

***Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Public Accounts and Estimates
Committee:***

***Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19
Pandemic***

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

August 2020

Note on language

We use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what we now call Australia.

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About VACCA

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is the lead Aboriginal child welfare organisation and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence services in Victoria. As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO), we provide services to vulnerable Aboriginal children, families and communities. VACCA's vision is Aboriginal self-determination – Live, Experience and Be. Our purpose is supporting culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal communities. We believe in the principle of the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination, the rights of the child and we commit to upholding Victorian Aboriginal cultural protocols. Our values are; Best interests of the child, Aboriginal Cultural Observance, Respect, Self-determination, Healing and Empowerment and Excellence.

VACCA's key areas of work are in service delivery, advocacy and training. We work across the spectrum of prevention, early help, early intervention, targeted support and tertiary level services. We deliver programs across Victoria, offering a broad range of services that seek to:

- Ensure child safety and community wellbeing
- Support young people to make positive life choices
- Targeted support for Aboriginal people and families
- Maintain strong connections to Aboriginal culture, and
- Promote culturally specific ways of growing up Aboriginal children

Our approach is underpinned by principles of; prevention, early intervention and therapeutic healing, premised on human rights, self-determination, promoting client voice, cultural respect and safety. Our services include supported playgroups, education, cultural support activities, emergency relief, homelessness services, alcohol and other drugs (AOD) support, family mental health, out-of-home-care (OOHC), justice programs, family services, youth programs, clinical services and family violence services including an Aboriginal women and children's crisis service and refuge.

VACCA brings the expertise of its Cultural Therapeutic Ways (CTW) framework. The CTW is a whole of agency approach to guide VACCA's practice of healing for Aboriginal children, young people, families, Community members and carers who encounter VACCA services, as well as creating a safe and supportive workplace for staff. It is the intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-determination theories. The core premise is informed by an understanding of the trauma held by Aboriginal families as a result of ongoing processes of colonisation. It is based upon Human Rights and United Nations Conventions, Victorian Legislation, organisational practice and strengths.

We also deliver cultural training and develop resources for the Aboriginal community and to a range of organisations. We advocate at a policy level for better outcomes for Aboriginal children, families and community members for their right to be connected to culture and to ensure that their needs are represented in culturally appropriate ways through service delivery. A particular focus of our advocacy is for additional resources to be dedicated to early help, prevention and early intervention. Culturally based services that support the social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and safety of children, young people and families can minimise involvement in tertiary systems such as Child Protection and justice.

Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact globally, with some people bearing a greater burden of the arising challenges. Aboriginal peoples are resilient and have survived in the face of colonisation, but its ongoing impacts manifest today in health and socioeconomic inequalities. While times of crisis may create entirely new challenges; they can also exacerbate and entrench some of the existing issues faced by Aboriginal communities.

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our submission is based on staff consultations and deep dives across our many programs in the justice, intensive family services, therapeutic family violence and homelessness space. We have also raised key shared concerns with other ACCOs and Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC) members. In responding to COVID-19, we have seen the incredible strength of community-based ACCO collaboration and networks. The under-representation of COVID-19 cases amongst Aboriginal communities is a testament to our self-determined response and deep care for community and one another.

VACCA has risen to the challenges of COVID-19 with innovative responses in crisis outreach and in delivering direct and remote services and supports. We continue to meet our core responsibility to our clients and to Aboriginal children, families and young people and community across Victoria and are looking to harness our innovations in service delivery into the future. We have utilised our social media channels and technology to extend our reach in delivering family support programs, community engagement, community events and a suite of education programs and resources.

Under COVID-19, we identified the exacerbation of some existing, and emergence of new challenges for the Aboriginal children, young people and families we support in areas of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB), Child Protection, family violence, justice, education, housing stress and homelessness and social security payments. We believe that when responding to both the new and existing challenges, policy and program approaches, governance and funding arrangements across the sector must be grounded in the principle of self-determination.

The Victorian State Government's response to these challenges has varied between government departments and improved over time such as the responsiveness of Family Safety Victoria (FSV) after significant advocacy from the ACCO network. The development of the Joint COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce has been a good forum for hearing and responding to emerging needs and challenges faced Aboriginal communities in Victoria. A key strength in the government's response has been a focus on housing and homelessness impacts and on the education needs of Koorie learners. We believe greater government consideration needs to be put to the impacts of COVID-19 on Child Protection, family reunifications and justice issues.

In reflecting on the strengths and gaps of the government's response, VACCA urges the State Government to develop with the Aboriginal community an Aboriginal Community Recovery Plan. This should include long-term commitment and significant investment in ACCO infrastructure and ACCO community-based responses. We also recommend for the State Government to co-develop a whole of government Victorian Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan that provides an overarching planning framework for responding to the needs of the Aboriginal community during crisis.

Introduction

First Nations communities globally are disproportionately affected by a range of disasters, including health emergencies, pandemics, floods, bushfires or crude oil spills on their traditional lands¹. The process of colonisation, invasion, displacement from traditional lands, separation from family and cultural genocide all have a continuing impact. Aboriginal peoples experience these effects through poor mental health and social emotional wellbeing, intergenerational trauma, misuse of AOD, overrepresentation in the OOHC and criminal justice systems and high rates of homelessness and family violence. Successive government policies around Child Protection, justice and the provision of housing have systematically failed to improve the wellbeing and outcomes for Aboriginal peoples.

Comorbidities of health conditions and overcrowded housing all contribute increased health risk and vulnerability to COVID-19 infection. The burden of disease for Aboriginal peoples is 2.3 times the rate for non-Aboriginal people, where chronic diseases account for 64% of the total disease burden². Unequal burden of disease and increased risk is evident in health advice encouraging Aboriginal people over 50 years of age with more than one chronic condition to self-isolate at home, while for the non-Aboriginal community, the recommended age was over 70 years.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the State Government as a part of the National Cabinet was swift and effective in establishing physical distancing and public health protocols. However, there were gaps in Aboriginal-specific health service coverage for Aboriginal communities. Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) has previously sought to expand their reach, services and infrastructure in key areas of Aboriginal population growth in west and south east Metropolitan Melbourne but have been unable to do so due to limited resourcing.

In Victoria, we have seen ACCOs work collectively through the AEC to ensure that community are informed and supported. VACCA and other ACCOs have distributed health messaging to Aboriginal families and communities on to how to keep safe during the pandemic. We have engaged with vulnerable members of the community through assertive outreach to Elders, those experiencing homelessness and other highly vulnerable Aboriginal people.

Infection rates during the first wave were relatively low and contained amongst the Aboriginal community. More recently, increasing rates of community transmission within Metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire have raised concern with members from the Aboriginal community being among these numbers.

While Aboriginal people comprise 1 per cent of the Victorian population, they comprise only 0.4 per cent of the total number of COVID-19 cases since the start of the pandemic. This level of transmission is disproportionately low despite the Aboriginal population experiencing higher levels of risk factors such as homelessness, chronic disease, living in overcrowded dwellings. The low level of transmission is a strong indicator of the effectiveness of the ACCO sector in responding to the needs of Aboriginal community in Victoria.

¹ A National COVID-19 Pandemic Issues Paper on Mental Health and Wellbeing For Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 2020, <https://ncceh.ca/environmental-health-in-canada/health-agency-projects/indigenous-disaster-response>

² AIHW., (2016). Australian Burden of Disease Study: impact and causes of illness and death in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.

Community sector response

ACCOs have many strengths being multi-service delivery hubs for preventative and crisis responses in health, housing, aged care, child and family services, AOD, family violence, legal support and other. During COVID-19, ACCOs have innovated and adapted to provide different ways of engagement and support to clients and community. We continue to be a source of information, resources and SEWB support and the only source of connection for some isolated Elders. An example of this is the collaboration between VAHS, VACCA and Charcoal Lane in community outreach, by delivering pre-made meals to community. The leadership and governance of peak bodies and ACCOs at both a state and national level and the efficient and adaptive response is exemplary of our capacity to support and respond to the rapidly changing needs of our communities in crisis situations.

Government response

When COVID-19 first emerged the State Government's initial response was understandably from a health perspective, but as the impact of a global pandemic on the Aboriginal community transcended every aspect of our lives, VACCA along with other ACCOs strongly advocated for the government to coordinate a holistic essential services response. In April, the Victorian State Government in partnership with ACCOs developed the Joint COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce. The Taskforce is led by the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) and consists of several ACCO members with representation across portfolios, as well as departmental representatives. The Joint COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce informs the government's coordination of services to Aboriginal peoples living in Victoria. It has developed a community mobilisation framework aiming to map out how the ACCO sector will work with DHHS and community to mitigate the spread of the virus and continue to provide services and support to community in culturally appropriate ways. The Taskforce is a forum where ACCOs can raise specific concerns and seek clarification from the government. This is an example of good governance, as the government has sought input from ACCOs about what resources are required to support community interests and needs. However, since the Taskforce is not operating as a decision-making body, we need to consider to what degree it is progressing self-determination. This is occurring in a backdrop of government commitment to transferring decision-making power to Aboriginal people under the *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF)* and outlined as a key element under the VAAF Self-Determination Guiding Principles³. The Joint COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce has developed a Data Dashboard across each of the VAAF domains which will be useful for comparing data trends and increased demand on support services due to COVID-19. However, as this is predominantly departmental data and does not capture ACCO data around self-referrals, it may underrepresent overall ACCO service demand.

Local Aboriginal COVID-19 Response Networks have been established to provide a single point of contact for the Aboriginal community and the State Government. VACCA is participating in the Northern Metropolitan Network and leading the Children and Young People portfolio. Through the Networks, the Aboriginal community can access resources, information and support for issues emerging from COVID-19; seek referral points; raise systemic issues and risks directly to government; and identify gaps in COVID-19 responses. Issues at a local community level that cannot be addressed at the Networks can be escalated up to the COVID-19 Taskforce. As the Networks were

³ State of Victoria 2018, *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023*. Victorian Government, Melbourne.

established recently in June, it is not yet clear how they are operating, whether any issues have emerged and been escalated to the Taskforce, or how their function might be improved.

The State Government's Aboriginal COVID-19 response and recovery funding package will provide \$23 million over two years⁴. The package consists of \$13 million for ACCO service sector supports to meet increased demand on ACCOs and \$10 million in flexible funding for an Aboriginal Community Response Fund driven by community needs. The funding package is based on information conveyed from the COVID-19 Taskforce, with input from the AEC. However, the AEC was not actually included in a direct decision-making process. The package details are as follows:

- ACCO service sector supports:
 - Public Health:
 - \$9 million to health services including clinical services support for ACCHOs, COVID-19 testing, Elders support, telehealth, IT uplift and patient transport services for ACCHOs.
 - \$287,400 in targeted business support for ACCHOs and a further \$100,000 to improve and create targeted health messaging.
 - Housing and homelessness:
 - \$300,000 for a feasibility study for an Aboriginal Homelessness Access Point with the study to be completed within 12 months as to be able to fund the Access Points as soon as possible.
 - \$1.6 million to fund Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) proposal for the Building Better Connections Project aiming to foster connections to social housing tenants.
 - \$440,000 to support 10 housing and homelessness support coordinators across ACCOs on 6-month contracts. The ACCOs have not yet been listed and will be decided by the Taskforce, AEC and community where they are needed the most.
 - Elders:
 - \$616,000 for ACCOs to deliver outreach, support and in-home care for Elders. Government has not yet listed to which ACCOs the funding will be directed to.
 - Traditional Owner Corporations (TOCs):
 - \$550,000 for Registered Aboriginal Parties, IT equipment and development opportunities.
 - Education:
 - \$400,000 for outreach supports for Koorie learners based on report from Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) and the Department of Education and Training (DET) regarding transition back to school.
- Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Response Fund:
 - \$10 million flexible to establish the Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Response Fund over 2020/21. DPC will oversee the expression of interest process but funding decision will be made by specific departments.

⁴ Premier of Victoria, 2020. Supporting Aboriginal Victorians Through Coronavirus - Media Release. June 16th 2020.
<<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/supporting-aboriginal-victorians-through-coronavirus/>>

- Funding to support community driven needs including Emergency Relief, Outreach and Brokerage, SEWB initiatives and Cultural Strengthening.

This package provides a number of positive areas of investment for the Aboriginal community, however, there are evident gaps with no reference to child, youth and family welfare services, OOHC, Child Protection or family violence. As a lead child and family welfare and family violence organisation in Victoria, we are concerned that lack of funding in these areas will place further pressure on the ACCO sector with expected significant increase to service demand over the next two years.

VACCA's whole of organisation response

On an organisational level, VACCA has adapted our service provision to adhere to government regulations, with the majority of our staff now working from home. We have established internal and external communications channels to ensure our staff and the community are informed and up to date with the latest of this health emergency. We initiated our essential services response by identifying our critical VACCA programs and activities, establishing regular client oversight for high-risk clients and providing essential goods to vulnerable clients. VACCA has an essential service role in a number of realms including adult and youth justice, residential care, Nugel – Aboriginal Guardianship, women's and children's crisis services, family violence management and family violence crisis accommodation centre, homelessness, mental health and high risk young people and family services clients. We have implemented a crisis governance structure as well as a recovery plan.

In planning and preparing for COVID-19, we encountered programmatic and regional silos within VACCA and addressed them by becoming more informed and attuned to client needs on a regional and local level as the central driver of our response. We strengthened our advocacy and engagement with government based on our findings and of client needs. In doing this, we hope that learnings from our strengthened community-based approach can contribute to further improved practice frameworks. Throughout our response, VACCA maintained our focus on culturally embedded responses and providing the protective benefits of culture in supporting the SEWB and mental health of our children, young people, families, carers and staff.

We are mindful of the impact of COVID-19 on our Elders. They are an intrinsic part of our community but also in the services that we provide. They are carers to our children; they also have a crucial role Aboriginal Family Led Decision Making (AFLDM) Programs and the Koori Courts. The pandemic required us consider Elders needs to access and support services through a lens of vulnerability due to their increased risk to infection.

By building our capacity of services when responding to crisis we hope to mobilise future effective responses. An example of this is evident in our response to the lock down of nine Public Housing Towers in North Melbourne and Flemington. We worked collaboratively with each of the Public Housing COVID-19 response teams to help identify, support, triage and connect Aboriginal residents with the appropriate supports. We also engaged with Aboriginal families in other public housing towers across Melbourne to determine their needs and prepare for potential outbreaks.

Impact of COVID-19 on social and emotional wellbeing and mental health

Aboriginal peoples face existing mental health disadvantages and inadequate and inequitable access to mental health care making them more vulnerable to the psychological impacts of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has had complex and varied impacts on Aboriginal families, including the ramifications of job loss, housing and financial stress, social isolation from wider family and community networks, Elder isolation, disruption of support services, impacts of home-schooling on children and parents and challenges of working from home if employed.

VACCA is highly concerned about the impact on the SEWB and mental health of the Aboriginal children, young people and families we support. The trauma, grief and loss that Aboriginal peoples have experienced through multiple generations continue to impact upon the wellbeing and health status of Aboriginal children and young people, particularly those in care, exiting care, or in Youth Justice. The pandemic has the potential to compound and exacerbate existing risk factors and vulnerabilities with serious impacts on their SEWB now and into the future.

Through consultation with staff across VACCA's child and family programs, we have identified the following key themes;

- Our clients are experiencing an exacerbation of existing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression due to COVID-19.
- Families are struggling with the mental health impacts of social isolation and many are concerned for their financial, job and housing security.
- Staff voiced that there will be long-term impacts on client's SEWB such as resorting to managing emotions with AOD, an increase in family violence or the re-emergence of mental health concerns.
- Some adults in our programs are presenting with a lack of motivation, and tolerance, frustration, sleep difficulty and anxiety about the future. Being isolated in the home environment exacerbates anxiety and triggers trauma and many clients speak about this experience as claustrophobic and distressing without access to social support and emotion regulation.
- Many people are struggling with the lack of face-to-face support from professionals. While telehealth/remote casework is in place through video calls, many of our clients cannot access the appropriate technology, feel uncomfortable speaking over the phone about personal issues or feel that this type of support does not meet their needs.
- Some children, particularly in the Aboriginal Children's Healing Team (AHT) program, are presenting with increased irritability, lack of cooperation with adults, and sleep difficulty. Reflective practice is showing that due to lockdown, children are feeling increasingly isolated and finding it difficult to regulate and express it in emotions.
- There are significant concerns with some children experiencing anxiety due to the transitions between remote and face-to-face learning. Supports need to be put in place to assist these children and young people to cope with the changing learning environment, with an awareness of the social impact on young people also.
- For children and families affected by trauma, the anxieties created by the pandemic – and in particular, social isolation and increasing tension within families - act as a feedback loop that increases difficulties

with emotion regulation, self-soothing and accessing supports in closed system where social isolation in place.

- For some who have experienced child abuse or family violence, wearing facemasks is quite confronting and has been triggering.
- On the positive side, when mental health has been part of the person's pre-COVID-19 presentation, services appear to be effectively planning supports.
- Another positive effect has been the ability of some clients to enjoy down time and the opportunity to spend more time with family.

Accessing protective benefits of culture

Culture, language, connection to Country and spirituality are known to support the SEWB and mental health of Aboriginal people and are a protection factor. This connection is essential to construction of self-identity, a sense of belonging, meaning and purpose and ultimately wellbeing, especially for young people involved in the Child Protection and Youth Justice systems.

We have developed a VACCA Wellbeing Plan in response to COVID-19 pandemic to create a consistent organisational wellbeing response for supporting staff to navigate the current COVID-19 restrictions and new working environment. This plan has been developed on the assumption that the current restrictions will remain in some form for at least 6 months. The situation continues to be fluid and rapidly evolving, and strategies will be adjusted as required. A key premise is that the approach to ensuring staff stay well and strong will always be trauma informed and culturally informed. Some strategies will be centrally driven, while others will be implemented regionally and programmatically and can be adapted according to local needs.

As a part of a community education program, we have developed mental health resources for youth suicide prevention available on our website and social media channels. These were specific for our Gippsland region and consisted of videos created by young people and staff in community - "We are Gippslanders - We are Strong".

VACCA has maintained our focus on culture under COVID-19 with cultural wellbeing embedded in our responses. Due to physical distancing requirements, we have innovated our approaches to ensure our children, young people and families and community remain connected to culture. This has been done internally with our staff, programmatically through resources, materials, education supports and through our Deadly Story Portal. We have established VACCA's Cultural Connections Working Group consisting of over 15 Aboriginal staff from across the regions, meeting regularly to ensure our community is connected to culture during this time. The group's first project was to launch our online NAIDOC Children's Day event which was a huge success having over 10,000 views online. We have communicated across our Aboriginal networks and conducted virtual cultural activities, youth groups, playgroups, art mentoring, song groups, Elder stories online and expanded the reach of our cultural programs such as Koorie Tiddas Youth Choir now being delivered online. We hope to harness the opportunity and reach of delivering our cultural programs remotely into the future beyond COVID-19. VACCA's Ovens-Murray office has also received new funding for a cultural mentor, case support workers and a cultural group coordinator where the community will finally receive some of the much-needed support to strengthen their connection with culture and Country.

Good News Story

Supporting the SEWB and mental health of our Aboriginal families

“Last Friday, on my way home, I dropped off a ‘Mums Supporting Families in Need’ package for the VACCA Family Services team. The father and his partner came out to say hi. I asked how they were coping, and they said they were tired, stressed and a little run down. The mother explained they have a young autistic son who needs a lot of care and attention and they were struggling emotionally and physically. However, she said that since engaging with one of VACCA’s Family Services workers, they have never felt more supported and could not speak more highly of her or the team at VACCA. Both parents have suffered from mental health issues in the past and, since the VACCA Family Services team have entered their life, everything has changed for the better, they both feel emotionally supported and feel like a worker finally gets them” – from VACCA’s Southern Region

Government response

The Victorian Government has announced a \$59.4 million funding boost for Victoria’s mental health system to ensure support for Victorians as demand for services spikes during the pandemic⁵. Yet, funding has been predominantly directed to mainstream services that do not address the specific mental health and SEWB needs of Aboriginal communities.

As part of the funding package to support Aboriginal peoples, the State Government has pledged \$10 million flexible funding for a number of initiatives, one of which is SEWB and cultural strengthening⁶. We welcome this funding but maintain that further support is needed for culturally safe and trauma-informed approaches, led and delivered by ACCOs and Aboriginal communities. It is essential for our child and family programs to be adequately resourced to respond to the ongoing SEWB needs and cultural healing of the families we support through recovery.

Challenges in the Child Protection system

⁵Premier of Victoria, 2020. Surge Funding Helping Our Mental Health System During Crisis- Media Release. 12 April 2020. <[⁶ Premier of Victoria, 2020. Supporting Aboriginal Victorians Through Coronavirus - Media Release. 16 June 2020.](https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/surge-funding-helping-our-mental-health-system-during-crisis/#:~:text=The%20Victorian%20Government%20has%20announced,spikes%20during%20the%20coronavirus%20crisis.></p></div><div data-bbox=)

COVID-19 has exacerbated some of the existing issues with the child welfare system faced by Aboriginal families subject to Child Protection involvement. Accessing information from Child Protection has been more challenging than usual due to COVID-19 restrictions, where an Aboriginal mother has had to seek legal assistance to make a formal request for a photograph of her removed child⁷. There is shared concern among Aboriginal child and family welfare organisations around the barriers for parents to maintain connections with their children who are in care. Supported access to children in OOHC is essential for Aboriginal families as this may be a child's only link to their family, community, culture and Country. Unfortunately, the disruption to many supports has restricted this valuable connection and access to children causing distress and anxiety for the whole family⁸. Families have struggled to maintain meaningful contact between parents and children with limited access to support services, informal forms of support including extended family, sources of cultural support and kinship networks and having to observe physical distancing measures.

Family reunifications

COVID-19 has affected families subject to family reunification orders under the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (CYFA)*. Specifically, lockdown measures have impacted on the capacity of parents subject to family reunification orders to progress towards reunification within legislated timeframes.

VACCA has participated in advocacy around this issue along with AEC, Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) and Koorie Youth Council. We raised several key concerns in a joint letter to the Hon Luke Donnellan MP, Minister for Child Protection, regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families subject to family reunification orders. Of particular focus was that while the CYFA provides discretion to extend timeframes in exceptional circumstances, no legislative amendment was required. We believe appropriate legislative amendments are required as the practice measures being taken under the advice of the DHHS are not proportional to the severe impacts that parents and families are experiencing. We are concerned that the DHHS practice directions place the onus on parents to demonstrate that COVID-19 has affected their capacity to meet conditions on orders, rather than the presumption that COVID-19 has undoubtedly impacted this. We hold that the best interests of children, young people and families are in conflict which an approach where parents must prove that they have been impacted by the pandemic.

We recommended for the State Government to amend the CYFA to extend the timeframes of all current family reunification orders by a minimum of six months. It is also crucial for Child Protection practice guidance to offer all affected parents an opportunity to seek an additional extension beyond this.

Supported contact between parents and children and family reunification is crucial to healing and strengthening Aboriginal children, young people and families. We must work co-operatively with DHHS, Courts and mainstream agencies to build family and community capacity so that families are not torn apart due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Government response

⁷ Change the Record (2020).

⁸ Ibid.

In April, the government announced supports for children, carers and families involved with Child Protection. The \$77.5 million package over the next two years is to bolster staff, resources and services available for at-risk children. It includes a one-off \$600 payment for every child in care received by foster and kinship carers, \$46 million to increase the capacity of family services, \$4 million to expand the Home Stretch program and \$15 million to support residential care service providers⁹. This package will provide much needed support for families; however, we are uncertain how funding be distributed between ACCOs and mainstream child and family services. Considering the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people in the Victorian Child Protection system and the significant challenges arising for them from COVID-19, we hope the government outlines specific funding for Aboriginal-controlled child and family services. Similarly, we are concerned that the COVID-19 funding package for the Aboriginal community does not include specific Aboriginal child and family welfare or Child Protection funding priorities. We urge the government to consider the long-term, detrimental impacts of COVID-19 on Child Protection matters for our families. We require a sector response that is sensitive to the cultural needs of Aboriginal families involved with Child Protection, ensuring COVID-19 does not prevent Aboriginal children to be raised by their families and communities in culture and Country.

Family violence concerns during COVID-19

⁹ Premier of Victoria, 2020. More Support To Keep Families And Children Safe - Media Release. 23 April 2020. <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/more-support-to-keep-families-and-children-safe>>

Physical distancing and 'stay at home' measures contribute to social isolation with research highlighting that this exacerbates collective and personal vulnerabilities, while also limiting options for people to seek support¹⁰. Consultations with VACCA staff in our family violence programs reflected these concerns, raising that physical distancing restrictions and home-schooling confine those at risk to the home, making family violence less visible and inhibiting access to appropriate supports and safety plans. There have also been reports of some families experiencing the emergence of coercion, controlling behaviour and family violence for the first time as relationships come under pressure due to lockdown measures.

Increased demand on our family violence services

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted new and unprecedented challenges for practitioners and programs supporting Aboriginal families experiencing family violence. To support all VACCA staff during this period, some of our initial initiatives included developing resources such as a VACCA Family Violence Risk Assessment tool, Family Violence Response Contact list, and Family Violence Fact Sheet for staff and clients. The majority of our early intervention family violence programs have shifted to crisis response and in this role, we have observed a significant increase in demand for over the phone support.

While VACCA is one of the largest Aboriginal specific family violence providers in Victoria, we have been facing a significant increase in demand and complexity of client needs and our resources have been stretched. Data from our family violence programs shows a steady increase in referrals since the emergence of COVID-19 in five of our six regions. Referrals appeared to spike a couple of weeks after physical distancing restrictions were put in place and then plateaued, where more recently a second spike was experienced. Our Orange Door Family Violence Support and Safety Hubs have also seen a spike in service demand with an increase in referrals with higher complexities and intensities. We have observed an increase in outreach calls reengaging with our family violence service between May and June, predominantly in the Southern region. This was attributed to the continuing physical distancing restriction and unpredictability during this time, in addition to the stressors of social isolation, mental health, financial, supporting children and young people returning to school making for increased levels of physical and emotional exhaustion for families.

Our Southern region has experienced high caseloads due to not having Family Violence Case Management funding in order to respond to the influx of L17 referrals. This is concerning in a context of already disrupted external support services where some essential behaviour change programs are no longer operating or have stopped taking referrals. Our families have also reported poor experiences in mainstream crisis accommodation suggesting the need for more culturally safe programs and refuges such as our Orana Gunyah program.

We are concerned that the emergence of family violence for the first time for some families will contribute to a greater future demand on support services and crisis accommodation. The increased risk to family violence in the context of COVID-19 is particularly concerning as we know this to be a significant contributor to homelessness

¹⁰ Usher, K., Bhullar, N., Durkin, J., Gyamfi, N. and Jackson, D., (2020). Family violence and COVID-19: Increased vulnerability and reduced options for support. *International journal of mental health nursing*.

amongst Aboriginal communities¹¹, with an expected flow on effect to an increased demand on family violence and homelessness support systems.

Orana Gunyah

Culturally appropriate crisis service and accommodation

Our Orana Gunyah programs is a promising example of Aboriginal-led service delivery embedded in Aboriginal self-determination and the rights of women and children. It supports Aboriginal women and children, women with Aboriginal children or carers with Aboriginal children fleeing family violence. Orana Gunyah operates in Gippsland, Latrobe Valley, Baw Baw, South Gippsland and Bass Coast. In 2014, Orana Gunyah opened a crisis accommodation refuge for clients in Morwell. All clients that seek refugee receive full case management, including administrative support to complete public, social and private rental housing paperwork. Since its conception, Orana Gunyah Outreach has supported 370 women and 527 children. The crisis accommodation aspect of the program has housed 139 women with children, and while some have returned to the situation they left, most have moved to other refuges, to stay with kin or acquired public housing or a private rental. The correlation between family violence and homelessness for Aboriginal women and children has in the past remained a hidden issue as Aboriginal women are apprehensive to approach mainstream services due to fear that if they disclose the presence of family violence, their children may be removed. Yet, when access to an Aboriginal specific, culturally appropriate and wrap-around response is available there is an increase in the number of Aboriginal women and children seeking assistance. A culturally safe response supports women's willingness to come forward, fosters empowerment and allows women to see a positive future for themselves and their children.

Government response

The Victorian government has invested \$40.2 million in specialist services and crisis accommodation for people experiencing family violence, including targeted funding for ACCOs to meet additional demand for family violence case management and crisis support. However, it is unclear what exact percentage of this sum will go towards Aboriginal-specific family violence supports. In improving Aboriginal justice outcomes, the government announced \$2 million for infrastructure upgrades to Aboriginal men's and women's family violence services¹². To date, VACCA has also received funding in almost all our regions to support the family violence and sexual assault response to COVID-19. While this much needed funding is welcomed, we are concerned there remains a disconnect between the strategic and operational functions of Family Safety Victoria despite many points of engagement and response potential under COVID-19. In addition, the lack of understanding of the ACCO service sector role, capacity and value in responding to and working with those who are vulnerable and at risk is a critical missed opportunity on the part of government.

Given the current volatile environment and the importance of this work, we need greater investment directed to Aboriginal-specific family violence support programs and culturally safe crisis accommodation and refuges. In

¹¹ Braybrook (2016)

¹² Premier of Victoria, 2020. Improving Aboriginal Justice Outcomes. 26 June 2020. <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/improving-aboriginal-justice-outcomes/>>

addition, investment in services and housing for men and young people using violence is critical to support behavior change and healing for families and the whole community.

Good News Story

“Recently, we supported a family fleeing family violence through the relocation process and the client has made it known that the support has been fantastic and is extremely grateful for the support. Even though we have had a higher than normal referrals coming over the last month, they have all been treated as immediate and most have been spoken to within 24 to 48 hours to assess their situation and referrals or things being put in place. We did a Flexible Support Package for a woman who recently left a family violence situation. She was so grateful for VACCA's support for her and her children. The package is providing her with financial assistance as well as a device for her son to engage with his online education. We supported a client and her daughter move interstate for safety due to family violence” - from VACCA's Southern Region Family Violence Response Teams

Challenges in the justice space

Aboriginal peoples are disproportionately overrepresented in both the adult and youth justice system with numbers continuing to rise¹³. Between 2008 and 2018, the number of Aboriginal men coming into contact with police increased by roughly 62 per cent and Aboriginal women became one of the fastest growing prison populations in Victoria¹⁴. Aboriginal children and young people are 16 times more likely to be involved in the youth justice system¹⁵. Several risk factors contribute to their involvement including experiences in OOHC, family violence, intergenerational trauma, housing stress, AOD misuse and poor SEWB¹⁶. Since 2014, detention rates for Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria have risen¹⁷.

Key justice challenges faced by our clients

Through consultations with VACCA staff across our justice programs, the following key themes and issues were identified as the predominant justice challenges facing our children, young people, adults and communities. Since the emergence of COVID-19, staff have observed the exacerbation of several existing issues as well as the unfolding of additional challenges.

Physical distancing rules and interaction with police

Overall, VACCA staff reported that our clients have not been abiding by the rules, particularly young people in our Residential Care and clients from unstable home environments. Carers have faced challenges in managing young people's difficult behaviours and adherence to physical distancing rules given disruptions to routine services. This is straining family dynamics as parents and/or carers are also struggling to keep children entertained indoors and with limited respite. To support families, VACCA has been providing education and cultural packs, whilst also maintaining communication over the phone and through video calls. Dropping off these packs has been beneficial in providing an opportunity to sight at-risk families.

In the initial stages of the pandemic, VACCA staff reported that our young people were not being issued fines for breaking physical distancing rules. They also observed that increased police powers to monitor physical distancing have not amounted to increased targeting of our children, young people and families. It was suggested that young people were generally being targeted just as much as before; with individual cases where larger families travelling together have been pulled over and interrogated about their movements, causing unease and triggering families with a history of trauma.

More recent reports from our staff suggest that two fines have been issued to young people for breaching physical distancing restrictions, and Child Protection have not yet advised who will have to pay these fines. Residential and Leaving Care program staff have raised concerns that when they are seeking warrants through the police for young people when out in the community, that they are inadvertently sending the police their way to issue fines. Staff have reported that police have been generally reasonable when returning the young person to placement, but this concern remains. In terms of police monitoring, staff have encountered frequent issues with police refusing

¹³ Victorian Government, 'Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report' (2019)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ AIHW, 2020. Youth Justice Snapshot. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australian Government.

¹⁶ Lewis, N., et al. (2019). The family matters report 2019: Measuring trends to turn the tide on the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care in Australia. Eltham: Postscript Printing and Publishing.

¹⁷ AIHW, 2020.

to conduct welfare checks and attend to high-risk homes, due to COVID-19 concerns. In some cases, it has taken more than a day for police to execute a warrant and nearly two days to have police execute a warrant to Secure Welfare, which created extreme risk for one of our young people.

Considering the recent legal requirements to wear a face covering in Metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire when leaving home, VACCA welcomes the government's COVID-19 Criminal Diversion Approach. DHHS and Police have negotiated that young people in OOHC, residential care and juvenile justice who are apprehended without any face covering would be treated with discretion and will not be issued fines or criminal records.

Justice proceedings

In light of COVID-19, there has been community pressure to shift justice priorities, and where possible, to release children and young people currently on remand in detention or nearing the end of their sentence and support them with services and housing upon release¹⁸. In Victoria, legislative changes have allowed for greater flexibility with the Youth Parole Board¹⁹. Physical distancing restrictions have significantly disrupted justice proceedings with only serious offences seen at court, and majority of charges being adjourned. VACCA staff were highly concerned about the uncertainty this has caused for clients, most of whom are unlikely to have their matter heard in court this year. The indefinite closure of Koori Courts has meant that clients must either choose to delay their matter, or progress with the mainstream court creating a missed opportunity for culturally appropriate justice approach. There are also considerable consequences of adjournment for justice proceedings with a potential backlog of cases and sentencing expected six months down the track.

Alcohol and drug misuse

Staff reported that for those with addictions to AOD, physical distancing restrictions and loss of income have pressured some to participate in petty criminal activity in order to acquire substances. In line with this, staff have observed some incidences of methamphetamine fueled violence. Staff shared concerns about the disruption to the delivery of essential AOD services which has resulted in long waiting lists for new clients. In addition, the closure of several day rehab programs has left vulnerable community members with limited options for seeking support for AOD issues. Concern has been raised regarding the impact of social security payments on addictions. For those who have received increases in due to the Coronavirus supplement, their consumption of AOD may have also increased and when their payments are reduced again, will they still be able to afford their addictions will this lead to a spike in petty crime.

Housing

Despite the additional emergency accommodation options made available for our clients who are in the process of leaving custody, the inability to conduct our essential post-release outreach is a significant barrier to adequately supporting our clients' well-being, needs and smooth transition into accommodation and their everyday life.

¹⁸ VALS, 2020. The Victorian government must do more for Aboriginal people impacted by COVID-19 - Media Release. 24th April 2020. <<https://vals.org.au/assets/2020/04/VALS-press-release-The-Victorian-government-must-do-more-for-Aboriginal-people-impacted-by-COVID-19.pdf>>; McGlade, H. 2020. COVID urgency and calls for release. Indigenous X. 21st April 2020. <<https://indigenoux.com.au/covid-urgency-and-calls-for-release/>>

¹⁹ DJCS, 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Information regarding Youth Justice operations. <<https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/justice-system/youth-justice/coronavirus-covid-19-information-regarding-youth-justice-operations>>

VACCA is concerned about outcomes and housing options for our Aboriginal people leaving custody during recovery and funding ceases for additional housing.

Social and emotional wellbeing and mental health

Staff working with young people in custody have not recorded a spike in mental health issues specifically related to COVID-19, though this could be due to Aboriginal young people in youth justice already having high rates of mental illness. Our Beyond Survival Program reported an increase in SEWB concerns, especially with new requirements for mandatory isolation for two weeks upon entering custody. Entry into custodial settings is already overwhelming and a two-week isolation period only exacerbates these feelings. In addition, physical distancing restrictions preventing visitations have poorly impacted the SEWB of the Aboriginal children, young people and adults we support²⁰. In response, our staff have used brokerage to create and distributed cultural support packs to our clients in custody with the aim to support SEWB and connection to culture.

Beyond Survival Program – Custody-based cultural healing

Our Beyond Survival Program engages with adult men and women in custody through narrative and cultural healing, allowing for the sharing of stories in a safe and non-judgmental environment. The cultural strength of this program lies in its exchange of historical and traditional knowledge with those in custody to help heal their disconnection from family, community and culture. Participants in the program yearn for culture, and once strengthened, it is healing for their trauma and fosters trust and connection. VACCA delivers Beyond Survival across Victorian prisons as a 3-day group program consisting of trauma informed facilitation of narrative group work for prisoners including yarning circles. It also provides as a point of contact upon release for people who have attended the yarning circles to support access to local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services and to connect to family, community and culture upon their release and sustain the changes they have made in prison, build their protective factors to maximise effective reintegration into the community and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

Shift in engagement, outreach and support

At the initial stages of COVID-19, staff reported difficulties in reaching clients involved with our justice programs and conducting welfare checks due to existing issues with limited access to phones and technology. Physical distancing restrictions preventing visitations to correctional facilities have also presented challenges to our engagement and outreach. To help maintain connection to culture and support positive SEWB, staff have conducted routine calls providing support to those in custody as well as their families.

Observations from our custody-based programs highlighted that yarning is essential for fostering connections to culture and community and difficult to recreate online or over the phone to the same personal and impactful level. While some clients engaged effectively with online yarning, this was not shared across programs with concern about whether electronic yarning was appropriate for more serious, personal matters. We heard reports that online yarning was successful when staff had rapport and an existing relationship with the client. When workers approached young people in custody by facilitating cultural exploration, they were eager to learn about

²⁰ DJSC, 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Information regarding Youth Justice Operation.

their Aboriginality and culture, and workers found this to be effective in breaking down barriers. However, access to technology in custody remains limited and inconsistent across the board.

Government's response

The Victorian government has announced funding for legal services and assistance with VALS and Djirra each to receive \$402,000 over two years to respond to COVID-19²¹. It has also announced a \$300,000 support package for ACCOs already receiving Youth Justice funding, amounting to \$11,000 per ACCO as a grant to support flexible assistance for children, young people and their families. It could be argued that this is a modest investment in the context of recent Black Lives Matter protests highlighting the gross overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in the youth justice and criminal justice system and the 434+ Aboriginal deaths in custody since the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1987-1991*. VACCA would like to see specific funding directed to early intervention and prevention supports that address contributing risk factors to the increased involvement of Aboriginal peoples in the justice system. This includes systemic reforms to address institutional racism within every stage of the justice system.

With increasing cases of COVID-19 in Victoria from mid-June, there is growing concern around the virus spreading through prison populations. Eleven people connected with prisons and youth detention centres have tested positive to COVID-19 as of 25th July²². Seven prisons and two youth detention facilities have been placed into lockdown due to COVID-19 outbreaks with reports of children being confined to their rooms for multiple days. Nerita Waight, CEO of VALS, reflects our concerns stating that extensive and cyclical lockdown and isolation are incredibly damaging to both Aboriginal children and adults, especially for those who have experienced past traumas or suffer mental health conditions²³. Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented both in prison population numbers and in having underlying chronic health conditions, where 7.4% of the current Victorian prison population are Aboriginal who are 50 years of age or older and high risk²⁴. Our sector is highly concerned that once COVID-19 spreads through justice facilities it will lead to further Aboriginal deaths in custody. VACCA believes that more needs to be done to ensure the wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people, women and men who are in custody. One of the most effective ways to protect Aboriginal peoples in custody from the virus is to release low-risk inmates or to divert them from custody and instead to a community-based order. The State Government has declined to comment on this matter and Premier Daniel Andrews has previously said no prisoners would be released²⁵.

Education and learning needs during COVID-19

A key concern for VACCA is to understand and raise awareness around the educational needs of the Aboriginal infants, children, young people, families and parents and carers we support. This was especially important for our

²¹ Premier of Victoria, 2020. Improving Aboriginal Justice Outcomes. 26 June 2020.

²² Longbottom, J, 2020. Pressure mounts for release of low-risk inmates due to coronavirus in Victorian prisons. 25th July 2020. ABC News. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-24/coronavirus-push-to-release-low-risk-victorian-prisoners/12489722>>

²³ Waight, N. 2020. Hundreds have died in US prisons from Covid-19. Will Australia act before it's too late?, 30 July 2020. IndigenousX. <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/30/thousands-have-died-in-us-prisons-from-covid-19-will-australia-act-before-its-too-late>>

²⁴ Corrections Victoria, Annual Prisoner Statistical Profile 2006-07 to 2018-19, 3 July 2020.

²⁵ Waight, N. 2020

children and young people in care settings and those involved in our at risk and youth justice programs. Initial challenges identified by our staff were how to best to support young people and carers to maintain engagement with education while participating in remote learning. In the middle of Term 2, we collected data about the education experience of VACCA's children and young people.

VACCA Data from Term 2, 2020 on 1012 clients:

- Of the 863 young people engaged in some form of formal learning; 26% were attending onsite, 61% learning from home 8% are doing a combination, 5% were unsure what to do, 1% N/A
- Of the 685 primary, secondary and tertiary students; 21% do not have access to internet or only have access sometimes, 36% did not have their own laptop, computer or tablet to learn on, 41% did not have a desk and/or chair to learn on
- Of the 184 children and young people in OOHC; 25% did not have an SSG, 17% did not have an IEP, 14% had neither

Limited access to resources, appropriate learning stations, devices and reliable internet all have implications for the facilitation of home learning, engagement and quality of the children's home learning experience. The lack of devices being provided by schools did not necessarily mean students did not have access to a device. In Western VACCA, for example, workers reported programs had provided families with multiple devices pre-COVID-19 therefore those families would not have needed one from the school. Another issue uncovered through our data collection was that in some cases carers were not aware of what resources were available from schools, only through the caseworker relating messages from the school, did they become aware. Other workers reported conflicting accounts from schools and carers, with schools reporting that a family had been given three devices while the carer reporting none. Such reports speak to a lack of consistency and coordinated approach across Victorian schools in supporting the needs of Aboriginal school children participating in remote learning.

All Koorie school students are supposed to have Individual Education Plans (ILP) and Student Support Groups (SSG) in place. These should have been useful for responding to and focusing on the education needs of our children and young people during COVID-19. It is concerning that such high percentages of Koorie students still do not have these mechanisms in place and are missing out on their right to education. Anecdotal data also revealed that staff needed additional supports to effectively assist and support carers and families with the learning needs of children and young people.

With disrupted schooling and potentially ongoing pivot between remote and school-based learning corresponding to lessening and reinstated restrictions, we are concerned for the level of continuous assistance required by our children and young people. This includes both supporting the capacity of parents, carers and Elders to support young people's education and the need for links to mentors and tutors to maintain engagement with learning. An emerging issue of concern reported by our staff remains how best to support the needs of children, young people and carers to maintain engaged with education in light of reinstated Stage 4 restrictions in Victoria.

Our responses to the educational needs of Aboriginal children

VACCA initially engaged with the Department of Education and Training (DET) and other ACCOs to ensure the 2000 Aboriginal children involved with Child Protection and those engaged with at-risk services were helped to transition to home learning. We concentrated our focus on education to ensure children and young people are

actively engaged in their education and communicated with families and carers to establish whether remote learning or attending school best suited children. Our case managers had a crucial role in supporting the transition to remote learning. They provided children, families and carers with essential tools for learning including resources and education and cultural packs and were also a key point of contact for parents and carers, taking some of the pressure off them throughout this challenging time. Some of our key actions in the education space have included:

- Ensuring where children and young people were not engaged in formal systems of support they had facilitated access to key health messages.
- Many VACCA workers offered to pick up packs and devices for families from schools and ensuring that each family had at least one device in the home also using this opportunity to check in on families.
- Establishing our 'Koorie Kids Getting ready for School' early education packs and distributed over 150 packs to our Northern, Ovens Murray and Morwell regions. VACCA has developed key Home Tutoring guidelines, a 'Keeping our Kids Engaged' working group and we have been advocating for ILPs and SSGs for children and young people in OOHHC.
- Developing innovative ways of engaging children and young people with learning. An example of this includes our Gippsland Cradle to Kinder Team purchasing iPads with Aboriginal Cultural books for families where case workers had the same books and were able to read along with the children and their whole family. For children returning to school, our staff provided information for carers and/or families with school aged children covering; uniform, hygiene, tutoring, wellbeing and online learning. Families have also been provided links to other educational and cultural activities, and activity sheets to encourage outside play and art.
- We have been repurposing some of our current brokerage to organise home mentors and tutors for young people struggling to engage with education during this time.
- Our Eastern region has appointed a dedicated education support worker to ensure Aboriginal kids do not fall behind during this time.
- The Southern Region prepared and delivered a range of education and cultural packs to keep many of its groups, such as the Windook Dads, Koorie Homework Club and playgroups, engaged and connected.

Good News Story

Supporting engagement in learning and cultural activities

The Northern Region prepared a huge number of pre-school learning packs and early literacy bags full of activities, books and other goodies, so the youngest members of our community and their families have plenty

to keep them stimulated, learning and engaged. Many bags headed out the door. Staff also engaged with our inspiring young Narrun Yana artists to produce culturally-rich art tutorials which were posted on VACCA's Facebook and YouTube channel. At the same time, we worked with Koorie Tiddas to create a virtual choir to continue to give a voice to our Aboriginal girls and young women - something that is so important during these disruptive times. A family interactive challenge was launched to promote family interactions and teamwork. Each week, families were invited to send in a video of themselves dancing to a key theme.

Government's response

As like much of the nation, we were initially concerned by the lack of clarity expressed by the National Cabinet regarding the closure of schools. This placed our families, carers and communities in a state of limbo and uncertainty about whether they should be sending their children to school. Upon announcing remote learning for Victoria, we felt there was limited consideration by the DET for how Aboriginal children, young people and families will transition to remote learning without the necessary technology, devices and support. During the first period of remote learning, more than 61,000 laptops and tablets and 23,000 SIM cards and dongles were loaned to students by the DET. With reinstated Stage 4 restrictions, public school students will continue to receive the support they need where students without access to a tablet or laptop will be loaned one by their school or the DET. The government has also pledged to provide face masks to school students residing in Metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchel Shire as a matter of priority²⁶.

Housing stress and homelessness issues

Governments have enforced physical distancing restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic urging the public to stay home. Yet, many of our Aboriginal community members do not have a safe place to call home.

²⁶Premier of Victoria, 2020. Face Coverings And Masks For Metro Schools. 20 July 2020. <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/face-coverings-and-masks-metro-schools>>

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the importance of safe, secure and adequate housing for positive SEWB and health but also the deep inequalities in accessing this basic human right. The geographical location of Melbourne's second COVID-19 spike and public housing tower lockdowns are an example of this showing the correlation between housing insecurity, financial hardship and health inequalities. People who live in conditions of housing stress, overcrowding and affordability stress have less agency and are limited to an environment with a lesser capacity to self-isolate than the remainder of the community. Such living conditions are the product of decades of public and social housing de-investment, systemic policy failure and stigmatisation creating highly vulnerable communities. We raise this concern and disparity because 22% of Aboriginal households live in social housing in Victoria, compared to 0.9% of total population²⁷. Rental affordability for Aboriginal communities in the private rental market also remains a significant concern prior, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aboriginal children and young people leaving OOHC or Youth Justice and Aboriginal adults exiting custody are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. These groups cannot access the health and social benefits of secure housing needed to stay safe especially needed in the time of COVID-19. With disrupted services and supports due to physical distancing restrictions, these challenges are compounded and exacerbated. Aboriginal people with AOD issues are also a cohort vulnerable to housing stress and homelessness. The closure of some AOD rehabilitation facilities with no new referrals being accepted, has left highly vulnerable people with limited options to seek assistance and safe living arrangements²⁸.

Observations from our northern region have not yet reported a significant increase in referrals specifically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is expected to be attributed to additional funding being granted to Homelessness Access Points around Metropolitan Melbourne. However, VACCA is concerned that once the height of the pandemic is over, and the Homelessness Access Points are no longer being funded to the same amount, our services will be inundated. Similarly, we are concerned for members of our Aboriginal community who are rough sleepers and are temporarily being housed in motels and hotels and may have nowhere to go once these accommodation options are no longer available.

Pressure on our homelessness programs

Given the large numbers of Aboriginal families who experience homelessness, we will require additional resources to support increased demand on our services once funding for Homelessness Access Points ceases. Unfortunately, for those who are most vulnerable to housing stress, the pandemic will have ongoing and long-lasting impacts. Significant consideration, preparation and resources are necessary to ensure sufficient, long-term support is available to our Aboriginal communities.

Wilam Support Service

Aboriginal specific homelessness support

Our Preston-based homelessness program, the Wilam Support Service, supports Aboriginal individuals, couples, families and young people 17 years or older who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to find

²⁷ Aboriginal Housing Victoria 2020

²⁸ Change the Record, (2020). Critical Condition – The impact of COVID-19 policies, policing and prisons on First Nations Communities. Change the Record. <<https://changetherecord.org.au/critical-condition>>

stable housing. This service is a two-caseworker model assisting Aboriginal clients with finding employment, access to educational opportunities, support the health and wellbeing of those seeking help and help connect them with their Aboriginal identity and culture.

The economic fallout of COVID-19 and consequential loss of employment and income is expected to impact rental affordability pressures and housing stress for a prolonged period. The culmination of such issues is likely to have flow on effects in the justice and homelessness sectors with an increased demand for support services. There is also concern amongst ACCOs around the impact of job loss on homelessness after the height of the pandemic, especially in the context of social security payments reverting to their former and inadequate amounts. We anticipate that this will continue to exacerbate housing stress and increase demand for our services for some time to come.

Government response

We welcome the National Cabinet's announcement of a six-month moratorium on rental evictions as well as protections for landlords and tenants under s15 of the *COVID-19 Omnibus (Emergency Measures) Act 2020*. These protections include suspensions of rental increases, new dispute resolution processes and rent relief for eligible tenants²⁹. Additional adequate support is critical for Aboriginal tenants with histories of trauma who may struggle to participate in a conflict resolution process or may lack the resources to apply for rental relief. We remain concerned for our clients who have experienced job loss and financial stress but will need to continue paying their full rent amount if unable to apply for rental relief.

The Victorian government has made efforts to keep people who experience homelessness safe during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing funding for Homeless Access Points and mainstream homelessness services. This is an initiative with St. Vincent's who are triaging people and supporting them to temporary motel and hotel accommodation³⁰. There is concern among the ACCO sector that the access and support issues which existed prior to COVID-19 remain for Aboriginal clients. Anecdotal evidence suggests that ACCOs have struggled to secure emergency and crisis accommodation for clients, especially for Aboriginal young people being released early on bail. We are also concerned that Aboriginal clients accommodated by mainstream agencies may not be receiving the type of support appropriate to their needs.

Data from our family violence programs suggests that between the 1st and 15th June, 21 of our family violence clients sought refuge and it can be expected that some of these were placed in CBD motels. There is concern that the case management and mental health support offered at CBD motels is not guaranteed to be culturally appropriate or meet the needs of Aboriginal families fleeing a violent situation. We have also heard reports that some Aboriginal women and children experiencing family violence were hesitant to access CBD motels for this reason. Having to access support through mainstream services often creates a disjointed system with many of our clients referred between services creating additional barriers for families to navigate while in crisis.

²⁹ State of Victoria, 2020. COVID-19 Omnibus (Emergency Measures) Act 2020 – Legislation. Victorian Government, Melbourne.; Department of Housing, 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19) rent relief grant. Department of Housing, Victorian Government. <<https://www.housing.vic.gov.au/help-renting/rentrelief>>

³⁰ Premier of Victoria, 2020. More Homelessness And Public Housing Support In COVID-19 Fight – Media Statement. <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/more-homelessness-and-public-housing-support-in-covid-19-fight/>>

While DHHS has allocated additional funding for Housing Establishment Funding (HEF) resources, none of this was provided to ACCOs who must apply to mainstream agencies on behalf of Aboriginal clients to access resources for emergency housing. This process is often time consuming, repetitive and inefficient application process. It is essential to adequately resource ACCOs to lead housing crisis support and recovery for the Aboriginal community. Our Gippsland region has recently received HEF with targets of 21.73 and roughly \$6,000 each, however this figure does not enable sufficient, long term support that is responsive to Aboriginal communities living regionally often with more complex needs.

To support Aboriginal people leaving hotel accommodation to transition into longer-term housing, the government has announced \$440m as a part of the COVID-19 support package for the Aboriginal community for ACCOs to employ ten VPS4 equivalent workers for 6 months to provide case management support in this process. While this much needed funding will assist the community, we believe that due to the severity and extension of lockdown conditions, the government will need to provide a more generous and longer-term funding commitment.

The homelessness system has significant data gaps regarding Aboriginal people. Investing in ACCO-led data collection to better understand local needs and data trends can help identify effective strategies and plan to appropriately address homelessness for Aboriginal peoples longer term.

A critical issue for Aboriginal peoples is access to long-term, secure, and stable housing as the homelessness system does well in meeting Aboriginal short-term need (70%) but less well in meeting demand for transitional housing (31%) and very poor in helping achieve long term housing (7%). This is only likely to be exacerbated by limited affordable rental properties available post pandemic to meet the demand on affordable housing. COVID-19 has heightened mental health, AOD, Child Protection, justice and family violence issues that contribute to unstable housing for Aboriginal peoples. Anticipating such future challenges emerging for Aboriginal people in housing crisis, we recommend the government establish further HEF specifically supporting ACCO homelessness services, family violence initiatives and young people leaving care and youth justice.

Investing in Aboriginal social housing

The government has announced funding for new Aboriginal social housing stock, upgrading existing stock, conducting maintenance work and investing in the support services necessary for Aboriginal people vulnerable to housing stress³¹. This consists of \$1.1 million to AHV for 12 additional homes and \$35 million for upgrades, maintenance and repairs for existing Aboriginal social housing. Funding of \$4.2 million for an Aboriginal specific Private Rental Assistance Program will also provide more efficient, less traumatising and a culturally safe approach. While this program will assist in subsidising Aboriginal people's access to private rentals, the transition of social housing to ACCOs would also more directly and effectively support Aboriginal people transitioning from hotel accommodation and their housing needs more generally.

³¹ Premier of Victoria, 2020. 'Building Works: Social Housing for Aboriginal Victorians' - Media Release. 21st May 2020. Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. Victorian Government, Melbourne. <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/building-works-social-housing-for-aboriginal-victorians/>>.



The State Government is working directly with AHV in order to address existing and emerging housing issues for Aboriginal peoples. This includes \$800,000 for the implementation of Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. The self-determination of housing outcomes for Aboriginal peoples is crucial in providing culturally safe housing options and services that support Aboriginal community members through the COVID-19 recovery process and beyond.

COVID-19 social security policies

The Victorian Government has previously advocated for the increase to the rate of JobSeeker (formerly Newstart)³². We welcomed the April decision of the National Cabinet to include a \$275 Coronavirus supplement per week to social security payments for a six-month period³³. However, we are concerned about the exclusion of people on the Career Payment and Disability Support Pension from receiving this supplement and this has been questioned by disability groups, including the First People's Disability Network³⁴. Aboriginal carers and peoples with disabilities face many existing challenges and increased health risks, therefore the additional pressures and costs in times of crisis cause further distress and anxiety³⁵. VACCA along with other advocates for social security payment recipients in a campaign lead by ACOSS, contend that all payments should be increased permanently as this is the most effective way to reduce poverty³⁶.

In July, the Commonwealth announced that JobSeeker will fall from \$1,100 to \$800 per fortnight from September, with the Coronavirus Supplement ending in December. Mutual obligations will be reinstated requiring recipients to apply for more jobs than earlier in the pandemic, where failure to take a job will result in people losing their payments. The JobKeeper payment will fall from \$1,500 per fortnight to \$1,200 in September and will continue until March 2021³⁷. The clear differential treatment between those receiving JobSeeker and JobKeeper shows that the Commonwealth is perpetuating the narrative that people receiving JobSeeker are less deserving of support than those who have been employed and lost employment during COVID-19.

There is sector-wide concern about the financial, employment and SEWB outcomes for the Aboriginal community as COVID-19 supports and policies are withdrawn onwards from September and December. The official unemployment rate has increased to 6.2 per cent and is projected to reach 8 per cent by the end of September, as a net of 600,000 people have lost employment in April and another 600,000 became underemployed³⁸. About 2.1 million people are predicted to come off JobKeeper in the coming months, and the Federal Government is expecting 345,000 new people will access JobSeeker in the last three months of the year³⁹. Such figures indicate a number of pressures on the social security system as COVID-19 policies are withdrawn. Given the state of the economy with a reduced pool of available jobs, vulnerable jobseekers will be placed under enormous pressure to seek work as mutual obligations are reinstated. There is widespread community concern for payment recipients when the Coronavirus supplement is reduced in September and cut in December as many of the financial

³² Victorian Government., 2019. Victorian Government Submission to the Inquiry into Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia. October 2019. Melbourne, Victoria.

³³DSS., 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19) information and support. Department of Social Services. Australian Government. <<https://www.dss.gov.au/about-the-department/coronavirus-covid-19-information-and-support>>

³⁴ PWDA., 2020. Joint Statement: Increase Disability Support Pension Now To Deal With Coronavirus. People With Disability Australia. <<https://pwd.org.au/joint-statement-increase-disability-support-pension-now-to-deal-with-coronavirus/>>

³⁵ F.P.D. N., 2011. Final Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Disability Care and Support. First Nations Disability Network.

³⁶ ACOSS, 2020., ACOSS: "Huge relief" with crucial doubling of Newstart. Media Statement. 22nd March 2020. : <https://www.acoss.org.au/media_release/acoss-huge-relief-with-crucial-doubling-of-newstart/>

³⁷Services Australia, 2020. How Coronavirus Supplement and eligibility for some income support payments are changing. <<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/news/how-coronavirus-supplement-and-eligibility-some-income-support-payments-are-changing>>

³⁸ ANZ, 2020. Job ads halve in April. Media Release. 4th May 2020. ANZ. <<https://media.anz.com/posts/2020/05/job-ads-halve-in-april>>

³⁹ Hayne, J. 2020. The key facts and figures from the JobKeeper and JobSeeker coronavirus support changes. 21 June 2020. ABC News. <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-21/jobkeeper-jobseeker-coronavirus-support-numbers/12477186>>

challenges due to COVID-19 remain. This is especially the case in Metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire where Stage 4 Restrictions remain in place.

The Senate Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart report, released in April, and has been pivotal in informing discussions on the future of social security payments⁴⁰. The report made 27 key recommendations, notably including;

once the Coronavirus Supplement is phased out, the Australian Government increase[s] the JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance and Parenting Payment rates to ensure that all eligible recipients do not live in poverty⁴¹

The temporary suspension of mutual obligations and voluntary participation in Parenting Programs during COVID-19 shows the potential for reform to the social security system as to support rather than punish vulnerable community members. As Aboriginal communities are disproportionately targeted by compliance schemes, such reforms to the system are crucial in ensuring Aboriginal peoples' right to self-determination and agency. To support the recovery, we must ensure that Aboriginal families experiencing financial crisis due to COVID-19 are empowered and supported to not be dependent on the social security system long-term. This is a unique moment in the history of social security policy where stakeholders ranging from business groups to community organisations hope to create momentum and advocacy for the positive changes we have seen during COVID-19 to remain permanent.

Recovery

Increased demand on existing ACCO services and infrastructure

⁴⁰ Commonwealth of Australia 2020, Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament House, Canberra.

⁴¹ Ibid.

VACCA has a number of concerns and considerations for our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. With the Emergency Measures legislation ending in September, we are concerned how this may affect Aboriginal children, young people and families. We are expecting a significant increase in demand for our services, particularly for our homelessness and family violence programs. This anticipated demand is occurring in a context of existing projected demand pre-COVID-19. The Social Ventures Australia Service Demand Project conducted in 2019 has estimated that demand for VACCA's services will increase substantially in all our regions along with predicted Aboriginal population growth⁴². There is already an existing, considerable unmet demand for culturally appropriate services in all Victorian regions in homelessness, family violence, AOD and mental health. Demand is also growing for all service types in western metropolitan Melbourne, with VACCA being the only ACCO in the area⁴³.

The numbers of Aboriginal children in care are increasing and according to the government's own data, in 2018 there were 1,975 Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC, compared with 5,979 non-Aboriginal at the rate of 88.8 and 4.4 per 1,000 respectively⁴⁴. Research also predicts that by 2028 there will be 3,902 Aboriginal children in OOHC in Victoria⁴⁵. Without local ACCO infrastructure in areas of high Aboriginal population growth and demand on services, existing issues and challenges will be further exacerbated. The State Government should co-develop an ACCO and Aboriginal community recovery plan that responds to the current gaps in ACCO infrastructure. Given the long-term impacts of the pandemic on the Aboriginal community in Victoria, we need significant investment in ACCO infrastructure in areas of projected Aboriginal population growth to support recovery and respond to current and future challenges.

In reflecting on our learnings from responses and actions during this crisis, we need to be resourced to conduct intensive support with the ability to engage, assess and set up the appropriate triaging. There is also a promising opportunity of utilising remote program delivery and engagement to broaden reach of the community we support, especially for prevention and early intervention.

Organisational impacts

We are concerned about the shorter and longer-term costs associated with operating as an organisation in a new environment where there is only a partial return to normal operations. The SEWB of our staff both working from home and delivering essential services is of significant concern, and while we have provided a number of internal and external supports, this toll is likely to be ongoing with a potential continuous cycle of lifting and reintroduced restrictions. Additional recovery-based costs must also be considered, such as ensuring our workplaces are COVID-19 safe, infrastructure, PPE resources and staff costs. Maintaining physical distancing in the workplace is bound to impact on our viable service delivery. Such significant organisational and operational changes require sector-wide, industrial relations advice to support innovative service delivery working models. Considering the long trajectory ahead out of the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope to engage in discussions with the State Government

⁴² Social Ventures Australia Consulting, 2019. Service Demand Projection Project – Final Report. Prepared for VACCA. 17th May 2019.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Victorian Government. 2019, Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report. State of Victoria, Melbourne.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

about further support to the ACCO sector to manage increased demands on operational and service delivery aspects.

Systemic and institutional reforms needed

Through our learnings and experiences under COVID-19, both on the ground and in cooperating with various government departments, VACCA believes a number of key systemic and institutional reforms are needed. Such reforms will build our capacity and better prepare our community, sector and government response to future crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to reimagine and realign our system with a greater service flexibility based on client needs rather than systems. In collaboratively aiming to improve access to services we can address emergent silos and increase coordination across sectors involving Aboriginal children, young people and families. COVID-19 poses challenges that require policy makers to develop shared practice guidelines and implement strategies across education, justice, health, housing and homelessness, family violence, Child Protection, AOD and mental health. This approach should be underpinned by an understanding of social and cultural determinants of health and a definite strategy that addresses systemic racism and implicit bias. Without these systemic reforms, our communities will remain increasingly vulnerable to future crisis situations.

COVID-19 has given us opportunity to reflect on existing strengths and challenges and the improvements we have had to make in best responding to Aboriginal community needs. Incorporating our learnings into reforms will help collaboratively improve crisis responses now and, in the future. By building the capacity of our essential services through a community-based approach we hope to establish a strong framework for future effective responses to crisis. An example of this is evident in our response to the Public Housing Tower situation where we worked across each of the Public Housing COVID-19 response teams to help identify, support, triage and connect Aboriginal residents with the appropriate supports. We also engaged with Aboriginal families in other public housing towers across Melbourne to determine their needs and prepare for potential outbreaks.

Victorian Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan

In the Canadian province of British Columbia, the First Nations Emergency Services Society (FNESS) works closely with First Nations communities, Emergency Management BC, Indigenous Services Canada and various other stakeholders, to support the successful implementation of Emergency Management for First Nations communities⁴⁶. The FNESS Emergency Management Department provides community-based Emergency Management guidance, support and assistance to BC First Nations communities. Such disaster management arrangements are an expression of self-determination where First Nations communities have assumed leadership during emergencies, clarifying jurisdictional issues, implementing First Nations ways of healing, and developing emergency plans and agreements with provincial and federal governments. This has been expressed in the Emergency Management Memorandum of Understanding 2019 recognising BC First Nations “as full partners in the governance and operations of emergency management”⁴⁷. This example highlights the importance of an

⁴⁶ First Nations Emergency Services Society, 2020. Core Programs – Emergency Management. <<https://www.fness.bc.ca/core-programs/emergency-management>>

⁴⁷ British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, 2020. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SERVICES MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING. <https://www.bcafn.ca/sites/default/files/2019-11/EM_MOU_Ecopy.pdf>

overarching framework and agreement between governments and First Nations communities in times of disaster and provides a potential model for a whole of government Victorian Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan.

The recent Victorian bushfire and COVID-19 crisis have produced enormous challenges for our communities to overcome. Our Gippsland region is an example where our community is more vulnerable and greater impacted by both disasters given local and regional variables. We believe a whole of government Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan must be established to provide an overarching framework when responding to disasters and their impact upon the Aboriginal community.

An Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan must be developed with the Aboriginal community and ACCOs to identify the risks for Aboriginal communities across the state when faced with disasters such as a bushfires, flooding or a health emergency. The plan should strengthen existing Aboriginal community-based and local responses in place when planning, preparing and responding to crisis. An Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan would implement a systemic approach when planning, preparing and responding to these risks, including guidelines and processes in the event of a disaster that would protect and support Aboriginal communities. An Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan should have both a regional and state-wide focus with five phases; prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. A critical element of the prevention and mitigation stage is a communications strategy between the government and Aboriginal community with communications material specifically produced to disseminate key messages to the community. During COVID-19, VACCA produced various communications material for wider community and targeted material for our clients including carers, young people and families. The Aboriginal community and ACCOs must be adequately resourced to produce communications material and resources so we can communicate critical messages to Aboriginal peoples in a way that is culturally appropriate, fitting to their specific needs and easy to understand. An Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan needs dedicated funding and an agreed governance structure that is triggered during a disaster, outlining the roles of key agencies and officials, with ACCOs as the coordinating points for response, relief and recovery. Such reforms that centring on engagement, involvement, community-based innovation of ACCOs can improve the coordination of future responses to crisis.

Recommendations

VACCA recommends the following:

- The State Government to develop with the AEC and ACCOs an Aboriginal Community Recovery Plan, including long-term commitment and significant investment in ACCO infrastructure and ACCO community-based responses to meet increased demand to ACCO services.

- The State Government to develop with the Aboriginal community a whole of government Victorian Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan to provide an overarching planning framework for responding to disaster and crisis.
- The State Government to respond to and take account of the following in the recovery effort:
 - *Social and emotional wellbeing*
 - Resource and fund ACCOs to run trauma informed SEWB casework delivered to individuals, families and community groups. Invest in cultural programs that support SEWB and healing, especially work with Elders and young people leaving care or custody.
 - Invest in real-time monitoring of the mental health impacts and community needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and work in partnership with ACCOs to address emerging issues of concern.
 - *Child Protection*
 - Involve ACCO sector and Aboriginal community in determining the local needs of Aboriginal children, young people and families involved with Child Protection during COVID-19.
 - Greater investment in ACCO infrastructure to be able to better respond to the needs of Aboriginal children, young people and their families in times of crisis; from early intervention and family support services to the strengthening of the ACAC program, with a focus on family strengthening and reunification.
 - Transfer of resources from mainstream child and family welfare organisations to Aboriginal organisations to deliver culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal children, young people, families and carers.
 - We recommended for the State Government to amend the CYFA to extend the timeframes of all current family reunification orders by a minimum of six months considering COVID-19. It is also crucial for Child Protection practice guidance to offer all affected parents an opportunity to seek an additional extension beyond this.
 - *Family violence*
 - Greater coordination between strategic and operational functions of Family Safety Victoria around the needs of Aboriginal peoples regarding family violence issues.
 - Greater investment directed to Aboriginal-specific family violence support programs and culturally safe crisis accommodation and refuges. We need further investment in services and housing for men and young people using violence to support their behavior change and healing.
 - *Education*
 - For the education system to harness the opportunities and reach from online learning, including alternative forms of learning through art, music and culture.
 - Expand one-on-one tutoring supports for Aboriginal children and young people involved with the Child Protection system.
 - *Justice*
 - ACCO-led engagement and outreach for Aboriginal people in custody with investment in early intervention approaches including pre-release engagement and outreach.

- Investment in transition supports like suitable accommodation options for independent living to support Aboriginal people leaving institutional settings, as demand for safe housing is likely to increase further in the recovery stage after COVID-19.
- Reduce the prison population by releasing low-risk inmates and diverting people at the court level to community-based orders to decrease the risk of COVID-19 spreading through Victorian prisons.
- *Housing and homelessness*⁴⁸
 - Address immediate access and support issues of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness. Securing accommodation for Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness is critical to efforts to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 among Aboriginal communities in Victoria.
 - DHHS and Aboriginal stakeholders to develop a plan and strategy to minimise the risk of escalating Aboriginal homelessness in the recovery period due to surge in evictions as the moratorium on evictions is lifted, Commonwealth supplementary COVID-19 payments are withdrawn and tenants experience financial difficulty in meeting rent payments. This needs to include a coordinated state-wide process to oversee delivery of responses to Aboriginal homelessness clients.
 - We seek government to consider the ongoing needs of Aboriginal tenants beyond the 29th September when the Emergency Legislation expires.
- *Social security policy*
 - Victorian Government must advocate to the National Cabinet for permanent increases to income support payments to reduce the poverty experienced by all Australians receiving such payments.

VACCA looks forward to supporting and working with the Committee for this Inquiry to ensure the progress of such important and necessary reforms.

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⁴⁸ Recommendations based on Aboriginal Housing Victoria paper *Improving support for Aboriginal homeless clients in the COVID-19 pandemic* Prepared for the Joint COVID-19 Aboriginal Community Taskforce Meeting 12 August 2020.