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Darwin Aboriginal Family Strengthening Collaboration

Submission to the Productivity Commission

Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

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Contents

1 Recommendations under the Four Priority Reforms 3
2 The Darwin Aboriginal Family Strengthening Collaboration 4
3 Closing the Gap Targets 12 and 13: The Northern Territory Context and Outcomes 4
3.1 Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence in the Northern Territory 4
3.2 Target 12: Aboriginal Children in out-of-home-care 5
3.3 Target 13: Safety of Aboriginal families and households 6
4 Limited progress in implementing the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms in the NT 7
4.1 Assessment of Priority Reform 1: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making 7
4.1.1 NT Government progresses major child protection reforms outside of policy partnerships 7
4.1.2 Specialist Aboriginal DFSV ACCOs are not represented in Target 13 decision-making arrangements in the NT 8
4.2 Assessment of Priority Reform 2: Building the Community-Controlled Sector 9
4.2.1 Lack of transparency in Commonwealth and NT Government DFSV response expenditure 9
4.2.2 DAIWS Men's Healing Program: Short-term funding limits Aboriginal-led DFSV services 10
4.2.3 Early Steps Together: Aboriginal-led prevention and family strengthening program co-designed and governed by the Collaboration 11
4.2.4 Circuit Breaker Program: DFSV investment priorities and accountability 11
4.3 Assessment of Priority Reform 3: Transforming government organisations 12
4.4 Assessment of Priority Reform 4: Shared access to data and information at a regional level 16
5 Conclusion 16
6 References 18
7 Appendices 21

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To the Productivity Commission

Re: Closing the Gap Review 2026 - Implementation of the Priority Reforms in the Northern Territory, with a focus on Target 13 (Family Safety)

1 Recommendations under the Four Priority Reforms

Priority Reform 1: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

- The NT Government must strengthen formal partnerships and shared decision-making with Aboriginal leaders and ACCOs in government funding and investment decisions.
- The Tripartite Forum must add representation of ACCO DFSV specialist services to address Closing the Gap Target 13 (family safety).
- The NT Government must strengthen formal partnerships and shared decision-making with Aboriginal leaders and ACCOs in government funding and investment decisions.

Priority Reform 2: Building the community-controlled sector

- The Commonwealth Government must strengthen accountability and reporting mechanisms for funding given to the NT Government relating to both the Federation Funding Agreement for Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses 2021-2030 and other streams of funding to address DFSV in the NT.
- The NT Government must increase investment in ACCOs in the DFSV sector, recognising their proven effectiveness in achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal people and communities.

Priority Reform 3: Transforming government organisations

- The NT Government must embed the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms in the strategic plans which relate to the DFSV sector including the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Corrections.

Priority Reform 4: Shared access to data and information at a regional level

- ACCOs must be able to access ACCO evaluations and other data held by the NT Government and be able to use this data to inform programs and service delivery.

2 The Darwin Aboriginal Family Strengthening Collaboration

The Darwin Aboriginal Family Strengthening Collaboration (the Collaboration) is a network of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) across Greater Darwin, including the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA), North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service (NAAFLS), Darwin Aboriginal and Islander Women's Shelter (DAIWS), Northern Territory Stolen Generations Aboriginal Corporation, CAAPS Aboriginal Corporation, Danila Dilba Health Service (DDHS) and independent member Nancy Jeffrey. The Collaboration advocates for effective responses to *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* Targets 12 (child protection) and 13 (family safety) and brings together extensive frontline experience supporting Aboriginal children, families and communities affected by domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV). This submission draws on the collective expertise of ACCOs working directly with families and communities as well as individuals involved in governance structures. It highlights the Northern Territory context, where rates of DFSV remain among the highest in Australia and continue to disproportionately affect Aboriginal women and children, as well as people who identify as LGBTQI+ (Brown and Leung, 2023).

The experience of the Collaboration indicates that Closing the Gap is not achieving its intended outcomes in the Northern Territory. Despite NT government commitments to the Agreement at national and regional levels, the evidence suggests the NT government is not committed to implementing the Priority Reforms. The Collaboration reports a lack of influence over policy, legislation, funding decisions and service design in policy areas associated with Targets 12 and 13 of the Agreement. This has limited the progress towards the structural reforms envisaged under the National Agreement and has contributed to ongoing gaps in accountability, partnership and community control and worsening outcomes for children in out of home care and people affected by DFSV. As a result, many Aboriginal people continue to experience poor outcomes across areas directly relevant to the work of the Collaboration, including child protection, family safety and justice. Despite evidence that Aboriginal-led, place-based responses are more accessible, trusted and effective, funding remains short-term, fragmented and inadequate to meet demand. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) operating in the DFSV sector continue to face challenges in building workforce capacity, infrastructure and long-term service sustainability, limiting their ability to deliver the culturally grounded prevention, early intervention, healing and recovery responses needed to drive lasting change.

This submission examines progress towards Closing the Gap in the DFSV sector in the Greater Darwin region and argues that achieving sustained improvements in child and family wellbeing requires greater investment in ACCOs with a clear pathway to transition to Aboriginal community control, genuine shared decision-making, and much stronger government accountability.

3 Closing the Gap Targets 12 and 13: The Northern Territory Context and Outcomes

3.1 Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence in the Northern Territory

The Northern Territory provides an important case study for assessing progress of the implementation of the National Agreement. With the highest proportion of Aboriginal people in Australia, a substantial remote population, persistent challenges across many Closing the Gap targets, and a large Aboriginal community-controlled sector, the NT presents both the greatest opportunities and the greatest imperative for reform. DFSV in the NT must be understood within the context of the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation, including dispossession, intergenerational trauma, and the disruption of cultural, family and community structures. These factors continue to contribute to complex social challenges and can undermine individual, family and community wellbeing. In many communities, experiences of trauma and disempowerment have contributed to cycles of violence that require long-term, community-led healing and prevention responses. DFSV has profound impacts on the safety, wellbeing and life outcomes of Aboriginal women, children, families and communities, and is closely linked to child protection involvement, homelessness,

justice system contact, poor health outcomes and intergenerational disadvantage. Addressing DFSV is particularly challenging given the complex and intersecting factors that have been described, with alcohol use frequently increasing both the severity and impacts of violence (Brill, 2026).

While men are the primary users of DFSV, with Aboriginal women disproportionately affected, women also use violence (Brown and Aylmore, 2026 & Shipway, 2026). Evidence from the Northern Territory suggests that DFSV is becoming increasingly prevalent. While intergenerational and personal trauma remain significant risk factors, violence is also being used by individuals without an identifiable trauma background (Walls, 2026).

Discussions of DFSV often focus predominantly on risk and deficit factors, overlooking the important protective role of Aboriginal culture, identity, kinship systems, community leadership and connection to Country. Strong cultural identity, community connection and opportunities for self-determination can strengthen individual and collective wellbeing, support healing from trauma, and help prevent violence before it occurs. These strengths-based factors are frequently under-recognised in mainstream policy and service responses, despite the evidence that Aboriginal-led, culturally grounded approaches are critical to reducing violence and supporting safe, resilient families and communities.

3.2 Target 12: Aboriginal Children in out-of-home-care

In 2025, Aboriginal children remained approximately 12.7 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children, despite a reduction in the reported rate since 2023. This is particularly relevant because DFSV is a significant contributor to child protection involvement. Families affected by violence may require support across several service systems, while concerns about statutory intervention and the potential removal of children can create additional barriers to seeking assistance. This makes coordination between child protection, specialist DFSV services and family support essential to progress against both targets.

Area	NT Direction of progress	2025 or most recent statistics	2023 or closest comparative year
Child Protection (Target 12)	The reported rate has declined between the selected years, although Aboriginal children remain substantially overrepresented. The effects of 2026 legislative changes are yet to be established.	Aboriginal children remain dramatically over-represented in out-of-home care. In 2025, 29.1 per 1000 Aboriginal children in OOHC vs 2.3 per 1000 non-Aboriginal children (Productivity Commission Data Dashboard 2026).	In 2023, 31.5 per 1000 Aboriginal children were in OOHC compared to 2.6 per 1000 of non-Aboriginal children (Productivity Commission Data Dashboard 2026).

3.3 Target 13: Safety of Aboriginal families and households

The Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap Data Dashboard includes a national measure for Target 13, but available data does not yet provide a sufficient basis for assessing progress at the Northern Territory and regional levels. Assessing progress against this outcome area is challenging due to significant limitations in the availability, quality and consistency of DFSV data (Brown and Aylmore, 2026).

In the NT, reliable measurement is hindered by chronic under-reporting, fragmented data systems, inconsistent definitions and limited Aboriginal-specific datasets. Remoteness and barriers to reporting and accessing services also mean administrative data are likely to underestimate violence.

Available indicators nevertheless show the scale of DFSV and its effects on Aboriginal people in the NT.

Indicator	Most Recent Data in the NT	Interpretation
Number of DFSV-related offenders proceeded against for an FDV related offence in the NT.	3,564 in 2022–23 and 4,818 in 2024–25 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2026).	Indicates a 35.2% increase in the number of FDV related offences from 2022-23 and 2024-25.
NT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged 18+ who were victims of intimate partner homicide	Approximately **25 victims per 100,000 women** in the NT in **2024-25**, compared with around 11 per 100,000 in 2023-24 and 7 per 100,000 in 2022-23. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2026 - see Appendix A).	Indicates a substantial increase in intimate partner deaths among Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory.
Prisoners incarcerated for DFSV offending	In 2023 more than half of the NT's prison population was incarcerated for domestic violence offending. Of those prisoners, 87% were Aboriginal (Mackay, 2023).	DFSV is a major driver of incarceration in the NT.
Projected demand	NT Police forecast a 73% increase in DFSV reports over the next decade (Mackay, 2023).	Suggests increasing demand for prevention, early intervention, crisis response and healing services.

4 Limited progress in implementing the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms in the NT

The experience of the Collaboration indicates that the NT Government is not giving effect to the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms consistently. While formal partnerships and governance arrangements have been established, government continues to make significant policy, funding and service delivery decisions without shared decision-making with Aboriginal partners. The Collaboration's experience also raises concerns about the limited role of specialist ACCOs in decisions affecting their services, the lack of a clear shift towards Aboriginal community control, and a lack of transparent reporting needed to assess government investment. These decisions affect the services available to Aboriginal children and families experiencing violence, including how families receive support before problems escalate or statutory intervention occurs.

Concerns about the NT Government's approach to Aboriginal partnership and consultation have also been raised publicly by Aboriginal leaders. In September 2026, the ABC reported a series of resignations involving Aboriginal leaders who expressed concerns about government policies and their impact on relationships with Aboriginal communities and outcomes for Aboriginal people (Garrick, 2026). In the same month, Commonwealth Finance Minister Katy Gallagher visited Darwin and raised concerns about how funding for areas including DFSV was being administered and distributed by the NT Government (Hislop, 2026).

The following sections examine these concerns against each of the four Priority Reforms, drawing on the Collaboration's experience of government policy, funding and service delivery.

4.1 Assessment of Priority Reform 1: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

Progress in establishing partnerships has not translated into shared decision-making. The NT Government has made progress in establishing the governance arrangements required under the National Agreement, including Northern Territory Executive Council on Aboriginal Affairs (NTECAA) and the Closing the Gap policy partnerships (Northern Territory Government, 2026; Productivity Commission, 2024). However, assigning responsibility for a target has not meant that Aboriginal partners have authority over the policies and funding intended to achieve it.

The Children and Families Tripartite Forum (TPF) illustrates this distinction. Established before the National Agreement, the TPF now operates within the NT's Closing the Gap arrangements. However, its responsibilities have expanded without a corresponding demonstration that its governance, membership and decision-making processes have been strengthened to support its role as a formal policy partnership. The Collaboration identifies two concerns: the absence of a specialist ACCO DFSV representative within the partnership and major reforms progressing outside the TPF. A related concern is whether formal partnerships have the authority and accountability mechanisms needed to influence government decisions once those decisions move beyond the partnership. This includes whether government agencies must implement agreed positions, explain departures from partnership advice and accurately report what Aboriginal partners have endorsed.

4.1.1 NT Government progresses major child protection reforms outside of policy partnerships

The NT Government's *Care and Protection of Children Legislation Amendment (Every Child Matters) Bill 2026* provides a clear example of the gap between formal partnership arrangements and government decision-making.

The TPF is an established policy partnership responsible for progressing reforms relating to children and families, including Closing the Gap Target 12 (Northern Territory Government, 2025). Despite this, the NT Government

developed and introduced substantial amendments to the child protection legislative framework without first progressing the proposed reforms through the TPF for shared consideration and decision-making.

In August 2025, the TPF publicly recorded that community-sector members wanted to be involved in proposed amendments to the Care and Protection of Children Act, noting the TPF's responsibility for Target 12 and its role as a principal source of advice to government on children and families (Northern Territory Government, 2025). The proposed amendments had significant implications for Aboriginal children and families, including changes to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, thresholds for statutory intervention, permanency arrangements and family responsibility mechanisms (Northern Territory Legislative Assembly, 2026a; Darwin Aboriginal Working Group, 2026).

During parliamentary scrutiny, the Collaboration, NAAJA, AMSANT, SNAICC and other Aboriginal and child and family organisations raised concerns about the proposed reforms, the consultation process and their potential consequences for Aboriginal children and families (Darwin Aboriginal Working Group, 2026; NAAJA, 2026; AMSANT, 2026; SNAICC, 2026). In its May 2026 submission to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee, the Collaboration opposed the Bill and called for an evidence-based reform process developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities and ACCOs. It recommended using the TPF as the relevant policy partnership and prioritising Aboriginal-led early intervention, family strengthening and the progressive transition of services to ACCOs (Darwin Aboriginal Working Group, 2026).

Despite these concerns, the legislation was passed in July 2026 (Northern Territory Government, 2026).

The Collaboration's concern is not simply that government proceeded despite sector opposition. It is that Aboriginal partners were left responding to proposed legislation rather than being able to influence the reform, examine the evidence and consider policy options before government settled its approach. The opportunity to make submissions during parliamentary scrutiny cannot replace Aboriginal partners' involvement in developing the policy itself (Productivity Commission, 2024). Review processes should assess whether formal partnership arrangements support Aboriginal partners to influence legislative priorities and policy design from the outset, rather than relying on consultation during the later stages of the legislative process after a Bill has been introduced.

4.1.2 Specialist Aboriginal DFSV ACCOs are not represented in Target 13 decision-making arrangements in the NT

A separate concern is whether the NT's Closing the Gap partnerships include the specialist Aboriginal expertise needed for the outcomes they oversee. In August 2025, a TPF communiqué recorded that the Forum was awaiting direction from NTECAA about which policy partnership would lead Target 13, while continuing to consider DFSV within its existing work (Northern Territory Government, 2025). The TPF includes ACCO and community-sector representatives but has no dedicated representation from ACCOs delivering specialist Aboriginal DFSV service (Northern Territory Government, 2025). This raises concerns about how specialist expertise informs decisions affecting DFSV, particularly given the relationship between Target 13 and the TPF's responsibilities for child protection and family support. The Collaboration brings together ACCOs working across specialist DFSV responses, legal assistance, health, family support and healing. Its members have direct experience of how violence intersects with child protection, housing, justice and other service systems, including the challenges Aboriginal individuals and families encounter when seeking support.

NAAJA is both a member of the Collaboration and represented on the TPF. However, its participation should not be assumed to constitute representation of the Collaboration or the broader specialist Aboriginal DFSV sector. Existing ACCO and community-sector representation cannot replace dedicated participation by ACCOs delivering specialist

Aboriginal DFSV services. For Target 13, specialist Aboriginal DFSV organisations bring practical knowledge of prevention, immediate safety, healing and responses for people who use violence. Their involvement is necessary to identify gaps in services, determine investment priorities and develop responses that work for Aboriginal families.

The review should examine whether existing partnership arrangements provide specialist Aboriginal DFSV ACCOs with meaningful influence over decisions relating to Target 13. The Collaboration considers that progress under the National Agreement will require clearer accountability arrangements and stronger shared decision-making mechanisms that enable Aboriginal partners to shape policy, investment and implementation priorities before decisions are finalised. This could be achieved through strengthening existing governance structures rather than establishing additional advisory forums.

4.2 Assessment of Priority Reform 2: Building the Community-Controlled Sector

4.2.1 Lack of transparency in Commonwealth and NT Government DFSV response expenditure

The *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses 2021-2030 Federation Funding Agreement – Affordable Housing, Community Services* supports Commonwealth and Territory investment in specialist DFSV services, including:

a. Funding for specialist services for women
b. Services to support children exposed to DFSV to heal and recover; and
c. Working with men, including behaviour change programs for people who use violence.

These funding priorities are directly relevant to the services delivered by Collaboration members, particularly specialist services for women and Aboriginal-led responses addressing violence, accountability and healing.

The Commonwealth has committed $6.6 million to the NT over the period 2025-2030. Importantly, page 4 of the Federation Funding Agreement states that this investment is intended to be complemented by ongoing financial contributions from the NT Government commensurate with the Commonwealth's investment. The Agreement does not provide sufficient transparency to track how Commonwealth and Territory funding is coordinated or to assess the extent to which government investment is strengthening ACCOs, consistent with the objectives of the National Agreement.

The *NT DFSV Reduction Strategy 2025-2028* commits $36 million per year, ongoing, to preventing and responding to DFSV. However, while p.11 of the Strategy (Appendix B) sets out funding allocations across government departments as lead agencies, it does not specify how funding will be distributed to ACCOs, which are key providers of specialist DFSV services in the NT. This lack of transparency is particularly concerning in the context of the Northern Territory Government's 2026-27 Budget, which allocates $63.5 million to DFSV responses, compared with $71.5 million in 2025-26. Although DFSV remains a stated government priority, overall investment has declined, and there is limited evidence that funding is increasing in line with the scale of violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children and families. Greater transparency and sustained investment in ACCOs are critical to ensuring resources are directed to the communities most affected by DFSV and to achieving improved outcomes for Aboriginal people.

The Collaboration's experience suggests that Commonwealth investment has played a significant role in supporting the development and continuation of Aboriginal-led DFSV and family-strengthening programs. The Department of

Social Services funding of NT ACCOs has increased from $15,621,298.22 in 2022-23 to $44,766,688.35 in 2025-26[1]. This indicates a 286.57% increase in funding. However, the Collaboration has not observed this growth in funding in their ACCOs; it has not translated into increased organisational capacity, infrastructure, workforce development or the ability of ACCOs to sustainably expand and strengthen their services. Available expenditure reporting does not make it possible to determine how much ACCO sector strengthening is attributable to Commonwealth investment, how much is funded by the NT Government, and how much of it flows from Commonwealth to NT government and into ACCOs.

The difficulty in tracking how investment reaches and strengthens ACCOs reflects a broader transparency and accountability problem. For example, the NT Auditor-General found that the *Closing the Gap NT Implementation Plan Annual Report 2021-22* did not identify the number or types of ACCOs receiving funding, despite the relevant action being marked as complete (NT Auditor-General's Office 2024, p. 52).

The availability and timeliness of NT Closing the Gap implementation reporting also requires scrutiny. This review should examine whether reporting has been sufficiently regular and detailed to allow Aboriginal partners to assess progress against agreed implementation actions, including the commitments to strengthen ACCOs and transfer services into community control. The NT Government and Commonwealth should report the source, recipient and purpose of DFSV expenditure, including funding retained within government, directed to mainstream providers and provided to ACCOs. This reporting should be published regularly against clear indicators of whether investment and decision-making authority are shifting towards ACCOs. They should also identify opportunities to transfer existing government-funded services and resources to ACCOs, rather than limiting sector strengthening to new grant opportunities.

Reporting should also identify whether funding agreements are competitive or recurrent, their duration, and whether they provide for workforce development, infrastructure, governance, leadership and evaluation. These factors affect ACCOs' capacity to sustain services and increase community control.

4.2.2 DAIWS Men's Healing Program: Short-term funding limits Aboriginal-led DFSV services

Most of the ACCOs in the Collaboration are funded through Commonwealth Government programs. One example is the DAIWS Indigenous Men's Healing Program. Commonwealth funding supports the Family Prevention and Healing Program, including the employment of two female staff and one male staff member. In addition, the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) has funded the Strong Men Strong Communities Program for approximately ten years, supporting the operational costs of the Men's Shed and one staff position. The Program also previously received Commonwealth funding for a Fathers Program, which operated for four years. While the program continues to operate using accumulated surplus funds, current resources are expected to be exhausted by the end of 2026. The absence of ongoing funding places the future of the program at risk.

In 2022-23, DAIWS Indigenous Men's Healing secured a NT Government grant of $10,000 to deliver a Sistagirl Workshop. However, access to this funding must be applied for annually and is insufficient to support the employment and retention of a skilled workforce. Short-term, project-based grants of this nature do not provide the stability required to sustain effective community-led programs. By way of comparison, approximately $100,000 per annum would be required to support a single full-time position and associated program delivery costs. This funding model makes it difficult to retain experienced staff, plan services and sustain men's healing work beyond individual projects.

[1] Personal communication, Department of Social Services, 18 October 2026.

The wider concern, reflected in the experience of Collaboration members, is that short-term and competitive funding can constrain workforce retention, investment in infrastructure and the development of organisational and leadership capacity. These are not incidental operating costs; they are necessary for ACCOs to exercise greater control over the services delivered to their communities.

While internal evaluations have been conducted for the Men's Healing Program and the Respectful Relationships Program, there is currently no systematic mechanism for ACCOs to access and share evaluation findings across organisations. This limits opportunities to share lessons, avoid duplication and build an evidence base for Aboriginal-led approaches to men's healing, family strengthening and violence prevention.

The issue is not whether government funds individual ACCO activities, but whether those arrangements provide the stability and resources needed for ACCOs to maintain and expand services. Sustained sector strengthening therefore requires minimum five year flexible funding that supports organisations as well as individual activities, including workforce, infrastructure, governance and evaluation.

4.2.3 Early Steps Together: Aboriginal-led prevention and family strengthening program co-designed and governed by the Collaboration

Early Steps Together provides an example of ACCOs working collectively to design an early-intervention response. Co-designed in 2024 by the Collaboration and funded by the Department of Social Services Outcomes and Evidence Fund, the Program was established to create a culturally safe, community-led early intervention model. It provides coordinated place-based support for families experiencing challenges, building on family strengths to enhance safety, wellbeing and connection, while working alongside families to prevent exposure to DFSV and reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. Rather than waiting until families experience circumstances that may trigger statutory intervention, the program seeks to strengthen family relationships, safety and connection through coordinated Aboriginal-led support.

Initially funded by the Department of Social Services, Evidence and Outcomes for a three year pilot, the Program Program recently received further funding from the Department of Social Services for an additional year. The program is an example of what is possible when ACCOs identify a need and develop a response collectively, rather than being asked to deliver a model determined by government. However, the one-year extension does not provide the funding certainty needed for longer-term service planning and evaluation. The program provides a practical example of both progress and persistent barriers under Priority Reform 2. Aboriginal organisations have designed and delivered a collective response that reflects the needs of families and communities; however, the funding environment has not yet shifted sufficiently to provide the long-term certainty needed to embed, evaluate and grow this Aboriginal-led approach.

4.2.4 Circuit Breaker Program: DFSV investment priorities and accountability

The allocation of DFSV funding to the NT Government's Circuit Breaker program raises questions about investment priorities, accountability and the extent to which DFSV funding is strengthening specialist frontline services, particularly ACCOs. Circuit Breaker is described by the NT Government as a program providing intensive case management, youth supervision, safe places and family engagement, including through Family Responsibility Agreements[2]. However, under the DFSV Reduction Strategy, the government has specifically committed to delivering

[2] Circuit Breaker Program | Department of Children and Families

an early intervention program for young people affected by or at risk of DFSV, consistent with RAMF and Safe and Together, to support safety, healing, accountability and behaviour change.

Of the NT Government's $36 million annual DFSV investment announced for 2025–26, $6.55 million was allocated to Circuit Breaker, compared with $5.2 million for specialist DFSV services. Circuit Breaker therefore received $1.35 million more than the dedicated specialist-services initiative[3]. Parliamentary evidence also raises questions about how Circuit Breaker's DFSV-specific contribution is measured. As at 31 March 2026, 312 Circuit Breaker cases were open[4]. Subsequent Estimates information recorded 155 referrals to service providers, including 14 classified as DFSV support, although the data notes that one referral may relate to several people[5]. These figures do not establish whether Circuit Breaker is effective. Public reporting should include the program logic, DFSV-specific outcomes framework and evaluation arrangements, including measures of victim-survivor safety and prevention.

The program's broader youth supervision and statutory family interventions may be relevant to some families affected by violence. However, reported case numbers and referrals do not establish what its $6.55 million DFSV allocation has achieved in prevention, victim-survivor safety, healing or behaviour change. Subsequent parliamentary scrutiny has sought information about Circuit Breaker's DFSV classification, program logic, outcomes framework and evaluation arrangements. These questions are particularly important where funding is drawn from an investment intended to improve DFSV prevention and family safety. The NT Government should explain the basis for allocating DFSV funding to Circuit Breaker, what alternatives were considered, how specialist Aboriginal DFSV organisations were involved, and how the program's contribution to Target 13 will be evaluated. This should include publicly available measures of risk assessment, safety planning, repeat harm, victim-survivor safety and other DFSV-specific outcomes, rather than reliance on case numbers or referrals alone.

4.3 Assessment of Priority Reform 3: Transforming government organisations

The progress of Priority Reform 3 was assessed through a review of key Northern Territory Government documents including strategic plans and annual reports relevant to Aboriginal affairs, child and family wellbeing, health and DFSV. This review considered the extent to which commitments to transforming government organisations have been embedded in policy frameworks, planning processes, funding arrangements and service delivery approaches. Documents reviewed included the *Northern Territory Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Strategy 2025-2028*, the *Department of Children and Families Strategic Plan 2025-2029, the NT Department of Corrections Strategic Plan 2024-2028* and the most recent available *Department of Children and Families Annual Report 2024-25*.

The analysis of these documents indicates that, despite repeated NT government commitments to Closing the Gap, the Priority Reforms are not being systematically embedded across key NT Government policies and strategies. There will necessarily be government functions that remain the responsibility of statutory agencies. However, this does not remove the obligation to examine how those responsibilities are exercised, whether relevant decisions can be shared with Aboriginal partners and which services and resources can progressively transition to Aboriginal community control. The strategies reviewed focus on improving services within existing government arrangements, with few specific commitments to shared decision-making, ACCO commissioning or service transition. They also do not clearly identify how decisions made through Closing the Gap partnerships are incorporated into departmental budgets and work plans.

[3] NT Government, *Record ongoing funding for domestic, family and sexual violence*, 9 May 2025.
[4] TP-8-1-AQON-8-6.pdf
[5] AQON-8-7.pdf

NT DFSV Reduction Strategy 2025-2028

The *Northern Territory Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Strategy 2025–2028* acknowledges Aboriginal family safety, the importance of culture and the role of partnerships. While the Strategy references partnerships, the NT DFSV Aboriginal Advisory Board, Closing the Gap Target 13, Aboriginal family safety and the "critical importance of Aboriginal culture and cultural strengthening as a protective factor against violence" (p. 8), it contains no dedicated strategy, investment stream, targets or accountability measures for growing ACCO capability, governance, workforce, infrastructure or service delivery in the DFSV sector.

Responsibility for implementing the Strategy and overseeing the associated $36 million annual investment is principally allocated to government departments, as outlined in Appendix B.

Although NT Government departments may commission external providers, the Strategy does not show how investment will increase ACCO control over DFSV services or how Aboriginal organisations influenced the allocation of funding. A single sentence within the Strategy captures its underlying approach:

> *For Strategy 2025-2028,* ***government agencies worked together to build on what we know works****, identified priorities for continued investment and supported the development of new and innovative programs to strengthen the DFSV service system"* (NT Government, 2025, p. 10).

Coordination between government departments is necessary, but the Strategy does not explain whether specialist Aboriginal DFSV organisations were involved in selecting the priorities and programs before government committed to them. References to Aboriginal-led initiatives are largely confined to prevention activities or partnerships with ACCOs "where possible" (p. 11), rather than as organisations to be strengthened and supported to lead the design, commissioning and delivery of DFSV responses. The Strategy identifies individual initiatives and allocations but provides limited explanation of how the different investments are intended to operate together to achieve Target 13. There is no clear program logic explaining how investment across statutory interventions, specialist services, early intervention and healing will collectively improve family safety, or how the balance between these investments was determined.

On page 10 of the Strategy, alignment is identified with existing Australian Government investment including the *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses 2021-2030 National Partnership Agreement* (NPA), the *NT Remote Aboriginal Investment (NTRAI) Partnership Agreement 2025-2031*, and the *National Access to Justice Partnership 2025-2030*. Given the significant and disproportionate impact of DFSV on Aboriginal children, families and communities in the Northern Territory, the omission of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* is particularly concerning and suggests that the Priority Reforms were not a central consideration in the development of the Strategy. The Department of Children and Families is identified as the lead agency for several initiatives under the DFSV Reduction Strategy. In its Annual Report 2024-2025, the department highlights a "reimagined governance structure", including the establishment of leadership positions such as the Director Culturally Secure Practice and the Director Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes (p. 9). While these reforms signal an organisational commitment to cultural security and improved Aboriginal outcomes, it is difficult to see how they will translate into meaningful change if the principal DFSV investment framework continues to position government agencies as the primary decision-makers, without corresponding commitments to Aboriginal community control, shared governance and long-term ACCO sector development.

The DFSV Hub serves as a clear example of the gap between the Northern Territory Government's commitment to the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and its implementation of the DFSV Reduction Strategy, with key decisions made before meaningful engagement with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations occurred.

The Hub was announced in early 2026, with recruitment for positions commencing in March 2026. Its establishment followed a directive from Minister for Prevention of Domestic Violence Robyn Cahill, who sought to create a "one-stop shop" that would bring together DFSV specialists alongside broader support services through co-location, outreach and visiting service arrangements.

Consultation with ACCOs working in the sector occurred after the directive had been issued and the establishment of the Hub was already underway. Feedback from the Collaboration indicated concerns that the Hub was intended to deliver services that ACCOs were already providing within the community. Additional concerns were raised about the Hub's location near the Department of Corrections and its positioning as a government-operated service. The Collaboration feared that the Hub's proximity to the Department of Corrections and its status as a government-operated service could deter women from accessing support, particularly those experiencing DFSV who may be afraid that seeking assistance could lead to child protection intervention or the removal of their children. One of the members of the Collaboration is currently considering an MOU with the NT Department of Children and Families for the DFSV Hub which involves placing a staff member there for 0.5 days per week. The establishment of the DFSV Hub without early and meaningful involvement of ACCOs is inconsistent with the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, particularly the commitment to formal partnerships and shared decision-making, and fails to recognise the existing expertise, leadership and service delivery role of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

The closure of YiSSA short stay accommodation in October 2026 also demonstrates a failure to give effect to the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms in practice (Danila Dilba Health Service, 2026). As an Aboriginal-led organisation providing support to women and children affected by domestic and family violence as well as those requiring medical attention, YiSSA represented the type of community-controlled service model that the reforms seek to strengthen. Its closure in Darwin and relocation approximately one hour away to Batchelor has raised significant concerns about reduced access to culturally safe and trusted supports for women and children experiencing violence, while also diminishing Aboriginal community control within the service system. A further significant change is that the new accommodation facility will be managed by Mission Australia, a mainstream service provider rather than an ACCO. This transition has prompted concerns about a reduction in Aboriginal-led service delivery and decision-making in an area where cultural authority, trust and community connection are critical to service effectiveness. Rather than strengthening the Aboriginal community-controlled sector, the loss of YiSSA represents a contraction of Aboriginal-led service delivery and highlights the gap between the government's Closing the Gap commitments and the decisions being made in practice.

NT Department of Children and Families Strategic Plan 2025-2029

The *Department of Children and Families Strategic Plan 2025-2029* states that it is aligned with the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (p. 6), however the Plan contains no explicit reference to the four Priority Reforms that are intended to drive systemic change.

Although the Acting Chief Executive refers to sector strengthening, the Plan does not establish measurable commitments for sharing decisions with Aboriginal organisations, transferring services and investment to ACCOs or improving Aboriginal authority over data. The Plan also refers to the Department's Aboriginal Cultural Security Framework, but cultural safety within government services is not the same as increasing Aboriginal community control. The scale of services delivered by the Department of Children and Families highlights the critical importance of ensuring that ACCOs play a leading role in supporting Aboriginal children and families. In 2023-24, the Department

reported delivering family strengthening and parenting support services across 39 locations, operating six Children and Family Centres, supporting a network of 403 foster and kinship carers, managing Family Responsibility Agreements, undertaking more than 4,200 child protection investigations, overseeing 847 children in out-of-home care, operating or funding 28 Women's Safe Houses, delivering behaviour change programs for more than 170 men, and supporting over 5,000 Territorians through specialist homelessness services (NT Government, 2025).

Given the scale of the Department's service system, it should identify which services and functions could progressively transition to ACCOs, the funding and capability required, and timeframes for doing so. The Strategic Plan provides no such pathway.

NT Department of Corrections Strategic Plan 2024-2028

The NT *Department of Corrections Strategic Plan 2024-2028* has four priority areas: Stronger foundations, Investment in our people, Break the cycle and Innovation. In the NT, Aboriginal prisoners represent around 85% of the entire prison population (NT Government, 2026). There is one reference under 'Break the cycle' to providing a service to Aboriginal inmates: "Deliver culturally informed programs aimed at improving decision making, skills, education, and employment outcomes". The Strategic Plan makes no reference to partnership, shared decision-making, or the involvement of ACCOs, raising concerns about alignment with Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and the effectiveness of efforts to reduce recidivism.

In contrast, South Australia's *Department for Correctional Services Strategic Plan 2024-2028* dedicates one of their strategic priorities to 'Closing the Gap' with a focus on reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal people incarcerated in South Australia through *cultural understanding and engagement*. Its seven actions include reducing Aboriginal incarceration, investing in culturally responsive programs, supporting community-based rehabilitation and reintegration, implementing the Aboriginal Strategic Framework, strengthening ACCO partnerships, procuring services from Aboriginal-controlled organisations and increasing Aboriginal employment and leadership.

South Australia's Department for Corrections Annual Report 2024-2025 states that partnerships continued to be strengthened with ACCOs delivering a range of key initiatives, including Yalakiana Tapa which has oversight of Program 1: Marni Tapa which focuses on addressing a trending increase in the remand prisoner population, and Program 2: Healing Lodge / Wodli focuses on cultural and community reintegration for Aboriginal people released from custody onto bail.

Advice provided by NT Correctional Services indicates that DFSV rehabilitation programs delivered within the Holtze Correctional Facility are primarily delivered by correctional staff and clinicians, with limited evidence of ACCO involvement in program design or delivery[6]. Aboriginal staff contribute important expertise, but employment within government programs is not the same as ACCO control over program design and delivery. The information provided does not identify ACCOs leading custodial DFSV interventions or formal pathways connecting these programs with Aboriginal-led healing and behaviour-change services after release. Behaviour change programs for Aboriginal men, whether delivered in custody or in the community, should be designed and led by Aboriginal men through ACCOs, and developed in line with the local languages, kinship structures and cultural authority of the communities they serve. Programs designed for mainstream populations and delivered in English by government staff are unlikely to achieve sustained change for Aboriginal men who use violence. The high rates of repeat domestic and family violence offending observed in the Northern Territory indicate that current interventions are not achieving long-term behaviour change,

[6] Personal communication, NT Correctional Services, 17 September 2026.

particularly for Aboriginal men, and reinforce the need for Aboriginal community-controlled leadership in the design and delivery of responses for users of violence (ANROWS 2025).

4.4 Assessment of Priority Reform 4: Shared access to data and information at a regional level

The experience of the Collaboration suggests that significant barriers remain to achieving the intent of this reform in the NT. ACCOs working in the DFSV sector have limited access to regional data, evaluation findings, and information about government investment and program outcomes, restricting their ability to participate as equal partners in policy development, service planning, and monitoring progress against Closing the Gap. Access to evaluation findings is particularly constrained, with no systematic mechanism for sharing evaluation reports, lessons learned, or evidence across the Aboriginal community-controlled sector.

While individual organisations undertake evaluations of their own programs, these findings are rarely accessible beyond the organisation commissioning or conducting the work. For example, DAIWS has completed internal evaluations of the Men's Healing Program and Respectful Relationships Program; however, ACCOs generally do not have access to evaluations commissioned by other organisations or government agencies. This lack of information sharing contributes to duplication of effort, limits opportunities to strengthen the evidence base for Aboriginal-led approaches and slows the transfer of knowledge and best practice across the sector.
A formal mechanism for sharing evaluation reports and lessons learned across ACCOs would help address these barriers, subject to confidentiality, cultural safety and Indigenous Data Governance requirements. The significance of these limitations extends beyond the ability of ACCOs to evaluate their own programs. Access to evidence is also necessary for Aboriginal organisations to participate meaningfully in decisions about which services government should fund, which interventions should be expanded and where investment priorities should change.

In the DFSV sector, relevant information is held across multiple government systems, including policing, health, child protection, housing, justice, corrections and funded service providers. There is also limited transparency about the relationship between government expenditure, program activity and outcomes. For example, the available information concerning Circuit Breaker identifies funding allocations and aspects of service activity, but does not provide a comprehensive account of the program's contribution to DFSV prevention or family safety. Without access to government expenditure, program evaluations and regional service data, Aboriginal organisations cannot properly assess investment proposals or participate in decisions on the same information as government. For Target 13, this should include specialist Aboriginal DFSV organisations participating in the development of measures relevant to prevention, victim-survivor safety, family wellbeing, repeat violence, service accessibility, healing and interventions for people who use violence.

This work must also give practical effect to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance, including appropriate arrangements for the collection, ownership, access, interpretation and use of information relating to Aboriginal people. In the DFSV context, these arrangements must protect confidentiality, cultural information and the safety of victim-survivors and their families.

5 Conclusion

The Northern Territory has made progress in establishing the governance arrangements required under the National Agreement, including NTECAA and its policy partnerships. The Department of Children and Families has also introduced initiatives such as the Director Transforming Aboriginal Outcomes and Director Culturally Secure Practice roles, signalling an acknowledgement of the need for change within government systems. However, the experience

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of the Collaboration indicates that these developments have not yet consistently changed how government develops policy, determines investment priorities, allocates resources or commissions services. The existence of governance structures and organisational reform initiatives does not, on its own, demonstrate progress towards the structural changes envisaged under the National Agreement.

The issues identified in this submission extend beyond whether ACCOs are consulted. In some circumstances, major policy and legislative decisions are substantially developed before matters are brought to formal partnerships. In others, Aboriginal partners participate in discussions without clear authority to influence outcomes. For the Collaboration, a further concern is the absence of specialist Aboriginal DFSV organisations from key decision-making arrangements relevant to Target 13, despite their direct experience delivering frontline services and supporting Aboriginal children, families and communities affected by violence.

This case study of Target 13 also raises broader questions about government transformation, accountability and investment. Current DFSV strategies and funding arrangements do not clearly demonstrate how Aboriginal partners influence investment decisions, how government expenditure contributes to increased Aboriginal community control, or how agencies are being held accountable for implementing the Priority Reforms. While government strategies reference Closing the Gap, there is limited evidence that the reforms are systematically embedded in departmental planning, funding frameworks, commissioning approaches or service delivery models.

The Collaboration considers that the next stage of Closing the Gap implementation must focus on how partnerships operate in practice, including who determines priorities, who exercises decision-making authority and how government agencies are held accountable for implementing agreed decisions and funding expenditure.

The Darwin Aboriginal Family Strengthening Collaboration welcomes the opportunity for further genuine engagement on this matter. If you require more information in relation to the content of this letter, please contact

Yours sincerely,

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On behalf of the Darwin Aboriginal Family Strengthening Collaboration

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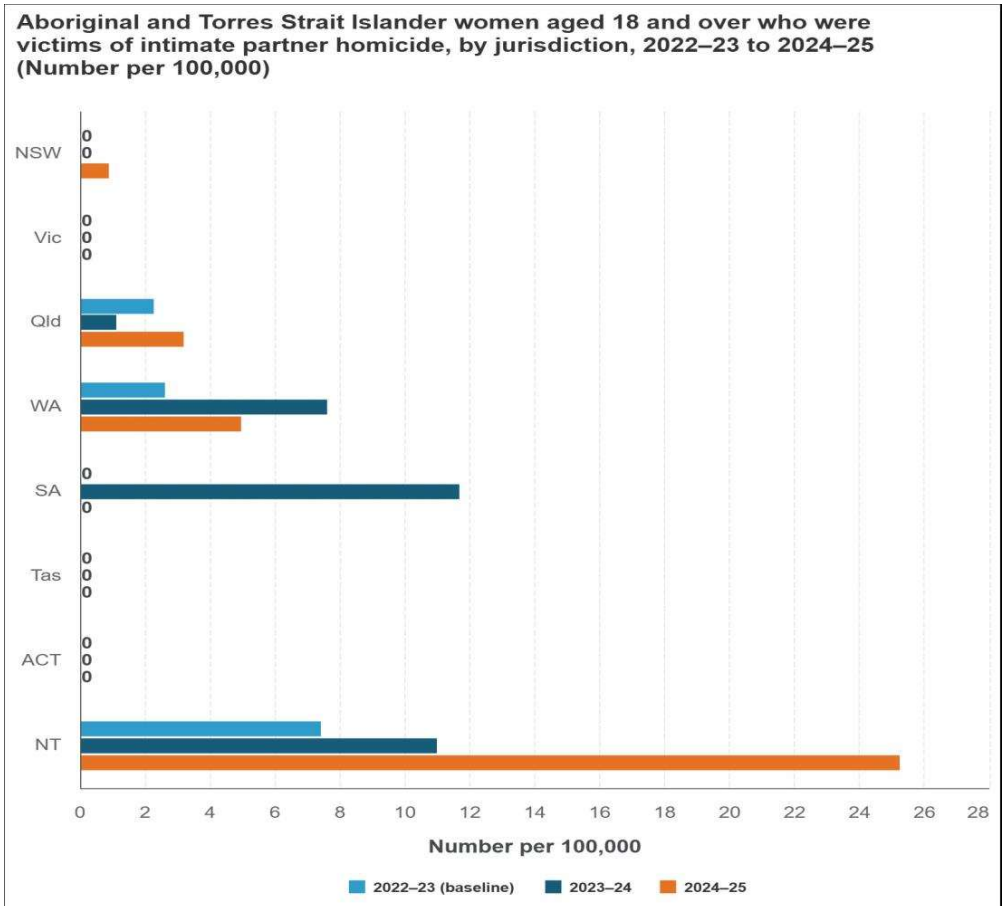
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7 Appendices

Appendix A

First Nations female victims of intimate partner homicide 2022-2025 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2026)



*: Calculated rates based on fewer than 20 events may be unstable.

Notes:

1. Intimate partner classification is based on the closest relationship between the victim and primary offender.
2. Rates use a derived December population (the midpoint of each financial year, based on the average of the 2 June populations either side from the ABS 2021 Census-based estimates and projections of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population for 2011 to 2031 - medium series projections).
3. The rate for intimate partner homicide victimisation is calculated as the number of victims of all ages divided by the number of people aged 18 years and over in Australia. This results in a rate more representative of the population which is most affected (people aged 18 years and over).
4. Calculated rates based on fewer than 20 events in the numerator may be unstable.
5. Excludes victims where sex was not stated or unknown.

For more information, see Data sources and technical notes.

Appendix B

Distribution of $36 million per year funding allocation for Northern Territory Government DFSV Initiatives 2025-2028 (NT Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Strategy 2025-2028, p. 11)

Initiative #	Lead agency	Initiative	2025-26 ($M)	2026-27[4] ($M)	2027-28 ($M)
1	DCF	Primary Prevention Grant Program	$1.400	$1.163	$0.250
3	DPSC	Community Innovation Activities and Events	$0.250	$0.125	$0.125
6	DCF	Circuit Breaker	$6.550	$6.550	$6.550
7	NTPF, DCF	DFSV Co-Responder	$6.259	$7.696	$6.923
11	DoC	Continuing Programs in prison settings for people committing DFSV	$1.900	$2.694	$2.282
12	DoC	New DFSV Offender programs in prisons	$1.810	$1.810	$1.810
13	DCF	Programs in community settings for people committing DFSV	$3.428	$3.178	$3.489
16	DCF	RAMF Implementation Universal Services	$0.250	$0.250	$0.250
17	AGD, DCF	Specialist DFSV Courts	$1.068	$0.868	$2.554
18	AGD (DPP)	DFSV Prosecution and Witness Support	$0.850	$0.757	$0.757
19	DCF	DFSV Specialist Services Funding	$5.200	$5.200	$5.200
20	DCF	Remote Women's Safe Houses	$0.500	$0.500	$0.500
22	DoC	DFSV counselling for women prisoners	$0.500	$0.500	$0.800
23	NT Health	Specialist DFSV Health Response	$0.400	$0.425	$0.425
26	NTPF, DCF	Family Safety Framework (FSF)	$1.569	$1.285	$1.085
30	DCF	DFSV Training and Resource Centre	$1.500	$1.500	$1.500
37	DCF	Whole of government DFSV coordination	$2.566	$1.500	$1.500
	TOTAL		**$36**	**$36**	**$36**