7 December 2015

To whom it may concern

Re: Submission to Issues Paper 10 - Advocacy and Support and Therapeutic Treatment Services

The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec) values the opportunity to provide a submission with respect to the Royal Commission into the Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Issues Paper 10, Advocacy and Support and Therapeutic Treatment Services.

AbSec is the NSW Aboriginal peak body providing child protection and out-of-home care policy advice and advocacy, and supports accredited Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations providing out-of-home care services in NSW.

AbSec acknowledges the terminology “victims and survivors” used in the Issues Paper when referring to someone who has been sexually abused. Often, this distinction represents the age of individuals, with children characterised as “victims” and adults as “survivors” of child sexual abuse. For the purposes of this paper, we will use the term “survivor” for both children and adults to acknowledge the agency of survivors in resisting and responding to violence and abuse, both immediately and across their life course. In doing so, we hope to pay appropriate respect to their strength and dignity as survivors of sexual abuse and other various forms of harm.

Background
Child sexual abuse affects survivors in many ways and across their lifespan. Such harm also impacts on their families and communities. We acknowledge the many factors that make children more vulnerable to high incidences of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities including family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, low educational outcomes and high unemployment, low health outcomes, poor housing and unresolved trauma, grief and loss. Aboriginal people are over-represented in all of these areas.

Despite this high incidence, it is likely that incidences of sexual abuse and other harm are under-reported due to a lack of awareness and understanding of child sexual abuse and its impacts, distrust of authorities in both believing reports of harm or responding appropriately to reported harm that contributes to a culture of silence within many Aboriginal communities, as well as community members not knowing how to respond to or talk about child sexual abuse.
In contemporary institutional settings, young Aboriginal people may feel isolated or disempowered to disclose abuse, or may be wary of responses to their disclosure including further placement instability and disconnection from limited social supports.

Those experiencing abuse may be uncertain about not being believed, further isolating survivors and increasing the risk of the abuse continuing, future abuse or harm, or generally undermining recovery and future wellbeing. As a result of experiences of abuse and inadequate or inappropriate social responses, survivors of child sexual abuse and other forms of harm are at significantly greater risk of poorer outcomes, including mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and adjustment across their lifetime.

There are systemic barriers facing Aboriginal survivors of abuse which impact on their healing, such as the lack of culturally appropriate universal and targeted specialised interventions aimed at preventing and responding to abuse. The lack of Aboriginal specialised services impacts immensely on Aboriginal survivors in accessing services they need to support them in healing, coping and being able to fully participate in their community throughout their life. The ability to manage mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder impacts heavily on one’s quality of life.

These systemic barriers apply whether the abuse has been recent or whether it occurred years ago, as experienced by some members of the Stolen Generations who as children were sexually abused whilst in institutional care as well as those who experienced such abuse whilst being apprenticed out as domestic help and labourers under various states’ protection and welfare legislation. For many Aboriginal survivors, experiences of sexual abuse and related harm were or are coupled with removal and disconnection – occurring within institutional settings such as group homes or out-of-home care. As a result, survivors are disconnected from protective familial and social supports and face additional challenges in cultural dispossession and identity.

The cultural barriers that Aboriginal survivors may experience when accessing non-Aboriginal services (if they do at all) include lack of trust and a sense of being judged by non-Aboriginal workers, issues and frustration around cultural and linguistic communication, lack of understanding in dealing with shame, trauma and stigma around sexual abuse from an Aboriginal perspective and lack of knowledge of Aboriginal communities, kinship systems and family dynamics.

AbSec argues that an Aboriginal survivor of child sexual abuse must feel culturally safe and connected to formal and informal supports, including culturally appropriate therapeutic services, if healing is to take place.

One challenge is the lack of Aboriginal professionals in the therapeutic services, highlighting the need for greater investment in the capacity of Aboriginal communities to meet the needs of their own children and families, particularly survivors of child sexual abuse and other complex traumas. Investment in the education and training of Aboriginal community members to deliver specialised therapeutic services would support culturally informed service delivery as well as the ongoing development of effective services for Aboriginal people.
Culturally appropriate advocacy and support and therapeutic treatment services are desperately needed to meet the long-term needs of Aboriginal survivors, engaging their family and community networks to provide supports and promote the experience of safety for survivors. Finally, the “one right door” approach is critical in meeting the needs of survivors and their families, reducing the need for survivors to retell their story and navigate a frustrating service system. For Aboriginal specialised services to be relevant and able to provide the necessary therapeutic support they must be linked in to Aboriginal community controlled organisations as part of an appropriately resourced Aboriginal service system. A truly integrated Aboriginal service system embedded within their community is needed; rather than a siloed or fragmented support system that provides little to no positive outcomes for the victim.

A Holistic Aboriginal Child and Family Service Sector

In response to the needs of Aboriginal survivors of child sexual abuse and other related matters in institutional contexts, and in light of the ongoing over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in NSW and nationally, potentially placing yet more Aboriginal children at risk of abuse in institutional settings, AbSec emphasizes the need for a holistic Aboriginal child and family service system, embedded in Aboriginal communities to deliver culturally appropriate support tailoring to individual needs, recognising the broad and lifelong (intergenerational) impacts of child sexual abuse. These Aboriginal Healing Centres can serve as a primary support for survivors and their families, coordinating tailored supports, delivering or linking to specialised, culturally appropriate therapeutic interventions, and providing other formal and informal supports to survivors and their families as needed across the lifespan.

Aboriginal Healing Centres, as a component of an Aboriginal child and family service system, can also ensure that survivors have a voice within their communities, particularly with respect to the provision of services and supports, and connect to a broad network of local community-embedded services to improve the capacity of communities to heal, advocate on behalf of survivors and their families, and stand ready to support children and young people experiencing abuse now and reducing it in the future. That is, a holistic Aboriginal child and family approach would form a community safety-net to prevent and respond to abuse through tailored, integrated child and family services, as well as addressing social and community factors that may contribute to children’s vulnerability to harm, being vigilant to harm and responding quickly to support children and keep them safe, serving as the backbone of child-safe communities.

Having an intergenerational approach where support is provided to the survivor, their family and other support people acknowledges the impact of sexual abuse and associated trauma not only on the survivor directly, but also their broader social network. This approach also acknowledges the dynamic needs of survivors across the lifespan, from childhood and adolescence and coming to terms with abuse in their developmental context, through to adulthood, parenting, caring for others and contributing to their community. This approach will result in a more culturally strong, safe and protective environment for the survivor across their lifespan, as well as strengthening their informal family and support networks.
For example, a holistic Aboriginal child and family service system would provide assistance to Aboriginal survivors becoming parents, acknowledging the often disrupted care histories of survivors of child sexual abuse and other forms of abuse in institutional settings and how these experiences may impact on parenting through mental health and social-emotional wellbeing and adjustment, as well as the worries, fears and re-experiencing of trauma that may accompany parenthood. The need for culturally appropriate parenting programs and ongoing support is essential in addressing the risk of Aboriginal children experiencing harm and entering institutional settings. A significant element of this approach would be the provision of ongoing support for Aboriginal survivors and their family support networks, recognising that ‘ongoing’ means that Aboriginal survivors would receive support as needed throughout their lifespan, especially those with long-term disabilities. Such an approach would be directly connected to their local communities, with staff that are well placed to understand the issues faced by survivors and are able to coordinate tailored services to meet their needs and those of their families and informal support networks, including:

- Navigating and dealing with the legal system including with police, while making sure Aboriginal survivors understand their rights in respect of any legal processes they may be subject to and ensuring that there are advocates acting on their behalf at all stages
- Encouraging cultural strengthening and connecting Aboriginal survivors and their family support networks with appropriate local community Elders and cultural educators, participating in cultural activities and reinforcing connection to country. Connection to culture is widely acknowledged as a key factor in resilience.
- Providing support in accessing various formal therapeutic services and informal support systems that will assist Aboriginal survivors in their healing process and promote lifelong wellbeing.
- Advocating for the ongoing needs of Aboriginal survivors.

Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Educating Aboriginal Families and Communities

Finally, an Aboriginal child and family service system, and its component focused on healing, connected to their local communities would play a central role in the development of community education strategies for local families and communities in understanding child sexual abuse and its impact including awareness of indicators, prevention, disclosure, debunking myths and developing a child-safe community that is able to recognise and respond to harm. These educational programs would provide opportunities for the creation of social networks of champions in Aboriginal communities to challenge and encourage others to stand up against child sexual abuse. The overall goal would be to empower Aboriginal communities to:

- Provide culturally strong, safe and protective environments for their children,
- Respond appropriately when a child or young person discloses sexual abuse, and
• Be inclusive of the needs of survivors without judgement.
• Develop culturally imbedded programs to educate children and young people about sexual abuse and the process to keep them safe.

This focus on child safe communities that are able to recognise and respond to abuse where it occurs will also have the benefit of creating a feeling of safety and support for survivors, supporting more timely disclosures and helping to ensure that survivors get the support they need, when they need it.

**Educating the Institutional Environment**

At a systemic level it is important to educate across sectors to ensure that culturally appropriate support are in place for Aboriginal survivors. For instance in the education sector, there is a need to ensure that on-going support and monitoring is in place as child survivors are more likely to be isolated from school and have behavioural issues. A culture of disbelieving children who disclose within institutional environments is also of much concern. Every child who discloses must be heard and investigations must take place by the right authorities. The institutional response to disclosure is critical to the culture of safety and the wellbeing of all children.

**Conclusion**

In summary, Aboriginal survivors of child sexual abuse and other harm in institutional settings require access to significant ongoing services that are culturally appropriate in order to promote healing, including:

• Aboriginal community controlled Healing Centres delivering culturally appropriate supports and services as part of a holistic Aboriginal child and family service system.
• Services tailored to individual needs of the survivor and their family support networks that recognise the broad and lifelong (intergenerational) impacts of abuse.
• Strategies to empower Aboriginal communities to provide a culturally strong, safe and protective environment, to respond appropriately to disclosures and be inclusive of the needs of survivors without judgement.
• Cultural strengthening and connectedness in communities as a key factor in resilience.

Yours sincerely,

Tim Ireland
Chief Executive Officer