

July 2025

Updated Position Statement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care

Vision

VACCHO's vision is for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the right to holistic, culturally rich supports that uphold the full exercise of self-determination throughout Eldership. This right has been clearly recognised by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner, whose report outlines a blueprint for transformative reform.

VACCHO fully supports all recommendations made by the Interim Commissioner and calls on the Australian Government to accept all recommendations in full, and to commit to new legislation to formalise its commitment to transforming Aged Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1:

The Australian Government accept and implement all the recommendations from the *Transforming Aged Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* report.

Recommendation 2:

Establish the First Nations Aged Care Commissioner as a permanent, independent statutory office, through specific legislation that enshrines and entrenches the Australian Government's commitment to transforming aged care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This legislation should also commit to establishing a specific aged care pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Immediately stop the forced mainstreaming of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations through the transition to the mainstream *Support at Home* program, and provide immediate exemptions for ACCOs from requirements to charge income tested fees and co-contributions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people and Elders.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Recognise and fund Aboriginal Community Controlled peak organisations to support the strengthening of the ACCO Sector and ensure its leadership in Aged Care reform implementation.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Co-develop and implement an intensive awareness and training initiative for Commonwealth Public Servants involved in aged care reform activities to ensure consistent understanding and application of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and its Priority Reforms.

Background

In 2021, following extensive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety delivered a clear blueprint for transforming the aged care system to better serve First Nations people. The Commission's final report included specific, high-impact recommendations, including the creation of a dedicated aged care pathway and the establishment of a First Nations Aged Care Commissioner, aimed at embedding cultural safety, flexibility, and Aboriginal-led governance into every aspect of the system.

VACCHO is deeply concerned that the Australian Government has not made progress toward the Royal Commission's Aboriginal-specific recommendations. We reiterate that practical, legislative action is now required. The system must embed Aboriginal governance, Aboriginal delivery, and cultural safety through a specific pathway, legislated alongside the permanent establishment of the First Nations Aged Care Commissioner.

An immediate stop to the mainstreaming of ACCOs

To date, very little progress has been made on the Royal Commission's recommendation to establish a specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care pathway. Instead, in the absence of a dedicated stream, a de facto policy of mainstreaming Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) into the general Aged Care system has emerged.

This approach directly contradicts the spirit and letter of the Royal Commission's recommendations and places Elders and ACCOs at increased risk of systemic inequity, especially under the incoming Support at Home program, which will require providers to impose co-contributions and may also expose Elders to income-tested fees. This is a clear example of overall systemic racism, is a breach of the Australian Government's commitment to Aboriginal self-determination, and moreover is a breach of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

VACCHO urges the Australian Government to immediately cease the de facto mainstreaming of ACCOs into the mainstream Aged Care system, and to provide immediate exemptions for ACCOs from requirements to charge income tested fees and co-contributions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people and Elders.

Partnership and Shared Decision Making

VACCHO further urges the Australian Government to recognise their obligations to work in partnership and to share decision-making in respect of the Aboriginal-specific elements of the Aged Care reforms.

For example, it is essential that the rollout of a First Nations Aged Care Assessment Workforce equitably meets the needs of our communities across Australia. At present, the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing is progressing this reform through an unacceptably mainstream competitive tendering process. **VACCHO rejects this approach.** The Department needs to work in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector to determine how this workforce will be distributed equitably across Australia, following the precedent set by the rollout of the Elder Care Support Workforce in 2023.

Legislative action to transform Aged Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

In February 2025, the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner handed down the *Transforming Aged Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* report, following several months of community engagement across the country. The report strongly reaffirms the findings of the Royal Commission and underscores the need for urgent, systemic reform. In particular, it highlights:

- The need for a comprehensive and dedicated transformation plan to advance the Royal Commission's blueprint for significant change to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care;
- The need for exceptionalism in reform implementation, recognising that Aboriginal-specific reforms require their own distinct implementation stream — one that must be led by Aboriginal people;
- The requirement that reforms be implemented in accordance with the Priority Reforms in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- The urgent need for the First Nations Aged Care Commissioner to be established as a permanent, independent, statutory office — with a model for the role developed through extensive community input.

VACCHO fully supports all of the recommendations made by the Interim Commissioner and calls on the Australian Government to formally respond to the report, accept all recommendations in full, and bring forward specific legislation to give effect to them. This includes embedding the Commissioner as a permanent statutory function and committing to the development of a specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Aged Care Pathway, led by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in full exercise of our right to self-determination.

There is no further time to delay. The blueprint for reform has been clearly articulated — first by the Royal Commission, and then reaffirmed by the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner. What is needed now is not more consultation, but legislative and structural action that embeds self-determination into the heart of the aged care system.

VACCHO calls on the Australian Government to honour its commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap by resourcing and legislating for Aboriginal-led implementation of aged care reform. This work must be done in genuine partnership with our peak representative bodies at national and jurisdictional levels. It must also be underpinned by long-term investment in the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector to enable culturally safe, trusted, and holistic support for Elders.

Our Elders have waited long enough. They cannot, and should not, be asked to wait another decade.

References

Kelly, A. (2025). *Transforming aged care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care.

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