

## Federal budget continues ‘unconscionable’ failure to close the gap in Indigenous health

*Boost to Indigenous ranger program welcomed, but budget ‘short-changing’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, say health groups*



*National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation CEO, Pat Turner said federal budget ‘business as usual’ wasn’t going to close the gap in Indigenous health.*

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The federal budget has delivered a boost to Indigenous rangers caring for country, but represents an “unconscionable” failure to close the gap in health and housing, Aboriginal organisations say.

The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation described the budget as “short-changing” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Naccho said structural reform and substantial funding were needed in order to close the gap in health and housing, and “business as usual” wasn’t going to work.

Chief executive, Pat Turner, said she was disappointed that core funding for Aboriginal health services (Acchos) has remained the same.

“I am also worried that the budget has assumed that Acchos’ expenditure will contract significantly after Covid. This may be a significant flaw in their modelling,” Turner said.

Naccho said it commissioned a report from Equity Economics which, based on the government's own data, puts the funding gap in Aboriginal health at \$4.4bn, or roughly \$5,042 for each Indigenous person. The commonwealth's share of this shortfall is \$2.6bn, according to the report.

"As long as this \$4.4bn funding gap remains and as long as there are funding gaps elsewhere – in particular, in housing – we cannot expect the unconscionable health gap to close. This budget is an opportunity lost," Turner said.

Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, said the budget would deliver a "a stronger future for Indigenous Australians".

\$223.8m has been allocated to Aboriginal housing in remote communities in 2022-23. Aboriginal community-controlled organisations estimate a \$5bn investment in remote housing is needed nationally, according to Get Up's First Nations justice campaigns director, Larissa Baldwin.

"Even after two years of Covid highlighting the impacts of overcrowded housing, the government has failed to respond with increased funding for remote housing," Baldwin said.

\$636.4m will fund another 2,000 ranger jobs in regional and remote Australia. The funding, guaranteed to 2028, will establish new ranger groups, and bring more Indigenous women into ranger work.

"It will address the unmet demand for cultural burning and other Indigenous land management expertise," Wyatt said.

Country Needs People, the NGO dedicated to supporting Indigenous land and sea management, said the funding was "globally significant".

"Indigenous rangers are increasingly at the frontline of managing some of our most challenging environmental issues," executive director, Patrick O'Leary said.

"In a warming climate we will need all hands on deck to protect and manage our environment.

"Traditional owners as the original managers of country are reasserting responsibility for keeping country healthy and we should be backing them," O'Leary said.

\$37.5m will go towards strengthening the governance of Prescribed Bodies Corporate (PBCs), which manage the interests of native title holders. This funding will establish a steering group and expand training for directors and staff.

\$31.8m has been allocated to the design of local and regional voice structures.

\$1.9m will extend custody notification services (CNS) in Western Australia and the Northern Territory by one year, pending an evaluation of CNS in all jurisdictions to "inform a best practice model for all states and territories to implement". CNS is a

24-hour phone service that provides welfare checks and legal advice to Aboriginal people, which police must notify when an Aboriginal person is taken into custody.

But Aboriginal legal services have expressed disappointment there is no new funding to manage demand for their services.

“I am truly devastated with this announcement,” executive officer of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal service, Jamie McConnachie, said.

“Our communities suffer due to this severe under-resourcing. It is totally unreasonable to manage service delivery expectations with this appalling level of investment.”

Labor’s Linda Burney said the government had failed to close the gap in life outcomes and “has simply decided to give up trying.”

“The gap will never be closed without extra effort on health and decent housing for Indigenous people. This budget contains no measures for either,” Burney said.