



Royal Commission
into Family Violence

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MURIEL PAULINE BAMBLETT

I, Muriel Pauline Bamblett, Chief Executive Officer, of 139 Nicholson Street East Brunswick, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1. I am authorised by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-Op. (**VACCA**) to make this statement on its behalf.
2. I refer to and rely on VACCA's submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (**Royal Commission**) dated June 2015, which sets out 37 recommendations addressing the following specific areas and questions articulated in the Royal Commission's Issues Paper 2015:
 - (a) awareness and education;
 - (b) service model;
 - (c) funding models; and
 - (d) research and evaluation to ensure we are providing evidence-informed responses and programs.

A copy of that submission is attached to this statement and marked '**MB 1**'.

3. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Co-Op. (VACCA)

4. VACCA is the lead Aboriginal child and family welfare organisation in Victoria, protecting and promoting the rights of Aboriginal children, young people, families and the community.
5. VACCA has been operating since 1977, and has grown from an agency of less than 20 staff to approximately 260. We are currently located across the state, with larger

service sites in each of the north, south, east and west of Melbourne, as well as inner Gippsland.

6. VACCA is governed by a Community elected Aboriginal Board which sets the direction for the organisation's strategic plan and the programs and services we deliver to the Aboriginal Community in Victoria. The Board also monitors and provides oversight and fulfils legislated governance functions in relation to the compliance and management of VACCA.
7. VACCA's purpose is to advocate for the rights of Aboriginal children, young people families and the community, and provide them with culturally responsive, safe and accessible services premised on human rights, self-determination, cultural respect and safety.
8. VACCA provides a range of services to Aboriginal communities, particularly children and family services, to support their wellbeing and safety, strengthen Aboriginal culture and encourage best parenting practices. It also provides re-unification services to Stolen Generations and advises government and community services organisations in relation to issues impacting them including child abuse and neglect.
9. VACCA has significant experience in the delivery of services across the universal, secondary, specialist and statutory platforms including:
 - information, advice and referral services;
 - parenting services;
 - financial literacy services;
 - intensive child and family services and out-of-home care services;
 - education support services;
 - cultural and Community strengthening group programs;
 - clinical healing programs across all service types;
 - family violence services, including crisis accommodation, outreach and case management;
 - homelessness services;

- drug and alcohol services (in development);
 - Stolen Generations services;
 - Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse support service;
 - Group based programs; and
 - Lakidjeka Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (**ACSASS**) (this service provides an Aboriginal perspective on risk to Child Protection).
10. We have a proven track record in successfully managing, developing and implementing large scale complex projects, such as the development of the Aboriginal Cultural Competence framework, the Culturally Informed Addendum to the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (**DHHS**) Standards Evidence Guide and the Orana Gonyah Crisis Accommodation and Support Service – a state-wide culturally appropriate service response to Aboriginal women and children escaping or experiencing family violence based in Morwell, Victoria.
11. Our staff are highly skilled in undertaking culturally appropriate case planning processes that identify objectives and goals of intervention. Notably, the Department of Health and Human Services has commissioned VACCA to develop a range of service models for other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations across Victoria, for example, case contracting guidelines for Aboriginal agencies, Aboriginal kinship care service model and Aboriginal therapeutic foster care model.
12. VACCA believes that Aboriginal culture and cultural practices offers our vulnerable children and families a way forward out of their hardship and difficulties. This has led us to incorporate cultural protocols into our child welfare practice and drives our cultural activities programs which have included Children's cultural festivals and the revival of practices such as possum skin cloak-making with children.
13. VACCA is a leader in the development of cultural resources that support mainstream organisations and government and non-Aboriginal staff and carers to build cultural sensitivity and to deliver culturally relevant and informed services for Aboriginal children and families. Examples include:
- Building respectful partnerships: The commitment to Aboriginal Cultural Competence in Child and Family Services (2010);

- Aboriginal cultural competence framework (2008);
 - Working with Aboriginal children and families: a guide for child protection and child and family welfare workers (2006);
 - Caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care; and
 - Culturally Informed Addendum to the DHHS Standards Evidence Guide (2015).
14. VACCA also has a strong record of engaging in a partnership approach when working with governments, community services, research institutes and Aboriginal Communities. Our leadership role and the development of partnerships over time have influenced systematic change and contributed significantly to our evolution as an agency.
15. VACCA believes that all children have a right to feel and be safe and to live in an environment that is free from abuse, neglect and violence. VACCA is committed to promoting and upholding the right of Aboriginal children to maintain and celebrate their identity and culture, recognising that connection to culture is critical for children's emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Current role

16. I am Chief Executive Officer of VACCA. I have held this position since September 1999. In this position I am responsible for day to day operations and overall management of VACCA.

Background and qualifications

17. I am a Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung woman.
18. I am active on many boards and committees concerning children, families and the Indigenous community, including the:
- Victorian Children's Council;
 - Foundation to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children;
 - Australian Institute of Family Studies Advisory Council; and

- Aboriginal Justice Forum and the Aboriginal Community Elders Service.
19. From 1997 – 1999, I was the Chairperson of VACCA; from 1998 – 2008, I was Chairperson of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, the peak agency representing Indigenous Child and Family Services nationally; and from 2009 – 2010, I was a Board Member on the NT Board of Inquiry into the Child Protection System.
20. I have received a number of awards and appointments, including:
- Centenary of Federation Medal 2001;
 - Robin Clark Memorial Award for Inspirational Leadership In the Field of Child and Family Welfare (2003);
 - Women’s Electoral Lobby Inaugural Vida Goldstein Award;
 - Participant at the Prime Minister's 2020 Summit (2008);
 - Appointed Adjunct Professor at La Trobe University’s School of Social Work and Social Policy within the Faculty of Health Sciences (2009); Inducted into the Victorian Honor Roll of Women and recognised as a finalist for a Human Rights Medal with the Australian Human Rights Commission (2011);
 - Ministerial appointment to Our Watch Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children;
 - Member of the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Action Group; and
 - Ministerial appointment to Victorian Children’s Council.
21. I was also awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2004 Australia Day Honours for my services to the community, particularly through leadership in the provision of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Family violence in Aboriginal communities

22. Family violence is never acceptable. It causes great harm and hurt yet it is clearly an issue challenging Aboriginal communities, and the Australian community as a whole.

23. Family violence is not a part of, and never has been a part of, Aboriginal culture and it undermines the pivotal role families play in protecting our children, and passing on our culture. Aboriginal cultural ways are based on strong families and kinship systems. Particularly in an Aboriginal context the impact of family violence is felt throughout extended families, kinship networks and the broader community. VACCA, and indeed Aboriginal people, are strongly concerned about the impact of violence on children and their levels of exposure to violence.
24. The Aboriginal definition of the nature and forms of family violence is broader and more encompassing than those used in the mainstream context. Family violence includes intergenerational violence and abuse, and its impacts on extended families and kinship networks. Community violence is an ongoing concern within Aboriginal communities across Victoria. This violence contributes to overall levels of violence reported by Aboriginal people and the trauma experienced within families and kinship groups. Another key consideration is that an individual can be both a perpetrator and a victim of family violence.
25. Traumatic experiences, including violence are widespread in our community. Past policies of dispossession and assimilation have also had an inter-generational impact which translates into a community-wide experience of trauma which requires collective strategies to address. This is where we believe that culture needs to be incorporated into all strategies and practices responding to family violence.
26. Family violence service providers and the broader family violence and intersecting sectors need to have an understanding and be more inclusive of the Aboriginal definition to ensure the delivery of culturally sensitive and respectful services to the Victorian Aboriginal community.
27. Whilst the data for Aboriginal children is stark when compared to all Australian children, we know that there are also many Aboriginal children who are doing well. We know that where there are strong Aboriginal families with strong networks and a strong cultural base, children thrive.
28. The number of Aboriginal children that are exposed to violence is deeply concerning and they are significantly over-represented compared to non-Aboriginal children. This is particularly evident in Victoria's Child Protection notification rates. Aboriginal Australians also experience violence at rates well above those of non-

Aboriginal Australians and a greater proportion of violent incidents in Aboriginal communities are family violence-related.

Causes of family violence in Aboriginal communities

29. There are a number of vulnerabilities that increase the likelihood of people being victims or perpetrators of violent offences and these factors are more pronounced for Aboriginal people.
30. Family violence within Aboriginal communities must be understood within the context of colonisation and its impacts. The past policies of forced removal of Aboriginal children and assimilation has an ongoing impact today along with structural inequalities of poverty and systemic racism that contribute to the over-representation of family violence within Aboriginal communities. This also means that to address this over representation, both poverty and racism experienced by Aboriginal communities needs to be addressed to see meaningful and lasting change to the devastating family violence statistics and its impacts on children, women, men and communities.
31. The legacy of colonisation and Stolen Generations means disadvantage at a whole of community level. Aboriginal communities have been unable to break the cycle of violence and, consequently, there are prisons full of Aboriginal men who have themselves been victims of sexual abuse, family violence and been exposed to drug and alcohol abuse and who experience anger management issues.
32. During a presentation at an Aboriginal Justice Forum held at Point Cook in 2014, the Department of Justice said that some Aboriginal men prefer to stay in the prison system rather than return to mainstream society. This means that there are then fewer men in Aboriginal communities. We need to ask what is on the outside for them if they do not want to leave. Big, strong Aboriginal communities provide protection, nurturing, role models and grounding, and offer support for children if something happens to their immediate family. With the prison system overpopulated with Aboriginal people, those networks are diminishing, a lot of the systems have broken down and there is an absence of support for children.
33. Many Aboriginal families are living on the fringes in Melbourne, particularly in the western suburbs (for example Mernda, Epping and Whittlesea). People living in these areas are often poor and there are limited job prospects and public transport

options to enable those people to get a job somewhere else. This leads to poverty and social disadvantage.

34. There is a growing prevalence of alcohol and substance abuse among Aboriginal young people, particularly in the areas of Gippsland and Western Melbourne. The current ice epidemic has resulted in a new wave of violence and the creation of mental health issues and psychotic, violent episodes. We now see violence, as a result of ice, in some Aboriginal families who had been doing well and were not previously regarded as at risk.

Family violence, Child Protection and out-of-home care systems

35. Today, Aboriginal young people continue to be over-represented in the out-of-home care and youth justice systems. Further, current rates of Aboriginal child removal in Victoria are greater than most other jurisdictions.
36. Family violence is one of the predominant contributing factors (along with drug and alcohol abuse) driving child protection intervention and the removal of Aboriginal children from family and placement in out of home care. Taskforce 1000, which was established by DHHS in early 2014, in response to the overrepresentation of Victorian Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care, has found that 88% of Aboriginal children and young people have experienced and/or been exposed to parental substance use, with 84% experiencing family violence. Neglect and parental mental illness are also key factors at 57% and 52% respectively.
37. Family violence is predominantly prevalent in Aboriginal families experiencing poverty and other issues including drug and alcohol abuse and homelessness.
38. The following data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2014) highlights the significant over-representation of Aboriginal children in Victoria's protection and care system. In Victoria, Aboriginal children were:
- almost 10 (9.4) times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be the subject of a child protection substantiation (68.6 compared with 7.3 per 1,000 children);
 - over 15 (15.6) times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be on care and protection orders (82.0 compared with 5.3 per 1,000 children); and

- more than 15 (15.7) times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be in out of home care (69.5 compared with 4.4 per 1,000 children) at more than twice the rate of non-Aboriginal young people.
39. According to the most recent DHHS Stability Planning and Permanent Care Project Report, Aboriginal children, on average, spend about 40% more time in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children. The over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care is partly caused by the fact that proportionately more Aboriginal children are entering care, but it is also caused by the longer periods that Aboriginal children spend in care.
40. Data also shows that less Aboriginal families and children access early intervention and prevention services thereby further compounding the tendency for children to be entered into child protection.
41. Unless children and young people are able to heal from their own experiences of trauma, many will go on to recreate these conditions and the cycle of intergenerational trauma will continue. Around 60% of families who present to VACCA Integrated Family Services at our Northern service have experienced family violence. In our experience, women will remain in the relationship with their partner in most cases.

Working with the whole family

42. VACCA is of the view that we need to have a comprehensive service support approach towards family violence that takes the whole Aboriginal community along with us while prioritising the safety of women and children. We realise that this approach may be at odds with a significant part of the service system. However we strongly feel that system leads to gaps in interventions which can make a difference.
43. Furthermore, current responses to family violence are largely adult focused; dealing with the mother and father. Children are often invisible and the system does not really take into consideration how the family violence impacts on children until it is too late and they are experiencing significant behavioural issues such as sexualised behaviour, high levels of violence and mental health issues.
44. The only ways in which we become aware of when children and young people and their family groups are in need is when Child Protection Services is involved. This

is because VACCA is only funded to work with children while they are within the Child Protection system through our Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS) program funded by the Department of Health and Human Services.

45. We have \$2.7 million in funding and have created 27 positions across Victoria including some administration positions. ACSASS provides culturally appropriate advice and consultation on significant decisions that determine the planning for at-risk Aboriginal children; such as whether there is a need for Aboriginal children to be subject to Child Protection or supported by community services, whether children need to be on formal court orders or removed from their families and relocated to a place of safety.
46. We are also concerned about the level of data and information sharing and collaboration in the community service and family violence sector. Data needs to be used to inform service responses. We feel that the system is hampered by workers' inability to access relevant data.
47. VACCA (through ACSASS) is informed about every Aboriginal child who comes before Child Protection Services at the point of intake. Where it is deemed necessary to investigate the concerns with Child Protection, we are expected to attend a joint initial visit. If we cannot attend the initial meeting, we can still provide secondary consultation with regard to those children.
48. If adults and young people say they do not wish for us to be involved, we are still expected to be consulted on a secondary basis. We have developed a protocol with DHHS whereby we inform DHHS about risk factors, placement, case planning, interventions and court processes within a cultural framework. The current arrangement is that the ACSASS remains involved in the decision making process for the life of a case. ACSASS can only close the case when Child Protection closes its file.
49. VACCA runs an integrated family services program. We are only funded by DHHS for this program for the north and west of metro Melbourne. We have an Aboriginal Liaison Child FIRST worker and take all of the Child FIRST referrals for Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal Integrated Family Services

50. It is my view that the funding of Aboriginal Integrated Family Services is patchy at best, and grossly underfunded and inadequate at worst, across the State. This is despite the fact that, when available, a suite of services offering early intervention support shows promise.
51. VACCA's Integrated Family Services is a voluntary service and is client directed. Motivational change is more likely to occur when families experience being an equal partner in the process and are in control of their life and family situation. This is in contrast to Child Protection that is statutory in nature where clients are often compelled to change by the system. They are often not invested in the change or motivated to change so the success is likely to be low. While clearly there are situations that require a statutory response, they often do not have outcomes that empower clients to develop better connections, skills and relationships to parent and manage their families.
52. Over the past 5 years the level of complexity has increased in Integrated Family Services cases. This relates to the increase in the child protection threshold. Cases that may have been involved with Child Protection 5 - 10 years ago are now often being managed in the community with the involvement of Integrated Family Services. As cases are more complex, often involving factors of family violence, poverty, intellectual disability, mental health, substance misuse and parenting difficulties, the time spent working with these families is usually much longer.
53. Integrated Family Services is funded for short episodic, medium and long-term work. However, once a family engages with the service, in the majority of cases the work is long term (over 90 hours of service). VACCA's North West Integrated Family Services has dealt with 407 cases since 1 January 2012. This is a significant commitment given that families are usually involved for over 90 hours of service (often 9 - 12 months) and beyond for some families.
54. The Aboriginal Liaison Worker role in the Northern region is to complete initial Child FIRST assessments for Aboriginal families when there are inadequate resources within the Child First alliance to do so. This ensures that Aboriginal families are receiving a prompt and seamless response. When this occurs, an initial assessment is completed by the Aboriginal Liaison Worker and then, if assessed appropriate for Integrated Family Services, the Aboriginal Liaison Worker completes

a handover with the allocated worker. Integrated Family Services has completed in excess of 20 initial assessments for Child FIRST North East since January 2014.

55. We work closely with Child Protection to prevent unnecessary reports and to strengthen community work with the family. Integrated Family Services consults with the Community Based Child Protection Worker for a range of reasons often relating to concerns about children and young people's safety in the care of their parent or primary carer. The consultative role of the Community Based Child Protection Worker allows us to discuss and plan the most appropriate community support plan and we can involve them in visiting the family concerned. This enables us to plan carefully, often with the knowledge of the family's Child Protection history, and assist in preventing families from entering the Child Protection system.
56. We advocate to Child Protection to prevent a family from entering the system where possible. For example, in a most recent Integrated Family Services case a school made a report to Child Protection after witnessing a verbal argument between parents in the playground. The family has a significant history of family violence. The children have recently been on Supervision Orders that expired at the end of 2014. Child Protection referred the case to Integrated Family Services towards the end of the expiry of those orders. The school did not contact the allocated Integrated Family Services worker prior to making the report.
57. Integrated Family Services was concerned that if Child Protection contacted the family directly to discuss the report, the parents may have withdrawn the children from the school. Their attendance at school affords the main opportunity to monitor the safety of the children as they are attending regularly. Their withdrawal would be most concerning because it would increase the family's isolation and decrease the children's visibility. After Integrated Family Services contacted Child Protection it was agreed they would not make contact with the family but rather Integrated Family Services would plan to manage the risk through consultation with the Community Based Child Protection Worker. This would be done through regular attempted visits to the family and through regular liaison with the school to monitor the children's attendance and wellbeing.
58. The Integrated Family Services program incorporates the 'Cradle to Kinder' program; an intensive ante and post-natal support service to provide longer term, intensive family and early parenting support for vulnerable young mothers and their

families, commencing in pregnancy and continuing until the child reaches four years of age or pre-school.

59. The Cradle to Kinder program is similar to the 'Bumps to Babes and Beyond' program being run out of Mallee & District Aboriginal Services, Mildura which focuses on pregnant Aboriginal women aged 14 to 25.
60. Unfortunately, the Cradle to Kinder program has a limited capacity, so we are only working with a very small number of families. For a family to qualify for access to the Cradle to Kinder program, there must have been a Child Protection notification and that notification must have been substantiated. In 2014 – 2015, ACSASS had 100 notifications for unborn babies.
61. VACCA's Aboriginal specific Cradle to Kinder program is showing positive signs but we are only running one of the two programs across the whole state of Victoria. We run the program in the North region, and entered a partnership with the mainstream provider, Queen Elizabeth Centre, in the Southern region, and are funded for .6 of a position. Once the target number of places is full, there are no more places until the program finishes. The waiting list is huge and if we had capacity, referrals would substantially increase.
62. I think Cradle to Kinder is an excellent program and very positive for those who are lucky enough to obtain a place. It has been able to engage Aboriginal communities and work with a really vulnerable group of young women having babies. The youthfulness of the Aboriginal population is challenging as the rate of young mums is increasing each year.
63. We are able to work more intensively with families in the Cradle to Kinder program as we are working with them for a long period of time. We try to engage the family long term and the period of time really makes a difference in terms of that goal. The workers also make a huge difference and having workers who are innovative and creative enables them to develop the program with the child and mother.

Koorie FACES program

64. Aside from funding and capacity issues, it is important that programs for Aboriginal families focus on building awareness and are embedded in a therapeutic understanding of the Aboriginal families' backgrounds.

65. A current, successful example of this type of program is 'Koorie FACES' which is a family strengthening program developed by VACCA in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. The Koorie FACES program aims to build on and increase the confidence in parents, carers and families of Aboriginal children. The program focuses on an increased understanding and knowledge of self, Aboriginal culture and parenting practices/styles, to build resilience and strength in the family unit against drug and alcohol misuse. The program could certainly be adapted for a family violence audience.
66. Koorie FACES focuses on the value and importance of Aboriginal culture and Indigenous families; using a range of activities to ensure participants are involved in an interactive learning environment. Aboriginal learning styles have guided the methodologies used throughout the program and include group discussions, storytelling – particularly by Elders – role plays, group activities which are highly visual and interactive and time to reflect on learning.
61. The program is not about telling families how to parent their children but focuses on participation and drawing on the group's own knowledge and experiences. By embedding Aboriginal culture in the program, we are both communicating messages about parenting and how culture is an empowering tool for bringing up kids to be resilient to drug and alcohol use.
62. One section of the program focuses on colonisation as it is important for Aboriginal people to understand what happened to their parents and the impact it had on their parenting. VACCA has received feedback that people often could not understand why they failed as a parent but once they saw the video on colonisation, it helped them understand how the past impacted on their parents. This enabled them to break through and connect with their parents and own children.
63. VACCA believes that there is insufficient work being undertaken to help men to understand the impact that their behaviour has on their children. The Koorie FACES program helps.
64. The program lacks recurrent funding under the Integrated Family Services funding arrangements and VACCA is constantly seeking out various funding opportunities. We are currently receiving funding from prisons because the program has been a success with Aboriginal offenders. We have received great feedback from prisons

and have been informed that Aboriginal men do not usually participate in programs in prison but they go to, and engage with, Koorie FACES.

65. A feature of Koorie FACES is that the program trains facilitators within each Aboriginal community. We help those communities to train their trainers by using connections and training people such as health workers and young men who are aspiring leaders. We provide the training and resources and they then have ability to run the program.

Aboriginal Stronger Families program

66. Another successful program is 'Aboriginal Stronger Families' which offers intensive and long term (up to 12 months) family case management support to enable Aboriginal children who are at imminent risk of being placed in out-of-home care for the first time, to remain at home with their parents or to support the child's return to their parents care when safe to do so. The program works closely with the family concerned and workers from DHHS to engage the family and understand their needs. Families must be on an order from DHHS to be eligible for the program.
67. The program focuses on addressing the immediate needs of the family the obligations set under Child Protective orders, and very importantly, the therapeutic needs of the family. We hope to support families to work on the deeper systemic issues which place the children at risk.
68. The Aboriginal Stronger Families program has been developed to be culturally appropriate for Aboriginal people. We do a lot of work around developing tools and training materials for children such as work around the Aboriginal flag and Aboriginal art.
69. As an example, VACCA undertook a case study through the program with a really challenging family. The father was extremely violent towards his partner and the children were stuck in the middle. The adolescent son had partnered up with an adolescent girl and the amount of emotional abuse that he inflicted was incredible. They were in a very toxic relationship. Aboriginal Stronger Families worked with the girl on a voluntary basis as participants do not have to be in Child Protection. The VACCA worker persevered and kept reinforcing that the program could offer the girl support if she was not coping. Eventually the girl opened up to the worker and the end result was amazing support linking her to services including housing and counselling.

70. One of the biggest hurdles is that people just do not know what support is available to them. The step of simply linking the girl in to a raft of people who could help her made a significant difference. The son was also linked into services and, for example, attended anger management sessions and addressed his health issues. The program therefore linked them into a whole series of services they did not know how to access.
71. In terms of how mainstream services can improve responses to Aboriginal children and families experiencing family violence, it is important to recognise that local Aboriginal communities say they want input into decision making about Aboriginal children. There seems to be a disconnect with Aboriginal people because that relationship just does not exist. Aboriginal people are frequently either not being referred to, or are not seeking, the services.

Service gaps and suggested solutions

72. Unfortunately, VACCA does not work with all Aboriginal children in care. There are over 1,400 Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and we only work with around 300 in that system. The majority are therefore the responsibility of mainstream services and/or DHHS that currently has responsibility for between 600 - 700 Aboriginal children in Kinship Care. In contrast, since 2012, New South Wales has taken the approach that all Aboriginal children will be handed over to the Aboriginal sector to manage within 5 - 10 years.
73. Data suggests that Aboriginal children are in out-of-home care longer once they are removed and there has been poor investment in reunification services for Aboriginal children. This is often because Aboriginal families are often considered 'too hard'. Part of the issue is that Aboriginal communities are not involved in decisions regarding at risk families. Aboriginal services, if resourced, are able to undertake intensive work to reunite children. This is based on our knowledge of the families, their underlying issues and the capacity to target interventions that can effectively engage our vulnerable Aboriginal families.
74. The same can be said for women's services. If women access mainstream women's refuges, it would be viable to establish a way of engaging with Aboriginal communities. Many Aboriginal women want to keep each other safe. Aboriginal men working in Men's Behaviour Change Programs also want to know who the perpetrators are in order to work with them but currently are unable to do so. There

are obviously privacy issues regarding information sharing but this often happens by word of mouth within Aboriginal communities anyway.

75. VACCA's family violence workers report that in their experience working with Aboriginal women affected by violence, the majority of them want to stay in the relationship; they do not want the relationship to stop, just the violence. They also report that many women will not seek the support of mainstream family violence services because they fear Child Protection involvement and removal of the children.
76. An example of a culturally safe multi-pronged service approach from Victoria is VACCA's Orana Gunyah, (meaning welcome, place of shelter); a state-wide Aboriginal women and children's crisis accommodation and support service which opened in May 2014 and is based in the regional centre of Morwell servicing regional and rural communities as well. VACCA provides a culturally appropriate service response to women and children escaping or experiencing family violence.
77. The service is holistic based on the principle of focusing on Aboriginality as a critical protective factor. The facility, run by VACCA in partnership with Community Housing Ltd, provides modern, secure and comfortable short term accommodation for up to five women and their children at a time. It enables on site access to support services for women and children (case management, advocacy and referral to other services such as housing, court support, health services, Centrelink, counselling). The program includes a children's worker and also provides outreach services.
78. Given the range of issues experienced by women who have accessed Orana Gunyah, the range of services provided by VACCA has been equally wide-ranging and has included counselling, housing, advocacy, brokerage, legal support, court support, financial support, mental health, child care and parenting support, along with the provision of women's groups, children's programs, youth support, recreation, drug and alcohol counselling, medical, reconnection to land, reconnection to culture, identity support, relocation, ACSASS, disability support services and referrals including interstate referrals.
79. We need Aboriginal communities to work together towards change. We have seen some exciting initiatives recently in this regard. For example:

- VACCA has organised sports carnivals for Aboriginal children to deliver messages around issues such as family violence and the importance of good health. We have secured sponsorships of t-shirts with key messages such as 'say no to violence and 'stop violence' as have found that this messaging and imaging works well with young people.
 - Our local Australian Rules Football team, the Fitzroy Stars, required all of its young men to sign up to the White Ribbon campaign. We see a massive difference now around that club which previously had high levels of violence and was not safe for women. Women now feel comfortable in that environment; there is no swearing and the behaviour of these young men has totally changed. A 'no violence within the home' policy has also been implemented whereby young men who are involved in episodes of violence are suspended from playing. The messaging involves sentiments such as 'we won't tolerate this behaviour' and 'Aboriginal people don't need to be violent'. A lot of people now take their children to the club to be mentored.
80. VACCA considers that parenting and relationship programs are what Aboriginal people need most, especially in response to family violence. Currently there is no state-wide systematic and strategic response for Aboriginal children and women. For example, Cradle to Kinder is a great program but it is aimed at a very small group of families at the top of the family violence pyramid. We cannot have programs that are just delivered to those most at risk; we need to have programs aimed at families and, in particular, starting at the antenatal stage, to stop the trajectory of those families moving into the high risk category and therefore into Child Protection Services and out-of-home care.
81. The role of Aboriginal organisations is also unclear which is concerning when the involvement of such organisations and the Aboriginal community as a whole is paramount to achieving meaningful change.
82. We need to invest in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, which are well placed to deliver prevention, early intervention and support services. These services are well connected to their communities, know particular families of concern and are able to more effectively engage with them.
83. VACCA's practice approaches incorporate understandings of the impact of past policies on families today and understanding how intergenerational trauma and

racism must be addressed as part of effective responses. We know that providing Aboriginal services for Aboriginal people, and allowing community-based decision-making control and responsibility for the implementation, is what works.

84. As I stated earlier, family violence has no part in traditional Aboriginal culture, nor in contemporary cultural expressions. It is important to note that the large majority of Aboriginal families are not experiencing family violence and are in fact thriving. It is important to learn from these families and why and how they are achieving success. From VACCA's experience these are families who have built strong kinship support, are well connected in the communities and are proud of their Aboriginal identity and have developed a pattern of resilience based on these factors. These families have also been able to utilise support services.
85. VACCA would like to see investment and resourcing of Aboriginal organisations to provide culturally relevant services to Aboriginal children, women and men to provide healing for Aboriginal communities impacted by family violence.
86. There also needs to be measures put in place to increase the uptake of mainstream services by Aboriginal families. The Victorian Auditor-General's report on Accessibility of Mainstream Services for Aboriginal Victorians (2014) identified barriers to access of mainstream services provided or funded by government included a lack of culturally safe services, a lack of awareness of available services, racism, shame and fear, complex administrative processes and affordability.
87. Culturally sensitive and respectful service delivery is one of the most important prerequisites to providing an effective and efficient service to Aboriginal people and is a major challenge for mainstream service providers. Agencies who are working with Aboriginal people need to understand how and why violence occurs within Aboriginal communities, and have a basic understanding of Aboriginal approaches to dealing with family violence. Our belief is the mainstream heavily gendered approach, with its power and privilege explanation of family violence does not really apply to Aboriginal perpetrators of family violence. It is therefore no surprise that programs delivered through this lens result in little change in Aboriginal perpetrators of family violence.
88. It is critical that all organisations understand that their services must be client driven and promote self-determination and enhancement of self-management within our communities, to address the various issues associated with Aboriginal family

violence. As a minimum real, sustainable, respectful and equitable partnerships with Aboriginal organisations and communities need to be developed and maintained.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Muriel Bamblett', written over a horizontal line of small, repeating characters.

Muriel Pauline Bamblett

Dated: 14 July 2015