



Submission to DSS review of children, youth and parenting programs

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

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Summary

This submission responds to questions 9 and 10 of the discussion paper, addressing the involvement of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) has been supporting the delivery of HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters) in 50 First Nations focused sites across Australia for nearly a decade. As part of an agreed strategy with Department of Social Services (DSS), we have recently been facilitating the transition of HIPPY from non-Indigenous organisations to local ACCOs. We believe lessons learned from this ongoing transition can be used to inform efforts to strengthen outcomes for First Nations children, youth and parenting programs and future transition and reform.

BSL recommends DSS:

- Fund transition activities separately to program operating costs. Strengthening the role of ACCOs in programs, and transferring programs from mainstream organisations to ACCOs, involves additional costs. Each transition requires careful planning, relationship management, comprehensive communications, community consultations led by an independent facilitator and program establishment resources. These costs are not included in current grant agreement allocations.
- Prioritise the development of the evidence-based transition approach as highlighted in the July 2024 Families Australia report *Changing the Balance*, and develop a national transition blueprint which would articulate the timing and process for the transitions needed across government departments and program areas.
- Consider supporting small and developing ACCOs in locations where there are no other or few appropriate ACCOs.

About the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and this review

BSL is a social justice organisation working towards an Australia free of poverty through our leadership on policy reform, our partnerships with communities and the quality of our services.

BSL welcomes the DSS Families and Children (FaC) Activity programs consultation and an opportunity to provide comment.

The consultation seeks feedback on specific programs, and on changes to strengthen outcomes for First Nations children, youth and parenting programs. This submission is focussed on the First Nations component.

This submission responds to two questions in the discussion paper.

Question 9: How could the number of ACCOs delivering FaC children, youth and parenting programs be increased within existing funding, especially in First Nations focused communities?

BSL has been supporting the delivery of HIPPY in 50 First Nations focused sites across Australia for nearly a decade. Over time the number of ACCOs delivering HIPPY has increased to 22 and through 2024 BSL has been developing a transition approach that will enable further transitions to ACCOs to occur in 2025.

Our experience lies in targeted transitioning of program delivery from a mainstream provider to an ACCO. Our broad experience demonstrates that increasing the number of ACCOs delivering an early learning program, such as HIPPY, requires dedicated funding support and cannot be done using existing funding alone. Growing First Nations involvement and leadership by transitioning programs to ACCOs is not a 'dollar-for-dollar' swap. Program and system redesign, and the support of ACCOs through a program establishment phase needs to be well resourced and supported. In relation to HIPPY, all available program funding and staff resources are focussed on HIPPY delivery. The key challenge for these organisations is maintaining service continuity for children and families while undergoing transition at the same time. Currently, there is no capacity for funds to be redirected to this significant organisational work. Additional transition costs include:

- **Supporting self-determination** – Independent facilitation by First Nations representatives is required to support local First Nations community-led decisions related to the most appropriate ACCO to deliver the service. This community consultation cannot be led by local non-Indigenous providers or BSL, as the purpose of these consultations is to ensure First Nations people determine the decisions related to delivery of HIPPY. While the views of the local non-Indigenous providers are very important and need to be considered, the non-Indigenous providers should not be decision makers in this context. Both SNAICC and Wunan Foundation have stated that resourcing independent First Nations facilitation is important to enable self-determination by the local First Nations people with cultural authority to make decisions.
- **Establishment** – Establishing new programs in ACCOs requires resources. While ongoing operating funds may be transferred from the mainstream organisation to the ACCO, establishing a new program will require additional funds upfront for the purchase of office equipment and

furniture, ICT hardware (phones and laptops), leases for cars and vans, and for recruitment and training and development.

- **Program transfer** – The transition from a mainstream organisation to an ACCO is a complex process. Transition activities and costs include:
 - Human resources – including the costs of redundancies resulting from the transfer of the program from one provider to another. Staff do not automatically transfer with the program so for some staff redundancy packages are required.
 - Local staff need to be allocated to partnership and transition management. This may include meeting attendance and coordination, relationship management, winding down the program including transfer of records and filing, ending leases, or packing up offices. Communications need to be developed and distributed to other service users, community members and stakeholders.
 - A period of post-transition support for the ACCO by the non-Indigenous provider to ensure smooth operation and that service delivery is uninterrupted for children and families.

Importantly, as stated above, it should not be assumed that transition is a cost neutral transfer of program funds, and that the non-Indigenous organisation simply stops service delivery on a Friday and the ACCO starts service delivery on the following Monday. Enabling self-determination and transitions to ACCOs requires investment in the ACCO organisation as a whole, non-Indigenous provider, the local partnerships and operational transfer process. An approach that increases the number of ACCOs without increasing funding relies on the goodwill on both the ACCOs and the mainstream organisations, putting additional financial and viability pressure on them and potentially jeopardising long-term local relationships, risking the delivery of quality children’s and family services and potentially setting incoming ACCOs up to fail.

Question 10: Considering the key elements for successful transition listed above, are there any other elements that would be important? (If yes, please specify.)

In addition to supporting an intra-organisational transfer of services, transfers to ACCOs should not only look at ways to increase engagement with First Nations community members but consider the long-term impact on non-Indigenous participants. Using the example of HIPPY, sites are categorised as ‘First Nations focused sites’, but they are inclusive of any family, First Nations or non-Indigenous, who meets the program entry criteria. Throughout the HIPPY transition trial phase, the ACCOs providing the program have been highly receptive to providing services for all current families. However, one of the aims of the transition is to increase the number of First Nations families engaging with HIPPY, and over time demand from First Nations families may result in constrained service availability for non-Indigenous families. This may result in community division and disharmony.

There is also a risk that ACCOs may be overwhelmed by the number of programs being transferred at the same time across a range of services. A recent example occurred in a region where the only ACCO that could deliver HIPPY declined the program. Their decision was because there were

multiple programs being received into the organisation at the same time resulting in a lack of capacity and resources to establish HIPPY.

More broadly, DSS should prioritise the development of the evidence-based transition approach as highlighted in the July 2024 Families Australia report *Changing the Balance*, which will ensure that transitions are executed well and risks for all stakeholders are identified and mitigated. In addition, BSL recommends DSS consider developing a national transition blueprint which articulates the timing and process for transitions needed across government departments and program areas. Having a well-communicated and coordinated national approach would mean that providers would understand current transition priorities. Applying limits to the number of transitions taking place in a particular local area at the same time would support a more effective transition which would allow time for programs to be established in the ACCO before another service is transferred.

Finally, DSS should consider supporting small and developing ACCOs in regions where there are no other appropriate or limited number of ACCOs. BSL is aware of fledgling organisations that have potential and local community support but need resources to fully establish themselves. Flexible funds to fast track these organisations through financial, governance, internal policy and procedure development, and recruitment support could enable these organisations, particularly in remote locations, to develop to provide quality child, youth and family programs.