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VACCHO Proposal

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Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Families and Children Wellbeing

Presented to	<p>The Hon. Lizzie Blandthorn, MLC, Minister for Child Protection and Family Services</p> <p>The Hon. Ingrid Stitt, MLC, Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-prep</p> <p>The Hon. Mary-Anne Thomas, MLA, Minister for Health</p> <p>Ms Brigid Monagle, Acting Secretary, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing</p> <p>Mr Euan Wallace, Secretary, Department of Health</p> <p>cc: Ms. Raylene Harradine, Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Self Determination and Outcomes, DFFH; Ms Nicole McCartney, Chief Aboriginal Health Advisor, DH</p>
VACCHO contact	<p>Ms. Jill Gallagher AO, CEO</p> <p>[REDACTED]</p>
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High level summary	<p>This proposal is to establish a Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Families and Children Wellbeing, with a primary focus on universal and preventive supports for Aboriginal families.</p> <p>It will provide a voice for Aboriginal families and offer robust, evidence-based, and cost-effective solutions to respond to Closing the Gap domains, including addressing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care.</p>

Executive Summary

The annual growth rate of Victorian Aboriginal children entering the statutory system is 15 percent per annum¹. If this rate continues, the number of Aboriginal children in out of home care could double from 2,450 in 2019-20 to 4926 in 2024-25². This is despite repeated commitments to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out of home care.

This situation is a direct consequence of past governments' policies and the ongoing impacts of colonisation, which have created significant and ongoing disadvantage for many Aboriginal families.

Evidence and best practice—from across Australia and internationally—show the importance of family wellbeing in predicting positive life outcomes and that access and participation in primary/universal services significantly de-escalates risk and reduces the need for further interventions.

There are many positive reforms happening through *Wungurwil Gapgaduiri* for greater self-determination in child welfare and there are recent investments in Aboriginal family preservation and reunification. However, there is significant under-investment in the provision of universal and primary services to support the known need of Aboriginal families.

VACCHO's proposal for the establishment of a Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Families and Children Wellbeing offers a different and complementary approach to the current child and family system. Through its primary focus on Aboriginal family wellbeing it will:

- Represent the voices of Aboriginal families
- Make recommendations for service improvements and system reforms to prioritise Aboriginal families
- Build a robust evidence base and case for investment in Aboriginal family wellbeing services.

Investment in a Centre of Families and Children Wellbeing, its activities, and recommendations for system and service reform will provide strategies to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care in addition to achieving positive outcomes for Victorian Aboriginal children and families across all Closing the Gap domains.

Promoting and embedding an Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing approach—which is recognised to “exemplify a comprehensive, person-centered, trauma-informed model”³ within Victoria's child and family services system—has the potential to not only benefit Aboriginal families, but all Victorian families.

¹ SVA Consulting 2020, Keeping families together through COVID-19: the strengthened case for early intervention in Victoria's child protection and out-of-home care system, p. 6 footnote 3.

² Based on a 15 percent growth rate estimated in 2020: 2019/20 data indicated there was 2450 Aboriginal children in care- which extends to 2817.5 in 20/21; 3240.12 in 21/22 3726 in 22/23; 4284.9 in 22/23 and 4926 in 24/25.

³ Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, 2019, Final Report p. 478

The current crisis in the Victorian child and family system

In 2019-2020, 26.9 percent of children in out of home care were Aboriginal⁴, and 11 percent⁵ (more than 1 in 10 Aboriginal children) had been removed from their primary caregivers. This is one of the highest removal rates in Australia and the world⁶. A 2020 report estimates that by 2026 Victoria will have the highest rate of children in out of home care in the country⁷.

To respond to the growing numbers of children in contact with the child protection system, the Victorian government's child and family services budget has ballooned from annual expenditure of \$1 billion in 2015-16 to \$1.88 billion in 2021-22: an 88.4 percent increase⁸.

Most of the expenditure maintains the status quo, with \$888.4 million going directly towards the employment of child protection workers and to meet the costs of out of home care⁹. Economic analysis suggests that the cost of child protection workers and care services alone could rise to \$2 billion per annum by 2026¹⁰.

There are notable exceptions within the state's budget and policy commitments to earlier intervention and reforms to embedded self-determination in child welfare through the implementation of *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*, but the fact remains: thousands of Aboriginal families are falling through the gaps within the state's child and family services. Under the system's current design and limitations most Aboriginal families only receive support only after concern has been raised about a child's welfare through a report to child protection or Orange Door¹¹.

According to the latest available data, Victorian Aboriginal families made up only 10 percent of Victorian families receiving intensive family support, and less than 5 percent of Victorian families receiving non-intensive family supports¹². This not in line with the rights or best interests of Aboriginal children, families or communities. It is also hugely costly for the state. Price/cost indexing for the delivery of child and family services interventions at this stage indicates it costs the government at least 20 times more than the provision of early help and preventative services¹³.

⁴ SNAICC, Family Matters Report p.91

⁵ SVA, 2020, *Keeping families together through COVID-19: the strengthened case for early intervention in Victoria's child protection and out-of-home care system*, p.2

⁶ The Commission for Children and Young People's 2016 inquiry, *In the Child's Best Interests*, found that in 2016 the Victorian rate of Aboriginal children represented in OOHC is more than double the rate of Indigenous children in Canada and more than 10 times the rate of Māori

⁷ SVA, 2020, *Keeping families together through COVID-19: the strengthened case for early intervention in Victoria's child protection and out-of-home care system*, p.5

⁸ Parliament of Victoria, The Hon Luke Donnellan MP Minister for Child Protection, 2021-22 Victorian State Budget Child Protection portfolio presentation accessed on 28 October https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/paec/2021-22_Budget_Estimates/Presentations/18_June/Donnellan/PAEC_CP_presentation-_FINAL.pdf

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Based on Productivity Commission, 2019, 2017-18 costs and assuming 1.9% indexation per year from FY17/18 dollars reported in SVA Consulting, 2019, *The economic case for early intervention in the child protection and out-of-home care system in Victoria*, p.7 The author cited this guide but cannot locate it publicly. Requests for brokerage/pricing/cost indexes for the provision of child and family services should be requested from DFFH.

¹¹ Family Matters, 2020 Community response to how Victoria is fairing accessed 13 November 2022 via <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Community-Voices-Victoria.pdf>

¹² Family Matters, 2020 Victorian Government's [data and written response](#) to Family Matters accessed 13 November <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/FM2020-Victoria-Response-Data.pdf>

¹³ The author cited this guide but cannot locate it publicly. Requests for brokerage/pricing/cost indexes for the provision of child and family services should be requested from DFFH.

A different approach: Aboriginal Family Wellbeing

An Aboriginal family wellbeing approach¹⁴ aims to restore the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal families and empowers them to raise their children drawing from the strength of their culture. It draws on evidence that family functioning is the biggest predictor of late life outcomes. It recognises that poorer life outcomes and overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in tertiary systems (justice, child protection, housing and homelessness, family violence, and AoD) are a direct result of the impacts of colonisation.

Queensland has adopted this approach to Aboriginal families and children both in **system reforms** and **service delivery** and have heavily invested in ACCOs to provide universal/preventive services¹⁵. This has achieved promising results, including the stagnation of rates of Aboriginal children entering the state's tertiary systems.

Their 20-year strategy *Our Way: A generational strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Children and Families (2017-2037)* is a whole of government response to strengthen Aboriginal families and is governed by a First Nations Children Board to oversee progress, set action plans, and report on a bi-annual basis to Parliament.

Some notable aspects of the strategy include:

- A strengths-based and holistic approach to Aboriginal Families
- Accompanying Wellbeing Outcomes Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children with outcomes adopted by all government departments
- A Monitoring and Evaluation Framework

The *Our Way strategy* also supports the delivery of Aboriginal Family Wellbeing services across the state. In 2019-20 the Queensland government invested \$42 million in community-controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Wellbeing Services (FWS) to support families to care for their children. Delivered at 32 sites across the state, these services are culturally informed and inclusive of all Aboriginal families focusing on self-referral and prevention and early help.

To date, Queensland's Family Wellbeing Services (FWS) have supported more than 20,000 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait families in Queensland and have a high-level of success in de-escalating risks and addressing family needs. 93% of children and families that completed a FWS required no further investigation by child protection in the following six months.

VACCHO's proposal for the Centre draws inspiration from Queensland, particularly in:

- System Reform: recognising the role of a dedicated voice focused on Aboriginal family wellbeing;
- Service Delivery: recognising how that level of oversight can support investment in ACCOs for the provision of family wellbeing services.

¹⁴ See Appendix 2 for system transformation which embeds an Aboriginal Family Wellbeing approach.

¹⁵ In 2019/2020 the Queensland government invested \$42 million for ACCOs for the provision of family wellbeing services.

How the Centre will add value to the current child and family system

- *Roadmap for Reform and Centre of Excellence Child and Family Welfare:*

Through investment into the *Roadmap for Reform*, the Victorian government is re-designing the current child and family service system. It is imperative that there is a strong Aboriginal voice based on rigorous evidence, to ensure Aboriginal knowledge is acknowledged, and Aboriginal families are prioritised in the systems reforms and investments.

This includes contributions to the *Centre of Excellence in Child and Family's* work, including partnership through the *Outcomes Practice Evaluation Network* (OPEN), participation and leadership in *Roadmap for Reform* discussions and additional Aboriginal-led forums based on community need.

- *Aboriginal service providers (VACCHO Members & VACCA)*

Appendix 1 shows Aboriginal organisations who are delivering a broad range of services to Aboriginal children and families, including Koori Maternity Services, early years, supported playgroups, parenting supports, intensive family supports and tertiary services such as child protection, out of home care and leaving care.

The call for greater investment into universal/preventative services is nothing new, but a peak voice for Aboriginal family wellbeing, building the evidence base, identifying Aboriginal-led best practice, and advocating for system improvement and making a rigorous case for investment is. It is anticipated that this voice in system reforms will assist Aboriginal service providers, including VACCHO members, who already deliver programs that are supportive of Aboriginal family wellbeing, but lack the investment.

Why VACCHO?

1. The call for greater focus on universal services improving Aboriginal family wellbeing came directly from VACCHO Members and VACCHO's board has invested in scoping its mandate.

Investment in a Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Families and Children Wellbeing is a direct investment in supporting self-determination in policy and reform environments.

It supports the first outcome in DFFH's 2022-2023 strategic plan: *Aboriginal voice, knowledge and cultural leadership drive Aboriginal policy, legislation and system reform*¹⁶.

2. VACCHO has the mandate and expertise

For more than 25 years VACCHO has been promoting and embedding a holistic Aboriginal definition of health and wellbeing in Victoria's health and wellbeing systems. Our mandate is ensuring access and inclusion of all Aboriginal people living in Victoria in universal health and wellbeing services.

VACCHO supports and represents 32 Member organisations who, deliver many of the services that fall under a suite of Family Wellbeing services: including Koori Maternity Services, supported playgroups, Cradle to Kinder and other health and wellbeing services to support Aboriginal families.

The Centre would be an Aboriginal voice in child and family systems reform, which naturally fits with VACCHO's mandate as a peak body and not a service provider. This follows the same function and governance as the *Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare* and builds on VACCHO's recently established *Balit Durn Durn Centre of Excellence in Social and Emotional Wellbeing*.

3. VACCHO has the existing infrastructure and reputation to support the Centre's establishment

VACCHO has existing capacity and expertise in communications, IT, administration, financial and project management to support the Centre to establish quickly and is offering an in-kind contribution towards these costs, maximising your investment and the funds that go directly to Centre activities.

Equally VACCHO's reputation and networks as the peak body gives it existing gravitas within government, private sector, and media to elevate the voice of Aboriginal families.

¹⁶ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2022, Strategic Plan 2022-2023 accessed 18 November 2022 via <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/dffh-strategic-plan>

The Case for Investment

The Victorian government, as a signatory to the National Closing the Gap Agreement, has committed to action to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care by 45% by 2031.

VACCHO's proposal for the Centre, with its primary focus on universal and preventive supports for Aboriginal families, will offer robust, evidence-based, and cost-effective solutions to respond to Closing the Gap domains, including addressing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care.

Investment into a Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Families and Children Wellbeing in Victoria, its policy initiatives and statewide campaigns, presents an unparalleled opportunity to respond to the needs of Aboriginal families, and the commitments of state and national governments to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and all Closing the Gap domains.

Notwithstanding the imperative to address the fastest-growing Aboriginal population in out of home care in the nation, Victoria is fertile ground for transformational change: the population size is mid-sized and concentrated in a smaller geographical area compared to other jurisdictions. ACCOs with their existing wrap-around service models and social capital are ideally placed to deliver broad and wide-ranging support to families.

Prospectus

Vision

We believe that every Aboriginal family should be strong in their culture and empowered to identify their needs, feel safe to ask for support and receive the right services at the right time, in the right place.

Centre Objectives

Promote and advocate for a restorative, strengths-based Aboriginal family wellbeing approach to system reforms, initiatives, and investments to support the needs, strengths, and aspirations of Aboriginal families.

Centre Overview

The Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Families and Children Wellbeing at VACCHO celebrates Aboriginal culture as the longest living culture in the world and aims to build on and restore the enduring strength, resilience and knowledge of Aboriginal families and communities in raising their children.

The Centre will work systematically to identify and dismantle the ongoing impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal families' wellbeing and ability to raise their children in safe, secure, and stable family environments. Working in conjunction with *Balit Durn Durn, the Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing*, the Centre will address the barriers Aboriginal families face through social, economic, cultural, and political lens.

The Centre will demonstrate bold Aboriginal thought-leadership to shift the narrative from a deficit model of child protection and to one that starts with, and builds upon, the unique strengths of Aboriginal culture. It will support a future service system that ensures broad access and inclusion of Aboriginal families in culturally-safe, culturally-informed and culturally-led universal and preventative child and family services (Appendix 2).

The Centre builds on evidence that the wellbeing of the family and its ability to function is the largest predictor of life outcomes: it posits that by focusing on improving Aboriginal family wellbeing will not only reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care, but it will also achieve positive outcomes over all Closing the Gap domains.

Founding principles

Collaborative: The Centre recognises its partners in the child and family service space, particularly the signatories of *Wungurwil Gapgaduir*: VACCA, the *Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance*, *Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Wellbeing*, and the Victorian government. It commits to be agile and complimentary in its approach to ensure Aboriginal families are supported through universal/preventative supports. The Centre also draws inspiration and knowledge and evidence from best practice across other states and jurisdictions and commits to reciprocity for the benefit of First Nation Children.

Partnerships: The Centre works in partnership with Aboriginal organisations (peaks/alliances/campaigns in Victoria, other state jurisdictions and nationally), child and family mainstream peaks and think tanks, and state and Commonwealth governments). A list of key partnerships and stakeholders is in Appendix 1.

Excellence for Aboriginal Families: The Centre commits to excellence in robust research, policy analysis, data collection, academic rigor, and Aboriginal thought-leadership. It will move from the status quo of "operating off the smell of an oily rag" to one that seeks investments to deliver world-class research, think-pieces, and leading policies.

Centre Activities

- Investigating the multiple factors affecting Aboriginal family wellbeing and family functioning and making recommendations across departments for proactive policies and reforms to address them.
- Researching the participation of Aboriginal families in universal services/primary supports, investigating barriers to participation, and making recommendations for system reform and service improvements.
- Building on national and international evidence of the role of family functioning in achieving positive life outcomes throughout life and ensuring that this has a Victorian Aboriginal lens and that this perspective plays a significant role in reforms happening through Roadmap for Reform.
- Collecting and promoting best practice for working with Aboriginal families in universal and primary supports.
- Identifying existing research and evaluations of programs, initiatives and supports to Aboriginal families and advocating for funding (government and private) to scale projects.
- Developing platforms for Aboriginal families to have an input into policies that affect them.
- Developing the capacity of local Aboriginal services to re-think/develop prevention programs in their communities.

Governance

The Victorian Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Families and Children Wellbeing will be established as a new unit within VACCHO, rather than as a separate organisation. It will be headed by an Executive Director who will report to the VACCHO CEO.

Staffing

- Executive Director (Identified)
- Senior Policy Officer
 - Expertise in childhood development/family functioning to assist *Roadmap for Reform* and *Centre of Excellence in Child and Family Welfare* initiatives
 - Expertise in Aboriginal self-determination, service design to work with Aboriginal partners (Victorian, other states, national and Aboriginal departments in governments)
 - Generalist with strong writing and communication skills to support media engagement, campaigns, and other advocacy efforts.
- Senior Research Officer: Collect existing research and evaluations, identify services ready for evaluation, partner with research institutes to investigate service gaps and advocate for affirmative action to prioritise investments in Aboriginal research and evaluations.
- Senior Data Officer: Extract and analyze census and other data so its applicable to Victorian communities; work with ACCOs and departments to collect data on Aboriginal families' participation in universal services and monitor this participation.
- Senior Project Officer: assist the Centre in project planning especially focusing on community engagement and support the sustainability of the Centre through funding applications, including philanthropic support
- Administrative Officer: Support all functions of the Executive Director, Centre staff and operations to maximise its efficiency and impact

APPENDIX 1: KEY PARTNERSHIPS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Victorian Aboriginal organisations working in the child and family system	Aboriginal organisations in other jurisdictions	Government departments
VACCHO (peak) + Members (service delivery)	ABSEC	Aboriginal Commission for Children and Young People (government) VICTORIA
Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance	QATSICPP	Department of Premier and Cabinet VICTORIA (Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework)
Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency	Queensland's First Nation Board	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing VICTORIA
Victorian Aboriginal Education Association	NSW Aboriginal Deputy Children's Guardian	Department of Health VICTORIA
Djirra	QUEENSLAND Family and Child Commissioner	Department of Education and Training VICTORIA
Victorian Aboriginal Housing	South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People	National Indigenous Australians Agency COMMONWEALTH
Victorian peaks for Victorian Families	Noongar Family Safety and Wellbeing Council	Australian Department of Social Services COMMONWEALTH
Centre of Excellence Child and Family Welfare	State Family Matters Campaign Working Groups	Research/Clearinghouses
VCOSS	Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
National Aboriginal voices on children and families		The Australian Institute of Family Studies
SNAICC		Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Family Matters		Lowitja Institute
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner		Murdoch Children's Institute
First 1000 days Australia		

APPENDIX 2: DRAFT THEORY OF CHANGE:

Outcome: Aboriginal families are empowered and supported to raise their children in safe, happy, healthy, and stable homes and culturally strong communities, reducing the need for tertiary interventions and services and mitigating other adversities leading to poor life outcomes.

CURRENT Approach	FUTURE Approach	ACTIVITIES
Child removal is viewed through a lens of child/abuse or neglect	The overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out of home care is understood as directly correlated to the ongoing impacts of colonisation.	Strong Aboriginal voices to counter dominant narratives through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media • Conferences • Amendments to training models, practice guides
The link between poverty and child removal missing in discussions and socio-economic reforms	The socio-economic determinants and their role in Aboriginal child removal are understood and affirmative action across housing, welfare and economic development reform and initiatives consistently prioritise Aboriginal families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build on evidence of the role of poverty in child removal and ensure it is acknowledged in Australian discourse. • Collect socio-economic data on Aboriginal families to show correlation between child protection • Develop a prioritisation of Aboriginal families' policy to be embedded in all government initiatives on all child and family reforms AND health, education, housing, welfare and economic development.
Aboriginal children and families access supports once a child welfare concern has been raised	All Aboriginal families are supported to identify their needs and feel empowered to seek help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broaden the eligibility criteria for all child and family services to respond to the needs of Aboriginal families. • Drive a public campaign to reduce stigma and encourage families to feel safe and empowered in seeking help • Develop a website/app for self-referrals.
Aboriginal families' participation rate in universal/ preventive services, child and families services is under-represented	Aboriginal families participate in services that are culturally safe, culturally-informed, culturally designed, and responsive to their needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor the access and inclusion of Aboriginal families in universal/ preventive family services. • Develop an Aboriginal model of service supports • Build an evidence base of best-practice Aboriginal lead child and family services, research and evaluations • Advocate for a fixed investment strategy based on rigorous economic forecasting.