



Background

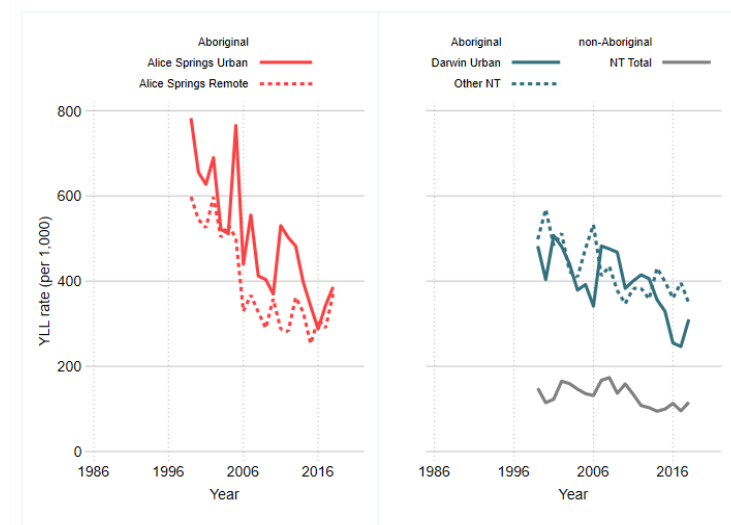
Central Australian Aboriginal Congress is a large Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (ACCHS) based in Alice Springs. We are one of the most experienced organisations in the country in Aboriginal health, a national leader in primary health care (PHC), and a strong advocate for the health of our people. Congress delivers services to more than 17,000 Aboriginal people in Alice Springs and across Central Australia.

On 6 February 2023, the Australian and Northern Territory Governments announced a package to improve community safety, tackle alcohol-related harm, and provide more opportunities for young people in Central Australia. This included \$250 million from the Australian Government for *A Better, Safer Future for Central Australia*, focusing on improved community safety and cohesion, job creation, better health services, preventing and addressing the issues caused by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, investing in families and On Country learning.

Congress has fifty years of experience in developing and implementing culturally-responsive, evidence-informed services. Along with other ACCHSs, we have made a significant contribution to 'closing the gap' in health in the region. The latest figures from our research project into the changes in health status for our communities shows a major decline in premature deaths and associated increased life expectancy for Aboriginal people from 1998 to 2018 (see graph).

We have developed and advocated for numerous services to reduce ill health and to tackle the causes of ill health including the impact of intergenerational trauma. On this basis we present the following strategic priorities some of which are priorities for funding through the *A Better, Safer Future for Central Australia* plan. Critical to the successful development and implementation of these proposals is collaboration and consultation with the Aboriginal community and its organisations to take account of the lived reality of Aboriginal lives (especially in terms of mobility which will determine service placement and design).

Note that this document only summarises key priorities based on the history of the detailed policy work Congress has done over many years leading up to the current situation, and details of each of the proposals can be found in the accompanying documents.



Years of life lost as a result of premature mortality before age 75 (Central Australia (red) and Northern Territory (blue-green)).
Source: Congress History Project / Professor John Condon (in press, not for distribution)

Priority 1. Ensuring the effectiveness of funding

1.1 Using established collaborative forums to determine priorities

Numerous government funding programs in Aboriginal health and wellbeing have failed due to lack of engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders and collaboration with other government agencies. It is critical that the once-in-a-generation investment announced by the Northern Territory and Australian Governments is not wasted. Accordingly, all priorities and funding decisions should be determined through two existing collaborative forums, namely the Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Forum and the Northern Territory Executive Council on Closing The Gap / Aboriginal Affairs:

- a) *The Northern Territory Executive Council on Closing The Gap / Aboriginal Affairs*. The Council has membership from NT Chief Minister and Cabinet, the NIAA, the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory (LGANT) and the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APONT). Its role is to oversee the coordination and implementation of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- b) *The Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Forum*, a peak-level partnership with considerable public health expertise and a long history of successful collaboration between the Northern Territory and Australian Departments of Health, the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAAA), the NT PHN and Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT).

See for details:

- Congress Submission regarding the Draft Northern Territory Alcohol Action Plan, March 2023

1.2 Recognising Aboriginal community controlled health services (ACCHSs) as preferred providers

ACCHS provide a comprehensive model of care that goes beyond the treatment of individual clients for discrete medical conditions to include:

- a) a focus on cultural responsiveness
- b) assistance with access to health care (e.g. patient transport to the ACCHS and support and advocacy to access care elsewhere in the health system)
- c) population health programs including health promotion and disease prevention
- d) public health advocacy and intersectoral collaboration for health gain

- e) participation in local, regional and system-wide health planning processes
- f) use of data and research to build the evidence base for what works
- g) structures for community empowerment, engagement and control, and
- h) significant employment of Aboriginal people.

Their greater effectiveness in delivering health outcomes has been recognised by numerous studies and is embedded in Australian Government policy, including the *Closing the Gap Agreement*. Accordingly, ACCHSs should be formally recognised as preferred providers for all comprehensive primary health care services in Central Australia.

See for details:

- *Congress Response to the Draft recommendations from the Primary Health Reform Steering Group Discussion Paper to inform the development of the Primary Health Reform Steering Group recommendations on the Australian Government's Primary Health Care 10 Year Plan July 2021*

Priority 2. Services with a focus on early childhood

2.1 Integrated child and family support services based in primary health care

Congress has developed an evidence-based model of child and family support services founded on a long term population health approach which will deliver results in health and wellbeing across the life course. Integration of services under a single provider is the key to achieving this potentially transformative change, enabling children and families to be referred seamlessly to the services that best meet their needs. Fundamental to the effectiveness of these services is the 'bicultural pair' model, in which Aboriginal workers with have strong connections to community are paired with Caseworkers (social workers, counsellors or psychologists, for example).

The following services developed at Congress should be expanded to ensure availability across Central Australia:

- a) Targeted and Intensive Family Support: provides services that build on the strengths of families and communities to care for children within their culture while supporting families to navigate through the formal (western) world; supporting families to keep children safe at home and for families at risk of involvement with the child protection system; in addition to providing support for parents more broadly through the model of the Parenting Under Pressure (PUP) program;
- b) Child Health and Development centres: using a culturally adapted version of the Abecedarian approach, the CHaD accepts children from disadvantaged, non-working families from the age of six months until the child enters preschool, using

evidence-based strategies for teaching and learning with a strong focus on Aboriginal language and culture;

- c) Nurse Home Visiting programs, such as the Australian Nurse Family Partnership Program (ANFPP), a sustained home visitation program that promotes healthy development in pregnancy and early childhood; and
- d) Child and Youth Assessment and Treatment Service (CYATS): a multidisciplinary team for the early detection of neurodevelopmental conditions such as FASD, ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and providing diagnostic assessment, early intervention, and support

See for details:

- *Congress Response to the Department of Social Services Consultation Paper: Implementing the successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 August 2021*
- *Congress Submission to the NT Department of Education's Education Engagement Strategy: Discussion Paper, July 2021*
- *Congress Submission to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, November 2016*
- Ah Chee D, Boffa J, and Tilton E, *Towards an integrated model for child and family services in Central Australia*. Med J Aust, 2016. 205 (1)

2.2 Improved birthing outcomes for Aboriginal women

Continue with the establishment of a high-quality Midwifery Group Practice (MGP) service at Congress Alukura, fully integrated and networked into specialist services under a collaborative arrangement with Alice Springs Hospital, to support improved birthing outcomes for Aboriginal women in Central Australia, especially reduced pre-term labour and improved birth weights.

- Kildea S., and Roe, Y. (2020). *Investigation into the operational management of Congress Alukura Women's Health Service*, Molly Wardaguga Research Centre, Charles Darwin University.
- Kildea, Sue, Gao, Yu, Hickey, Sophie, Nelson, Carmel, Kruske, Sue, Carson, Adrian, Currie, Jody, Reynolds, Maree, Wilson, Kay, Watego, Kristie, Costello, Jo, and Roe, Yvette (2021). *Effect of a Birthing on Country service redesign on maternal and neonatal health outcomes for First Nations Australians: a prospective, non-randomised, interventional trial*. The Lancet Global Health 9 (5) e651-e659

Priority 3. Youth services

3.1 Therapeutic secure care rehabilitation for young people

Alternative models for youth detention, particularly for at risk populations, are required. For example the Diagrama Foundation focusses on the rehabilitation of young people through secure, therapeutic care and education preparing them for release and supporting them to gain the social and formal skills needed to obtain employment and re-integrate into their local community.

See for details:

- Congress Submission to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, November 2016
- Congress Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, September 2020
- Romero McGuire D, *A Blueprint for Change: Adapting the lessons of the Spanish Youth Justice System to the Northern Territory (Report of Diagrama visit, October 2019)*. 2019, Diagrama Foundation
- Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APONT) *Submission to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory*, July 2017

3.2 Youth support / diversion programs in remote communities

Detention can have a very negative effect on young people, through stigmatisation, disruption to positive family and community relationships, and exposure to the risk of further criminalisation. As far as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders are concerned, diversion programs have been shown to lead to reduced drug and substance use and reoffending, especially if programs include culturally appropriate treatment and rehabilitation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community Elders or facilitators.

Youth support and diversion programs are needed in remote communities where young Aboriginal people live. One successful model that could be explored is the Back Track program in Armidale NSW, providing caring, non-punitive, therapeutic treatment and education for its clients. The program is aimed at providing young people with the skills making them ready for employment opportunities in the pastoral industry and community development.

- Congress Submission to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, November 2016
- Congress Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, September 2020
- BackTrack: <https://backtrack.org.au/>

3.3 Supported Accommodation

Establish culturally responsive supported accommodation services in different localities in Alice Springs, focused on high needs families currently pregnant or with children in trouble, and through which they can access family support, maternity, psychological and other services. Note the potential for government to purchase the St. Mary's site for this purpose where a significant number of houses already exist with plenty of room to build more.

See for details:

- Congress Paper: *Rebuilding family life in Alice Springs and Central Australia: the social and community dimensions of change for our people*, 2011

Priority 4. Action on family violence

4.1 Support for women victims of family violence

Support for Aboriginal women experiencing or at risk of family violence, including

- a) reorientation of police and justice systems to ensure that family violence against Aboriginal women is treated equitably and with the seriousness that it deserves through specialist family violence units, with responses informed by local Aboriginal social and cultural knowledge
- b) establishment of mechanisms for coordination, information-sharing and case management amongst local agencies for Aboriginal women including those at lower levels of risk;
- c) needs-based funding for culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal women experiencing or at risk of family violence, including through free culturally safe crisis accommodation; women's support services (outreach and centre based); and advocacy services.
- d) establishment of integrated, evidence-based women's health and family support services for Aboriginal women in Aboriginal community controlled health services across Australia

See for details:

- Congress Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Legal & Constitutional Affairs *Inquiry into missing and murdered First Nations women and children*, December 2022

- Congress Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into Community Safety, Support Services and Job Opportunities in the Northern Territory, December 2022

4.2 Funding for a male cultural space / Men's shelter

That a male cultural space ('Men's Shelter') be piloted in Central Australia, incorporating male cultural leadership and therapeutic trauma-informed and healing focused care. Based on participatory action research principles, the pilot should investigate the possibility of the space including supported accommodation for mandated residential care for male perpetrators with the use of electronic monitoring to protect their families and the community where appropriate.

See for details:

- Congress Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Legal & Constitutional Affairs Inquiry into missing and murdered First Nations women and children, December 2022

4.3 Investigate the establishment of a Central Australian Regional Family Responsibility Commission

Formally investigate the development of a Central Australian Regional Family Responsibility Commission (FRC) to empower Elders to establish social norms with the authority to assert consequences (e.g. through application of limits on welfare payments) to families neglecting their children.

See for details:

- Congress Paper: *Rebuilding family life in Alice Springs and Central Australia: the social and community dimensions of change for our people*, 2011

Priority 5. Action on the social determinants

5.1 Healthy public policy and services on alcohol

Address alcohol as a major determinant of harm for individuals, children, families and the community through continuing and expanding population level restrictions on supply and establishing appropriate treatment services, including:

- a) Maintaining current restrictions on the sale of takeaway alcohol

- b) Putting in place a well-resourced system for the monitoring and administration of Interim Alcohol Protected Areas
- c) Expand availability of non-residential alcohol treatment as part of comprehensive primary health care for clients with alcohol problems, based on Congress' three streams of care (medical; psychological and socio-cultural support).
- d) Address the shortage of an Aboriginal workforce to address alcohol
- e) Ensure a range of legislative changes are made to protect Central Australian people and economy from the harms of unrestricted access to alcohol, including through indexation of the floor-price for alcohol as per the *NT Liquor Act*.

See for details:

- Congress Submission regarding the Draft Northern Territory Alcohol Action Plan, March 2023
- Congress Input to the Three-Year Review of the Northern Territory Liquor Act 2019, March 2023

5.2 Improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal young people

Without an education system that delivers results for its Aboriginal citizens, the Northern Territory will fail to 'close the gap' in health (as measured by life expectancy), as committed to in National Agreement on Closing the Gap. As well as action on early childhood and adult literacy, we recommend a range of reforms to NT school education including

- a) the provision of two years of preschool at twenty hours per week for all Aboriginal children
- b) evidence-based teaching
- c) supporting developmentally vulnerable children through the development of individual learning plans with wrap around family support services as needed
- d) improving staffing levels and turnover at all schools
- e) developing a population-based funding model for Northern Territory schools,
- f) developing a clear definition of bilingual education and implementing this in appropriate schools, and
- g) an accommodation facility where young people coming to town for secondary school can live with a choice of school.

See for details:

- Congress Submission to the NT Department of Education's Education Engagement Strategy: Discussion Paper, July 2021

5.3 Action to address housing overcrowding and homelessness

High levels of government investment in culturally appropriate, well-maintained remote housing is critical to addressing the very high rates of Aboriginal overcrowding and homelessness in the Northern Territory. Such investment must be increased and sustained over the long term; guided by genuine Aboriginal community input; and must take account of future population increases.

In addition, substantially increased provision of urban public housing stock is urgently required to reverse decades of under-investment, to increase the numbers of public housing dwellings available across the Territory, decrease wait times and decrease very high rates of homelessness (noting that wait times for public housing in Alice Springs are currently around 7 years, and around 11 years in Tennant Creek).

- Congress Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into homelessness in Australia, June 2020

5.4 Employment and workforce

Aboriginal community controlled organisations are major employers of Aboriginal people in Central Australia. Congress itself employs over 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including in management and leadership positions. However, there is currently a primary health care workforce crisis, affecting much of regional and rural Australia. In this context, the availability of a workforce – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal professionals where appropriately skilled Aboriginal people are not available – needs to be addressed if the expansion of services in Central Australia with Australian Government funding is to be successful.

Congress has identified a suite of potential short-term, medium-term and long-term policy options to address workforce shortages of staff. Those of most relevance to the Central Australian region are as follows:

- a) Provide tax relief (e.g. full or significant partial tax exemptions or credits) for all essential workers in MM6 and MM7 areas, with a gradient based on remoteness throughout Central Australia (including practising primary health care professionals, teachers, police, etc)

- b) Implement a Commonwealth funded retention payment system for remote essential workers after 12 months of service
- c) Establish a skills-based Aboriginal Health Worker training program, commencing at certificate 2, delivered in communities to provide a pathway for Aboriginal community members into the health professions
- d) Support two-year graduate nurse programs such as that developed by Congress
- e) support the establishment of a national 'Aboriginal Health Worker' profession at Certificate II level to provide an entry point for community members to the health professions;
- f) establish a national scheme of scholarships and cadetships directed especially through ACCHSs to support the training of the multidisciplinary primary health care team including Aboriginal medical receptionists, nurses, psychologists and social workers.
- g) Expand Aboriginal leadership at all levels of the health system, including as managers, administrators, and health professionals, through cadetship and scholarship programs

See for details:

- *Congress Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into Community Safety, Support Services and Job Opportunities in the Northern Territory, December 2022*

5.5 Adult literacy programs

Improving adult literacy is critical to addressing the drivers of disadvantage, social inequality, poverty, poor school performances, and incarceration. Adult literacy is fundamental to developing 'literacy practices' (reading, writing, interpreting text) within families, which then support children to engage and perform well at school. To address, this, the Literacy for Life adult literacy campaign should be extended to the Northern Territory to improve adult literacy, support literacy practices in families, and build a culture that values learning amongst adults and children.

See for details:

- *Congress Submission to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, November 2016*
- *Congress Submission to the NT Department of Education's Education Engagement Strategy: Discussion Paper, July 2021*

5.6 Ensuring the NDIS delivers services to meet the needs of those in the community

Central Australia is operating in a 'thin market' where the providers of NDIS services are unable to meet the demand of a very remote, mobile population with high levels of disability. We understand that there are around \$100 million in approved NDIS plans in Central Australia, but the holders of many of these plans are unable to access services as there are not enough providers with only two currently going into some very remote communities. Congress proposes formally investigating the development of increased provider capacity for Central Australia by setting up a disability service organisation to meet the extra demand. The organisation will require 'seed' funding while it establishes itself and recruits clients; after which the number of funded plans in Central Australia should make it financially independent.

See for details:

- Congress Submission to the Department of Social Services / National Disability Insurance Agency National Disability Insurance Scheme Thin Markets Project, August 2019

5.7 A fair, appropriate system for citizenship entitlements

In remote Central Australia both poverty and inequality are worsening for Aboriginal people, with real incomes falling and the income gap to non-Aboriginal people widening. Unless action is taken on this fundamental issue, many other programs and services will fail or have limited effect.

Aboriginal people are disproportionately dependent on citizenship entitlements such as Jobseeker. However, these are inadequate to meet the needs of families and their children, especially in remote areas where the cost of living is much higher. Living on jobseeker means living in poverty and this is the reality for too many Aboriginal people. Strong advocacy is therefore needed for the Australian Government to increase Jobseeker to 90% of the Aged pension.

In addition to the inadequacy of the payment levels, it is very common for Aboriginal families to not receive their entitlements due both to inflexible and inappropriate program rules and to low English literacy. We acknowledge the recent action of the Australian Government to provide a Centrelink Liaison Officer at Congress, to ensure Aboriginal community members receive the benefits to which they are entitled. Such positions should be provided and embedded within Aboriginal community controlled organisations across Central Australia, especially in remote areas.

See for details:

- Congress Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into Community Safety,

Support Services and Job Opportunities in the Northern Territory, December 2022