

***A Fairer Victoria* for Aboriginal Communities: A Framework for Action**

Introduction

This proposal was initiated by Victorian Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations in response to the Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) consultative project concerning the Victorian Government's *A Fairer Victoria* policy. The five peak and statewide organisations involved are:

- Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited (VACSAL);
- Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Limited (VAEAL);
- Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA);
- Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO);
- Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Limited (VALS).

These organisations represent the aspirations of Aboriginal communities of Victoria in the areas of health, education, child and family welfare, juvenile justice, community services and the law and in many cases provide Aboriginal-specific government funded services. Victorian Aboriginal Statewide organisations and peaks were established by Victorian Aboriginal communities. They predate the establishment of ATSIC and they continue to play a vitally important role in meeting changing Aboriginal community needs in Victoria and enhancing the capacity of government policy and programs to meet community needs.

This document outlines a framework for creating a 'Fairer Victoria' for Aboriginal communities, based on the key principles on which our organisations are founded.

Our vision: key principles

Acknowledging the past and its impact on the present

Historically, Aboriginal communities had strong, functioning and sustainable social, cultural, legal, economic and ecological systems which enabled them to live and thrive. This capacity was greatly diminished by the process of colonisation which dispossessed and fragmented Aboriginal communities. Today, this diminished capacity is evidenced by disproportionate rates of disadvantage, impoverishment, poor health and incarceration. Government needs to take a greater responsibility for restoring the capacity of Aboriginal communities. The first step towards restoring capacity is to acknowledge the impact of the past, and to promote the importance of honouring Aboriginal culture, and a spirit of reconciliation.

Self-determination

Self-determination is recognised internationally as a fundamental human right for individuals and distinct peoples, including Indigenous peoples. Self-determination is also fundamental to restoring the capacity of Victorian Aboriginal communities to overcome disadvantage. We acknowledge the sovereign rights of Aboriginal peoples as the owners and custodians of their traditional lands and waters. Community-controlled Aboriginal organisations are critical organs for self-determination and locations for communities to meet ensuring that communities have a voice in policy development and directions; and that programs and services are culturally sensitive and appropriately targeted.

Restoring capacity through cultural respect

We believe that culturally-based approaches to overcoming Aboriginal disadvantage are the most effective. Aboriginal cultures are the longest continuing cultures in the world. These cultures are sophisticated and holistic, linking spirituality with politics, education, economics, ecology and law. Aboriginal cultures have proved resilient and continue to change and adapt to the impact of colonisation. In Victoria there are many Aboriginal and Islander people, some of whom come from other states and territories. We support an approach to reform which focuses on promoting cultural respect and restoring capacity. We work to increase the cultural competence of non-indigenous organisations; to build public awareness of the effects of dominant culture on Aboriginal people; and to develop sustainable and equal partnerships that value and respect Aboriginal culture, skills and knowledge.

A Framework for Action: Creating ‘a fairer Victoria’ for Aboriginal people

Building the capacity of Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations and developing an effective partnership with government and non-indigenous community service organisations

Enhancing the capacity of statewide and peak organisations to represent communities is a key step towards the creation of ‘a fairer Victoria’ for Aboriginal people. Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations play a central role in building the capacity of communities and individuals to overcome disadvantage and to prosper. We consult with communities across the Victoria to determine their needs and aspirations, and work in partnership with government to develop and implement strategies to meet these needs, and to increase opportunities for Aboriginal people.

Strategy 9 of *A Fairer Victoria* is about ‘Building new partnerships with Indigenous Victorians’. We strongly support the development of new partnerships. Governments and non-Government organisations need to work in partnership with Aboriginal

communities and organisations to re-build societal and economic capacity. This can be achieved by increasing the capacity of Aboriginal peak and statewide organisations to represent and serve Aboriginal communities.

The following aspects of the Framework outlines the key areas in which the Victorian government can build the capacity of Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations.

Developing partnerships between Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations and the Victorian State Government

If governments are to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people, they must work in partnership with communities. Statewide and peak organisations provide a key link between government and communities. Formal partnerships between statewide and peak organisations and government are a highly effective means of promoting culturally appropriate and relevant best-practice strategies. Partnerships enable the development of protocols which ensure that communities are consulted effectively on government initiatives and programs (ie: consolidation of consultation). Formal partnership arrangements facilitate the development of long-term policy and provide opportunities for the state government formally to commit to principles which are endorsed by Aboriginal communities.

Building on existing partnerships and developing new partnerships are important steps in increasing the capacity of statewide and peak organisations to represent Aboriginal communities.

Specific measures

We suggest that the State Government, in consultation with Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations

- develops clear and equitable partnership protocols for engagement on issues concerning our areas of expertise,
- resources Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations to participate in engagement processes

Increasing the capacity of Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations to provide high quality policy advice

Statewide and peak organisations play an important role in advocating for Aboriginal individuals and communities in the areas including health, education, child and family welfare, juvenile justice, community services and the law. We provide high quality policy advice to government utilising our respective areas of expertise, through extensive consultation with communities. We promote quality in service delivery, and advocate for the development of improved services, and work to ensure, through various partnerships, strategies and agreements, that people have access to culturally appropriate services. Peak and statewide organisations are also instrumental in providing non-indigenous organisations with guidance on effectively engaging Aboriginal people.

The policy environment has changed considerably since the peak organisations were first established. Aboriginal peak organisations are now frequently consulted as part of the process of policy development, and required to analyse policy in relation to cultural relevance and appropriateness. It is important to enhance the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to reflect this change in the culture of policy development. Enhancing the capacity of Aboriginal peak organisations would improve workforce planning and training, improve the quality of policy development and improve the quality and range of partnerships between Aboriginal service providers, government and non-government organisations, and complement government attempts to build a local and regional consultative structure.

Specific measures

We suggest that the state government provides funding for Aboriginal organisations to develop policy, research and program delivery capacity.

In relation to statewide and peak organisations we propose that, as a matter of principle, funding be provided for ten project workers so that each of the following organisations will have a Senior Project Worker (policy worker) and Junior Project Worker (network worker) – VAEAI, VACCA, VACSAL, VALS, and VACCHO:

The Project Workers will engage in:

- Forecasting the likely impact of Government policy initiatives on Aboriginal people.
- Providing advice about integrating and prioritising community consultations and service provider feedback.
- Developing policy proposals to reduce inequities of Aboriginal people
- Liaising with mainstream organizations about service improvements.
- Gathering information from service users and community members about ways to strengthen communities.
- Disseminating information on good practice to non-Government organisations and all levels of Government.
- Providing input into the research and development of national and international best practice for services.
- Identifying how programs and services could better reflect United Nations human rights standards, particularly in relation to economic, social and cultural rights.
- Identifying strategies to better overcome Commonwealth Aboriginal disadvantage as against the COAG indicators

Increasing the capacity of Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations to engage in cross-sectoral policy work

At present, peak organisations are mandated to provide policy advice and/or services exclusively in their area of expertise (i.e health or education). However, we have long

recognised that social, legal and economic issues are inter-related, and have a combined effect on individuals and on communities. It is important that we are supported to work on a cross-sectoral basis to develop comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategies to improve outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

Supporting statewide and peak organisations to work proactively together on cross-sectoral policy issues would enable us to combine their expertise, experience and community networks to develop long-term initiatives that would benefit Aboriginal communities. A sustained, cross-sectoral approach could lead to significant progress in improving the efficiency of the community consultation process, developing long-term research projects and forecasting the likely impact of government policy initiatives on communities. It would also complement a 'whole-of-government' approach.

The 2006-07 State Budget allocates \$10.8 million for new representative arrangements. If these new arrangements are to work well it is important that communities are supported, resourced and given access to relevant information. A properly funded cross-sectoral statewide and peak organisations initiative would assist the implementation and success of the new representative arrangements. Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations already have extensive representative models and community consultation structures which have proven to be effective in representing Aboriginal communities.

Specific measures

We suggest that the government:

- provides funding for an annual Aboriginal sector joint forum.
- establishes clear processes and provides resources to enable the Aboriginal sector to formally engaged in the annual budget bid.

Increasing the capacity of Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations to provide high quality services

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that the Aboriginal population base will increase by up to 44.1% between 2001 and 2009. Specifically, this will mean a dramatic escalation in the population of youth. Aboriginal organisations are already facing increasing demand for services and expertise. There is a critical need to build the capacity of Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations to remain responsive to a community which is changing demographically.

A majority of Aboriginal people prefer to use Aboriginal services where possible. The availability of such services strengthens communities and generates employment. By drawing on local knowledge, understanding of culture, and community consultation, Aboriginal service providers are best placed to tackle specific issues and to offer culturally appropriate services. In some cases the availability of Aboriginal services is limited by funding or there is no proximate service. It is important therefore to ensure improved capacity of Victorian Aboriginal and non-Victorian Aboriginal service providers to provide culturally appropriate services (see below).

Specific measures

We suggest that the state government

- commit to the rolling out, funding and sustainability of best practice service delivery models as may emerge from the evaluation of pilot projects
- develop an Aboriginal sector Capacity Building Plan that is sustainable which involves developing skills and providing resources in the areas of:
 - Infrastructure/administration;
 - Recruitment and education;
 - Training;
 - Research and evaluation;
 - Advocacy;
 - Governance and management;
 - Community development and consultation and
 - Community sector-wide and government liaison

Increasing the capacity of Aboriginal peak and statewide organisations to form workable partnerships with non-Aboriginal service providers

We commend government initiatives to make cultural competence a key requirement for registration for non-Aboriginal service-providers (for example, child and family welfare). However, the onus to provide cultural competence training generally falls on Aboriginal statewide and peak organisations. Government needs to ensure that Aboriginal organisations are adequately supported to provide this training; and to develop protocols to facilitate partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations; in particular, to ensure that such partnerships are genuine, sustainable, and of benefit to Aboriginal organisations and communities.

Specific measures

We suggest that the state government in consultation with Aboriginal organisation develop guidelines and standards for equal partnership formation and maintenance. The framework of partnerships should include: recognition of and respect of Aboriginal culture and expertise.

We suggest that non-indigenous community service organisations make the following commitments:

- To provide a culturally sensitive and accessible service to the Aboriginal community;
- To be accountable in service delivery for funding that is secured for the purpose of meeting the needs of Aboriginal people;
- To develop culturally respectful and appropriate partnerships, policies and practices with Aboriginal agencies;
- To support the capacity building of Aboriginal organisations;

- To develop partnership arrangements with Aboriginal organisations that ensure that there are proper protocols in place and that Aboriginal organisations benefit from the partnerships;
- For statistical purposes, to have in place a process of identifying whether a client is Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander;
- To make statements of acknowledgement and incorporate recognition of Aboriginal traditional ownership/custodianship in their Constitutions;
- To acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land at public meetings;
- To make cultural competence a key policy and employ an appropriate Aboriginal organisation to deliver cultural competence training;
- To employ Aboriginal persons when appropriate and provide appropriate support.