



Dear National Children's Commissioner, Ms Anne Hollonds

### Deadly Inspiring Youth Doing Good (DIYDG)

DIYDG make this submission on behalf of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) young people, their families and our communities in Cairns and surrounding regions. Our submission seeks to focus on the need for preventive programs that heal our Indigenous young people. Programs that are responsive to a young person's individual circumstances, their strengths, hopes and needs, while being inclusive of their family and community.

DIYDG is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation, founded in 2016 by Indigenous young people, with the aim to *Inspire, Equip and Empower* the next generation to take action that positively changes their world. Adhering to cultural protocol, DIYDG was established and operates under the cultural wisdom, knowledge and guidance of community leaders and Elders.

The foundation of DIYDG programs in an authentic application of principles of Indigenous knowledges and worldview. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *ways of being* and *ways of doing*. This provides transformative 'relational-based' experiences that facilitates positive transition through increased cultural identity, family and community connections, voice, empowerment and autonomy, and engagement with life goals and direction-setting.

A core value at DIYDG is for everyone to feel that their world is a safe place, that people care about their wellbeing and that they feel respected, supported and empowered to work through their life's challenges. Directly engaging young people in their own decisions and responsibilities in a transformative (life changing) way that enriches their connections and wellbeing and increases positive life choices. Building relationships and connections that encourage and sustain a young person's achievements is critical.

As a community, DIYDG invites young people to co-design and shape their own program journey; this allows for an individual strength-based approach. *Inspiring, Equipping and Empowering* youth to actively participate in their decisions is fundamental; this allows youth to feel positive possibilities and aspirations and channel their energy toward incremental and realistic achievements. This happens in a supportive and connected environment that gives young people the time needed to rebuild their trust in themselves, families, communities and services. This is a relationships model applying the belief that *it takes a village to raise a child*. This collective model is the path to healing.

This submission advocates that community-led placed-based prevention and early intervention program are critical to heal our young people; and acknowledgement of this must inform the design and funding of future Indigenous youth justice and wellbeing programs in Cairns. Such a change will stem the ongoing systemic policy and funding failures that entrap our Indigenous youth and communities into cycles of negative destruction. The Queensland youth justice system is punitive and void of any rehabilitation failing both youth and communities. This must change, so youth have access to the structural, cultural, therapeutic and community connections needed to establish and build a healthy future.

To substantiate our call for the acknowledgement of, and increase to, Indigenous-led and placed-based youth justice prevention programs, we reference research DIYDG conducted in partnership with Jawun Research Centre (Central Queensland University); key research papers by the Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse; and the 2023 Justice Reform Initiative Report.

Our submission addresses the four questions listed in the call for submissions, however we'll share our story rather than directly answer questions.

## *Integrated Atlas of Mental Health and Wellbeing Services for Indigenous Children and Youth in Cairns (Cairns Atlas)*

The Cairns Atlas (1) provides baseline data on the service provision for Indigenous young people in Cairns. The data highlights current issues relevant to the funding and delivery of Indigenous youth justice programs; and raises questions on the planning and funding of future programs.

### **Where the youth program funding goes**

The development of the Aboriginal Community Controlled (ACCO) sector has been prioritised in the 2022 National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Despite this and the recognition in numerous Federal and State Policy Frameworks, of the critical role that ACCOs play in Indigenous health and wellbeing, the Cairns Atlas showed that in 2022:

- around 75 percent of the services available specifically for young people in Cairns, were delivered by non-Indigenous organisations
- approximately half of all services were delivered by non-government organisations (NGOs)
- up to a third were delivered by the public sector (Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural affairs, Queensland Health and Queensland Education)

The high proportion of NGOs providing services for Indigenous youth, compared to those provided by ACCOs, raises questions around NGO's service design and delivery, such as the:

- equity, culturally safety and the cultural appropriateness of services and delivery
- governance, decision making, and accountability and evaluation of the NGO sector and what outcomes are valued most by funders and non-Indigenous service providers
- extent of an NGO's engagement with ACCOs around service provision and decision making about Indigenous youth in their programs
- level that non-Indigenous service providers build collaborative partnerships with ACCOs to include cultural and community knowledge and co-design decision making processes
- capacity of the current funding and NGO's service provision to deliver on Federal and State policy commitments to Indigenous advancement, leadership and social emotional wellbeing (SEWB) models of care

### **Prevention versus crisis intervention**

The Cairns Atlas shows that ACCOs provide proportionally more high intensity services, that is services related to youth justice, child safety and mental health. Approximately two thirds of Indigenous youth services are high intensity support services for youth already experiencing difficulties related to youth justice, child safety, or mental health. As such, ACCOs provide proportionally more downstream/crisis intervention than upstream/wellbeing support.

In summary, Cairns ACCOs provided less than a quarter of youth services yet, they provided more than a third of high intensity services.

It's critical to note that the more general preventative wellbeing services, that should be closely aligned with an Indigenous SEWB model of care, were delivered by non-Indigenous NGOs. These services are usually provided without Indigenous communities or ACCO's contributing to program design or the provision of culturally safe services. This is despite the Federal and State policy recognition of the importance of ACCO's SEWB models of care for Indigenous youth and the importance of alignment with the SEWB models in reducing the need for higher-level intensity services.

Overall, Cairns ACCOs are primarily being tasked with providing the intensive higher-level crisis intervention level services rather than services at the preventative SEWB level of care.

### Flipping youth service provision

Findings indicated that when the NGOs have failed Indigenous youth in the delivery of downstream programs, these youth then land in an ACCO upstream crisis intervention program. Often these programs operate with short-term funding and have contractual restrictions that limit program design and delivery and hence, youth outcomes. This current system of practice is failing youth and is neither humane nor acceptable to the individual and their community.

Indigenous SEWB models of care are holistic, connected to country, community, family and spirituality, and to physical wellbeing. As such, these are privileged in positive and protective factors intrinsic to Indigenous SEWB models of care. Hence, closely aligned with upstream preventive models of care. SEWB models are built on kinship, on relationships that are interconnected, intricate, and cultural; generally, a young person caught in the justice system lacks the skill to navigate these issues on their own.

Yet ACCOs in Cairns are not recognised or funded as primary providers of upstream preventative support for indigenous youth. Instead, funded to provide the high-level downstream support to children and families who already have reached a level of crisis, and are likely entrenched in the child protection and youth justice system. As such, the youth and their family are likely to have complex histories and require long-term specialised support.

The funding and provision of Indigenous youth services needs to be flipped. ACCO's need to be funded to deliver long-term, flexible, community-led placed-based SEWB preventive programs that provide the wrap-around community and therapeutic care needed.

### National and State policy agreements

Multiple Federal and State government policies, strategies and reports, over many years, have recognised and reiterated the impact of colonisation and the need for community driven, culturally informed programs that support the health and wellbeing of Indigenous youth.

The high number of youth justice and child safety support services in Cairns, statically reflects the commitment to services to reduce the rate of over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care and in the justice system. However, the Cairns Atlas shows, that the current funding and service provision does not demonstrate the recognition of and the call for community-led and place-based approaches to address Indigenous youths' specific developmental and cultural need.

This finding raises two fundamental questions:

- 1) whether funding non-Indigenous NGOs for downstream preventive program is the most effective way of delivering services and achieving the best outcomes for Indigenous youth
- 2) the level of community control participation and partnership required to assess the contractual deliverables and outcomes tied to an NGOs funding, especially agencies where models of care are not derived from an Indigenous perspective or SEWB model of care

### Research: Cairns Atlas data

A selection of the data from the Cairns Atlas is included below. This data substantiates DIYDG's advocacy for increased and secure funding to Indigenous-led and place-based child and youth services, for prevention downstream programs. This change would result in less youth progressing up stream and becoming captured in a crisis intervention cycle; as is evidenced in Queensland's current youth justice system. Importantly this would deliver a human rights and cultural advancement for Indigenous youth, families, community and our society.



### Cairns Indigenous youth population

The 2021 ABS census data reports the Cairns population as 253,748 with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations being 9.7 percent of the city's population. This is over double Queensland's average proportional Indigenous population that is 4.6 percent. Of the Cairns Indigenous population, 44 percent is aged under 20 years. ([abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021](https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021))

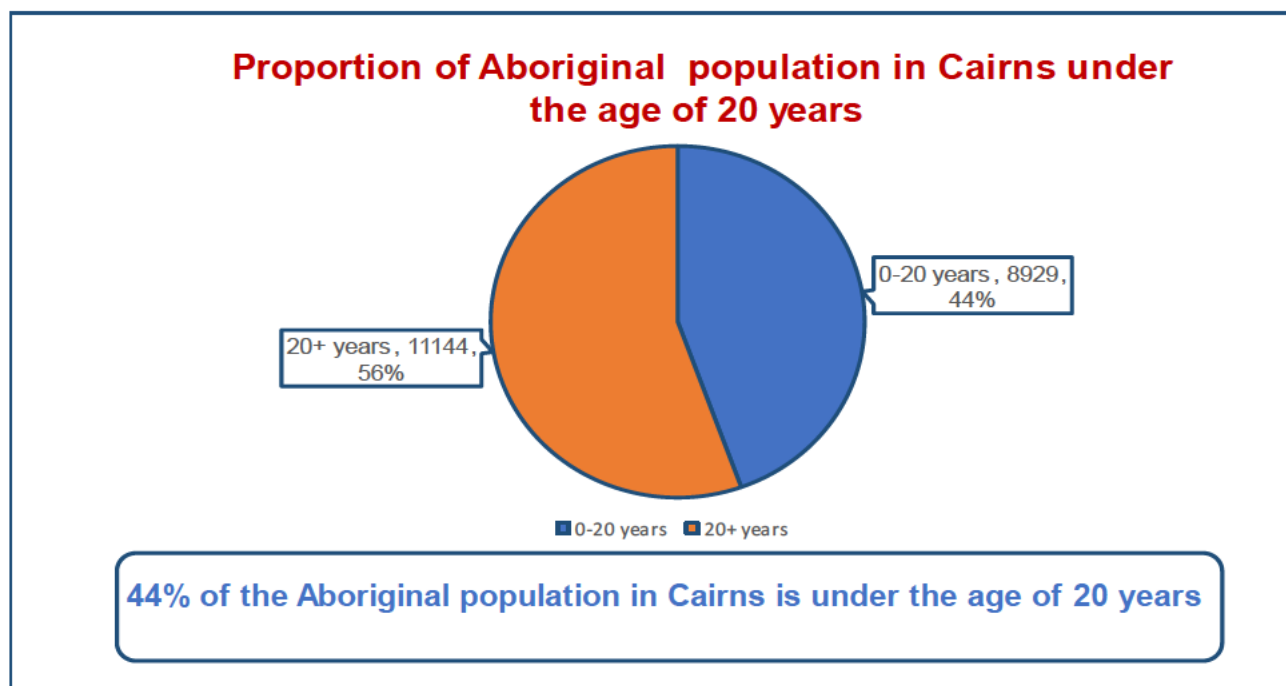
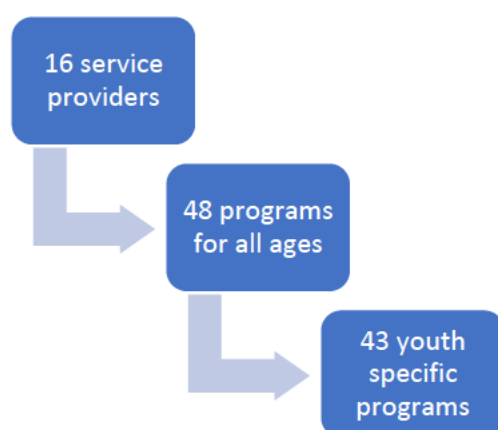


Figure 1 Proportion of Cairns Aboriginal population aged less than 20 years of age

### Cairns Youth Services

In 2022, sixteen service providers were identified in Cairns who provided 48 different care programs. 43 of these programs specifically supported young people.



The providers of the 48 programs available to all ages were:

- 54 % 26 services delivered by NGOs
- 25% 12 services by ACCOs
- 11% 5 services - QLD Department youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs (CYJMA)
- 8% 4 services by Queensland Health, Cairns and Hinterland Health services (CHHS)
- 2% 1 service by Queensland Department of Education (EQ)

### Youth service providers

Figure 2 shows the youth specific services were provided by:

- 51% - NGOs
- 26% - ACCOs
- 23% - Queensland Government (CYJMA; CHHS; EQ)

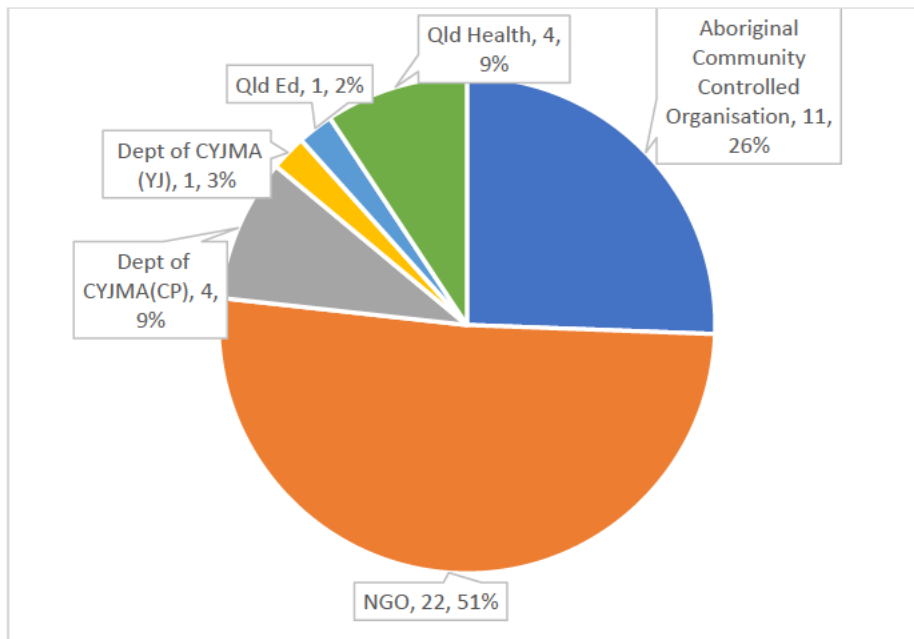


Figure 2 Type of provider delivering services-youth specific services only

### Reason for a young person's engagement with a service

Figure 3 shows that services providing unspecified psychosocial/wellbeing support were most commonly accessed With nine services for young people in, or at risk of, contact with the justice system.

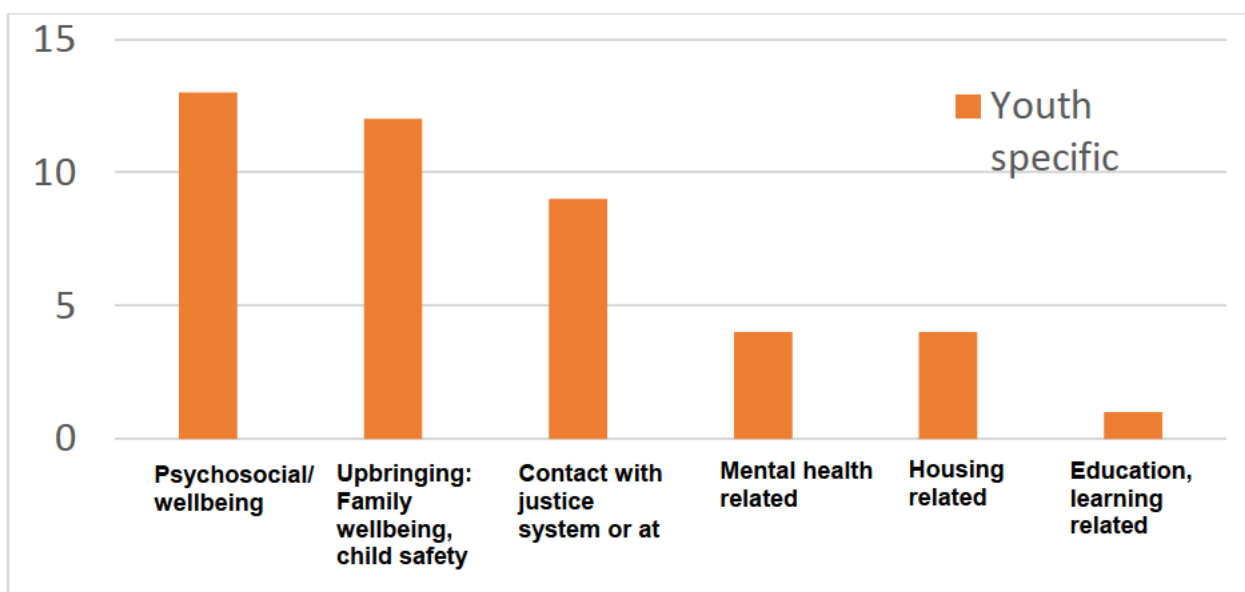


Figure 3 Diagnosis or reason for a young person's engagement with a service.

### Service providers

Figure 4 shows that ACCOs provided services to all age groups except the 0-11 year age group. However, ACCOs provided only 11 of the 43 youth services. The breakdown of the ACCO services was:

- 0 - 11 years 0 services
- 12-18 years 6 services
- 0-17 years 4 services
- 16-25 years 1 service

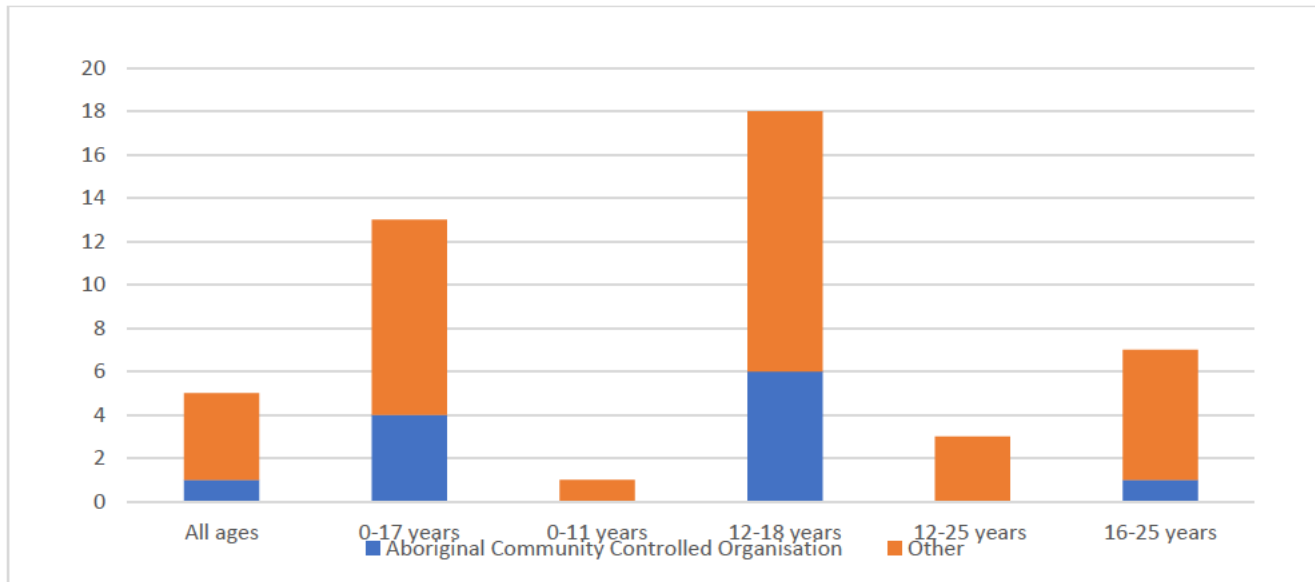


Figure 4 Number of services for 0 -25 years provided by ACCOs

### Youth services by type and provider

Figure 5 shows the reason, by sector and service providers, for using a type of service-youth specific service:

- NGOs provided the most psychosocial/wellbeing (preventive) type support, followed by child safety related services
- NGO sector and CHHHS provided mental health related services
- ACCOs provided the youth justice intervention programs

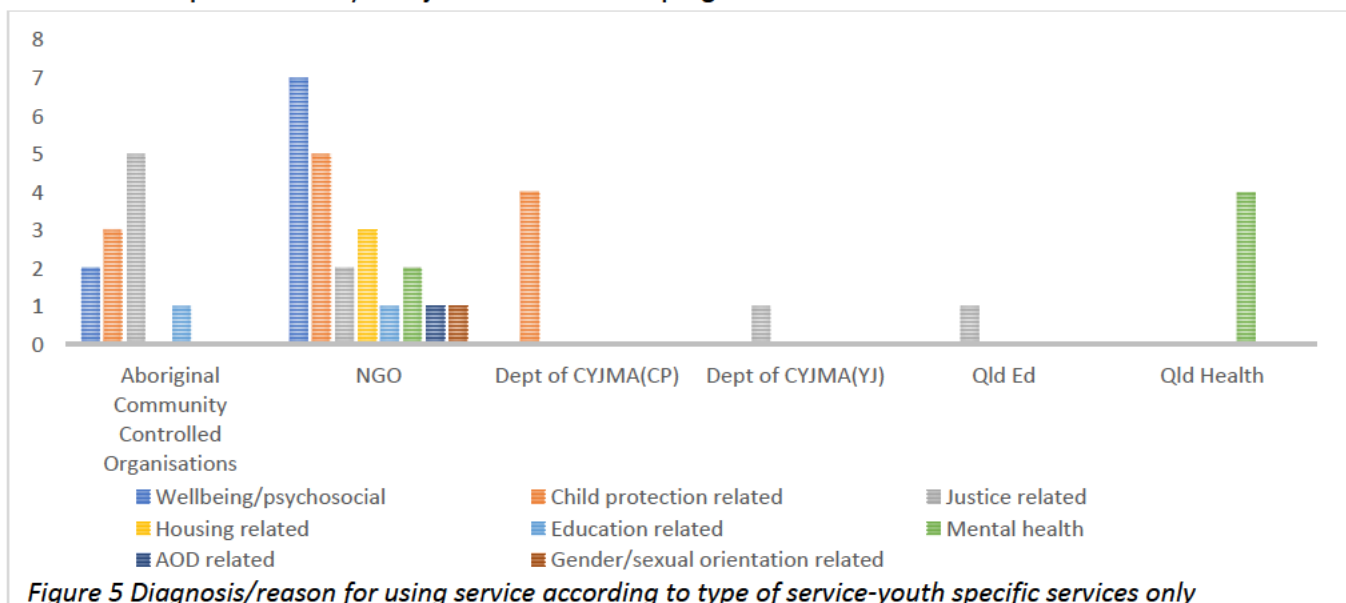


Figure 5 Diagnosis/reason for using service according to type of service-youth specific services only

## Summary

The Cairns Atlas data provides evidence that the availability of the types of youth services and the current funding source. This highlights the over reliance on the NGO sector to deliver Indigenous youth programs and the lack of funding to ACCOs to deliver culturally appropriate youth programs.

## Research: The Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse

The Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse – research brief 10 (2) and research brief 32 (3), investigate a number of Indigenous youth justice programs. The emerging theme from this research is that an effective preventive Indigenous youth justice program needs to be Indigenous-led and place-based. Highlighting an across the country, a one-size-fits-all model hasn't worked and will not work.

The specific circumstances and needs of Indigenous Cairns youth in the justice system are unique to them. Therefore, program design and delivery must be fit for purpose and address the specific socio-economic, psychosocial, educational, community and cultural factors that influence their behaviours and decisions.

Research brief 10 lists the key factors for effective Indigenous prevention programs. These are:

- Intervene early to maximise early intervention to reduce offending trajectories
- include youth in the design and implementation of their prevention/intervention program
- address multiple risk factors in a holistic way (wrap around services)
- involve members of the youth's community to build intergenerational family and community support and sustainability of the youth's success
- collaboration across agencies to negate inter-agency gaps and the associated risk factors

Research brief 32 further develops these findings. The research lists essential program elements to achieve sustainable and improved outcomes for Indigenous youth. These are:

- the nature, composition and program design is vital and must consider a youth's connection to community and involvement in the justice system
- interventions must acknowledge and amplify relationships as a mechanism of change
- apply a strength-based approach to validate a youth's lived experience, their identity and connection to culture and community
- Indigenous community controlled, designed and delivered programs will ensure specific needs of community are addressed to foster community by-in
- The importance of planned and resourced program protocols supported by appropriate data and evaluation methods

The principles listed above are those that are foundational to DIYDG youth programs. Our programs are evidence based and robustly designed with 360 degree accountability, delivered by qualified, skilled and experienced Indigenous youth workers and we work collaboratively with other youth agencies. DIYDG's (and other local ACCOs) expertise in the design and delivery of youth programs needs to be recognised and for funding agencies to acknowledge this; and follow through with committing long-term funding for the delivery of Indigenous-led and community-based youth services.

## Research Justice Reform Initiative Report – Jailing is Failing: The need for alternatives to incarceration in Queensland

A select summary of the key findings from the Justice Reform Initiative Report (4) are:

- Queensland’s system of incarceration for youth that is harmful, expensive and ineffective
- Queensland has the highest incarceration rate of all States, with a 41% increase in the child prison population since 2019-2020
- Prison does not work to reduce crime; or to build safer communities; nor does it work to address the social drivers that result in a youth’s contact with the youth justice system
- First Nations led and place-based approaches have seen significant reductions in crime, criminal justice system contact, youth justice contact and significant cost savings, as well as improvements in a range of cultural, social, health and wellbeing measures
- Early intervention and prevention programs reduce crime at a population level by between 5 and 31 percent
- The State needs to invest in, and increase the availability, scope, and capacity of programs that have a strong evidence base in terms of breaking cycles of youth captured in the justice system

The Queensland government recently overrode its Human Rights Act to pass more bail laws to incarcerate more First Nations children. Instead of acting on evidence, research or listening to experts, to build community supported pathways to rehabilitation, the government has acted punitively and politically rather than humanely and bravely.

### First Nation Collective – a Cairns community driven initiative

The collective findings presented in this submission demonstrate the critical importance of implementing community designed and led prevention programs to sustainably address the multiply factors that contribute to Indigenous children and youth becoming captured in the destructive cycles of the Queensland youth justice system. In Cairns, there is a need to invest in, and increase the availability, scope, and capacity of Indigenous prevention programs that have evidence of breaking the cycles of youth in the justice system.

Within Cairns’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, there is enormous expertise and goodwill to heal our youth. This is demonstrated by the recent establishment of the First Nations Collective (FNC). DIYDG, in collaboration with five local community organisations, Qld Police Cultural Liaison Officers, Cleveland Youth Detention Centre and Cairns Youth Justice First Nations Action Group have formed the FNC to develop and implement preventive evidence-based culturally appropriate youth prevention approaches.

The FNC leaders and organisations are extraordinarily committed to shape the FNC into a powerful and effective body that creates positive change for Cairns youth and communities. The FNC aims to build collaborative relationships with the criminal justice service. Relationships that support truth telling within the sector and to progress the development of strategic, placed based responses. The diversity of the FNC allows the implementation of First Nations practice frameworks to deliver services that provide On Country engagement, spiritual connection, youth mentoring, holistic health models of care and family and community supports.



The FNC will operate, albeit at a minimal level, without government or NGO support. However, should government work in partnership with the FNC and contribute funding to secure it, it can work at full capacity and have significant ground-breaking changes for the Cairns community. For this to happen, there is a need for government and agencies to acknowledge the failure of the current policies and program funding for Indigenous youth programs and seek better options for Indigenous youth in Cairns.

## **ATTACHMENT A is the FNC Position Statement**

### **Concluding remarks**

DIYDG has endeavoured to provide the submission panel with research data on local Cairns youth services and national research on the factors that contribute to successful Indigenous-led placed-based preventive programs.

Sadly, Indigenous communities have waited too long for the recognition that past and present youth justice policies have failed and are failing. Recognition is essential for there to be a change in approach. Without this recognition, the over representation of Indigenous youth in the justice system will continue. Meaning that the current trend of youth offending will also continue. This is unacceptable, at a human cost, and community and society cost.

There is an urgent need to address the disconnected and fragmented way that programs and services for Indigenous youth are funded, delivered and evaluated. The current system benefits those who have funding; any adjustment of this funding status quo sets up NGO 'competitive-bidding' to maintain their existing funds. Risk adverse funders (Federal and State government and philanthropics) will back a high profile national NGO rather than an innovative community-led program, or organisation such as DIYDG, the FNC., or ACCOs. This system has contributed to and will perpetuate the current destructive cycle of life choices that youth in Cairns are in.

DIYDG make this submission under the belief that community-led and community-based prevention programs are the best option to support Indigenous youth to thrive in their community. This automatically reduces the number of youth entering into and being captured in the youth justice systems.

Please contact DIYDG if you would like to discuss this submission. DIYDG also invite the panel to visit DIYDG and meet our youth. You can see first-hand the community drive, energy and commitment of the DIYDG village – who are all part of *Inspiring, Equipping and Empowering* the next generation to take action that positively changes their world.

You can read our website to learn more about [DIYDG](#); or read the DIYDG capacity statement (ATTACHMENT B)

### **Submitted by Merrissa Nona**

Chief of Good

Deadly Inspiring Youth Doing Good

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation

15 June 2023



## Attachments

ATTACHMENT A: First Nations Collective - Position Statement

ATTACHMENT B: DIYDG Capabilities Statement

## References

1. The Integrated Atlas of Mental Health and Wellbeing Services for Indigenous Children and Youth in Cairns. Furst, M., McDonald, T., McCalman, J., Jose, S., Nona, M., Rosendale, D., Salinas-Perez, J., Saunders, V., Cadet-James, Y., Salvador-Carulla, L. (2022)

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2. Prevention and early intervention programs for Indigenous young people in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand 2022 - Research Brief 32, May 2022. Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse - Australian institute of Criminology | Council of Attorneys General. Stringfellow, R., Tauri, J., Richards, K., (2022)

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3. Promising interventions for reducing Indigenous juvenile offending – Brief 10, March 2011- Australian institute of Criminology | Council of Attorneys General. Richards, K., Rosevear, L., Gilbert, R., (2011)

<https://www.indigenousjustice.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/mp/files/publications/files/brief010.v1.pdf>

4. Justice Reform Initiative Report – Jailing is Failing: The need for alternatives to incarceration in Queensland - May 2023

[https://assets.nationbuilder.com/justicereforminitiative/pages/337/attachments/original/1685393777/JRI Alternatives QLD FULL REPORT.pdf?1685393777](https://assets.nationbuilder.com/justicereforminitiative/pages/337/attachments/original/1685393777/JRI_Alternatives_QLD_FULL_REPORT.pdf?1685393777)