

POLICY STATEMENT

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Carers

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers make vital contributions to their family, friends and communities. Carers NSW aims to increase awareness and recognition of carer roles in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and promote effective, culturally appropriate support.

Profile

In 2016 an estimated 20 600 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers aged 15 years and over were living in New South Wales (NSW).ⁱ Service providers working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities report very high levels of caring, suggesting that the true number of carers in these communities is much greater.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to be carers than the general population. The high incidence of caring in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is linked to the greater prevalence of disability and chronic health conditions in these communities.ⁱⁱ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers are more likely to be women, and are significantly younger than other carers on average.ⁱⁱⁱ

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers often have strong connections with their families and communities through kinship systems and view care as a shared family and community responsibility.

Research also indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers are more likely than other carers to support multiple care recipients.^{iv} This is particularly true of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who often have multi-generational caring roles.^v

'In Aboriginal culture, as a Torres Strait Aboriginal woman, we kind of do it anyway without noticing. Caring is the way in our culture that it just comes naturally. Culturally, it's a big part of our lives.'

**Dolly Brown, Carers NSW
Reconciliation Action Plan 2016-18**



The socio-economic disparities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are well documented. Being a carer can result in additional challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including balancing paid work and care.^{vi} The effect of providing care on paid employment is particularly significant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men.^{vii}

Wellbeing appears to be lower among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers than other carers, with 70% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents to the Carers NSW 2016 Carer Survey reporting high levels of distress.

Policy and legislation

Public sector agencies in NSW are obliged under the *NSW Carers (Recognition) Act 2010* to ensure their staff and agents are aware of the principles of the NSW Carers Charter (Schedule 1 of the Act) and reflect the Charter in their HR policies. Human service agencies are additionally required to ensure their staff and agents enact the principles of the Charter. The Charter lists a range of best practice principles for working with carers, including a principle recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers.

‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, heritage and concepts of caring should be respected and valued.’

NSW Carers Charter

‘All carers should have the same rights, choices and opportunities as other Australians, regardless of...Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander heritage, cultural or linguistic differences....’

Statement for Australia’s Carers

The Commonwealth *Carer Recognition Act 2010* refers to diversity and carers of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage in its Statement for Australia’s Carers (Schedule 1 of the Act). Public service agencies must raise awareness of, and reflect, these principles.

The *NSW Carers Strategy 2014-2019* was developed in consultation with Aboriginal communities and Project 3.4 within the Strategy – Information for carers in Aboriginal communities – commits the NSW Government to working with Aboriginal community partners and key stakeholders to develop and distribute practical resources for Aboriginal carers.

Key issues

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers experience many of the same challenges as non-Indigenous carers, however, the care they provide is influenced by a range of unique historical, cultural, spiritual and socio-economic factors.

Carer identification

Despite the higher prevalence of disability and caring in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers are less likely to use support services.^{viii} One reason is that they may not identify themselves as carers. The term ‘disability’ is not used by many Aboriginal communities within NSW,^{ix} and may be rejected to avoid labelling, stigmatisation or exclusion. Because caring is so common, it is often seen as a natural extension of normal family roles and ultimately a community responsibility, reducing the likelihood that carers will seek assistance from formal carer support services.

Cultural and historical barriers

Another reason for low service uptake is distrust of service providers due to experiences of discrimination and inter-generational trauma from historical mistreatment and government interventions. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander carers often find that the limited mainstream services that are available are not culturally appropriate. Limited choice may also prevent carers from accessing formal support. ^x

Socio-economic factors

Socio-economic factors, such as low income and lack of access to transport, represent a common barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers accessing services. This barrier is particularly common for carers in rural and remote areas of NSW, where service availability is already limited.

Key recommendations

To improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, Carers NSW will work towards and advocate for:

1. **Self-determination** through enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers to shape the policies and programs which affect them.
2. **Raising awareness** of carer supports and services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through accessible and culturally appropriate information.
3. **Flexible, holistic services** that accommodate diverse caring circumstances and historical and cultural factors, as well as supporting existing kinship networks.
4. **Culturally secure services** delivered through or in partnership with services and staff who have built relationships and established trust within Aboriginal communities.
5. **Increased social and emotional wellbeing** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, taking into account the importance of cultural and spiritual factors.

‘Allowing time for stories to be shared and working alongside the families, for they will tell you what they really need.’

June Reimer, Carers NSW Conference 2015.

ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) *Census of Population and Housing*, table I09, Canberra.

ⁱⁱ NSW Ministry of Health (2012) *NSW Aboriginal Health Plan 2013-2023*, North Sydney;. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011). *The health and welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: An Overview*, Canberra.

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) *Census of Population and Housing*, table I09 +GCP1, Canberra.

^{iv} Carers NSW (2014) *Carers NSW 2014 Carer Survey: Main report*, Carers NSW, Sydney.

^v Wall, S and Koori Growing Old Well Study Project Team at Neuroscience Research Australia, in partnership with The Benevolent Society (2013), *Working with Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*.

^{vi} *ibid*.

^{vii} Hunter, B., Gray, M. & Crawford H. (2016) ‘Who Cares and Does it Matter for the Labour Market? A Longitudinal Analysis of the Labour Force Status of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Carers’, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Canberra: ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences,

^{viii} Carers Australia (2013) *Practical ways to overcome isolation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers*, Canberra.

^{ix} NSW Aboriginal Community Care Gathering Committee (2011) *Challenge, Change and Choice- Policy Position*, p. 10, Sydney, 2011: Carers Australia (2013) *Practical ways to overcome isolation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers*, Canberra.

^x Carers Australia (2013) *Practical ways to overcome isolation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers*, Canberra, 2013