

Victoria

Victoria has seen progress in terms of promising policies to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in or at risk of being placed in out-of-home care. However, there are also a number of challenges and a significant way to go before the goal of eliminating over-representation can be realised. In fact, the ratio of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care in comparison with non-Indigenous children increased by 1.3 points in Victoria from the 2015-16 to the 2016-17 periods.

To address the issue, the Victorian Government has committed to progressively transferring case management of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care to ACCOs, with the intention to transfer case management of all Aboriginal children by the end of 2021. As part of this process, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) launched its *Nugel* program in November 2017. The program was managing 32 children in September 2018, with plans to expand to 72 children in October 2018. The challenge remains to ensure that ACCOs are receiving the funding and supports they need to facilitate a smooth transition.

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's (VACYP) Alliance has also been involved in this process, assisting with the design of the child and family service system, and the programs for *Transitioning Aboriginal Children to ACCOs* and *Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care*.

There have also been advancements in relation to improving children's connection to culture and community. A new model of Aboriginal cultural planning commenced in 2016, with a State-Wide Coordinator for Aboriginal Cultural Planning appointed in 2017. This model seeks to ensure that Aboriginal people and organisations play a key role in developing and approving cultural plans for Aboriginal children in the child protection system. Since the new model commenced, there have been 550 cultural plans endorsed by ACCO CEOs. The feedback from ACCO CEOs has been that they have seen an improvement in the quality of the plans, with a much greater focus on the child's voice. Further, the *Deadly Story Portal*, an online resource to support Aboriginal children to stay connected to culture and community, was launched in November 2017. Data collected thus far indicates that a large volume of users are child protection practitioners. It is hoped this will translate into a high level of completion of quality cultural plans.

Moreover, Victoria's *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement* has been a significant step in government commitment towards self-determination. This is the country's first tripartite agreement between the Aboriginal community, government and community services organisations committing to better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. The *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir Strategic Action Plan* outlines specific steps to be taken to address over-representation, with government investing \$53 million to implement the strategies agreed upon. Progress will be monitored by the Victorian Aboriginal Children's Forum, which has continued as a successful forum involving ACCOs in high-level oversight of system reform and monitoring of outcomes data.

Finally, the *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023* has clear targets to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection substantiations. It is important that the government, when developing targets, takes into account the fact that the rate of reunifications significantly drops after children are in care for 12 months, and the need to provide reunification supports early.

Despite these developments, challenges remain. Aboriginal kinship carers should be receiving equal supports as foster carers and greater efforts are needed to recruit Aboriginal kinship carers. Further,

there is a need to prioritise investment in prevention and early intervention strategies as little has been done to holistically address families' complex needs and circumstances prior to families entering the tertiary system. Given that only 25.7 per cent of real recurrent expenditure for child protection in Victoria was spent on family and intensive family support services in 2016-17, it is vital that funding is increased in this area and that ACCOs have precedence in the design and delivery of these services.

Finally, ACCOs are expanding rapidly in their delivery of holistic services, ranging from health, housing, child protection, family violence, wellbeing and cultural programs and services. As a result, more must be done to adequately resource and assist ACCOs to respond to the requirements of expanding service provision and an expanding workforce.