



Submission to the Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations

Part 1

(a) Who is Connecting Home?

Connecting Home is a state-wide organisation committed to providing a broad range of services to survivors of the Stolen Generations. In addition to direct service provision, the organisation also provides information and education to the wider community regarding Stolen Generations history and current issues.

The organisation was set up in early 2010 in direct response to reports such as the Bringing Them Home report and Closing the Gap, understanding that past removal policies still affect Aboriginal families and communities. As such, Connecting Home aims to respond to the needs of not only those people who are directly affected by such policies, but their children, partners and families as well.

Connecting Home defines a member of the Stolen Generations as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who was removed or separated from family, land, language and culture as a result of past policies, including adoption, foster care and institutionalisation.

Connecting Home is pleased to provide further oral evidence to the Inquiry on 18 March 2013. Additional information is available upon request.

Connecting Home has provided this submission as a public submission.

(b) Working with the Stolen Generations

The Stolen Generations in Victoria represent a unique set of challenges within the scope of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Over a period of decades, many Aboriginal children were detained in institutions, whereby they were emotionally, physically and sexually abused or neglected, and as a result of this process, were separated from their land, language and culture.

As adults, Connecting Home's clients face a number of challenges stemming from the impacts of abuse and neglect suffered while confined in institutions, compounded by the experiences of cultural loss. The rate of sexual abuse among Indigenous clients who were institutionalised is extremely high. The majority of our client base (at least anecdotally speaking) have at times indicated they were subject to sexual abuse of some

form while institutionalised. This of course has had severe consequences in adult life compounded by the loss of cultural ties and the psychological effects of ongoing racism.

Connecting Home has compiled evidence from 4 members of the Stolen Generations regarding the abuse they suffered in care. Please see the submissions of Murray Harrison, Deb Kerr, Howard Edwards and Jack Charles.

(c) What does Connecting Home do?

Case Management

Connecting Home has a number of male and female case workers who can assist clients within a range of services, including housing, counseling, addiction reduction, health and wellbeing, domestic and lateral violence, service referral and finding identity. Our case managers can also assist in referring clients to pro bono lawyers for legal information.

Healing

Connecting Home facilitates a number of healing programs focused upon adults, youth and families. The programs are designed to assist people in their 'journey of healing' and include the highly acclaimed Marumali program designed by Aunty Lorraine Peeters. This program complements the Case Management program to ensure that we focus upon the person as a whole.

Education Programs

Connecting Home has a number of education resources for teachers and educators at every level, and can arrange in-house professional development and teacher training. Connecting Home has a long standing partnership with the History Teacher's Association of Victoria and is currently designing resources for the new curriculum.

Presentations

As well as education programs, Connecting Home can also present to a wide range of health and human service professionals, Justice and Correctional professionals, council reconciliation groups, State and Federal Government Departments and other community agencies. Presentations can be developed to suit the needs of the audience.

(d) In what areas does Connecting Home support people?

Indigenous people who were removed face a number of social, emotional and psychological challenges. Some of which include:

Coming forward

Many people who were removed as children have difficulties in coming forward and acknowledging their removal.

Lack of records, lack of identity

Many removed people talk of the lack of personal records (such as photographs) which reinforces their loss of identity and sense of belonging. Some removed people had no knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage until late in life, as this information was not recorded.

Caught Between Two Worlds

Many clients describe experiencing identity conflict between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, often feeling as if they belong to neither.

Inter-Generational Impacts

The consequences of removal ripple throughout the community and the generations, and are seen in ongoing family dysfunction and the high rates of Indigenous child removal by Child Protective Services.

Low physical and psychological health

Life expectancy is estimated at 17 years lower for Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people.

Lost educational and employment opportunities

Due to their experiences in institutions, clients often have attained very little education and experience greatly reduced employment opportunities as a result.

Increased contact with the Criminal justice system

Clients may face increased chances of contact with the criminal justice system, and for some people, institutionalisation unfortunately becomes a 'normal' experience.

Complex and Compounded Problems

Clients often experience complex and compounded problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, family violence and anger management problems.

Lack of Justice

Lack of justice, reparations and compensation reinforces negative feelings and fuels the anger felt by many of our clients.

Outcomes

During 2012, Connecting Home has worked with 91 clients on the following Life Domain outcomes:

- my identity
- my life
- my community and belonging
- my safeguards
- my rights
- my health and wellbeing

The areas we are finding to be of particular importance are mental health, housing, legal support, the need for material aid and connection with the Stolen Generations and Indigenous community.

Part 2

Connecting Home recommends that:

- As a first priority, there be an acknowledgement of and awareness that sexual abuse occurred in the past and that where children continue to be cared for out of home, there is still great risk that it continues to occur. Further, all past allegations need to be fully and openly investigated.

- All people charged with the out of home care of children are suitably trained and credentialed professionals, and that there is vigilant monitoring and professional supervision.
- Staff and Managers working with children should be professionally trained and skilled, with clear and concise reporting processes.
- Where an investigation is commenced the staff member should be stood down on full pay during the course of the investigation to protect all parties involved.
- Wherever possible congregate care arrangements are limited.
- Organisations should fully investigate each and every formal and informal allegation of abuse.
- Where criminality is suspected the Police should become involved, but where the investigation does not result in criminal proceedings the organisation should continue it's own investigation as this burden of proof is likely lower than for criminal actions.
- There needs to be reparation in terms of support systems funded specifically for those affected. This does not require the funding of new agencies or the creation of administration intense department programs, but could simply involve the rolling out of additional funding to existing support agencies to provide additional capacity.
- A package of compensation that will enable real reparation to occur be considered.
- The Catholic Church should exclude any confessions of sexual abuse from their vow of silence. There should be mandatory reporting for such allegations.
- In the case of victims of the Stolen Generations, the Inquiry refer to previous reports and investigations specific to Indigenous health and wellbeing including Closing the Gap, the Bringing Them Home report and reports investigating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody.

Should it be of assistance to the Inquiry, Connecting Home is able to liaise with its client base to ensure that the views and testimonies of potential victims with the Indigenous/ Stolen Generations population of Victoria are represented within the scope of the Commission.

Part 3

(a) Compensation

The issue of compensation for Indigenous people who were removed as part of the Stolen Generations is one that Connecting Home continues to have agitated by clients and the community generally. The Terms of Reference for this Inquiry open up the possibility for recommendations being made regarding this. To date, the State of Victoria has not awarded compensation to address this issue, as many other states in Australia and some international jurisdictions have done. The provision of compensation goes hand in hand with an acknowledgement of the wrongs done to the Stolen Generations.

Connecting Home recommends that the State of Victoria seriously considers a compensation scheme to address the ongoing issue of the removal of Aboriginal Victorians due to past policies. To this end, with the assistance of a leading law firm it has completed research into the possibility of members of the Stolen Generations

receiving compensation and is in the process of conducting research into various compensation models. Given Connecting Home's link to the community, it is well placed to advise the Government on the processes of developing a satisfactory model of compensation and will make itself available to do so, should this be required.