

31 August 2023

Position Statement



Workforce

Background

The World Health Organisation has recognised a global health workforce shortage and calls for countries to actively strengthen their health workforce through adequate investment into health sector education and training, deployment of health workers into rural, remote, and underserved areas, and better planning to meet community health needs (World Health Organisation, 2022). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing workforce play a critical role in ensuring Community are able to access and receive Culturally safe and holistic health care (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in Victoria are a leading employer of Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander people, however, there remain ongoing shortages of the workforce across the sector (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, 2022).

Introduction

Shortages are present in Australia's health and social support workforce, with a reduction of applicants for suitable roles, employers struggling to fill vacancies, burnt out staff, and a 12.2% increase in job changes by the end of February 2022 (National Skills Commission, 2022). In Victoria it is projected that there needs to be an increase of at least 65,000 new health and community service employees by the end of 2025, with regional areas at the forefront of workforce shortages (Victorian Skills Authority, 2022).

Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria are significantly under-represented in the health workforce, with identified staff representing less than 1% of Medical Nursing Workforce, and are significantly underrepresented overall in the total health workforce staff in Victoria (374.4 vs 521.5 per 10,000) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Furthermore, it is estimated that there are Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander workforce deficits in many community, social and wellbeing professions, with historical targets of employment at 2.5% for Justice and Safety support (Department of Justice and Community Safety, 2023), and only around 1% of the social work workforce identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).



The under-representation in the workforce contributes to the already ongoing challenges for reduced access to health and wellbeing services for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community, as well as further increasing the strain on the existing services ACCOs provide.

This is within a current context of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* stating that Aboriginal Community Controlled services are best placed to meet the healthcare needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In agreeing to implement priority reform two, *building capacity of the community-controlled sector, this places Aboriginal health back in Aboriginal hands, enabling self-determination and creating better health outcomes for Community* (Commonwealth of Australia: Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2023).

Additionally, ACCOs are a significant employer of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with over half of their employees identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). This employment provides economic independence and higher levels of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, addressing key socioeconomic issues.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031 (National Workforce Plan) aims to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the health workforce proportional to the population (e.g., 3.43 per cent nation-wide) by 2031 (Australian Government, 2022).

Following the release of the National Workforce Plan, VACCHO has developed and commenced implementation of the *Victorian Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Workforce Strategy 2022-2026* (the Strategy). The Strategy aims to build on existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce policies, including the Workforce Plan (Australian Government, 2022), to increase employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the ACCO sector and the broader health system in Victoria, to create a more Culturally safe healthcare environment.

In building the workforce for the ACCO sector in Victoria, the following key issues have been identified:

- Disparity in funding and capacity to provide a competitive remuneration packaging in a competitive employment environment, career development and employee wellbeing support.
- Significant number of ACCOs also deliver programs that provide a holistic approach and deliver a diverse range of programs in addition to clinical support (e.g., NDIS and Aged Care, Just Support, Cultural Services, Early Education, Family Supports, Social and Emotional Wellbeing, Housing and Homelessness, Transport).

- There is a need to implement development strategies to build the entire workforce as described above, as well as non-client facing support staff (e.g., Human Resources, Finance, Governance, Executive), who are critical for the operation of ACCOs.
- Work together to change the current competitive approach and implement a partnership approach across health providers for the employment, and training, of key health staff within rural and remote locations.
- Maintain an ongoing focus on building education pathways within schools and vocational/tertiary institutions to foster engagement and employment in the ACCO sector.

VACCHO Position

Ensure all current and future Workforce strategies include plans and are funded appropriately to increase recruitment and retention of the whole of ACCO sector workforce. This will be necessary to provide the full range of services offered by ACCOs and to address the various factors that affect health.

For example, strategies should also consider long-term investment and support for Social and Emotional Wellbeing workers, Disability and Aged Care receptionists, practice managers, Human Resource staff, and Information Technology staff. This will help to address the shortage of workforce in these areas and create sustainable staffing pipelines for the future.

VACCHO advocates for a partnership approach with other health providers across Victoria to support improved recruitment, retention and resource sharing for critical workforces. This is to also include joint mechanisms for ongoing training and support for staff, including joint placements, secondments, internships, and graduate programs.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1:

That Commonwealth and Victorian governments provide additional flexible funding to ACCOs to address pay parity and training opportunities for their staff in a way that suits the unique needs of their organisation, and to support and strengthen community-controlled health services, consistent with priority reform two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

The Victorian Government fund the full implementation of the Victorian Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Workforce Strategy (2022-2026), to support the ongoing recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander Workforce.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

That Victorian Government fund the full implementation of the *First Nations Workforce Strategy for Action*, which includes actions relating to addressing pay parity and training to attract and retain a skilled health workforce across both mainstream and ACCO services in Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

There is a strong dialogue with commitment to action between VACCHO and the Department of Health for the implementation of the forthcoming Workforce Strategy, to ensure meaningful change for the Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander health and wellbeing workforce.

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