

South Australia

“When any system is overwhelmed, it is all too easy to prioritise the needs of the system over the needs of a single child. Robyn Layton QC recognised this reality in 2003” (SA Government 2019).

By 2003, Aboriginal children’s needs had come second to the needs of the system, in place for 225 years. This has resulted in the critical need for systems with the capacity to heal unresolved transgenerational collective traumas of Aboriginal families and communities. This includes the profoundly disabling effects from policies and practices that led to the Stolen Generations, now confirmed to be a system driven, gross abuse and violation of human rights for Aboriginal children, their families and communities.

In 2020, the SA Child Protection system reform is having difficulty demonstrating that the reform across the spectrum of services – spanning early intervention to statutory care – is meeting the cultural needs of Aboriginal children, young people and families. Evidence shows that despite best intentions, the current child protection system reform is still struggling to change the trajectory of our most vulnerable children and their families, and is slow to improve sustained, long-term outcomes for our children. It has also been noted that the current reform process has not addressed the need to arrest the devastating cycles and intergenerational impacts resulting from the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their family, community and culture in the present day.

The Productivity Commission’s 2020 Report on Government Services (RoGS) shows that for South Australia, the disproportionality ratio of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care has risen to 7.3 in 2018/19 from 6.88 the previous year. The disproportionality ratio for Aboriginal children on care and protection orders has also risen to 7.02 from 6.76 in the previous year. This is not a trend that is confined to South Australia, however, and similar increases have been observed in other jurisdictions (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2020).

Aboriginal families and communities in South Australia are becoming more vocal and more organised in their advocacy efforts as another generation of our children and young people are *lost to the needs* of an obviously overwhelmed system that continues to see our children and young people removed from their families but placed in care environments where they are still at significant risk of harm.

The *Guardian for Children and Young People’s Annual Report 2018-19* has highlighted concerns about deficiencies for Aboriginal children and young people in care, particularly those living in residential care. The report notes that as at 30 June 2019, 34.2% of children and young people on 12-month and 18-year orders were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Government of South Australia 2019). The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People also noted on 13 May 2020 that “at 30 June 2019, only 62.7% of eligible children (854 of a possible 1,363) were placed in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle” (Government of South Australia 2020).

Aboriginal families and communities in this state are calling for the SA Government to proactively engage with and consult Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations (ACCHOs). This engagement is considered crucial given the critical role ACCHOs have in the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children, families and communities across the state. The work that the Department of Human Services (DHS) has undertaken recently to develop Aboriginal co-design criteria and a trauma-responsive early intervention system has involved

discussion and consultation with South Australian ACCHOs, and it is hoped that this engagement will continue.