

Submission to the Productivity Commission's Draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

Aboriginal Strategy and Oversight and the Centre for Evaluation, Research and Evidence,
Department of Health and Human Services
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Introduction

The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (the department) acknowledges the effects of colonisation and past government policies and practices on Aboriginal Victorians¹ who continue to experience poorer health, wellbeing and safety outcomes than the broader Victorian population.

The Australian Government's draft *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, which places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at its centre, shows promise in contributing to the system-wide change needed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians.

This submission finds that the principles and priorities of the *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* are in alignment with the department's key evaluation principles, strategies and activities relating to Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety.

The Department of Health and Human Services

The department's vision is to achieve the best health, wellbeing and safety of all Victorians so they can live a life they value. For Aboriginal Victorians, connections to culture and community are key enablers for improved health, wellbeing and safety.

As one of five domains in the Department of Health and Human Services Outcomes Framework, these cultural connections are foundational to the other outcome domains where Victorians are healthy and well, are safe and secure and have the capabilities to participate. Importantly, the department includes a system-wide focus on person-centred and sustainable services and programs across Victoria. This focus aligns with the *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy's* 'Cross System Priority' which will better integrate the key levers and enablers for improving outcomes.

A guiding principle underpinning the department's vision for improving the health, wellbeing and safety of Aboriginal Victorians, is Aboriginal self-determination, which is reflected across the department's four Aboriginal strategies. The Victorian Public Sector Commission describes self-determination as an "*ongoing process of choice to ensure that Indigenous communities are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs*".

¹ The terms, 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' are used interchangeably in this document depending on the source of the information provided for this submission. Australian Government Productivity Commission: Request for responses to the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

Aboriginal self-determination as a guiding principle

The department considers self-determination as a necessary approach for delivering effective and sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal people for three reasons:

1. It is an effective policy – Evidence shows that social policies and services are most effective and deliver better outcomes when the users of the policies and services participate in their design, delivery and evaluation.
2. It is a right – Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Ethically, Australian governments are accountable to Indigenous communities for transferring power and resources to those communities.
3. Aboriginal Victorians have requested self-determination – The *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* puts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's perspectives, priorities and knowledge central to its guiding principles.

Four strategies that place Aboriginal self-determination as a driving force for system-wide change include:

- *Korin Korin Balit-Djak*: Aboriginal Health, Wellbeing and Safety Strategic Plan 2017-2027
- *Wungurilwil Gaggapduir*: The Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement
- *Dhelk Dja*: Safe Our Way - Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families
- *Balit Murrup*: Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF), coordinated through the Department of Premier and Cabinet on the advice of Victorian Aboriginal organisations and communities, provides a whole-of-Victorian government approach to delivering improved outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians.

The VAAF includes eleven self-determination guiding principles and provides a strong emphasis on these principles in evaluative practice. As a key accountability mechanism for the department, the VAAF places Aboriginal knowledge, expertise and cultural integrity at the forefront of its priorities.

Aboriginal Health, Wellbeing and Safety Evaluation Framework

Aboriginal Strategy and Oversight (ASO) is a unit with the Department of Health and Human Services. Its key functions include:

- Working across the department and portfolios to support reform and policy design
- Sharing evidence from the voice of Aboriginal clients and project partners
- Analysing and interpreting data
- Exploring insights to inform policy

ASO commissioned the development an Aboriginal-led health, wellbeing and safety evaluation framework. The intent of this project is to:

- Understand the role that culture plays in health and wellbeing through a literature review about the cultural determinants of health

- develop a library of Aboriginal-defined indicators across the domains of health, wellbeing and safety
- deliver comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plans and theories of change that enable the monitoring of the strategies at the program level
- deliver a system level theory of change about how change will happen through cross-portfolio level collaboration.

The project recognises Aboriginal expertise and cultural knowledge as a legitimate source of data in evaluation and monitoring activities across multiple strategic reforms.

In 2020, the department will add indicators from the Aboriginal Indicator Library to the updated Health and Human Services Outcomes Framework, which will embed the Aboriginal voice into a key departmental tool for monitoring the progress of its health and wellbeing programs.

The Centre for Evaluation and Research Evidence

The Centre for Evaluation and Research Evidence (the Centre) is the department's internal evaluation and research function that provides advice, support and training for evaluation. It also delivers research and evaluation projects and works in partnership with service delivery partners to improve their impact.

The Centre works closely with Aboriginal Strategy and Oversight to ensure Aboriginal voices are embedded across the department's evaluations and to ensure Aboriginal-led evaluations are credible, useful and culturally and ethically appropriate.

Building the Aboriginal Evidence Base Project

The Building the Aboriginal Evidence Base project is a collaboration between the department and Victoria's Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that intends to build capacity of the department and the Aboriginal community sector to develop the Aboriginal evidence base. The project will support Aboriginal organisations to take ownership of, and responsibility for designing, delivering and evaluating policies and programs on their own terms.

This project involves working with ACCOs to:

- scope a centre for Aboriginal knowledge and culturally based practice in children and family services
- identifying models of Aboriginal evidence-informed practice in Victoria
- building knowledge of Aboriginal-led approaches to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families using culturally appropriate methods and approaches
- build capacity to document and strengthen the evidence base of what works for Aboriginal children, families and community across Victoria.

Building the evidence base and sharing Aboriginal knowledge are critical enablers to achieve the aims of the Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement (Wungurilwil Gapgapduir) and Australian Government Productivity Commission: Request for responses to the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

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the work through the Roadmap for Reform to deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people which reflect Aboriginal values and needs.

Alignment of key principles and priorities

The department finds that the principles for the *Indigenous Evaluation Framework* aligns with its own commitment to Aboriginal-led evaluation and monitoring. By placing Aboriginal people, their perspectives, priorities and knowledge at the centre of the *Indigenous Evaluation Framework*, the department's approach is consistent with that of the Australian Government.

The proposed Australian government-wide 'Cross System Priority' also aligns with the department's integrated responses that reflect Aboriginal holistic understandings of health, wellbeing and safety. Addressing racism, discrimination, healing and trauma, and the promotion of cultures and languages for Aboriginal people reflect the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework priorities for action. Importantly, the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework measurement domains, together with the department's Health and Human Services Outcomes Framework, are closely aligned with the Priority Policy Areas of the *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*. This will enhance the capability of the Australian and Victorian governments and Aboriginal communities to jointly measure the impact of multiple strategies with greater consistency and comparability.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that Victorian Aboriginal organisations have well-established approaches based on their own knowledge systems and cultural expertise. The challenge for government is to embed this knowledge and expertise across the whole health, human and community services sector and other sectors seeking to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people. The *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* will provide an additional layer of accountability to Aboriginal families and communities and provide greater impetus for other jurisdictions to follow suit.

The department cautions against overly prescriptive approaches to evaluation and encourages a greater emphasis on drawing from Aboriginal perspectives early in the evaluation process, including initial design activities and then at every stage of delivery.

Further examples of Aboriginal-led practices should be considered for the *Indigenous Evaluation Framework*, where Aboriginal communities have the choice, control, authority and responsibility for determining evaluative priorities and measures of success.