



# **Yalu Aboriginal Corporation**

Submission to the Productivity Commission

**Determinants of Regional Airfares Inquiry**

Galiwinku (Elcho Island), Northern Territory

March 2026

## About Yalu Aboriginal Corporation

Yalu Aboriginal Corporation is a Yolŋu-led Aboriginal charity based in Galiwinku on Elcho Island in Northeast Arnhem Land. Yalu works with children, families and community members to strengthen culture and support community wellbeing.

Galiwinku is a remote island community with no road access to the rest of Australia. Flying is therefore the primary way people travel to and from the community. For many remote communities across Arnhem Land and the Torres Strait, aviation is not discretionary transport—it is essential in connecting people to services, employment, healthcare and family networks.

## Regional Aviation and Closing the Gap

Prohibitively expensive flights affect all Aboriginal people living in remote communities and their family members living in urban areas. Expensive airfares also negatively affect Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and other service providers in their ability to run programs and deliver services designed to produce outcomes to reach Closing the Gap targets.

For remote Aboriginal communities such as Galiwinku, access to affordable and reliable flights is closely linked to progress against several targets in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. One-way flights from Galiwinku to Darwin or visa versa are generally over \$600 and up to almost \$1000. It is often cheaper for an overseas return flight than it is for just a one way ticket between Darwin and communities in the Northeast Arnhem Land region.

Communities in Northeast Arnhem Land have no road access to major service centres such as Darwin. Aviation is therefore the primary way people travel for education, employment and services. Where airfares are extremely high as they are in this region, this creates structural barriers that affect progress toward Closing the Gap outcomes.

Affordable flights would support progress toward all Closing the Gap outcomes.

## Outcomes 1 and 14: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives and high levels of social and emotional wellbeing

It is widely understood that maintaining strong social networks contributes significantly to living long healthy lives and social and emotional wellbeing. Many Yolŋu are disconnected from close kin who may live in urban areas or other communities only accessible by plane. Yalu works with families who have:

- children in care
- loved ones whose medical needs require them to live away from family
- family members who are detained
- family who are dispersed across the region due to housing shortages and other factors.

Extremely expensive flights are prohibitive in allowing people to stay connected with family in these circumstances. This is in addition to other obvious negative effects such as gaining access to regular healthcare and preventative services.

It is worth noting that where Yolŋu are unable to afford flights, they regularly take small water craft which are generally not seaworthy and which are full of adults and children through crocodile-inhabited waters, sometimes in extreme weather conditions just to see family or attend funerals in other far away communities.

## **Outcomes 4 and 12: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years are not overrepresented in the child protection system.**

It is widely known that removing Aboriginal children from their families causes long-term trauma, disconnects them from their culture and kin and increases their chance to come into contact with the justice system – usually ongoing throughout their lives.

For those children who are in out-of-home care, Yalu works with their families to identify appropriate kinship carers and to reconnect children in care with their families and communities. The ability for families to be able to maintain that connection depends wholly on their ability to access flights. While child protection agencies may bear the cost of extremely limited visits for reunification, families who wish to maintain more regular contact must pay the exorbitant airfares to do so.

Expensive airfares mean that children in care are deprived of the opportunity to thrive and indeed will continue to suffer the effects of being disconnected from family, well into their adult years.

## **Outcomes 7 and 8: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are engaged in employment or education and strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.**

Yalu Aboriginal Corporation is one of the main employment providers in the Northeast Arnhem Land region and many of our staff are youth.

For a grassroots organisation such as Yalu to be able to continue to provide meaningful employment to Yolŋu youth and to continue to grow and increase employment opportunities for Yolŋu generally, Yalu must recruit specialist staff and contractors from outside the community to provide appropriate support.

Prohibitively expensive airfares is one of the key barriers for organisations such as Yalu to be able to create the conditions in which Yolŋu can be engaged in employment or participate in education initiatives. The factors affecting this include:

- Workforce recruitment and retention – external staff are disincentivised to live in remote settings where flights to maintain family connections or take leave are too costly.
- External training providers – training and education opportunities for youth could be broadened and more regular if the cost of airfares were more reasonable.
- Yalu would be able to increasingly provide employment and education opportunities to surrounding Yolŋu communities, which are only accessible by air.

## **Outcomes 10, 11 and 13: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and young people are not overrepresented in the criminal justice system and families and households are safe**

Yalu provides services and programs which aim to reduce contact with the justice system in the first place and also to reduce recidivism. From our preventative programs and services targeted toward children, youth and families, through to working with Yolŋu who are incarcerated, previously convicted of offences or due to stand trial.

All of these services and programs are directly affected by expensive airfares in ways already mentioned and also by creating a barrier for Yolŋu families and support staff to attend trials, visit incarcerated kin and provide guidance and support to reduce recidivism.

## **Policy Considerations**

Remote resident airfare subsidy or cap schemes could reduce the cost of essential travel for residents of remote communities. Western Australia's Regional Airfare Zone Cap Scheme provides an example of a policy approach designed to reduce airfare costs for regional residents.

Community service obligation arrangements could also be considered for routes that function as essential service connections rather than purely commercial aviation routes.

Funding models for programs delivered in remote communities should recognise aviation travel as a structural cost of service delivery.

## **Conclusion**

For remote Aboriginal communities such as Galiwinku, aviation is essential to enable connection to programs and services, employment opportunities and family networks. Extremely high regional airfares create barriers for both community members and the organisations delivering services. Improving the affordability and reliability of regional aviation would support more effective service delivery and contribute to progress toward Closing the Gap outcomes.

There is much more that could be said about how affordable airfares would support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in the Northeast Arnhem Land region where it is the only viable transport option. This submission only briefly touches on the topic but at Yalu we are committed to taking action as opposed to endless discussion and encourage governments to do the same.

## **References**

Australian Government 2020, National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Australian Government 2024, Aviation White Paper: Towards 2050, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, Canberra.

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