels of trauma, including child protection and juvenile justice statistics.

In late 2011, the Healing Foundation awarded funds to three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled organisations in Brisbane, Darwin and Kununurra, ensuring that the pilots were spread across urban, regional and remote Australia. \$1.5million over two years has been allocated to support the lighthouse projects.

To support our commitment to building programs from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander world view, we have invested significant time, energy and resources in the planning and development phase of the initiatives. Healing Foundation staff are working closely with the funded organisations to develop service-specific program logics for each of the three sites. Although all three pilot projects will be working to achieve common goals – improved wellbeing of children, strengthened family relationships, and an integrated service system – the individual projects have taken into account the unique challenges their children, young people and families face and the cultural context in which they live.

A range of project activities is being delivered over the life of the initiatives, including

- healing camps for children, young people and families
- healing circles
- use of country to support increased cultural connection
- outreach support to young people and families
- revitalisation of ceremony and cultural activities
- mentoring and personal development programs for young people
- participation in employment and education programs
- counselling and therapeutic support for young people and families.

All pilot sites are also being supported through additional training provided by the Healing Foundation. This training will ensure staff involved have the opportunity to build their skills in how to provide appropriate healing activities. Sites will be coming together to share learnings and collectively problem solve challenges as the pilots progress and an external evaluation team from the National Centre for Child Protection (University of South Australia) has been appointed to evaluate the projects.

Attached to this submission is our paper “Growing our Children up Strong and Deadly –healing for children and young people” that documents the evidence base for this initiative and details the emerging practice that is benefiting our children and families.

The Healing Foundation commends the Commission on its focus on children and families wellbeing. However, we would urge the Commission to consider the following when looking at how to build a better 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
- 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.

We believe that the significant focus that you have brought to this issue has the opportunity to truly begin to implement positive change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Our children and young people are the future leaders of our communities all efforts must be made to ensure that they are given the opportunities to heal from the past and build positive futures for themselves and our nation.



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