



26 May 2006

Open letter to The Hon. Mal Brough MP  
Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and its members, representing agencies providing services to over three million Australians, write this joint and open letter in order to convey our concern at conditions within some Indigenous communities in Australia.

We welcome your recent focus on this issue and your stated commitment to taking urgent, much-needed action to address the level of abuse and violence in some Indigenous communities.

While it is imperative that children be protected from harm, solutions to the alarming levels of abuse in Indigenous communities cannot be addressed by the legal system or the child protection system alone. In moving forward, ACOSS and its members encourage the Government to invest in addressing the causes, as well as the symptoms, of these problems in Indigenous communities.

The World Health Organisation has identified the following five risk factors that are more likely to lead to child maltreatment and abuse: high density of people living together; poor socio-economic status; social isolation; high levels of stress, and; a history of abuse or violence in families. All of these factors are present in Australian Indigenous communities, whose members often live in third-world conditions with poor health, housing and education.

The Government must work with Indigenous families and communities to identify solutions to the factors that impact on violence in communities. This can be accomplished by improving housing and living conditions, boosting educational and employment opportunities, providing more funding to health services, establishing community and social development programs on alcohol and substance abuse and supporting Indigenous early childhood education & care and legal services.

As first steps towards addressing Indigenous disadvantage, as detailed in ACOSS's recent Budget submission, we propose that the Government:

- Create and resource an Indigenous housing plan, which would take into account the findings of the Grants Commission report and input from Indigenous communities.



- Boost funding to health services (particularly Indigenous community controlled health services) as part of a holistic approach to health equity.
- Work with communities to build capacity and increase opportunities for employment and economic development.
- Establish additional community-based Indigenous child-care services which are multifunctional and responsive to community needs.
- Allocate sufficient funding to Indigenous Women's Legal Services to enable adequate provision of effective legal services for Indigenous women in family law and family violence matters, including funding for additional culturally-sensitive services in areas of greatest need.

We, the undersigned organizations, welcome ongoing dialogue with the Australian Government about its approach to Indigenous disadvantage. We hope that our combined concern and efforts will support Indigenous communities to find solutions that give their children a better start to life.

Yours sincerely,

ACOSS President Lin Hatfield Dodds

Anglicare Australia Executive  
Director Sue Leppert

Australian Federation of Homelessness  
Organisations Executive Officer Jack Quinane

Brotherhood of St Laurence  
Executive Director Tony Nicholson

Catholic Social Services Australia  
Executive Director Frank Quinlan

Colony 47 CEO Sue Ham

Jesuit Social Services Associate Director  
Father Peter Norden SJ.

National Council for Single  
Mothers & their Children  
Convenor Elspeth Mc Innes

National Welfare Rights Network  
President Michael Raper

The Salvation Army National  
Secretary Lt. Colonel John Staite

Uniting *Care* Australia  
Associate Director Colleen Geyer

ACTCOSS Director Ara Creswell

NTCOSS Executive Director  
Wendy Morton

NCOSS Director Gary Moore

SACOSS Director Karen Grogan

TASCOSS CEO Mat Rowell

WACOSS President  
Rae Walter

VCOSS Director Cath Smith