



Position Statement

September 2023

The National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners (NAATSIHWP) acknowledges the Traditional Owners as the ongoing custodians of the various lands and waters across our nation. We understand the importance of the continuing connections to culture and Country and pay our respects to Elders past and present and thank them for their wisdom and guidance.

The Voice to Parliament

NAATSIHWP's Board Position

NAATSIHWP's Board fully supports constitutional change to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia and the enshrinement of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament.

Rationale

"When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish."¹

The proposition of the Voice comes from the Uluru Statement from the Heart,² an invitation given to non-Indigenous Australians following decades of dialogue, consultation, and research across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Countries. As well as expressing aspirations for a future based on justice and self-determination through truth-telling and agreement-making, the statement called for the *"establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution"*.³

If the referendum is successful the change to the *Constitution* means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will have a recognised place in Australia's government, to speak on matters that affect their own communities. It is not a cession of sovereignty, an ability to control or make laws, or a method to divide Australian identities. It is a means to continue self-determination and agency around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing, culture, health, employment, education, and livelihoods. To have our voices enshrined in the *Constitution* is to have the opportunity to communicate the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, regardless of any change of Government.

The Voice provides an effective mechanism to realise elements of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which specifies self-determination as a right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Research shows that self-determination and leadership, the ability to make or impact decisions, our beliefs and knowledge, cultural expression, and continuity, are all essential to improving the inequity that exists across the raft of socio-economic indicators.⁴ Despite this evidence, policies

and practices continue to work to our detriment, impacting negatively on self-determination, our relationship with Governments, and ultimately our health and wellbeing.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap⁵ has four priority reforms which speak to the government working differently to further centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices through formal partnerships and shared decision making. To date, this Agreement has failed to translate into action. Governments have shown little accountability for changing the way things are done and report continued disparities in health and wellbeing outcomes, with some outcome areas such as mental health worsening.^{6,7}

Our Board therefore recognises that a Voice is the catalyst for meaningful change through a human rights-based approach; it fosters both a space of participation and empowerment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and a space of heightened accountability for Government to make informed and strengths-based decisions. The Voice will support solutions for our people that are appropriate, long-term, and out-come focused. It will strengthen existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led programs. All sectors will benefit.

NAATSIHWP's work emphasises the importance of self-determination and the benefits found in giving our people agency and culturally safety in the healthcare system. Our national membership network of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Health Practitioners consistently demonstrate this. It has been reported time and time again that healthcare treatments, education and interventions are most successful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when they are provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.^{8,9}

The Voice is a commitment from Government to our communities. It provides a significant avenue for reparation and accountability, through meaningful engagement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Under the current proposal, members of the Voice will be selected by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, not appointed by the Government. We do not see the Voice as a mechanism that will undermine or replace self-determining processes, but as a positive step to embed the voices of those who have historically been erased and neglected be heard.

Our Board advocates for the support and wellbeing of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, regardless of their perspective on the Voice or politics. We note the increase of racist rhetoric that has emerged in the lead-up to the Voice referendum and urge our community to make use of support services. Take care of yourself, friends and family, and seek support if you need.

¹ [The Statement - Uluru Statement from the Heart](#)

² [ibid.](#)

³ [ibid.](#)

⁴ [Mayi Kuwayu - Developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural indicators: an overview](#)

⁵ [Closing the Gap - Priority Reforms](#)

⁶ [Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Reports: Key Indicators \(All reports 2005-2020\), Productivity Commission, Canberra.](#)

⁷ [Productivity Commission - Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2023: Draft report](#)

⁸ [Bureau of Health Information - Aboriginal people's experiences of hospital care](#)

⁹ [Australian First Nations response to the pandemic: A dramatic reversal of the 'gap'](#)