

Closing the Gap: Where to for Victoria?

**VCOSS Submission to the Closing the Gap
and Victorian Aboriginal Affairs
Framework refresh**

June 2018



About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups, and individuals interested in social policy. In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

This submission was prepared for VCOSS by Brooke McKail.

Authorised by:

Emma King, Chief Executive Officer

© Copyright 2018

Victorian Council of Social Service

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street

Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

+61 3 9235 1000

For enquiries:

Llewellyn Reynders, Policy Manager

Email: llewellyn.reynders@vcoss.org.au

VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays its respects to Elders past and present.

Contents

Introduction	2
Recommendations	3
About Closing the Gap	4
Progress in closing the gap	4
Embed self-determination as the basis of the frameworks	5
Put Aboriginal voices at the centre of the process	5
Rethink the prosperity agenda	5
Recognise the legacy of colonisation	6
Recognise culture	7
Adequately fund Aboriginal community-controlled organisations	7
Influence the federal process	8
Review the targets	9
Retain existing targets	9
Include additional targets	9
Strengthen Aboriginal control over data availability and use	12

Introduction

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Victorian government on the refresh of the Closing the Gap and Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF). This refresh process is an important opportunity to address the slow rates of progress in improving health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal Australians.

VCOSS is the peak body for social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the community services sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy. In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

The principles of Aboriginal self-determination and co-design must underpin the refresh. Government and society need to recognise that current inequalities have been created by generations of dispossession, marginalization and discrimination. For too long, policies and decisions about the future of Aboriginal people have been made without them.

Closing the gap in health and wellbeing outcomes will require genuine reconciliation and a shifting of power and control away from government and mainstream organisations and back to community owned solutions. It requires a systemic approach to addressing the underlying causes of health inequality and a commitment to adequately funding preventive measures that address the social determinants of health and build the capacity of Aboriginal organisations and communities.

Closing the gap will require genuine partnerships between Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), governments and mainstream organisations. Mainstream agencies need to recognise the expertise and strengths of local ACCOs, and empower them to work with and meet the needs of their communities. Many mainstream agencies in Victoria have embraced the role of ACCOs as primary providers of services to Aboriginal Victorians. They are identifying ways to transfer control and funding to ACCOs (for example, through the Aboriginal Children's Forum and the transfer of guardianship of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care), and build meaningful and respectful partnerships. They are also building their own cultural competency through learning from and listening to Aboriginal people and organisations.

VCOSS believes that the refresh process must be led by Aboriginal people. We support the many submissions made by Aboriginal organisations, and add our voice to strengthen their advocacy.

In preparing this submission we consulted with VCOSS member organisations from both the Aboriginal community controlled sector and the mainstream community services sector. We have also drawn on the expertise of Aboriginal leaders and peak bodies to inform us.

Recommendations

Embed Aboriginal self-determination as the basis of the frameworks

- Ensure Aboriginal self-determination is at the centre of the VAAF and Closing the Gap refresh processes, frameworks and governance structures
- Consult more extensively with the Aboriginal community about whether the prosperity framework is appropriate and reflective of community aspirations
- In consultation with Aboriginal communities, recognise culture as a strength and protective factor for Aboriginal people
- Ensure the refreshed frameworks recognise the historic and continuing impacts of systemic injustice, dispossession and racism
- All states and territories and the Commonwealth should develop preferred providers policies that recognise the role of ACCOs in communities.
- All levels of government commit to long-term funding of programs and services for Aboriginal people
- Continue to strengthen the VAAF, irrespective of the commitments made in the federal Closing the Gap framework
- Use Victoria's experience and position as a national leader to influence COAG to strengthen the Closing the Gap framework

Review the targets

- Retain existing targets in VAAF and Closing the Gap frameworks
- Add additional targets where there are gaps, including in justice, homelessness, family violence and mental health and racism.
- Where possible, frame targets in a way that is aspirational and strengths based

Strengthen Aboriginal control over data availability and use

- Improve data availability for ACCOs and mainstream organisations to use in local planning and evaluation.
- Build the capacity of ACCOs to collect and own their own data.

About Closing the Gap

The Closing the Gap agenda commits the Australian, state and territory government to national targets to close or reduce the gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians in health, education and employment.

2018 marks the 10 year anniversary of the Closing the Gap agenda, and the expiry of 4 of the 7 targets.

The priority areas for Closing the Gap are life expectancy, infant mortality rates, children's reading, writing and numeracy, school attendance, employment, year 12 attainment, and early childhood education (added in 2014).

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework reflects the Victorian context, and includes additional targets not included in Closing the Gap, including for maternal child health, child protection and youth justice.

Progress in closing the gap

Nationally, we are only on track to meet targets related to Year 12 attainment. In all other areas we are failing to close the gap at the rate needed to meet the targets.

At current rate of progress, it will take 495 years to close the gap in life expectancy.¹

At a state level, we have seen real progress in closing the gap in kindergarten participation and year 12 attainment, and a 50 per cent reduction in perinatal mortality. However, Aboriginal people continue to be overrepresented in the prison and out-of-home care systems. They face significant disparities in health, housing and disability outcomes. Despite more young people staying in school, there are no improvements in Aboriginal students meeting NAPLAN benchmarks.²

This refresh is an opportunity to reflect on the challenges of the last decade and influence the next phase of the Closing the Gap framework. Clearly the existing frameworks and approach are failing.

Closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians requires a genuine change in the way we engage community, and in how we partner with Aboriginal communities in the design, delivery and monitoring of policies and services that affect them.

¹ Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, Monash University, *Health and Life Expectancy*, <https://www.monash.edu/law/research/centres/castancentre/our-research-areas/indigenous-research/the-northern-territory-intervention/the-northern-territory-intervention-an-evaluation/health-and-life-expectancy>

² Victorian Government, *Aboriginal Affairs Report 2017*, November 2017.

Embed Aboriginal self-determination

Put Aboriginal voices at the centre of the process

Recommendation

- Ensure Aboriginal self-determination is at the centre of the VAAF and Closing the Gap refresh processes, frameworks and governance structures

The central aim of a refreshed Closing the Gap and VAAF framework should be promoting the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over their own health, wellbeing and safety outcomes. The most effective way to deliver sustained improvements in health and social outcomes for Aboriginal people is through a policy of self-determination.³ The refresh process, and the governance and implementation of the new frameworks must be led by Aboriginal people and communities.

Aboriginal representative and peak bodies are well placed to work in partnership with government in designing and delivering the refreshed frameworks. They must be resourced to do so. The Aboriginal community has repeatedly emphasised the focus of the refresh must be genuine listening to the voices of Aboriginal people, and real partnerships that support local solutions.

Among other things, this may require flexibility in timelines to allow genuine co-design with Aboriginal people. VCOSS stakeholders report that sometimes decisions appear to have been made by government before consultations commence.

Aboriginal communities and cultures are also diverse. They have different needs and aspirations. The refreshed frameworks need to recognise this diversity and allow opportunities for local input, decision making and service design.

Rethink the 'prosperity' agenda

Recommendation

- Consult more extensively with the Aboriginal community about whether the prosperity framework is appropriate and reflective of community aspirations

³ Behrendt, L, Jorgensen, M & Vivian, A, *Self-determination: Background concepts – Scoping paper 1 for the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services*, UTS Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, 2016.

Many Aboriginal people and organisations have criticised the Closing the Gap framework for adopting of a deficit-based approach that fails to recognise the structural and systemic failures that have led to poor outcomes for Aboriginal communities. A deficit-based approach can perpetuate stigma and place responsibility for improvement on individual Aboriginal people and communities, instead of governments and systems.

In response to these criticisms, the federal government has proposed the refreshed framework adopt a 'prosperity lens.' According to the discussion guide, prosperity is about moving beyond wellbeing to flourishing and thriving. It refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having the economic empowerment to be the decision-makers over issues that impact their lives, and to seize opportunities for themselves, their families and communities.

VCOSS is concerned that a prosperity lens may over-emphasise economic factors, and not give adequate attention to entrenched inequality and the underlying drivers of disadvantage. VCOSS members reflected that the proposed framework contains a limited definition of community, and fails to recognise the diversity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

It may also fail to reflect the priorities that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have for themselves. Government's conception of prosperity may be quite different to what people consider prosperity to be for themselves, their families and communities.

The prosperity lens may not be the most appropriate basis for the Closing the Gap framework. Some VCOSS members recommended the adoption of a wellbeing framework. Members also emphasised that Aboriginal self-determination must remain the underlying platform and key enabler of the framework.

Recognise the legacy of colonisation

Recommendation

- Ensure the refreshed frameworks recognise the historic and continuing impacts of systemic injustice, dispossession and racism

The refreshed frameworks must recognise and address the systemic failures of government policy that have led to the disparity in outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians.

The VAAF already explicitly acknowledges the impacts of colonization and dispossession:

“The consequences of this are far-reaching and include dispossession of land and traditional culture, breakdown of community kinship systems, racism and vilification, economic exclusion and entrenched poverty, the effects of institutionalisation and child removal policies, inherited grief and trauma, and loss of traditional roles and status.”

Only addressing the outcomes of this historical disadvantage, such as poor health, will not close the gap. We must be willing to recognise and address the underlying causes, by partnering with Aboriginal communities to address the wrongs of the past and eliminate structural inequalities.

Recognise culture

Recommendation

- In consultation with Aboriginal communities, recognise culture as a strength and protective factor for Aboriginal people

Aboriginal cultures are rich and diverse. VCOSS recognises culture as a source of strength, resilience and pride for Aboriginal people and communities. Strong cultural identity is also closely linked to good social and emotional health.

VCOSS supports refreshed frameworks that recognise culture as a strength and ensure appropriate funding is made available for programs that support cultural and language activities. How culture should be embedded in the frameworks should be determined by the Aboriginal community.

Adequately fund Aboriginal community-controlled organisations

Recommendation

- All states and territories and the Commonwealth should develop preferred providers policies that recognise the role of ACCOs in communities.
- All levels of government commit to long-term funding of programs and services for Aboriginal people

The high rates of disadvantage in Aboriginal communities means there is significant demand for support from Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs). ACCOs also play a vital role in engaging their communities in conversations about governance and decision-making. ACCOs should be recognised as the experts in and preferred providers of culturally safe services for Aboriginal people.

Achieving real change in closing the gap will require a much more consistent approach to funding of ACCOs, promoting a stable environment for them to work. Expenditure on Aboriginal affairs does not meet the amount required to address the high and complex needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.⁴ For example, organisations funded under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy have not received CPI increases since 2013-14, meaning they are unable to keep up with the real costs of service delivery. The National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services program estimates the cumulative loss over this period to its program at \$9.7 million. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-23 also continues to be unfunded, limiting its ability to meet its desired goals.

⁴ NACCHO, *Increased support to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations needed to Close the Gap in life expectancy*, February 2018.

Many contracts for the delivery of services to Aboriginal communities are short-term, leading to loss of trust by the community and difficulties retaining high quality staff.

ACCOs have also been subject to chaotic and rushed tender processes, like the Indigenous Advancement Strategy competitive tender process in 2014-15, which was implemented without meaningful engagement with community and lacking a clear set of desired outcomes. It was also a missed opportunity to preference culturally safe organisations and grow the capacity of the ACCO sector.

Competitive tender processes can actively discourage the kind of collaboration and partnerships that can deliver good outcomes for Aboriginal communities. They can also disadvantage small, local organisations, at the expense of larger organisations with greater economies of scale, and fail to adequately value things like cultural safety, connection to community and established relationships with marginalised communities. These types of procurement processes should be avoided.

Influence the federal process

Recommendation

- Continue to strengthen the VAAF, irrespective of the commitments made in the federal Closing the Gap framework
- Use Victoria's experience and position as a national leader to influence COAG to strengthen the Closing the Gap framework

Many of the recommendations in this submission relate to the Closing the Gap framework. This is because in many respects Victoria is already leading the way nationally in progressing self-determination and empowering Aboriginal communities to design solutions to address the challenges they face.

Victoria has already taken significant steps towards embedding self-determination and shifting power and control to Aboriginal communities. For example, the formation of the Treaty Advancement Commission and the introduction of legislation to appoint an elected body are important steps in progressing self-determination for Aboriginal people in Victoria.

Victoria has also incorporated a wider range of additional targets and measures into the VAAF, compared to the Closing the Gap framework. The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Report presents a more comprehensive picture of the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal Victorians than the Closing the Gap reports.

VCOSS members emphasized the importance of Victoria continuing to show leadership in this area. In particular it was noted that Victoria has the opportunity to use its experience to influence other states and the Federal Government to strengthen the targets in the Closing the Gap framework and encourage measures that embed Aboriginal self-determination in the refresh.

Review the targets

Recommendations

- Retain existing targets in VAAF and Closing the Gap frameworks
- Add additional targets where there are gaps, including in justice, homelessness, family violence and mental health and racism.
- Where possible, frame targets in a way that is aspirational and strengths based

Retain existing targets

Limited progress has been made against many of the targets in the Closing the Gap and Victorian Aboriginal Affairs frameworks. However, it is important that we continue monitoring and working to achieve progress against the original targets, in order to be able to track long-term change and compare results.

There may also be opportunities for expanding how we measure and understand progress against them. In addition to comparing outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, it may be useful to publish data that shows the difference in outcomes between metropolitan and rural Aboriginal people, or between men and women.

Include additional targets

Additional targets are needed in areas where there are gaps in data collection and monitoring, including in justice and family violence.

Aboriginal organisations note that existing targets are deficit based, and highlight the refresh as an opportunity to reframe new targets in a way that incorporates aspirational elements and strengths. For example, the target related to life expectancy could also measure quality of life. The target related to unemployment can incorporate participation in the economy and business ownership.

Close the gap in incarceration rates

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians are incarcerated at rates far higher than their percentage of the population. A recent Australian Law Reform Commission report states that the disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal Australians is deeply interrelated with incarceration.⁵ VCOSS supports the call of organisations like the *Change the Record* campaign, for the inclusion of a justice target to close the gap in rates of imprisonment between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal people by 2040.⁶

⁵ Australian Law Reform Commission, *Pathways to Justice – Inquiry into the incarceration rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, March 2018.

⁶ Change the Record, *Closing the gap must address the violence and over-imprisonment crisis destroying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives*, May 2018.

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework already includes targets and measures related to Aboriginal adults and young people in the criminal justice system, and reducing incidences of family violence.

Reduce family violence victimisation

Family violence disproportionately impacts on Aboriginal communities, especially women and children. This is perpetuated by the often poor system responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing family violence by police, child protection agencies and courts.

The refresh provides an opportunity to focus efforts on strategies to address violence experienced by Aboriginal families. VCOSS supports the call of the National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services to include a target to close the gap in rates of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by 2040.

VCOSS members also supported a more strengths-based measure around access to prevention services.

Reduce the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care

Aboriginal children in Victoria are about 12 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than other children, and the rate of removal of Aboriginal children is growing.⁷

The refresh should include a target to close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child removal by 2040, and increase reunification of Aboriginal families. The strategies identified by the *Family Matters* campaign⁸ will be vital to achieving this target.

Increase safe and secure housing options

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people account for 20 per cent of all Australians experiencing homelessness. Around one third of Aboriginal Victorians have experienced homelessness at some time in their lives.⁹ A safe and secure home improves health outcomes and can have positive impacts on people's ability to work, study and engage in community life.

Efforts to address homelessness and overcrowding in Aboriginal communities have been welcome, but are often short term, or subject to frequent changes (for example, the recent decision not to renew the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing). In Victoria, the most recent state budget forecast an \$8 million reduction in spending on housing assistance.

Setting a target to close the gap in homelessness and provide people with safe and secure homes could encourage a longer term sustainable funding approach to addressing the housing needs of Aboriginal people. The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework already includes measures of the number of people who are homeless.

⁷ Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services; Child Protection Services*, February 2018.

⁸ <http://www.familymatters.org.au/>

⁹ Victorian Government, *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Report 2017*, November 2017.

Close the gap in mental health and suicide rates

The suicide rate for Aboriginal people is more than twice that of non-Aboriginal people. Reported levels of psychological distress are also much higher for Aboriginal people.¹⁰

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs framework includes targets to close the gap in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults reporting high or very high levels of psychological distress by 2031. It also measures rates of self-harm among Aboriginal Victorians. A more strengths-based approach could include measures of self-assessed quality of health and life.

Reduce racism and build social connectedness

More than a third Aboriginal people report having experienced racism in the last year, as a result of their Aboriginality.¹¹ Racism has profound effects on people's health and welfare, and can lead to people withdrawing from work or study and diminish their quality of life.¹² Government, business and the broader community all have a role to play in stamping out racism and building culturally safe workplaces and communities.

VCOSS supports the inclusion of a target to reduce reported incidents of racism and build participation in cultural and social activities.

¹⁰ Victorian Government, *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Report 2017*, November 2017.

¹¹ Victorian Government, *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Report 2017*, November 2017.

¹² Australian Human Rights Commission, *Racism; it stops with me*, 2017.

Strengthen Aboriginal control over data availability and use

Recommendation:

- Improve data availability for ACCOs and mainstream organisations to use in local planning and evaluation.
- Build the capacity of ACCOs to collect and own their own data.

Access to data helps organisations and communities make decision, plan for the future, target services where they are most needed, and evaluate the difference they are making.

Community service organisations report that they collect and report much data for government, but most of it is about outputs not outcomes (for example, the number of people supported in a given time period and the types of supports provided). This kind of data does little to help organisations or government understand and measure impact. Where outcome data is collected, it is sometimes not reflective of the outcomes identified by the Aboriginal community itself.

Data collected is not often analysed and provided back to organisations in a useful format that would inform planning and evaluation. When data are provided back it is sometimes in formats that are difficult to work with or require specialized and expensive software. This is a barrier to more widespread use of data and evidence in program design and evaluation. Data collected are also often not comparable across time and funding programs. Different data definitions are used and the type of data collected changes from time to time as requested by government funding bodies.

ACCOs need additional funding and capacity to enable them to analyse and work with their own data. This would also help transfer ownership of data and control of research from mainstream agencies and organisations to Aboriginal community controlled organisations and research bodies.

It can also be difficult for organisations and communities to access local level data, especially below local government area. This restricts their ability to implement and evaluate programs that tackle disadvantage at a town or even street block level. Government departments or agencies, like police, often have some of the data they need, but can be reluctant to make it available to external organisations. The negotiations to access data can be long and time consuming, creating a barrier for organisations looking to implement collective impact, justice reinvestment or other collaborative, place-based models.

Victorian Council of Social Service

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street,
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

e vcoss@vcoss.org.au

t 03 9235 1000

www.vcoss.org.au

