



NACCHO

National Aboriginal Community
Controlled Health Organisation
Aboriginal health in Aboriginal hands

www.naccho.org.au

Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan – Discussion Paper

Submission to the National
Indigenous Australians Agency

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About NACCHO

NACCHO is the national peak body representing 143 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) Australia wide on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing issues. NACCHO's work is focussed on liaising with governments, its membership, and other organisations on health and wellbeing policy and planning issues and advocacy relating to health service delivery, health information, research, public health, health financing and health programs.

Our Members provide about 3.1 million episodes of care per year for about 410,000 people across Australia, which includes about 800,000 episodes of care in very remote and outer regional areas.

Sector Support Organisations, also known as Affiliates, are State based and also represent ACCHOs offering a wide range of support services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs to their Members including advocacy, governance, training and advocacy on State and Territory Government health care policies and programs.

Affiliates also support ACCHOs to deliver accessible, responsive and culturally safe services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The leadership and support provided by Affiliates strengthens governance and financial expertise in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health sector. Affiliates provide a strong interface for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health sector with the national reform agenda occurring in the health system. Together NACCHO and Affiliates harness better coordinated, more cohesive and cost-effective mechanisms for stakeholder and community engagement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health issues, and providing advice to State, Federal and Territory Governments.

ACCHOs range from large multi-functional services employing several medical practitioners and providing a wide range of services, to small services which rely on Aboriginal Health Workers/Practitioners and/or nurses to provide the bulk of primary care services, often with a preventive, health education focus. Our 143 ACCHOs operate approximately 700 facilities, including about 550 clinics. ACCHOs and their facilities and clinics contribute to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through the provision of comprehensive holistic primary health care, and by integrating and coordinating care and services. Many provide home and site visits; provision of medical, public health and health promotion services; allied health; nursing services; assistance with making appointments and transport; help accessing childcare or dealing with the justice system; drug and alcohol services; and providing help with income support.

Collectively, we employ about 6,000 staff, 56 per cent of whom are Indigenous, which makes us the single largest employer of Indigenous people in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how effective the structure and combination of NACCHO, State and Territory Affiliates and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services is in responding to COVID-19.

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Introduction

NACCHO welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) on the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan – Discussion paper (Plan).

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement), agreed to by all Australian Governments, represents a new approach where policy making that impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people occurs in full and genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people¹. In seeking to improve digital inclusion outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is essential that all reforms align with the National Agreement.

The *2018 Regional Telecommunications Review – Getting it right out there* recommended that there be a targeted Indigenous Digital Inclusion Program, with a focus on access, affordability and digital ability, to be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. After three years, NACCHO is disappointed to see that instead of implementation activities and range of programs funded to address this digital inclusion gap, we are instead seeing another plan developed that highlights what we already know.

Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have been required to respond to the pandemic often without adequate communications. To close the digital inclusion gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians a substantial policy and program reform is required to support the development of effective local strategies, combined with the necessary data collection to track outcomes at a national level².

Programs are required to improve access to reliable and affordable telecommunications and digital services and to improve the digital ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is critical that ACCHOs have access to adequate infrastructure support and appropriate connectivity to be able to provide the growing range of health and related services. There are limits to the extent that ACCHOs can continue to deliver quality, safe comprehensive primary health care to a fast-growing population when faced with pressing capital works and infrastructure needs.

NACCHO has highlighted below some of the key considerations that must be considered as part of the Digital Inclusion Plan to enable improved access and affordability, and digital ability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the ACCHOs that provide their essential healthcare.

Access

Digital literacy and access to affordable and reliable internet and information communications and technologies is critical to ensuring access to education, employment, government services and healthcare in the 21st century. For our people, this access is limited.

Additionally, ACCHOs are critical in delivering primary health care services, allied health, and social support programs, including alcohol and other drug services, social and emotional wellbeing projects, family support and youth engagement and diversion programs. Unless access to adequate digital and telecommunications services are improved, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will continue to experience a gap in access to necessary health and social services.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have equal levels of digital inclusion it is going to take dedicated effort. We must see dedicated funding for targeted infrastructure to increase access for regional and remote communities to enable broadcast and telecommunication services.

¹ Coalition of Peaks (2020). National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

² Australian Digital Inclusion Index, <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/>

It is time to address the structural and skills issues that are holding back many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities from accessing the economic and social benefits of digital technologies and services. Better access to phone and internet services would mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities could continue to learn, work, and engage with essential government services while living in their cultural homelands³.

It is important that there is local ownership in all aspects of the Plan, and that it builds upon the capacity of existing organisations, infrastructure and programs to avoid duplication. It is crucial that a digital literacy *program* is included as part of any such strategy, and is developed to be culturally and linguistically appropriate for the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities⁴. All programs developed under this Plan must be designed in alignment with the National Agreement from inception through to delivery. Local solutions are required to improve access in a way that is relevant for and supported by the local community.

Affordability

There is significant overlap between access and affordability. It is important that the Plan takes a broad view of affordability and understands the considerable financial barriers to accessing digital technology, access to service connections, data allowances, devices, and staff with appropriate skill levels.

While it is important to address the individual affordability of access digital services, there needs to be action taken to address structural barriers. NACCHO would like to see additional infrastructure support provided to ACCHOs which may not have appropriate connectivity, or the technical equipment needed to facilitate telehealth. The Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (ACHWA) have previously reported to NACCHO that while the Australian Government announced upgrades and funding to NBN to assist GPs with telehealth delivery, ACCHOs throughout Western Australia had to increase data plans to accommodate satellite requirements and mobile plans needed to be upgraded to compensate for the poor quality and unreliable internet issues the ACCHOs in WA experience.

The statistics around use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Telehealth MBS items highlights these issues with use of video consults at extremely low levels, while use of telephone options is higher, likely due to increased accessibility of this option since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is likely the result of barriers arising from the lack of internet connectivity, or the prohibitive cost of connectivity in many areas. NACCHO note that recent changes to MBS billing to incentivise video telehealth consultations have also reduced equitable access to telehealth for some people. Particularly in remote areas where access to reliable internet is problematic, and for patients who do not have reliable internet access or access to data for reasons of affordability.

An additional issue is the MBS requirement that an ACCHO can only submit a MBS claim for a telehealth consultation provided by a specialist if that specialist also submits a claim. This is problematic when the specialist is based at a hospital (most of the specialists who work with ACCHOs are) as the ACCHO cannot submit a MBS claim because the hospital-based specialist will not submit a claim.

³ 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review, <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-regional-telecommunications-review-getting-it-right-out-there.pdf>

⁴ 2018 Regional Telecommunications Review, <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-regional-telecommunications-review-getting-it-right-out-there.pdf>

The connectivity problems ACCHOs have experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic further limits their capacity to improve and expand on telehealth provision of care and must be resolved to facilitate equitable access to telehealth Australia-wide.

The Plan must also address affordability barriers ACCHOs and other organisations have in accessing IT support and adequately skilled staff. These organisations should receive funding to appropriately install IT equipment and train staff to use this correctly. While organisations may, in theory, have access to appropriate digital services, without adequately skilled staff these services cannot be utilised.

NACCHO notes the issues outlined in the discussion paper around consumer protections for people with limited financial and consumer literacy. While the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman may provide fair and independent dispute resolution, it evidently does not cater well for the particular needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers, either through its communications or provision of service. NACCHO supports the strengthening of consumer protection assistance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers in consultation with our people.

Digital Ability

As important as literacy and numeracy, digital literacy is essential to employability in today's workplaces, as well as to ensure people are able to effectively navigate online system and services. Improved digital literacy also supports access to online training delivery as the need to travel off Country for education and training is often a prohibitive barrier to access. While supportive of online training, NACCHO notes that mixed model delivery and practice based assessment remain critical to successful completion rates.

Establishing an accurate indication of the level of literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is difficult without reliable or consistent data sources. One of the primary data sources for Australian adult literacy, the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey, specifically excludes people living in very remote areas and discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and does not differentiate data by Aboriginality⁵.

However, emerging evidence suggests that levels of literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults is low. Research from the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) estimates that between 40 and 65 per cent of Aboriginal adults are functionally illiterate in English⁶. Improving general English literacy is an effective way to improve health literacy and outcomes, and foster health development in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities⁷.

Programs are required to improve digital ability and literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These programs must be developed and implemented in line with the National Agreement. These programs need to be relevant for the communities in which they are delivered.

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, PIAAC, <https://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/programme-international-assessment-adult-competencies-australia-methodology/2011-2012>

⁶ <https://www.lflf.org.au/>

⁷ Boughton, The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, Volume 38, Issue 1, January 2009, pp. 103–109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1375/S1326011100000648>

Conclusion

Digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is an issue requiring resolute and immediate substantive policy action and program funding, beyond a mere plan. The continuing failure to address the root causes of digital exclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly those in rural and remote regions, perpetuates cycles of entrenched disadvantage. This Plan must result in decisive action to ensure our communities have access to the same digital health, education and employment opportunities as other Australians, in alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.