



**NAAFLS**  
NORTH AUSTRALIAN  
ABORIGINAL FAMILY  
LEGAL SERVICE



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## **MEDIA RELEASE**

# **Don't take our babies. Call around International Women's Day and National Closing the Gap Day for more support of Aboriginal women as mothers and carers**

International Women's Day on 8 March and National Closing the Gap Day on 16 March are an opportunity to reflect on progress made by and with women. It's also a keen reminder of Aboriginal women's continued struggle for justice, particularly in being able to care for our babies and children.

Our First Nations women are strong but even the most resilient can be worn down by the constant dysfunction of current day colonial systems. As legal professionals we want to highlight how systems such as child protection, housing, welfare and education are often hindering not helping Aboriginal women care for themselves and their children.

Cassandra Carolin is an Aboriginal woman and the Acting CEO of North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service ('NAAFLS'). She sees systems for the most part failing Aboriginal women. "Too often the voice of our women is unheard by non-Indigenous systems which aren't accountable to the cultural, emotional and health needs of our women".

Child protection is a prime example where systems, including the law, let Aboriginal women down. Aboriginal mothers trying to raise their children and keep them safe are too often blamed and punished - not helped.

### **Child protection notification scheme**

PC Clarke, CEO of the Central Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Unit ('CAAFLU'), Arrernte woman and Deputy Chair of the National Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum said:

"Basic things aren't sufficiently in place. NAAFLS and CAAFLU continue to call for a child protection notification scheme which would operate in a similar way to the custody notification scheme for the Aboriginal Legal Services. This would require a mandatory referral for all Aboriginal parents and

carers to an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation with relevant expertise, including specialist Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLSs) for independent, specialist and preventative legal advice and culturally safe wraparound support. This would be at the earliest opportunity where child protection becomes involved with an Aboriginal child.

“Men’s violence against Aboriginal women is the number one driver of the disproportionate and escalating rates of Aboriginal child removal in the Territory. There is a desperate need for greater front-end support for Aboriginal mothers. The earlier that mothers are linked in with a specialist Aboriginal community-controlled organisation with family violence expertise, the better the outcomes are for her and her children.”

Carol Smith, Arrernte woman and Principal Solicitor with CAAFLU said “there is a myriad of systemic issues around child protection for Aboriginal women, children and families in the NT and problematic non-Indigenous perspectives and decisions are often bombarding and not helping our people.”

Judy Harrison, Principal Solicitor at North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service said, “sometimes there is guidance but insufficient follow through. For example, Australia’s National Breastfeeding Strategy (2019) calls for health, justice and child protection systems to support women to breastfeed and specifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as a priority population. But the proportion of Aboriginal babies being breastfed isn’t factoring in, or being supported, as a justice and child protection indicator.”

### **SAFeST Start Coalition**

The ‘Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families to Stay Together from the Start’ (SAFeST Start) Coalition, an Aboriginal-led coalition focused on addressing systemic failures associated with the disproportionate removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander newborns through rights-based reforms and holistic responses. The Coalition made an urgent call to action in January 2022, for “open and courageous truth-telling about current child protection systems and practice, to ensure the safety and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children.” This includes calling for the urgent transformation of these systems, including the full realisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (SNAICC, 2019), and implementation of outstanding recommendations and reforms, including those through various inquiries and the national Family Matters campaign (SNAICC, 2020; 2021; 2022). NAAFLS and CAAFLU echo these calls for urgent actions.

“Today we sadly have a new stolen generation of Aboriginal children, reflected through highly disproportionate rates of Aboriginal children in out of home care” said Catherine Chamberlain, Palawa Woman, Professor of Indigenous Health and member of the SAFeST Start Coalition Leadership Group.

Professor Chamberlain said: “This crisis in rising numbers of Aboriginal children in out of home care needs to be reversed by providing nurturing care and support especially to Aboriginal women as mothers and carers. Approaches and systems have to change, and this is essential for Closing the Gap more broadly”. The SAFeST Start Coalition, which sits under SNAICC, is not alone in calling for

more investment in prevention and early intervention, as well as Aboriginal-led responses to end unnecessary infant removals.

“The very real concern to our communities is the fear of our children being removed. Aboriginal families are still affected by the Stolen Generation and fear that the continued removal of children will add to the trauma for more generations to come,” said NAAFLS A/g CEO Cassandra.

“We are professionals on the ground working with Aboriginal women, and taking children is not an answer. The answer is to support women to care for their children and to support communities to do better,” said Carol Smith, Principal Solicitor at CAAFLU.

### **Calling for a national inquiry and individual action**

Around International Women’s Day and National Closing the Gap Day **we are calling for a national inquiry into how government systems are impacting now on the care First Nations women provide. This includes how systems are impacting on their safety and wellbeing as mothers and carers.**

We’re also asking you to think about systems you’re involved in, and how they can better serve the practical, cultural and emotional needs of Aboriginal women as mothers and carers. If we’re serious about closing the gap, our systems need to change to serve First Nations women better.

Cassandra believes “the most important thing we can do is continue to speak up for our women and recognise that women should be supported and not set up to fail by systems that have no understanding of our needs.”

### **For more information or interview**

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