



VACCA
Connected by culture

**SUBMISSION TO THE 2022
VICTORIAN STATE GOVERNMENT BUDGET
January 2022**

Building prosperity across generations

About VACCA

As the lead Aboriginal child welfare organisation and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence services in Victoria, VACCA has over 40 years of experience in promoting, advocating for, and achieving positive changes in the lives of Aboriginal children, families and communities. As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO), we believe in the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-determination, the rights of the child and commit to upholding Victorian Aboriginal cultural protocols.

We provide services to over 3,000 Aboriginal children and young people, and over 500 families, with unparalleled connections not only to clients, but across community. We are the largest employer of Aboriginal staff in Victoria outside of Government, growing social capital within our communities and striving to build prosperity across generations. This places VACCA in a unique position with extensive reach across the state and the ability to provide holistic, early and wrap-around supports in a timely manner to those that need it most.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document serves as a reminder to Government of the importance of inviting the voice of Aboriginal peoples in informing and driving reform, and the investment needed to address issues affecting our own communities and lives. It is solutions focussed approach to sector wide reform that puts the rights of Aboriginal children and young people to grow up safe, cared for and connected to community and culture as the central focus. VACCA is committed to ensuring the ongoing needs of the Victorian Aboriginal community, especially children, are reflected in Victoria's future planning and budget commitments across portfolio areas as at the whole of Government level.

Victorians have shown incredible resilience in the face of the ongoing global pandemic. VACCA have seen demand for our services across sectors increase significantly and this has had a profound impact on our workforce capacity. We are concerned for the social and emotional wellbeing of our community, and now is the time to ensure adequate infrastructure and resourcing is available to support community rebuild, heal and thrive.

The Victorian Government is leading the way in its commitment to self-determination in working with Aboriginal Victorians to negotiate Australia's first treaties. We believe that the whole of Government and each Ministerial portfolio area need to play a more dynamic role in enacting change for Aboriginal Victorians and the service system through their legislation, policy and funding levers now irrespective of future Treaty outcomes. VACCA implores the Government to be active in driving reform and equality for Aboriginal Victorians at every opportunity including the 2022 State budget.

Aboriginal-led child and family, family violence and justice services are still behind mainstream providers in terms of funding, services and infrastructure. This is also evident in mental health where a one-size fits all approach has been applied to Aboriginal children and families. Aboriginal children and families should not be forced to access mainstream supports or services where there are suitable, yet under-resourced Aboriginal led solutions available. This is an ineffective policy approach to achieving the Closing the Gap targets.

If we are to rise to the many challenges we will face in meeting our collective obligations in Closing the Gap, Aboriginal organisations and communities, in partnership with Government, must be innovative and embrace a systems transformation agenda. One that is based on a foundation of rigorous data collection, evaluation and reporting. Monitoring and accountability structures must be imbedded into policy and funding levers if we are to achieve sustainable change.

VACCA's recommendations below are not simply about achieving equity in funding and resource allocation for Aboriginal children, women, men, Elders and families with a focus on Closing the Gap; but are a considered and purposeful means to achieving self-determination. To effect actual change requires courageous leadership and a willingness of the Victorian Government to work alongside ACCOs to ensure that Aboriginal children and families

are safe, cared for and connected to their culture, as well as righting historical injustices. This requires a transfer of power and resources to ACCOs

RECOMMENDATIONS

WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are related to policy and are critical to progressing meaningful reform and progressing towards achieving Aboriginal self-determination.

Self-determination and building an Aboriginal evidence base

1. That the Victorian Government commit that all new legislation include a **Statement of Recognition** on Aboriginal people's right to self-determination.
2. In line with the principle of data sovereignty and VACCA's commitment to building an Aboriginal evidence base, we call on the Victorian Government to add a **20% evaluation funding levy** to all programs funded to deliver services for Aboriginal peoples that is dedicated to evaluation and public reporting on return on investment. This will ensure transparency for Aboriginal communities.

Emergency Management Planning

3. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for a coordinated planning and implementation approach to disaster management. The strength of the ACCO sector was highlighted in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we seek the opportunity to work alongside the Victorian Government and Traditional Owner Groups in developing an **Emergency Management Plan** for Aboriginal Communities.

Closing the Gap

To effectively meet the National Agreement on Closing the Gap targets and successfully implement Victoria's Closing the Gap Implementation Plan there needs to be collective agreement on the following steps:

4. That the Victorian Government urgently undertake **modelling for each of the Close the Gap Targets** to drive outcomes. This will help keep all parties accountable for Closing the Gap areas and targets.
5. To achieve the targets across all areas ACCOs must be allocated **proportional funding**.

Stolen Generations

VACCA and Link-Up Victoria await the commencement of the Stolen Generations Compensation Scheme, we have been actively involved in the development of the scheme following many years of advocacy call for its establishment. Link-Up Victoria has been operating since 1990 and does not receive State funding. We support the Stolen Generations and provides family research, family tracing and reunion services to the Stolen Generations to reunite them with their families, communities, traditional country and culture.

6. To ensure Stolen Generations are supported effectively to access and engage with the Scheme upon its commencement VACCA calls for **equity in funding** across the three providers based on service provision and current client engagement.

DEPARTMENT OF FAMILIES, FAIRNESS AND HOUSING (DFFH)

Children & families (including out of home care)

Investment in Early Intervention and Prevention Services- An Aboriginal Family Wellbeing and Support Model

Aboriginal children and young people are disproportionately represented in out-of-home-care. There is a shared commitment to achieving the Closing the Gap targets. VACCA contends however that a fundamental shift in approach is still required to meet Target 12 and reduce the rate of over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care by 45 per cent by 2031. It is clear this target cannot be met without prioritising early intervention and family support. Currently ACCOs only receive **4 percent** of the early help funding. This level of funding does not reflect the Government's commitment to develop an Early Intervention Investment Framework

in the 2021 budget. An Aboriginal Family Wellbeing and Support model must be developed, led and implemented by ACCOs. VACCA seeks the following reforms and budget priorities:

7. Commitment from the Victorian Government to develop an **Aboriginal Family Wellbeing and Support model** that encompasses early intervention and prevention programs in line with the Victorian Government's commitment to develop an Early Intervention Investment Framework. This model would include VACCA leading a sector development role in establishing ACCO based centres across the state, VACCA is prepared to pilot the model across a number of regions.
8. **Proportional funding must be transferred to ACCOs** to deliver early intervention and prevention programs support for this Aboriginal Family Wellbeing and Support initiative to be successful.
9. That Aboriginal Parenting Programs developed by ACCOs be funded across each DFFH region. VACCA is well placed and ready to deliver our **Koorie FACES parenting program** across our 6 regions on an ongoing basis. This will ensure equitable access to parenting programs to Aboriginal families.
10. That VACCA's multidisciplinary **Aboriginal Child Healing Team** is sufficiently resourced and funded to provide social and emotional wellbeing services and healing supports for Aboriginal children and young people in both Family Services and Out of Home care over the next 3 years across our 6 regions.

Young people leaving care

Aboriginal young people leaving care are one of the most vulnerable populations. Access to safe and affordable housing is of critical need for this cohort alongside education and employment pathways. The Youth Foyer model which has been largely successful overseas has been implemented in Victoria with little consideration to Aboriginal young people. VACCA has undertaken a feasibility study, funded by the Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Program to develop an Aboriginal Youth Foyer model.

11. That VACCA be funded to develop and implement the **Aboriginal Youth Foyer** over the next 5 years¹.
12. That DFFH **increase all housing brokerage funding by 10%** for ACCOs providing leaving care, homelessness and housing services to allow for flexibility and to assist Aboriginal Victorians to navigate the housing sector including the provision of rental brokerage programs to give people a start in the private rental market and shared equity programs for people in stable employment to help them buy a home, particularly in regional Victoria.

Foster and Kinship Carers

VACCA is deeply concerned that over 50 percent of our Kinship Carers are living below the poverty line. Many of them access Emergency Relief support regularly, and this has only increased during the pandemic. As more carers of Aboriginal children transition to ACCOs, government must ensure carers are supported so they can provide a safe and nurturing home environment for the Aboriginal children in their care.

13. VACCA calls on the Victorian Government to **increase the financial supports** available to Aboriginal Kinship Carers.
14. That VACCA and other ACAC providers to be funded to develop and trial the implementation of a Statewide intensive "**Carer Welcome Pack**" to all new foster and kinship carers that support Aboriginal children, including those transferring across from mainstream CSOs over the next 3 years to ensure better placement stability and connection to culture.

¹ VACCA's proposed Aboriginal Youth Foyer would have capacity for 40 students accommodated in studio style apartments with communal living and support service areas supervised by trained staff 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Two staffing options have been developed for this study, with different levels of case manager presence. The higher staffing option would allow the service to take in more of the highest needs young people. Residents will stay up to two years. Costs for the service are as follows: Capital costs - **\$7,114,076**. Operating costs Year 1, Option 1 (higher case manager to resident ratio)- \$2,203,081. Operating costs Year 1, Option 2 (lower case manager to resident ratio) -\$1,443,086.

Family Violence and Sexual Harm

VACCA, as the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence services in the state we work holistically with women, men, young people, and children affected by family violence providing support in prevention, early intervention, intervention, and crisis family violence programs. VACCA recently launched Nowununmurrumbununneryearkun, the first of its kind Aboriginal Sexual Assault Therapeutic Pilot Program. This has given us unique insights into the complex barriers preventing this vulnerable cohort from accessing the justice system. These issues are compounded by the prevalence and intergenerational impact of family violence in Aboriginal communities. Research suggests that Aboriginal women are up to 35 times more likely to experience family violence than non-Aboriginal women.

15. VACCA seeks funding for our proposed **Aboriginal Women's Exchange (AWE)**. It is a digital platform for Aboriginal women that provides access to relevant and culturally safe information and service pathways. AWE's priority areas are parenting issues, housing difficulties, family violence and other crime, probate and wills, employment and social security assistance, and fines resolutions. It is modelled on Women's Information Referral Exchange (WIRE), the successful state-wide information and referral service for women. AWE seeks to influence social change and overcome structural inequalities by recognising that information empowers decision-making.²
16. VACCA advocates for greater investment in **Aboriginal family violence therapeutic programs** including family violence counselling across the sector.³
17. For the Victorian Government to commit to funding an **Aboriginal Family Violence Centre for Excellence**.
18. VACCA seeks the Victorian Government's commitment to implement the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse. Given the commitment for place-based Aboriginal healing approached to support survivors of child sexual abuse VACCA strongly contends that all Aboriginal Family Violence services be funded to provide **Sexual Assault specialists** across all Family Violence teams.

Disability

With the current Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with a Disability it is timely to focus on the needs of Aboriginal children, young people and adults with disability. Disability is also one of the sectors agreed for joint national strengthening in Closing the Gap. It is widely accepted that children and young people with disability are overrepresented within the Child Protection system, though the prevalence specifically of Aboriginal children with disability is less clear. For this reason, VACCA undertook a data prevalence study looking at disability among our program clients, indicating that 35% of clients aged 17 were living with a disability. For the adult cohort, 46% of clients aged 18 and over surveyed were living with a disability. The findings of this data collection project demonstrate the high prevalence of disability across many of VACCA's OOHC, family violence, family services and justice support programs, and indicate a high level of need for disability support and services for the communities we serve. VACCA seeks the following reforms to better support our children, young people and adults with disability:

19. That DFFH develop a cost free service whereby children and young people in out-of-home-care can access **disability assessment services** early in their care experience.
20. That VACCA be funded for to provide **disability specialist support workers across all Family Violence teams** including Orange Door sites across our regions.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

Access to and engagement with early childhood and schooling is a key priority of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It is a critical element of addressing the disparity in education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. We know there has been high levels of absenteeism and disengagement

² VACCA's AWE Program - \$75,000

³ VACCA seeks for our funding to provide these services to at least doubled across all six regions that we provide services to.

from school, particularly with the impact of COVID-19, for Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria in the past two years. We ask for the following reform:

21. That the Government support and resource VACCA to scope and develop two **Aboriginal led long day care and kindergarten centres** in the population growth corridors of the West (Melton or Werribee) and in Bayside Peninsula (Frankston).
22. That VACCA be funded to establish a specific **Aboriginal Navigator Program**.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SAFETY (DJCS)

Youth Justice

In addition to disability, many Aboriginal young people who are engaged with the justice system have also been victims of crime; however, the system is designed to focus on offending behaviour and not on a young person's victim experience. We ask for the following reform:

23. For the Victorian Government to commit to funding an **Aboriginal led Victims Assistance Programs (VAP)**.
24. That the DJCS provide greater investment in ACCOs to deliver and **expand early intervention, prevention and diversionary programs** to address risk factors contributing to offending behaviours across the Aboriginal population but with a focus on young people up to the age of 25. **This is in line with the Victorian Government's commitment to develop an Early Intervention Investment Framework in the 2021 budget.**
25. That the DJCS fund VACCA to establish a **post release, crisis accommodation and support service** in the West, with a particular focus on **Aboriginal women leaving prison and their children**.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH (MENTAL HEALTH)

Mental Health and Alcohol & other Drugs (AoD)

Current approaches to mental health are tertiary focussed and based on a reliance on western approaches that were not designed with or for Aboriginal Victorians. The recent recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's mental health system also prescribed a clinical, health system focussed intervention that provides little investment in Aboriginal led solutions especially for children and young people. The following reforms are required:

26. That VACCA be funded to **expand our men's support and mental health services** such as our men's cultural SEWB/healing camps and "men's sheds" and behavioural change programs.
27. That VACCA be funded to provide **AoD specialists** in each of our regions to **support children, young people and their families that are experiencing substance abuse problems** for the next 4 years.
28. That VACCA be funded to scope, develop and implement a **Residential withdrawal service for Aboriginal women with children fleeing family violence or engaged with child protection**.

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