

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 caring roles in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and promote effective, culturally appropriate support.

Profile

According to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014-15, approximately one in four (24%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in New South Wales (NSW) had provided unpaid care to a person with disability, a long-term health condition or old age in the four weeks prior to interviewed. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more likely than men to be caring for someone (30%), as were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote areas (34%).¹

Research also indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers are more likely than other carers to support multiple people in need of care. This is particularly true of older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who often have multi-generational caring roles.² The 2018 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers found that 834,300 NSW residents, or 13.2% of the population, had caring responsibilities.³ While the methods for identifying carers in the two surveys differ, this suggests that caring is nearly twice as prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

'For me, as an Aboriginal person...I'm caring for my Pop...It's like a cultural responsibility, this is just what you do.'

Aboriginal young carer

The higher 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.⁴ Other contributing factors include limited appropriate service options and reluctance to engage in formal services for historical and cultural reasons. At the same time, 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.

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)

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

NSW Carers Charter

and reflect the Charter in their human resources 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.

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: Caring in NSW 2020 – 2030*⁵ was developed in consultation with Aboriginal communities and prioritises supporting Aboriginal carers to access supports and services that build on their strengths and culture.

Key challenges

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

Socio-economic disadvantage

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.



While not representative of the broader population, the Carers NSW 2020 National Carer Survey received 142 responses from carers who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander nationwide, 54 of whom were living in NSW.⁶ Compared with other respondents, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers were more likely to experience financial stress, more likely to report an annual household income of under \$50,000 and less likely to be employed.⁷

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.

‘There are many barriers for [people from Aboriginal backgrounds] to access services including cultural preference, lack of knowledge about the system and lack of cultural competency in service delivery.’

NSW Carers Strategy: Caring in NSW 2020 - 2030

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.⁸ One reason is that they may not identify themselves as carers. The term ‘disability’ is not used by many Aboriginal communities within NSW⁹ and the term ‘carer’ is often associated with other types of relationships such as foster care and kinship care, which differ from the definition of carer under the *NSW Carers (Recognition) Act 2010*. Further, because caring is so common, it is often seen in these communities as a natural extension of normal family roles and a community responsibility, reducing the likelihood that carers will seek formal assistance.

Cultural and historical barriers

Another reason for low service uptake among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers is distrust of service providers due to past 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.¹⁰

‘Carers need to be supported to remain proud and deadly, to survive and thrive while taking on their caring role.’

Aboriginal carer at a 2019 co-design workshop for the NSW Carers Strategy

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.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014-15*, Cat. No. 4714.0, available online at <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4714.0~2014-15~Main%20Features~Key%20findings~1>, last updated 3 October 2019.

² Carers NSW (2020) 2020 National Carer Survey, unpublished data.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019), *Survey of Ageing, Disability and Carers 2018*, TableBuilder Dataset, Australian Government, Canberra. Available online at: www.abs.gov.au.

⁴ NSW Ministry of Health (2012), *NSW Aboriginal Health Plan 2013-2023*, NSW Ministry of Health, North Sydney; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011), *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: An Overview*, AIHW, Canberra.

⁵ NSW Government (2020), *NSW Carers Strategy: Caring in NSW 2020 – 2030*, NSW Government, Sydney. Available online at: <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/download?file=791991>, last accessed 2 November 2020.

⁶ Carers NSW (2020) *2020 National Carer Survey: Summary Report*, Carers NSW, North Sydney. Available online at: www.carersnsw.org.au/research/survey.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Carers Australia (2013) *Practical ways to overcome isolation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers*, Canberra.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Carers Australia (2013).