

Key strategies currently being undertaken by the Department of Health and Human Services Victoria

The Victorian Government is committed to improving the safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and families and to reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care. The government has implemented a range of initiatives to address over-representation.

The Roadmap for Reform: children and families

Roadmap for Reform is the Victorian government's blueprint for transforming the child and family system: focussing on earlier intervention and prevention; reducing vulnerability; and equipping children to reach their full potential.

Underpinned by Aboriginal self-determination and self-management the *Roadmap for Reform* provides opportunities to develop new models of care and more connected pathways of care that support cultural connection and improve outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and families. For example, with the establishment of the new Aboriginal kinship finding service, we will better support children who cannot live with their parents in kinship placements, strengthen reunification where appropriate, and promote placement stability.

Aboriginal Children's Forum

Operating since 2016 and held quarterly, the Aboriginal Children's Forum (ACF) is convened by the Minister for Child Protection and co-chaired with a nominated Chief Executive Officer (CEO) from an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO). The forum brings together ACCOs, community service organisations (CSOs) and Department of Health and Human Services (department) staff to respond to the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care by delivering on priorities identified in the submission *Koorie Kids: Growing Strong in their Culture*. From June 2018, the ACF has adopted the priorities and actions outlined in the *Wungurilwil Gaggapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement*.

Wungurilwil Gaggapduir: Children and Families Agreement

Wungurilwil Gaggapduir: Children and Families Agreement signed by the then Minister for Families and Children and Aboriginal and community representatives on 26 April 2018, sets out a vision for the future where all Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria are safe, resilient and thriving and living in culturally rich and strong Aboriginal families and communities.

The 2018-19 Victorian Budget allocated \$53.3 million to support implementation of *Wungurilwil Gaggapduir* and the 2019-20 budget added an additional \$23.7 million to implementing the Agreement.

Wungurilwil Gaggapduir year one highlights include:

- The 2018-19 State budget provision of \$6 million over four years for an innovation and learning fund to provide Aboriginal organisations with opportunities to build a body of evidence, embed existing innovations into practice, grow innovative practices across the system and support ACCOs to explore new and culturally informed ways of working to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. Ten of 14 ACCOs shared \$1.7 million for innovation and learning grants in 2018–19 to undertake activities that include

an evaluation project, a cultural connection and mentoring program, an alternative foster care model and a cultural strengthening program.

- The development of a culture and trauma informed model of residential care by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) and the Mallee District Aboriginal Service.
- Aboriginal advisory groups have been established at four out of five of the new Orange Door locations, Victoria's family violence and family support service coordination access hubs.
- At least 13 per cent of Home Stretch targets will be for Aboriginal care leavers, proportionate to the number of Aboriginal young people leaving care. Home Stretch is the new \$11.6 million service response that gives young people leaving out-of-home care the option to continue living with their carer until the age of 21.
- The department launched a new Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework. The framework has been developed to help the department and mainstream Victorian health, human and community services to create culturally safe environments, services and workplaces.

Transfer of case management and funding from non-Aboriginal providers to ACCOs

In partnership with the ACF the department continues transferring case management of Aboriginal children subject to child protection orders and resources to ACCOs. The department has agreed to targets set by the ACF to transfer case management of all Aboriginal children in care to ACCOs by the end of 2021. At June 2019, 46 per cent (708) of Aboriginal children and young people on a contractible order in care were managed by an ACCO. This is an increase of 250 per cent since August 2017.

\$13.6 million in the 2019–20 budget will enable a further 200 Aboriginal children in kinship care to transition to ACCOs.

Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care

The *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, Section 18, enables the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services to authorise the Aboriginal principal officer of an Aboriginal agency to undertake specified functions and powers in relation to a Children's Court protection order for an Aboriginal child or young person. *Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care*, the operationalisation of Section 18, is a key provision supporting the principle of Aboriginal self-management and self-determination.

Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care launched in 2017 at VACCA, has expanded in 2019 at the Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative, where the service is known as Mutjang Bupuwingarrak Mukman, which means 'keeping our kids safe' in Dja Dja Wurrung language.

Pre-authorisation work is underway to establish *Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care* at the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative and Njernda Aboriginal Corporation in Echuca in the next 12 months.

Aboriginal Kinship Finding Service

Following an invited call for funding, VACCA in partnership with the First Nations Legal and Research Services and the Koorie Heritage Trust was selected to provide an Aboriginal Kinship Finding Service.

The new service includes the establishment of a genealogical database to support early kinship carer identification and connections to family, community and culture for Aboriginal children and young people involved with the Victorian child protection system.

Improving responses to Aboriginal children – Cultural planning

An independent evaluation was undertaken on the new model for cultural plans implemented in 2017. The evaluation found support for the new model and promotes additional guidelines for practitioners and revised templates for cultural plans.

The 2018-19 State Budget allocated \$11.9 million over four years to continue the new model of cultural planning, thereby supporting the new model to become an ongoing program.

A one-day State-wide Cultural Planning forum was held in June 2019 to share best practice outcomes, knowledge and experience, review the cultural planning template and further discuss the evaluation's key findings in order to develop a state-wide work plan for the program.

Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (ACPP) Project

The department has initiated an ACPP project to progress implementation of recommendations made by the Commission for Children and Young People in its inquiry, *In the Child's Best Interests – Inquiry into compliance with the intent of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle in Victoria, 2016*.

On 18 June 2019, the department held a state-wide ACPP forum, facilitated by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), that brought together over 70 child protection practitioners, ACCOs and CSOs to discuss the critical importance of the ACPP in making decisions that are in the best interests of Aboriginal children.

Strengthened identification process

The process for identifying Aboriginal children involved with child protection has been strengthened, requiring practitioners to verify each child's Aboriginal identity with the family in person at the earliest opportunity (preferably during the first home visit).

The department's Client Relationship Information System (CRIS) functionality has been enhanced so that verification by a family member can be recorded, providing an additional step that aims to increase accuracy and reduce the possibility of de-identification of children incorrectly identified as Aboriginal. This work has been supported by the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.

Consistent and accurate recording of Aboriginal cultural information on CRIS leads to improved service provision and data recording. This data is used when planning service and program delivery and in identifying what works well, to support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and their families involved in the child protection program.