

31 July 2020

New Closing the Gap targets welcome, but action is what's needed

The Queensland Human Rights Commission has welcomed yesterday's announcement of new Closing the Gap targets to improve outcomes for Indigenous Australians as positive, but says now is the time for action.

"It is encouraging to see a refreshed commitment to reducing the appalling levels of disadvantage many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still face, and to see that community have been involved in identifying priorities and setting these new targets," says Queensland Human Rights Commissioner, Scott McDougall.

"What would be more encouraging is if concrete action now follows."

The Commission says the priority areas identified by the new targets are critical ones and have been for some time.

"It is heartening to see us finally name issues like over-incarceration and tragically high suicide rates as a priority for government attention," says Mr McDougall.

"There are scandalously disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, women and children detained within the criminal justice system.

"It should be our national shame. And while I'm pleased to finally see governments commit to action to reduce these rates of incarceration, I am also urging them to make sure they follow through."

Many of the priority areas identified in the new targets – such as maintaining language and kinship ties, reducing rates of child removal from First Nations families, and improving educational outcomes – are supported by rights now protected under Queensland's Human Rights Act and therefore come under the purview of the Commission.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility, from 10 to 14, is one action the Commission says governments could take right now if they are serious about making these targets a reality.

"We were incredibly disappointed to see a decision on raising the age of criminal responsibility delayed yet again this week, while we wait for the results of yet another report," says Mr McDougall.

"It's a logical starting point, and one that we could start working on right now."

Mr McDougall says that there have been too many reports, inquiries, and consultations on the issue of Indigenous disadvantage, and that the time for action is now.



“We know what the issues are. We also know how to address them – through culturally safe service delivery, through justice reinvestment, through family and community support. Community knows what works. There’s no shortage of knowledge and experience in community about what needs to be done. Now they need to be supported and resourced to put these solutions into action.”

“We don’t want to be in the position, in 12 months’ time or 24 months’ time, of hearing that once again we haven’t met our targets under the Closing the Gap strategy. We need all governments – federal, state and territory – to work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identify and implement the actions that will achieve these targets. Governments must be prepared to create sincere power-sharing relationships with community if they are to achieve these important goals,” says Mr McDougall.

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