

Third Annual Indigenous Family Violence Prevention Forum  
“Men, Women and Community – Partners”  
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Role and Membership of the NIC and Shared Responsibility Agreements as they relate to family violence prevention

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## Introductory Remarks

Thank you for the invitation to speak today.

As practitioners and policy makers working to prevent Indigenous family violence you will be well aware of the statistics and stories in the lives of real people which highlight the prevalence of family violence within our communities. The Australian Government recognises the damage to people and communities. Through the new arrangements being implemented in Indigenous affairs, the Australian Government has committed to a whole of government approach to tackling family violence in Indigenous communities.

It is acknowledged the best solutions often come from the communities themselves and are implemented at the grassroots level.

Governments and communities together must tackle not only the end results but also the underlying issues concerning family violence in Indigenous communities. It is important to acknowledge that we all have responsibilities in tackling this crisis.

Community leaders, and I do not mean just Indigenous people, but all people that have either a responsibility or the capacity to make a difference, must take responsibility for family violence in their communities.

For the next short while, I would like to give you a bit of background about what is happening in the national arena as well as give you a little more information about the National Indigenous Council. I think the context is important and so I will spend a few minutes on the directions of the Australian Government and a couple of States as well as the Northern Territory.

## Government Cooperation

In June 2004, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the peak inter-governmental forum in Australia agreed to work cooperatively to address family violence under two frameworks.

Firstly, COAG committed Governments to the *National Framework of Principles for Government Service Delivery to Indigenous Australians*<sup>1</sup> which has been given effect through the new administrative arrangements.

Secondly they agreed to a *National Framework for Preventing Child Abuse and Family Violence in Indigenous Communities*<sup>2</sup>.

## Australian Government Initiatives

The Australian Government's response to the issue of family violence within Indigenous communities commenced with the Prime Minister's family violence roundtable in July 2003.<sup>3</sup>

The Australian Government is currently spending about \$76m over the period 2004-2008<sup>4</sup> on major programmes specifically aimed at addressing Indigenous family violence such as the:

- *Family Violence Partnership Programme*<sup>5</sup> which enables the Australian Government to pursue agreements with state/territory governments to fund family violence, sexual assault and child protection initiatives in Indigenous communities.
- *Family Violence Prevention Legal Services*<sup>6</sup> provides legal assistance, court support, counselling and advocacy services for victims or those at immediate risk of family violence and sexual assault. These services provide specialist services, particularly for women and children, responding to local needs, providing culturally appropriate responses to family violence and heightening awareness of family violence issues in communities; and
- *Family Violence Regional Activities*<sup>7</sup> provides funding for local non-legal solutions to family and domestic violence. Examples include night patrols, safe houses and support groups.

In addition, the Australian Government is providing support to Indigenous Australians through broader family violence and family support initiatives, for example through the *Women's Safety Agenda*. The 2005-06 Budget committed \$75.7 million over four years to address domestic violence and sexual assault. The Community Development Grants initiative is part of this agenda and funds various research projects at all levels of the Australian community, to inform policy development on domestic violence and sexual assault.

Family violence in Indigenous communities is also being addressed by the Australian Government through the *Indigenous Women's Development Programme*<sup>8</sup>. It has three broad components; namely,

- Indigenous Women's Leadership, which targets women already making a contribution in their communities and provides leadership training and opportunities to launch them in to leadership positions more widely;
- the Men and Family Relationships component which provides a forum for Indigenous men to discuss issues facing their families and communities, and to develop strategies for reconnecting men with their responsibilities; and

- the Networking Indigenous Women element which promotes a network of mutual support and fosters links among women.

### *Bilateral Agreements*

Jurisdictions are working cooperatively to improve how they engage with each other and with Indigenous communities to prevent family violence and child abuse in Indigenous families and have agreed to formalise their arrangements between the Australian and the State and Territory Governments.

The Australian Government is negotiating bilateral agreements on Indigenous affairs and to date four agreements have been signed with the Northern Territory, Queensland and as recently as 17 April with South Australia and New South Wales. These agreements have agreed priority areas which include promoting safer communities, including tackling family violence. Negotiations in this area are continuing both within the agreements and with the other States and Territories.

### **New Arrangements in Indigenous Affairs**

With regard to the Australian Government's new arrangements for the administration of Indigenous affairs, national Indigenous programmes are now being administered by mainstream agencies or departments, but under a 'whole-of-government' approach. Now, mainstream departments are required to accept responsibility for the Indigenous services as well as the mainstream services they deliver, and they will be held accountable for outcomes.

Indigenous Coordination Centres have been created which operate in 30 locations around Australia. They look after coordination of the Australian Government's Indigenous programmes; they negotiate across agencies and they negotiate SRAs with local Indigenous people and communities. I will go into detail about SRAs a little later.

### *Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs*

The Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs was established as part of the new arrangements, comprising nine Ministers (all but one of whom are in Cabinet). The real significance of this group is the recognition that responsibility for Indigenous issues no longer belongs solely to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs.

It seems the key question facing the Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs is, where do Indigenous people want to be in 20-30 years time? The thinking is evident in the Ministerial Taskforce's charter which outlines the Australian Government's 20-30 year vision for Indigenous Australians:

That 'Indigenous Australians, wherever they live, have the same opportunities as other Australians to make informed choices about

their lives, to realise their full potential in whatever they choose to do and to take responsibility for managing their own affairs’.

There is nothing wrong with a long-term vision. However, the minister now responsible for Indigenous Affairs, the Honourable Mal Brough<sup>9</sup> has appeared in the media recently where he spoke on *Meet the Press*<sup>10</sup> advising that he was looking at having concrete improvements in the lives of many Indigenous Australians within 12 months.

In 2005 the taskforce’s charter identified three urgent priorities for immediate attention which continue today; namely:

- early childhood intervention;
- safer communities (which includes issues of authority, law and order, but necessarily also focuses on dealing with issues of governance to ensure that communities are functional and effective); and
- building Indigenous wealth, employment and entrepreneurial culture.

The focus on children and safer communities, and the recognition of the need for a future vision is an important step in addressing the problem head on.

### *Secretaries Group*

At the next level down there is the Secretaries Group. This comprises the same portfolios and is chaired by Dr Peter Shergold, Secretary for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

### *National Indigenous Council (NIC)*

The National Indigenous Council (NIC), of which I am a member, is an advisory body to Government, appointed on the basis of merit, experience and expertise in particular areas.

Members do not represent a particular region, community or organisation, and the NIC is not intended to be a representative body.

The NIC’s Terms of Reference require it to:

- provide expert advice to Government on how to improve outcomes for Indigenous people;
- advise on the appropriateness and effectiveness within the Indigenous community of programmes across government;
- promote constructive dialogue and engagement between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations;
- advise on national priorities and alert government to current and emerging policy, programme and service delivery issues.

The NIC will not be involved in specific funding proposals or specific planning or programme matters related to individual communities or regions.<sup>11</sup>

The NIC's first Annual Report which includes details of our work in the first year as well as details of membership and our key interest areas are available on the OIPC website<sup>12</sup>.

Given the NIC's strong interest in family violence and child abuse, I would be keen to receive practical feedback on interventions which in your experience would assist the Government to improve the safety of Indigenous Australians.

## Shared Responsibility Agreements

Shared responsibility is a fundamental element to the Government's new arrangements for Indigenous affairs and SRAs are a means for government to engage with communities.

The emphasis on shared responsibility recognises that:

- Governments alone cannot bring about all the changes necessary to overcome Indigenous disadvantage; and
- Indigenous people and communities must be involved in planning and building their future.

Shared Responsibility Agreements are agreements with a community development focus that spell out what all partners – communities, governments and others – will contribute to bring about long term changes which will achieve better outcomes for Indigenous communities.

SRAs can be developed in remote communities, regional areas or discrete parts of urban areas if Indigenous people locally decide they want to make changes in this way. At present, 155 SRAs have been signed in communities around Australia as well as one Regional Partnership Agreement<sup>13</sup>.

Early SRAs have been mainly single issue focussed with very modest mutual obligations, however, as Government and communities continue to work together and gain trust, they should evolve into more comprehensive arrangements which focus on sustainability and ongoing community benefit.

### *SRA's Addressing Family Violence*

To address family violence, action needs to be based on local community priorities, which (in some cases) are being expressed through SRAs.

Some SRAs respond directly to the issue of family violence. Other more general SRAs implement strategies that will help families to prosper. These SRAs demonstrate the ways communities can work together and in partnership with governments to get the support they need to respond to and prevent family violence.

I will give you a few examples of what agreements have been made so far; in all there are about 20 family violence type SRAs<sup>14</sup>.

## Cape Barren Island

Two SRAs have been agreed with the community of Cape Barren Island, in Bass Strait, north eastern Tasmania with a population of 70. That community has engaged with the Australian and Tasmanian Governments to enhance community cohesion and wellbeing. Two closely related projects are now part of SRAs.

The Australian Government will provide funds for a Community Wellbeing Centre and provide training.

The Australian and Tasmanian Governments will work together with the community to provide a range of regular, community determined activities to promote good family relationships and community harmony.

The community will contribute to the cost, amenities and building of the centre, and will develop, deliver, participate in and support the programmes including a meals programme, a children's programme and men's and women's groups.

The Tasmanian Government will also work with people on the island to establish guidelines around community safety.

## Derby

Derby is a regional town in the West Kimberley of WA with a population of approximately 5000, half of whom are Indigenous. The Aboriginal community of Derby has entered into two SRAs.

In the first SRA the Australian Government will provide money for a coordinator to work in the community men's centre to work with local men, helping them to rebuild a sense of identity and responsibility and to regain respect in their community. The coordinator will also work to improve relations between local men and government service providers, police and courts.

The men in the community in turn have committed to use the services provided at the centre, observe the centre's code of behaviour, respect property and take part in counselling sessions.

The second SRA focuses on family and community safety and provides for awareness sessions on violence, practical workshops through TAFE, and a campaign on local Indigenous radio. These are designed to encourage people to speak out about child abuse and family violence in their homes and community. The teaching curriculum 'Talk Up For You' will be re-launched, and a coordinator employed to bring these activities together.

The community has agreed to work with the men's, women's and youth centres to come up with new ideas for building family and community safety in a culturally appropriate way. Families and individuals in the community have agreed to participate in activities to raise understanding of these issues and attend counselling services where appropriate.

## Tennant Creek

Tennant Creek is a regional town in the Northern Territory with a population of approximately 3,500, half of whom are Indigenous.

The focus of the Tennant Creek SRA is governance and community safety, with Elders keen to restore respect for their people and country. For the first time they will work with non-Indigenous people to improve safety and justice in the town.

Through the SRA the Australian and NT Governments will jointly fund the establishment of an Elders Council and associated activities such as planning, community consultation and media promotion.

Council members will work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members and help with policing, the justice system, education and other activities that will contribute to community harmony and safety.

## Coffs Harbour

In the Coffs Harbour SRA, the community priority was to prevent Indigenous people of the North Coast of NSW from becoming involved in the Family Court, and for those that do, providing a culturally sensitive service pathway.

There are ten Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) positions being used to establish ten Indigenous Community Contact Officers (ICCOs) to be located in key communities to provide information on the services available from the Family Court to Indigenous families in the region. They will also support families and help refer them to other agencies that can provide assistance.

The Australian Government is funding the positions and the family court will provide skills training, coordination and support to the ICCO's and develop culturally appropriate material for Indigenous people.

## Coonabarabran

In Coonabarabran, NSW an SRA has recently been signed with the aim of creating a safer family and community environment by building the capacity of the community. The Australian Government will assist the community to develop a Community and Family Violence Plan. The community will identify men to participate in the 'Black on Track' programme. Community volunteers will also organise youth activities. The Coonabarabran Domestic Violence Committee will provide ongoing support for men who complete the 'Black on Track' Programme.

## Hope Vale

There is no SRA directly related to family violence in Queensland, however, the community of Hope Vale in the Cape, with a population of 750 wanted to support their young people and encourage them to go to school, as well as stop anti-social behaviour so they signed an SRA in October 2005 supporting that aim.

The SRAs mentioned above are demonstrations of the ways communities can work together with Governments to get the support they need to address the concerns in their community.

To negotiate an SRA in a particular region, communities need to talk directly with Government through the Indigenous Coordination Centres.<sup>15</sup>

### *State and Territory Initiatives*<sup>16</sup>

As well as involvement in the bilateral negotiations a number of states and territories have in recent years raised public awareness of family violence and have conducted inquiries which have led to new or enhanced programmes in response to child abuse and the broader framework of family violence for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

I will mention only a few.

#### *Western Australia*

The Chair of the NIC, Sue Gordon has seen the devastating effects of child abuse and family violence, both in her role as a Magistrate in the Perth Children's Court and as Chairperson of the Western Australian Government's *Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities*, often referred to as the 'Gordon Inquiry'.

The Gordon Inquiry looked at the causes, prevalence and effects of violence and examined how each government department responded to family violence and child abuse in Indigenous communities.

The Inquiry reported on 31 July 2002, making 197 recommendations and providing best practice models and a community-focused systematic response.

In December 2002, the Western Australian government tabled in Parliament - *Putting People First* - the Government's implementation plan in response to the findings of the Gordon Inquiry.

In June 2003, the WA government released its first progress report on the implementation of *Putting People First*. The report identified a range of specific priority initiatives designed to strengthen responses to child abuse and family violence; responses to vulnerable children and adults at risk; the safety of communities; and the governance, confidence, economic capacity and sustainability of communities.

The Western Australian government has committed \$75 million to implementing initiatives to address family violence.

#### *Northern Territory*

The Northern Territory Government implemented an Aboriginal Family Violence Strategy in early 2003, following extensive consultations with Aboriginal Territorians which establishes a coordinated, comprehensive and

collaborative framework to prevent family violence, improve community safety, protect victims and develop capacity and encourage local solutions.

The *Strong Family, Strong Community, Strong Future* Project is the major project under the Aboriginal Family Violence Strategy which has been developed after more than 18 months of talking with Aboriginal people in communities.

The project is based upon case (family) and place (location of the community) management principles. Initially each family decides on problems that are to be addressed by that family and the order in which the family will tackle the problems. Families then agree on an action plan to deal with each of these issues.

As mentioned previously, the Northern Territory and the Australian Government have signed a bilateral agreement and are negotiating a schedule that sets out how both governments can work to build safer communities.

### *Queensland*

In April 2002, the Queensland Government introduced a new whole-of-government policy called *Meeting Challenges, Making Choices* which is designed to address the alcohol and violence issues in Indigenous communities.

*Meeting Challenges, Making Choices* focuses on the key areas of alcohol intervention, economic development, healthier people, education and training and land and sustainable natural resource management.

The issue of family violence has also been flagged in the “overarching” bilateral agreement between the Australian and Queensland governments.

## Concluding Remarks

There has been a fair bit of press around lately about the issue of family violence and child abuse in Indigenous communities. Recently, Sue Gordon made a radical statement about violence in Indigenous communities, particularly in the Alice Springs town camps<sup>17</sup>. Mrs Gordon acknowledges that Governments can only act if they know they have the support of the Aboriginal community and that we are all responsible for our actions. She goes on to say:

The time has come for Aboriginal people and their leaders to stand up and say “No more child abuse, no more violence, no more rape of our children, men and women, and no more tolerating these toxic environments.

Mrs Gordon advocates that ‘at risk’ children need to be removed from those dangerous environments and has full backing for this from the new Minister responsible for Indigenous Affairs nationally.<sup>18</sup> I think it is fine to have a robust debate on the topic. But lets not make the same past mistake of ignoring it or just passing the buck.

My view is that family violence is not part of our culture and it is not acceptable in any form. Where ever possible we should continually challenge people to think about this, as changing this misconception is vital to our future and the future of our communities.

Governments at both State and Commonwealth levels, as well as Indigenous people themselves, have recognised the importance of protecting children and providing for them a safe and healthy environment.

We need to encourage community level initiatives that focus on giving our children and grand children a good start in life. We should develop initiatives that strengthen our families and communities and create better ways of working with each other.

Our children are the future of our communities. We owe it to them to protect their futures. To do this we need to drive policy and programmes to achieve real results in communities to improve the lives for the current and future generations.

Ends

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<sup>1</sup> This framework is at Attachment A

<sup>2</sup> This framework is at Attachment B

<sup>3</sup> In July 2003, the Prime Minister held a national roundtable on Indigenous family violence. Following the roundtable, a working group was established to advise the Prime Minister on ways of advancing strategies to address family violence in Indigenous communities. Former ATSIC Commissioner Alison Anderson, Lowitjia O'Donoghue, Jackie Huggins and Ian Anderson were selected from the national roundtable to form this working group to draft a family violence strategy with the aid of government representatives. At the time of forming the working group it was envisioned that the draft family violence strategy would inform the public about the violence crisis as well as be discussed and supported by COAG. Subsequent to the forum the Prime Minister made a commitment of \$20 million as a 'down payment' to address family violence issues.

<sup>4</sup> Family Violence Partnerships Programme, Family Violence Regional Activities Programme, Women's Safety Agenda all on [www.facsia.gov.au](http://www.facsia.gov.au) website. Family Violence Legal Services on [www.ag.gov.au](http://www.ag.gov.au)

<sup>5</sup> *Family Violence Partnership Programme* \$37.3m over four years.

<sup>6</sup> *Family Violence Prevention Legal Services* expanded by \$22.7m over four years

<sup>7</sup> *Family Violence Regional Activities* \$15.2m over four years

<sup>8</sup> OIPC Website: note that the following are being held: Men's Workshop in Canberra 7-10 May, graduation of this year's Women's Leadership Group in Caloundra 16-17 May and Youth Forum 7-9 June in Kurrajong, NSW.

<sup>9</sup> Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Canberra Times, Monday 24 April 2006, Page: 6

<sup>11</sup> NIC Terms of Reference at Attachment C.

<sup>12</sup> Address of page is <http://www.atsia.gov.au/NIC/communique/PDFs/ReportCard2005.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Regional Partnership Agreement provide a coherent government intervention strategy across a region. RPAs are a means of eliminating overlaps or gaps, and promoting coordination to meet identified priorities for the region.

<sup>14</sup> Information on all SRAs launched to December 2005 on OIPC web-site – rest obtained from OIPC SRA area

<sup>15</sup> A copy of contact details for Queensland ICCs is at attachment D.

<sup>16</sup> All State material extracted from Sue Gordon's speech to the Tenth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, Wellington New Zealand 14-16 February 2006

<sup>17</sup> Australian Newspaper 24 April 2006 page 8

<sup>18</sup> *Canberra Times* 27 April 2006, p 8 "Indigenous Minister supports plan to remove "at risk" kids and in *The Age* 27 April 2006, p 10 "Plan for Indigenous Children"