



Cuts will hurt Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

Cuts announced in the 2014 Federal Budget on 13 May will place even more pressure on some of the most disadvantaged citizens in Australia — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families — and reduce their access to some crucial services.

SNAICC believes the cuts to Indigenous early childhood education and care, health and legal services seriously compromise the Abbott Government's Closing the Gap efforts and will inflict even more stress on our families and communities.

SNAICC is extremely disappointed that the Australian Government will not fund the 38 Aboriginal Child and Family Centres beyond June 2014. The Government's decision to turn its back on these critically important services means their funding and future is now in the hands of state and territory governments — many of whom say they cannot feasibly fund them over the long-term. This is a serious setback for our children, families and communities.

These new centres were created under a COAG national partnership agreement to provide integrated education, family support, child care and health services in 38 disadvantaged localities across the country to children and families in desperate need. See page 5 for more information on the impact of the Government's decision on ACFCs.

The Australian Government has also announced a \$3.7m cut to the Budget Based Funding program, under which the vast majority of Indigenous community-controlled early childhood services are funded. The cuts will affect staff who are working with the most disadvantaged, high-needs children — often in rural or remote areas where finding experienced staff is a constant challenge.

Federal Budget at a glance...

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion announced a \$4.8 billion investment on Indigenous programs, with a focus on school attendance, employment and community safety (see page 4).

The Budget outlines a total of \$549.4m of savings from Indigenous programs.

This includes \$15m from National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and \$534.4m from program consolidation within Prime Minister & Cabinet (PM&C).

It is not clear from the Budget what programs will be cut or consolidated as part of the changes within PM&C.

However, the Government will no longer fund Aboriginal Children and Family Centres (\$78m) and has cut funding for the Budget Based Funding Program (\$3.7m) and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Legal Services (\$15m).

According to NACCHO, Indigenous health programs have been cut by \$80m to \$90m.

Cuts in mainstream education include \$450m from Outside School Hours care, \$500m from Universal Access to Preschool and \$14.7m from Early Learning Projects.

Other cuts announced in education will have a major impact on our children and families and compromise education outcomes under Closing the Gap. These cuts include:

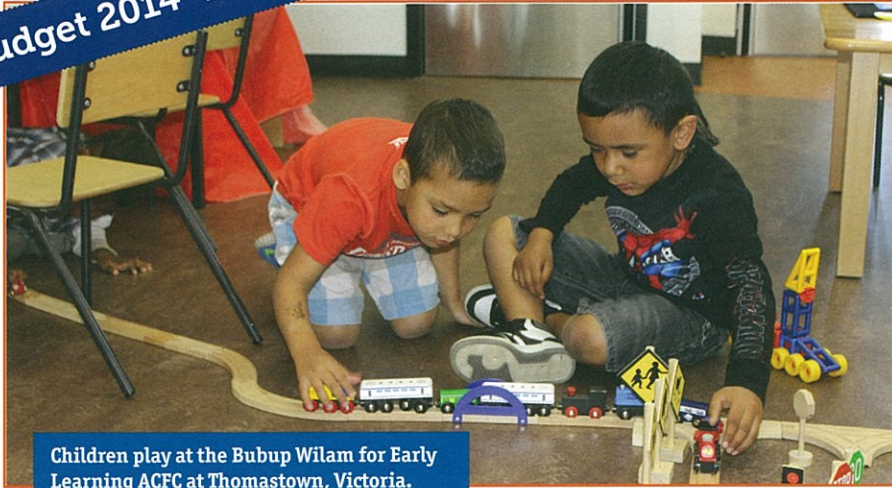
- \$450m from Outside School Hours care, which provide vital services and are often the only programs available for children after school and during holidays
- axing the Universal Access to Preschool (\$500m per annum), which will disadvantage Indigenous children in the critical year before formal schooling starts, and
- \$14.7m from Early Learning Projects — this will mean community-driven programs such as *iti ninti tjuta* in the APY Lands will no longer be funded despite showing positive results.

SNAICC is concerned that the \$549m the Government has identified in savings in Indigenous affairs over the next four years — which it says is the result of

rationalising programs — will also lead to a reduction of programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens.

As Reconciliation Australia has pointed out, Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion has announced a \$4.8 billion investment but provided no detail about where this funding is directed, and very little information about how the radical proposal to replace 150 Indigenous programs with five streamlined programs will be implemented.

SNAICC is disappointed that the Abbott Government has carried through with its plan to no longer fund the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, a democratically-elected body that is in the best position to represent the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and play a pivotal linking role between governments and our communities.



Children play at the Bubup Wilam for Early Learning ACFC at Thomastown, Victoria.

Cuts will hurt our children and families

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We are also concerned that the Budget has cut \$15m from National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS), a decision that will have a major impact on efforts to reduce the dramatically high number of our people in jail.

Budget measures aimed at the wider community, such as changes to family tax benefits, unemployment benefits for young people, the fuel levy and the \$7 co-payment to visit a doctor will also inflict considerable stress on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

For example, the fuel levy will make the cost of fuel and other items, such as food, even more exorbitant in remote communities; while the reduction in unemployment benefits for young people will be severely felt in our communities, where youth unemployment is extremely high.

While the Abbott Government warned that Indigenous Australians would not be quarantined from cuts, SNAICC is alarmed that the measures will inflict a disproportionate amount of stress on already vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

"We are doing what we do with education, but the spin offs in the community are huge."

Nita Roberts, Manager of the Ballina Aboriginal Child and Family Centre on the NSW north coast, said the lack of commitment by both levels of government was "threatening our organisation's obligation to the local Aboriginal community."

"We are now in the process of laying off staff and looking at winding down our childcare centre which has over 79 children attending. This means that children settled in over the past four months will be disadvantaged in their early learning, education, health and wellbeing," Nita said.

"Once again our Aboriginal community is facing broken promises in regards to their children's education, health and wellbeing and assistance to supporting their parents."

Where to now for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child and Family Centres?

The Australian Government's decision not to fund the 38 new Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) beyond June 2014 is devastating news — and seriously undermines the Government's efforts under Closing the Gap, particularly its new target to improve school attendance of Indigenous children.

The ACFCs represent a \$300m investment by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). It's a considerable investment that acknowledges the importance of providing more support in the critical early years of a child's development, as well as an acceptance that mainstream fee-based services are not a viable option for many of our children and families.

Some of the ACFCs began operations two years ago, others have officially opened their doors in the past two months (see pages 8–9 on the official opening of Dala Yooro ACFC at Bairnsdale), having worked from temporary premises. Others are yet to officially open, with one (at Palmerston, NT) still under construction.

But centres are already having an impact, providing quality early childhood education grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and — just as important — integrated related services for families such as maternal health and family support programs.

Despite the Australian Government's decision, SNAICC will continue to campaign for long-term sustainable funding for centres and keep up pressure on Canberra on the issue.

In the short term, SNAICC will continue to assist ACFCs in their dealings with

state and territory governments to secure funding so that they can continue to deliver crucial services to children and families.

In recent developments at the state level:

- The Tasmanian and WA governments have agreed to fund the ACFCs in their respective states until December 2014; and the Queensland Government will fund ACFCs until 30 June 2015.
- New South Wales ACFCs have sent a petition (also signed by SNAICC) to the state Minister for Family and Community Services, Gabrielle Upton, calling for an urgent decision on the issue. There are unconfirmed reports the NSW government will offer a two-year agreement to ACFCs.
- In Victoria, the Thomastown ACFC, SNAICC and Whittlesea Council have written to the Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development, Wendy Lovell, seeking an urgent meeting to discuss the situation, which was held with ministerial staff on 30 May 2014.

CEO of Bubup Wilam for Early Learning Aboriginal Child and Family Centre at Thomastown, Lisa Thorpe, said her centre had had a major impact on children, families and the Aboriginal community in Melbourne's northern suburbs since opening its doors in February 2012.

"Three years ago there was only one (Aboriginal) child in the local primary school next door. Now they have 20. That's us just being here and families are starting to engage with us, feel safe with the education system and start sending their children. The secondary school is starting to grow with the Aboriginal population as well," Lisa told *New Matilda* magazine.