



AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Acknowledgement Statement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

The AASW Reconciliation and Indigenous Issues Working Party have developed the following acknowledgement statement in consultation with the National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Work Association. The working party is also drafting a position paper that will reflect the AASW's commitment to Reconciliation and Indigenous Issues for the future. These are intended to be living documents that will be revisited to ensure that they reflect the position of the AASW.

Introduction

This acknowledgement statement represents the AASW's commitment to facilitating the healing of the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the social work profession. This commitment includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers, fellow AASW members, who were themselves subjected to harmful policies and practices or the legacy thereof. It also focuses on the building of a new process of reconciliation that acknowledges the struggle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for social justice, economic independence and cultural security.

The statement includes historical factors that the AASW understands have led to current social, economic and cultural disadvantage and acknowledges the role of non-Indigenous social workers in the implementation of these factors.

Acknowledgement of dispossession and disadvantage

The AASW acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' relationships with the land and sea were an intrinsic part of their lives, providing a healthy and environmentally sustainable lifestyle, which was central to their social, cultural and spiritual beliefs. Subsequent dispossession and removal from their lands has threatened the survival of this lifestyle and belief system and resulted in high unemployment, poverty and the permeation of welfare dependence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This has left them disempowered and disenfranchised. The AASW recognises that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have suffered many injustices in the process of colonisation and in subsequent government policies that have led to dispossession and disadvantage. This disadvantage is manifested today in decreased access to services and resources, lack of culturally appropriate services and over representation in the welfare and criminal justice systems.

The AASW is committed to addressing disadvantage in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and advocates for the acknowledgement of their entitlements to land and sea and their social, economic and cultural rights.

The AASW acknowledges that the historical actions of non-

Indigenous social workers as government agents and instruments of government policy, regarding justice, welfare and health, have contributed to the destabilisation and disempowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. The social work profession responded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in accordance with the prevailing values, norms and policies of that time, which resulted in the displacement, isolation and continuing attempts at assimilation of their people. The implementation of assimilation policies by the social work profession, contravened core values of social work such as human dignity and worth, social justice and self-determination. Assimilation as it was practised meant the denial of self, destruction of community and cultural systems, and the imposition of non-indigenous parenting values and methods that presented difficulties for Indigenous parents. This ultimately led to the removal of children from their families.

The AASW acknowledges the role that non-indigenous social workers had in the creation of the stolen generation. The systematic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families resulted in the fragmentation of families and communities, the loss of cultural knowledge and the erosion of a cultural identity. As a consequence, generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have been reared without culturally appropriate parental role modes.

The social work profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – the future

Contemporary Social work is committed to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, helping them to achieve self-determination and to having their social, economic, and cultural rights acknowledged and validated. It is the moral and ethical obligation of our profession to work to address these issues. It is within this spirit that the AASW acknowledges the profession's previously inadequate response to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We now commit ourselves to working with communities to heal the past, grieve the losses and rebuild family and community structures, to achieve better social, cultural and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.