

Monday 12th May 2014

New National Director says budget cuts must not come from those most in need – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

New National Director for ANTaR, Mr Andrew Meehan today said that government should not be cutting investment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, communities and organisations in the budget tomorrow.

He said that across every social and economic indicator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a group are the most disadvantaged in the country.

“Investing less in Aboriginal programs, communities and organisations would mean government would be less likely to meet the commitments it has made to closing the gap and addressing Indigenous disadvantage.” Mr Meehan said.

“The Prime Minister has made some strong commitments to closing the gap and placing Indigenous affairs at the heart of his government, but some of the recommendations in the Commission of Audit Report would make meeting these commitments harder.” He said.

Mr Meehan said that the Medicare Co-payment would have a disproportionate effect on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who, on average, are poorer and unhealthier.

“If we’re to close the gap in Indigenous health equality we must improve access to health services, not create barriers such as increased costs.” He said.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer chronic disease at twice the rate of non-Indigenous Australians. Addressing chronic disease means more prevention and more treatment, not less accessibility.” Mr Meehan said.

Mr Meehan also cautioned that the recommendation to consolidate 150 Commonwealth Indigenous programs into six or seven must involve real engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives so that programs don’t become one size fits all.

“This is a big change and it requires real engagement.” He said.

He said that the previously announced defunding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations such as the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS), and the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service that will be in the budget should be revisited.

Mr Meehan, who commenced in the role this week, said that ANTaR would continue to work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations to support them in getting a fairer deal.

“This week, I will be signing an Accord with National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples on behalf of ANTaR to set out our support and our readiness to work in partnership with them.” He said.

Working together in genuine partnership with, and supporting, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations like Congress, NATSILS, NACCHO and other organisations is what government needs to do.

He said that ANTaR looked forward to working with government and ensuring that the commitments made to closing the gap last year became a reality.

ANTaR is the only non-Indigenous organisation dedicated solely to supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and working to educate the wider community, shape public opinion, and speak up for justice, rights and respect for Australia's First Peoples.

Media contact: ANTaR National Director, Mr Andrew Meehan – 0434 920 906