Care services

Research Summary

VACCA
VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD AND COMMUNITY AGENCY
Connected by culture

Aboriginal Care Leavers Service System Review

This summary highlights key findings and recommendations from research exploring how Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people leaving care in Victoria.

What does it mean to be a care leaver?

Care leavers are young people who have spent time living away from their families, in formal or informal care, and are transitioning to life after being in care. Aboriginal care leavers may face particular challenges maintaining connection to family, community and culture.

Better Futures is the main support program for care leavers in Victoria. The program offers flexible case support and funding to care leavers up to 21 years of age.

Why did we do this research?

The history of forced child removal and colonisation in Australia continues to shape the ways in which Aboriginal families are affected by child protection services. In Victoria, Aboriginal children are over-represented within the wider care system, at a rate that is the highest in the country.

This research explored how well the current care system supports Aboriginal children and young people leaving care, how well leaving care services are being delivered, and how these services could be improved.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCH FIND?

Culture and connection are key to positive outcomes

Culture and connection are key to positive leaving care outcomes and experiences for Aboriginal children and young people. However, ACCO staff report that these are often devalued by the Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing (DFFH) and mainstream organisations.

> "ACCOs have more understanding of the culture and the cultural needs of the young person when transitioning. So, [ACCOs provide] more cultural healing... having that cultural understanding and having that cultural need met in the transition planning is important."
>
> — Metro ACCO staff

ACCOs make a difference in supporting care leavers

ACCOs are well placed to support Aboriginal care leavers throughout their transition from care, including by strengthening their connection to culture, kin, family and Community.

> "I think the system is just a bit outdated. It needs probably an overhaul, and to see what's working and what's not working. Because I think there's quite a bit that's not working at the moment."
>
> — Regional ACCO staff



The leaving care system presents significant challenges

The leaving care system is not working as it should. Systemic racism, inflexible and limited services, weak collaboration between services, and unrealistic expectations of care leavers are significant challenges.

Relationships between Aboriginal families and DFFH are unequal

ACCO staff are concerned about the impact of the unequal dynamic between families and DFFH on care leavers and the quality of care and parenting they receive from DFFH.

> "It's all good and well that child protection have to tick these boxes before they [care leavers] turn 18. But I feel like it's the young person that should be saying, 'Well this is what I want, this is what I need, this is what I have.' ... we all have tick the box of things we have to do. But it really should be led from the young person, not from the worker."
>
> — Regional ACCO staff

Staff are overstretched and experiencing burnout

Staff supporting care leavers provide critical support. However, the workforce is overstretched and experiencing burnout. Competing pressures undermine staff's ability to support care leavers to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Voice, choice, and readiness matter when leaving care

Aboriginal care leavers having a voice and being able to make choices about their transitions from care are foundational to positive outcomes. Empowering care leavers to be heard, exercise self-determination, and develop independence are central components of good practice.

> "High caseloads mean a lack of relationship building... These young people need to feel like someone's got their back and they're not going to trust you after a single conversation once a year."
>
> — Metro ACCO staff

WHAT ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS?

For broader state government

- **Reform** the Victorian leaving care system:
  - Extend all leaving care supports and funding from age 21 to 25.
  - Move from age-based to gradual, ability-based transitions from care.
  - Extend all leaving care supports to care leavers who reunify with their parents and those in voluntary care placements.
  - Ensure funding and targets match ACCO service demand.
  - Begin leaving care planning earlier, from around age 12.
  - Extend funding for care programs, such as, kinship care, to provide post-care support.
  - Co-design support services and system with care leavers.
- **Implement** policies and strategies with DFFH to prevent and address racism across the leaving care system, including at individual, organisational and system levels.
- **Strengthen** shared accountability for care leaver outcomes by reducing power imbalances between ACCOs and Government, supporting equitable partnerships and strengthening Aboriginal-led decision-making in line with the Supporting Stable and Strong Families legislation.
- **Increase** investment in the care leaver workforce and support an Aboriginal-led redesign of the leaving care system, including Better Futures program.
- **Increase** investment in family finding and genograms for Aboriginal children in care, including expanding family finding services to support family finding and reunification at all stages of the care journey.
- **Invest** in services that reduce the need for DFFH intervention and increase access to family healing services.

For DFFH

- **Develop,** in partnership with ACCOs, a clear and actionable step-by-step guide for staff to follow when supporting care leavers.
- **Strengthen** the championing of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, including recognition of the importance of cultural connection and cultural documentation for Aboriginal children in care.
- **Strengthen,** in collaboration with the broader state government, accountability for following processes to prepare children and young people for leaving care and ensuring care leavers have access to key documentation.
- **Implement** state-wide mechanisms to ensure consistency in care and leaving care practice.
- **Ensure** all staff complete mandatory, ongoing cultural awareness and anti-racism training.

For ACCO leadership

- **Recognise** and prioritise skill-building opportunities for care leavers who want to become future mentors and join the ACCO workforce.
- **Strengthen** ACCO workforce capabilities by embedding opportunities for staff to participate in reflective practice and training.

Find out more

For questions or more information, contact us: **redteam@vacca.org**

About this research

This research was led by VACCA's Research and Evidence Development team, and funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing through the Aboriginal Children and Families Innovation and Learning Fund. It included a desktop review of sources published from 2015 to 2025 focused on leaving care, as well as community conversations with staff from VACCA, Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative and Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative.

About VACCA

The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) is a statewide Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation servicing children, young people, families, and community.

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