



National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

February 2022

VACCA

PO Box 494, Northcote Plaza

Northcote

Victoria, 3070

Email: vacca@vacca.org



Introduction

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. We work holistically with women, men, young people and children, delivering over 70 programs across a wide range of program areas, including family violence, integrated family services, child protection, cultural strengthening programs, mental health, financial services, justice, early years and homelessness services.

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

VACCA's extensive experience in delivering programs to Aboriginal families affected by family violence is through primary prevention, early intervention, response, healing, and recovery. Our suite of programs includes intensive individual case management for men who use family violence, men's behaviour change programs, adolescents who use violence case management, intensive case management for people experiencing family violence, The Orange Door practice leads and practitioners in three established hubs, management of a state-wide Aboriginal women & children's crisis service, and therapeutic & group work.

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (the Plan).

Feedback

General

1. VACCA contends that the voice of children and young people must be stronger within the Plan and that their agency needs to be prioritised and promoted.
2. There must be an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander National peak in the primary prevention of family violence. VACCA is the leading and largest provider primary prevention of family violence for Aboriginal Victorians but similar Aboriginal led supports and structures are needed at a National level and in all jurisdictions.
3. VACCA promotes the need to adopt a holistic approach to address the causes and the consequences of family violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. If we treat family violence as a simple law and order matter, a matter of legal compliance, or a health matter, we will not Close the Gap or achieve lasting improvements. The solutions are complex, multi-faceted and require long term focus and commitment to address, this Plan must be reflective of such an approach, with a particular focus on the systemic reform required.



4. To effectively eliminate violence against women, children and young people we must understand their experiences, and ensure they have access to a service system that can meet their individual needs. Disappointingly this Plan does not include the stories of those with lived experience, including the intersectional experiences of Aboriginal community who identify as LGBTIQ+ or Aboriginal women, children and young people with disability. There needs to be greater inclusion of the voices of survivors and their lived experiences alongside more statistics about the current experience of Aboriginal children, young people and families experiencing family violence in the 'What we know about violence against women and children' section.
5. Young people and adolescents who are affected by and use family violence are largely silent in this Plan. This cohort requires a specialised approach in practice, including for those young people who use violence in the home, and this must be reflected in the plan, including the measurements.
6. Currently there is very limited focus on why working with men who use violence is so critical to a family centred approach to healing, where men are held accountable.
7. There are currently only two mentions of elder abuse in the whole Plan, which is limited to the discussion around violence affecting women across all life stages and the definition of family violence. Given the concerning prevalence of elder abuse, VACCA contends that there should be greater focus on both the prevalence and approaches required to eliminate it.
8. Understandably there is a focus in the National plan on types of violence experienced, particularly intimate partner and family violence. However what is missing from this plan is financial abuse, reproductive coercion, and other forms of violence. This plan must not silence the experience of anyone experiencing violence. This weeks report by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia demonstrated the prevalence of financial abuse and control. We also point Government to the white paper written by Marie Stopes Australia on reproductive coercion for more detailed information.
9. The Plan is largely focussed on the individual, however VACCA contends that a family focussed, holistic, trauma informed therapeutic approach based on the principle of culture is a critical protective factor is fundamental to being able to address the over-representation of Aboriginal women and children experiencing family violence.
10. The Plan must acknowledge and recognise the impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, Stolen Generations and experiences of family violence on both victims of family violence as well as on those who use violence, and in doing so include cultural drivers of gender based violence in Australia, alongside practice and reforms that have a cultural lens. These include the enduring impacts of:
 - a. Colonisation
 - b. Transgenerational trauma
 - c. Structural and systemic oppression
 - d. Historic and contemporary child and family welfare policies
 - e. Chronic underfunding of Aboriginal led services and programs



11. VACCA strongly contends that the language in this Plan needs to be shifted away from the victim/perpetrator binary to affected family member and user of violence. This better reflects the complexity and nuance so common in family violence situations, where we know all too often people using violence have also been 'victims' themselves.
12. While we can see there is recognition of the need for alignment to other National Strategies, Agreements, Frameworks or Plans, VACCA contends that relevant and intersecting state and territory jurisdictions should also be included in scope. We hope to see established Aboriginal frameworks like Dhelk Dja in Victoria features in the National Plan and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan.

Legislative Reform

13. Victoria has benefited from a government that has shown significant commitment towards addressing the alarming rates of violence against women and children. They committed to implementing all 227 recommendations from the Royal Commission into Family Violence, and currently sit at 204 being fully implemented with the remaining 23 in progress. This level of accountability is commendable, but there is still a ways to go in addressing the underlying issues and causes of family violence.
14. VACCA echoes the consistent calls for national alignment of legislative terminology and definitions across jurisdictions, particularly around sexual harm, age of consent and family violence. Only Victoria and Western Australia have removed any mention of the term 'relationship' when concerning sexual offences against children, and instead use the terminology of persistent sexual abuse.

Data and Evaluation

15. VACCA is committed to building an Aboriginal evidence base in line with the principles of data sovereignty. Data sovereignty is a rights-based framework surrounding the ownership, control, management, and acquisition of data¹. In the Indigenous context, this actualises as a form of self-determination where Indigenous communities, organisations and individuals have access to data about Indigenous people and with the ability to makes decisions pertaining to them that are in the best interest of community. Using techniques to employ a holistic approach to data including its generation, maintenance, ownership, control, access and possession. VACCA recommends that the Plan include a commitment to support Aboriginal data sovereignty as one of its guiding principles.
16. VACCA is concerned that there is currently no data modelling for how Victoria will be able to achieve the Target 13 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This must be implemented as a priority.

¹ Kate Devitt. (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2019) 26-36, retrieved from <<https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10289/12919/data%20practices.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>>.



17. The Federal Government's 2021-2022 Budget Committed to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Personal Safety Survey. We commend this approach and seek that there is a commitment for this to be a societal longitudinal study over twenty years so we can better understand the nature and prevalence of family and sexual violence within community. This research needs to be led by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Council on family, domestic and sexual violence, in conjunction with the National Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission who is tasked with collating data and outcomes for the Plan.
18. VACCA is concerned to see there are currently no measurements focussed on users of family violence, including young people who use violence in the home, nor is there proposed measurements around children and young people's experiences of family violence and the correlation between child protection.
19. In Victoria, Victoria Police have started recording the identity of the user of family violence, this long overdue step has confirmed our anecdotal evidence that the vast majority of Aboriginal women who experience family violence are partnered with non-Aboriginal men, initial data from Victoria Police indicates around 75 per cent of partners who use violence are non-Aboriginal. This data must be used to inform a better understanding about the nature of violence against Aboriginal women and children, family violence is not simply an Aboriginal problem.
20. VACCA recommends separating the current measurement of 'physical and/or sexual family and domestic violence' as they different experiences and require different responses.

Practice

21. There must be a greater focus on culturally safe early intervention and prevention approaches than is currently included in the Plan. We know that early intervention and prevention is critical, and for these to be successful there must be an Aboriginal lens applied, including prevention programs teaching healthy respectful relationships throughout the life stages commencing from pre-natal.
22. VACCA contends that there must be a coordinated approach to addressing family violence where sexual harm is disclosed. Our experience is that there is a significant disconnect in service provision, which only further isolates those impacted. Where sexual harm is disclosed in a family violence service there is a tendency to refer out to sexual harm support services, rather than ensure family violence specialists are adequately trained or bring in specialists in sexual harm.
23. VACCA recently established *Nowununmurrumbununneryearkun*, our Aboriginal Sexual Assault Therapeutic Pilot Program in the Southern Melbourne area, the first of its kind in Australia, in partnership with South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault. A unique therapeutic and healing service responsive to the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, women, and men who are victims/survivors of sexual assault. ASSAS' distinctive feature is the integration of a specialist sexual assault service within an Aboriginal cultural healing context. The service will be accessible to Aboriginal children, young people, and adults residing in the Southern Melbourne Area. This specialist therapeutic service is nested in VACCA's broader suite of Family Violence services.



24. VACCA was disappointed not to see a greater focus on the need for information sharing across sectors. Victoria's MARAM Framework is a mechanism for such a coordinated approach, and while there is still progress to be made to ensure full compliance and implementation, we know that we have a much better understanding of family violence and child wellbeing.

Workforce

25. VACCA recommends that additional training and supports are provided to family violence practitioners, not just mental health workers to better understand and support clients facing multiple and complex needs including alcohol and other drugs, mental health, sexual harm and housing and homelessness. This will ensure community receive holistic care meeting the needs of the individual and their family.

For more information, please get in touch with Sarah Gafforini, Director, Office of the CEO on sarahg@vacca.org.