

# Tasmania

The Tasmanian Government has made little progress over the past year to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. Aboriginal children are 4.3 times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children. Although the government's *Strong Kids Safe Families Implementation Plan 2016- 2020* demonstrates a commitment to reforming the child protection system, it contains few reforms specifically aimed at Aboriginal children and families. Tasmanian Aboriginal organisations, communities, families and children should be at the forefront of decision-making, yet they continue to be overlooked by the department when designing and implementing systems that affect Aboriginal children.

For example, instead of engaging the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC), the department funded two religious non-government organisations (NGOs) to appoint three Aboriginal liaison officers (ALOs) to provide culturally appropriate advice to the department regarding Aboriginal children and families. The department's lack of recognition of the TAC in this decision and preference for religious NGOs is offensive and a demonstration of the sheer disregard of the skills and expertise of the TAC to provide services for Aboriginal children. Despite being awarded the government funding, the NGOs recognise their lack of expertise and subcontracted TAC to provide two of these positions.

This lack of recognition of expertise is also evident in the development of the Beginning Practice program for new Child Youth and Families staff. While the department states the new training module embeds the element of culturally responsive practice into the learning program, it appears the package was developed without consultation from TAC. The authors of the training package and the extent of involvement of Aboriginal people in its design remain unclear.

There continues to be a significant under-investment in family support services in Tasmania, with the current level of funding inappropriate to support the work of TAC state-wide. More positively, TAC is one of only three organisations in the state to have been re-funded to deliver the Intensive Family Engagement Services program (IFES). Funding for IFES is allocated on a per family basis, allowing TAC to deliver intensive support that meets the needs of individual families. The high level of support required for these families is acknowledged in the funding arrangement, an example of a best practice funding model that would improve all family support services.

There are no department-established programs or initiatives for Aboriginal organisations to participate in child protection decision-making, to lead in family participation through family group conferencing, or to take up case management or guardianship powers and functions. There are no formal processes that require child protection staff to inform TAC when notifications for Aboriginal children occur, with TAC involvement limited to the discretion of Child Safety Services (CSS) staff.

There is a distinct lack of department processes supporting Aboriginal children's connection to culture. The development of cultural support plans also occurs at the discretion of the child's support worker, with no standard for cultural support planning in the department. Further, only 13% of Aboriginal children who are removed from their families are placed with Aboriginal carers. Those placed with non-Indigenous carers often lose contact with their community, and thus many lose their connection to culture.

Once Aboriginal children are in care, the child protection system prioritises needs of foster carers over the needs of families. Young children are often kept with non-Indigenous carers

to maintain continuity of care, without recognising the parents' right to reunification or the significance of a child's connection to culture as a protective factor.

In the future, we would like to see Aboriginal children, families and organisations as key decision-makers in the system. This can only be done through significant investment in initiatives such as Aboriginal family-led decision-making, early intervention and support and the delegation of guardianship powers and functions to the TAC. In order to achieve self-determination for Aboriginal people in Tasmania, the department must recognise the value and skills of the TAC and commit to legislative change focused on Aboriginal decision-making. This is the only way to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.