

Opening Statement

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1. It is a privilege to be meeting here today on the lands on the Wurundjeri people. I pay my deep respect to the Elders with us today and for their strength and bravery over so many years. I am very mindful that the opportunity for Aboriginal people to be able to speak our truth in a safe and respectful way here today is only possible because of the sacrifices and labour of those who have come before us.
2. I particularly pay my respects to our First Nations children, including those Koori Kids who have had contact with the child protection system and indeed those who right now, while we are speaking, are living in state funded facilities away from their families and country.
3. I come before the Commission today as a proud Murrawarri man, and an executive in the department responsible for Child Protection.
4. I am acutely aware of the evolution and history of the department I represent. We identify as the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. I clearly understand that the use of the words families and fairness is triggering for many Aboriginal people when it includes the portfolio of child protection.
5. I want to acknowledge that we are also known by other names for our Aboriginal communities, not only now but well into our history. In various iterations and to varying degrees we have been part of the Department of Social Welfare, the Aborigines Protection Board, the Department for Neglected Children, and most commonly The Welfare.
6. For the actions of the department in our long history and to this day, I extend my deepest, and genuine heartfelt apology to my Aboriginal brothers and sisters across your various Koori nations. I am sorry for the harm, pain and trauma the department,

in all its iterations and throughout its history, has caused you, your families and your ancestors. My commitment today is that I will speak my whole truth in this Commission in the hope that we can start to right the many wrongs we know have been perpetrated against Aboriginal people.

7. Before I touch on my observations working as an Aboriginal executive within the child protection system, I want to state who I am speaking on behalf of. When a Murrawarri man travels to other countries, we walk respectfully and lightly on that land. I speak today on behalf of myself and not on behalf of any other Aboriginal people. It is however my genuine hope that the evidence I give will resonate with the experiences of Aboriginal child protection workers, Aboriginal Elders and traditional owners and for me, most importantly, our Aboriginal families and children who are living within the bounds of the child protection system and do not have a voice in evidence giving today.
8. Commissioners, I have listened carefully to the evidence provided by a number of my respected peers and while the evidence I will provide from my own lens may differ in detail, it is my hope that my words are heard and received by those of us working in this space as constructive. We will not agree on all things, but I hope we can all agree that we must undertake drastic reform and significantly improve the way the system works. It is with this in mind that I offer my evidence today and I thank the commission for inviting me to speak my truth.
9. To assist the Commission in understanding the lens through which I provide my evidence today, I thought it useful to take a moment to explain a bit about who I am and how I came to be before you today.
10. Like many Aboriginal public servants, I have my own personal experience of child protection, both when I was a baby through a cultural de-identifying adoption, but also supporting my own family in understanding and navigating the system.
11. The experiences in loss of identity and connection to culture were highly detrimental to me throughout my early life and I still to this day struggle with relationships, abandonment and attachment issues. While some may say that what happened to me is unfair, I say it is nothing. Nothing compared to the trauma and life-changing harm I have witnessed happening to our kids in statutory systems designed to keep them safe.
12. This year marks my 27th year as a public servant. Much of my career has been working with Aboriginal communities in the East Kimberley, Central Australia and Top

End. I have worked in multiple jurisdictions in Child Protection and Youth Justice. I hold a masters degree in public administration and I was keen to work with the Koori communities in a progressive state with enormous potential.

13. The importance of the work I have chosen to do became clear to me when I was sitting with team members in the office I managed for child protection in Adelaide. A staff member asked what suburb my adopted parents lived in. I replied, and the staff member laughed and said, "Just so you know, you were probably carried around in the office as a baby, just like the ones you see us carrying around with you here now as the Manager". I decided that day that I needed to pursue opportunities to make a difference for those kids in our systems who have not had a fair start in life.
14. Another profound moment for me in developing my understanding of our child protection systems occurred when I started sitting as a Respected Person on Koori Court. When offenders appear I always ask about their past, their childhood and the journey that led them to be in contact with the adult justice system.
15. It is so clear to me now as I look back at the pathway offenders have travelled, all of the critical missed opportunities that with the right understanding, cultural sensitivity and early intervention, we would not be talking about possibly sending another Aboriginal person to jail. We would not have seen years of pain and trauma, not only for the offender, but their family and the impacted victims of crime. Added to this we would have saved millions of dollars and the offender would, in all probability, be a strong, proud, contributing member of our community.
16. From a child protection systems perspective, my lens is one of operations leadership. While I am classified as a senior executive in the department, I have taken steps to ensure I remain grounded and connected to my teams, our families and communities.
17. Out of 17 Areas that deliver child protection in our organisation, I am the only operational Aboriginal leader, in fact for a number of years I was the only Aboriginal executive in our department of then 4000+ staff.
18. I bring a strong desire for innovation and I have a healthy risk appetite. I have, with my Aboriginal staff and our allies in my area, demonstrated time and time again that community controlled and Aboriginal led practice works. It's stronger, safer, cheaper, and far better for the people we are here to serve.
19. While I agree and accept that a part of the process of Yoorrook needs to be accountability, I very much wish to spend as much of my time as possible with you today talking about opportunities. There is so much community strength, knowledge,

power and resilience. There are so many resources that are not being used or are disregarded.

20. It is plain and clear to me where the deficits exist in our system and while I stress this is my lens into this space, I hope my contributions to this discussion prove useful.
21. Finally, while we focus today on the child protection system it would be remiss of me not to mention that obligations in this space extend well past the statutory system. Shared responsibility must exist and be prescriptive across all departments and funded agencies. If any one authority is to be responsible for child protection, it is simple mathematics that it would need a workforce of well over 20,000 people. Not only is this counter-productive but the skill set of a statutory system is, in my view, not suitable for the key elements that are needed in the successful delivery of early support, empowerment and intervention models.
22. I welcome any and all questions the Commission may have for me today and again thank you for the invitation to speak to you today.