

Western Australia

Western Australia continues to have the highest over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the country and rates are rising. While good intentions and some initial progress on reforms can be seen, this year's report continues to raise huge concerns. There has been a significant drop in investment in family support services, in a state that spends the lowest proportion of its child and families service budget on family support services.

There has, however, been some progress. Family Matters WA welcomes implementation of *foundational pillars* towards a comprehensive Aboriginal child protection system reflective of and responsive to our children's and families' needs. Notably, this important shift shows alignment to the Family Matters Building Blocks.

The current government has begun to shift towards a more robust, culturally safe approach across the prevention, early intervention and statutory child protection systems. This shift away from a reactionary, deficit-based model will only be maintained and progressed by listening to our Aboriginal communities, people, professionals, and organisations, including members of Family Matters WA.

It is important to acknowledge the steps taken towards a comprehensive Aboriginal child protection system across our great state:

- The *foundational* implementation of the Department of Communities Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) Strategy through investment in:
 - The Noongar Child Protection Council to establish a regional representative membership base and voice for approximately 1400 Aboriginal children and young people in the South West;
 - The Aboriginal In-Home Support Service (limited to Metropolitan), an ACCO consortium led by Wungening Aboriginal Corporation delivering intensive family support services;
 - Yorganop out-of-home care service, providing recruitment, assessment, and ongoing case management support for foster and kinship carers. This is our state's only Aboriginal-led out-of-home care service; and
 - Kinship Connections' family identification and family finding service, which is instrumental in assisting the fulfilment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. However, there has been limited investment, and the service is fee based.
- The *Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy* sees an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation taking the lead and 11 Aboriginal community-controlled organisations working as partners in consortium arrangements across Western Australia. The strategy will be responsible for providing culturally safe intensive family support services that aim to divert families from the child protection system.
- The proactive and effective relationship between government and Aboriginal organisations and leaders in the development of legislation, policy and practices. Of particular importance is the foundational work on legislative reform to establish recognised Aboriginal organisations to provide advice to government. Family Matters awaits the recognition of representative organisations within the statutory framework.

These foundational pillars are the first incremental step. However, we must not be complacent, and must continue to work towards a comprehensive, culturally proficient child protection system through:

- A state level symposium with strong Aboriginal representation and co-design to develop a comprehensive Western Australian plan to address Aboriginal children and young people's over-representation in child protection with clear actions, and measurable outcomes;
- Establishment of a representative state Aboriginal child protection peak body to assist in development of best practice legislation, policy and frontline service delivery;
- Empowering and investing in the Aboriginal community-controlled sector across metropolitan and regional areas for frontline service delivery across prevention, early intervention and statutory responses; and
- Immediate establishment of an Aboriginal Children's Commissioner with advocacy, monitoring and oversight powers and responsibilities.

Family Matters WA highlights the immediate need for strong government leadership on the Earlier Intervention and Family Support Strategy. Government must demonstrate effective contract management and oversight in relation to their intention to build ACCO capacity and transfer child protection service delivery to the 11 newly funded Aboriginal organisations across our state.

Although there has been a shift in the right direction, our communities await further action and investment, especially given that the rate of over-representation continues to rise.

"A right delayed is a right denied."

– Martin Luther King Jnr

