

Statement of Apology and Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and our undersigned members deeply regret the damage caused by the forcible separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

We acknowledge that the removal of children devastated individuals, families and entire communities. We acknowledge the finding of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission that a major intention of this official policy was to assimilate the children so that Aborigines as a distinct group would disappear. Hence, as the Commission found, it was a genocidal policy. We further acknowledge that the resulting loss of land, language and identity is a key cause of the intolerable levels of disadvantage currently faced by indigenous Australians.

Collectively, we feel a particular sense of responsibility for the consequences of these racist policies because their implementation required the active involvement of community welfare organisations. We unreservedly and wholeheartedly apologise to the individuals, families and communities who have suffered such pain and grief from these terrible acts of injustice.

We know that the impact of the past continues to resound today. Aboriginal children continue to be removed from their families for 'child welfare' reasons at a rate six times greater than the general population, and placed in juvenile detention centres at a rate twenty-one times higher. These disturbing facts show that the past lives on in the present, and will continue into the future unless we unite in a sincere effort to make amends.

We therefore commit ourselves to the reconciliation process and to promoting the rights and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Each in our own way will strive to match our words of apology with actions aimed at moving forward together to share responsibility for the future and establish a sound foundation for reconciliation.

In deciding how best to make our individual contributions, we will be guided by the recommendations made by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in its report, *Bringing them home*. We pay tribute to all who told their painful stories and to the Commissioners. Their thorough and moving exposure of the facts will be of lasting benefit to all Australian children and their families, and strengthens our resolve to ensure that such a terrible infringement of human rights never occurs again in our country.

We collectively call on the federal government, as the embodiment of the will of the people, to make an unqualified apology on behalf of all Australians for the damage caused by the removal of indigenous children. This step is a fundamental building block in the process of healing the nation and would significantly assist all of us, both indigenous and non-indigenous, who are presently engaged in coming to terms with the past and creating a better future.

We further call on the federal government to accept and implement the recommendations of the Commission, including the establishment of a National Compensation Fund and the provision of programs designed to assist the affected people and communities to maintain their languages, cultures and histories. We are particularly mindful of the important role played by the primarily ATSIC-funded Link Up and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child care services and the need for such services to be expanded.

It is only through the commitment of all governments and non-government organisations to make reparation and the support of the wider community that non-indigenous and indigenous Australians can heal the wounds of the past and create a solid foundation for a shared future. Without such a commitment, the reconciliation process, embarked upon with such hope, will be rendered meaningless.

ACT Council of Social Service
New South Wales Council of Social Service
Northern Territory Council of Social Service
Queensland Council of Social Service
South Australian Council of Social Service
Victorian Council of Social Service
Western Australian Council of Social Service
Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia

Alzheimers Association of Australia
Anglicare Australia
Association of Civilian Widows of Australia
Association of Non-English Speaking Background Women of Australia
Association of Services Supporting Australia's Families
Australian Association of Social Workers
Australian Community Health Association
Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes
Australian Council for Volunteering
Australian Federation of Deaf Societies
Australian Financial Counselling and Credit Reform Association
Australian National Association for Mental Health
Australian Pensioners' and Superannuants' Federation
Australian Psychiatric Disability Coalition
Australian Psychological Society
Australian Youth Policy Action Coalition
Centacare
Community Services Australia
Consumers Health Forum
Council on the Ageing
Family Planning Australia
Family Services Australia
International Social Service
Maternity Alliance
Mercy Foundation
National Association of Community Legal Centres
National Council for the Single Mother and her Child
National Ethnic Disability Alliance
National Federation of Blind Citizens of Australia
National Institute of Industrial and Economic Research
National Union of Students
National Skillshare Association
Relationships Australia
The Abbeyfield Society of Australia
UNIYA
WESNET
Welfare Rights Centre
YWCA of Australia
Australian Consumers Association

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