



## An office for advocacy and accountability in Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia

Based at the Telethon Kids Institute, the five year (2016-2020) *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* (Our Children Our Heart) research project is working with the (largely) Nyoongar Aboriginal community of urban Perth. One of the objectives of the project is to translate the research findings regarding Aboriginal child rearing practices and early childhood development into changes to policy and practice. Three priority areas have been identified through a range of consultations with members of the Aboriginal community(s) across Perth. These priority areas are:

- The impact of child removal
- The importance of education across the early years (early childhood education and care and early schooling); and
- The lack of housing security for many Aboriginal families.

The project is working closely with stakeholders including service providers, to translate the project's research findings into culturally safe policies, practices and services. One of the unique aspects of the project is the incorporation of an Aboriginal worldview and knowledge framework that is achieved through the role of nine Aboriginal Elders who are Co-Researchers on the project.

The following submission represents the views of the Nine Elders regarding the proposal for an office for advocacy and accountability in Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia.

### What do you think of the Government's proposal?

The Elders of the *Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort* Project welcome the State Government's proposal to establish a new statutory office to strengthen the Government's accountability to Aboriginal Western Australians and to advocate for Aboriginal people's interests in government policy and performance.

We agree with the Government's own suggestion that it is "not serving Aboriginal people as well as it should". This reflects the reality that Governments of all political persuasions have historically treated the concerns of First Nations people as a low priority. In order to begin to address this historical inequity, we support the concept of establishing a permanent entity with statutory powers to lobby for, and advocate on behalf of, Aboriginal people. We believe that if this position is genuinely resourced and supported, and therefore able to move Government towards a position that is more responsive to the needs and priorities of Aboriginal people, it could, as the Government's discussion paper puts it, deliver 'real change in the lives of Aboriginal people'.

In part because of a fraught historical relationship, as well as the continuing legacy of that history, many Aboriginal people have a negative view of Government and the way it engages with them. We suggest that a major benefit with regards the Government's proposal is that it has the potential to shift the way Aboriginal people view and engage with government.





### Do you have comments or suggestions?

Given the history of Aboriginal-state relations we touched on above, the Government should not be surprised if this proposal is met with scepticism by some Aboriginal people in WA. While many Aboriginal people continue to suffer disproportionately bad health, education, employment and other outcomes, the fact is that, given the reality of systematic racism and exclusion that has occurred in WA (and the rest of Australia), Aboriginal people are not responsible for much of what has happened to them. At least since 1905, Government policy has explicitly sought to disempower, discriminate against, and exclude Aboriginal people. More recently, the Government has disbanded the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, which some have interpreted as reflecting a further downgrading in the level of concern shown for Aboriginal people. The Government should not expect to replace the machinery of a whole department with a single individual or office. Establishing an office for advocacy and accountability in Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia shouldn't let the government off the hook for not consulting with Aboriginal people about programs and services.

The Elders of the **Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort** Project strongly support the suggestion that the position and office should be, and should be seen to be, independent from Government. This is an issue both of substance and perception. A position that seeks to exert a level of monitoring, review, and even criticism of Government, needs to have sufficient authority and independence to carry out this role. Furthermore, if the position and office is viewed by the Aboriginal community to have a degree of separation from Government, this will instil confidence. Conversely, any suggestion that this role is just an agency of Government like any other, then its legitimacy in the eyes of the Aboriginal community will be undermined to the point where they will find it hard to support, let alone 'own' the office.

### How should Aboriginal people be involved in choosing the right person?

There are many Aboriginal organisations in WA. Which should have a role in the appointment process? What that role should be?

**Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort** Elders support the Government's suggestion that Aboriginal people and organisations should have a role in the appointment process for the new office. We believe it is critical that Aboriginal people have a say in who is selected for this important role. Again, this will serve to increase the legitimacy of the office in the eyes of Aboriginal people, and differentiate this proposal from the numerous policies and processes of the not so distant past that have been imposed upon Aboriginal people with little or no consultation.

We note the important role that Aboriginal organisations have played in supporting First Nations people in WA for decades. It is right and proper that these entities should be consulted with respect to the appointment of someone to the proposed office. However, the Elders of the **Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort** Project also believe there should be some mechanism for more 'grass roots' input as well. For



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example, a group of distinguished Elders such as ourselves represents some hundreds of years of combined wisdom. We, and groups like us, should have a say on this important issue.

This input must be sought in such a way that it cannot be accused of being tokenistic consultation. There is a real argument to suggest that given this is such an important position, a unique selection process including all Aboriginal people should be established. Aboriginal West Australians should have the right to vote for this Office.

If the appointment is made in this way, it will assist in ensuring the role is seen as representing the views and needs of all Aboriginal people across the state. This would be further reinforced by creating or endorsing mechanisms for enabling representative groups from each area across the State to advise/assist the new Office holder. These representative groups would be composed of Elders and other Aboriginal senior community representatives.

Should the process of choosing the initial office holder include recognising a role for Elders, there would be a number of significant benefits. Firstly, it would again differentiate itself from the vast majority of Government processes by reflecting the particular cultural authority of senior people in the Aboriginal community. Secondly, it would reflect another cultural reality that Aboriginal WA is made up of numerous First Nations, all of whom should have a voice in selecting and endorsing this office holder.

Prepared on behalf of:

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