

Senate Estimates 18 February 2022

National Indigenous Australians Agency, CEO, Ms Jody Broun

Opening Statement

Good morning Chair and Senators.

Wanthiwa

[For Hansard: Yindjibarndi for hello]

I wish to acknowledge we are on Ngunnawal country and I pay my respects to the Elders.

I would also like to acknowledge the record level of representation we see in the Parliament and across the senior levels of the public service, and I extend my respect to all of you and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander witnesses appearing today.

Chair, thank you for the opportunity to make a brief opening statement.

As the Committee knows, I have commenced as Chief Executive Officer of the National Indigenous Australians Agency this week and look forward to leading a passionate, committed and highly productive Agency.

I think when you look at the record of the Agency over the last couple of years, an incredible amount of work has been delivered and progress has been made to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In this forum, I would like to publicly acknowledge the invaluable work of my predecessor, Mr Ray Griggs, in establishing the Agency and cementing its place in the public service landscape. I would also like to acknowledge the excellent stewardship of Mr Blair Exell who has been acting in the Chief Executive role for the last seven months and Ms Letitia Hope as Deputy CEO who have been instrumental in steering the Agency through an important period.

For those I have not yet had the pleasure to meet, I am a Yindjibarndi woman from the Pilbara and am deeply committed to community decision making and empowerment through strong community governance and employment.

Working with communities, Indigenous organisations and Governments to build trust and capacity to work in genuine partnership will be a focus of mine.

I also bring a deep commitment to accountability and transparency and, with that lens, I look forward to supporting this Committee with its work.

COVID-19 and its health and non-health impacts are, of course, dominating the Agency's work.

We continue to work extremely closely with state and territory counterparts and local partners, most recently with our attention on the Northern Territory, to complement their efforts to respond to the current outbreaks and prepare for future responses.

Whether working from the office, or from our homes in line with public health orders, we are connected with community and are committed to supporting them.

Through our Local Investment Fund, as well as other programs that operate in remote Australia, we have re-allocated significant resources to support jurisdictions' health departments and the Indigenous health sector to support efforts to boost vaccine take-up and ongoing pandemic planning.

The NIAA is an active participant in many forums that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and health services, NACCHO, Land Councils, community groups and other community controlled organisations, to assist where we can with coordination and the mobilising of resources.

To help illustrate that effort, I'd like to share a few examples of the work we've been doing.

In South Queensland, the NIAA is funding Mindle Bygul Aboriginal Corporation to deliver a series of pop-up vaccination events across the Moreton Bay region which target the 18–35 year old cohort.

In Yuendumu and Maningrida in the Northern Territory, the NIAA has provided assistance with transport to and from vaccination clinics.

We are addressing local vaccine misinformation and hesitancy, including engaging Ernie Dingo to roll out the "Vax the Outback" campaign across the Pilbara in Western Australia; supporting Iwiri Aboriginal Corporation to deliver a series of education workshops in Adelaide late last year; and providing funding to Melbourne's 3KND "Kool N Deadly" radio station to develop and broadcast culturally appropriate and targeted COVID-19 messaging.

In Dubbo, NIAA established the COVID-19 Central West Koori Community Circle, which gathers to share information and resources, problem solve and provide solutions for organisations and community with regard to COVID-19 and vaccination acceleration in Western and Far Western New South Wales.

Of note, NIAA supported the rapid establishment and stocking of a pop-up store in Goodooga to address food security issues during last year's outbreak in Western NSW.

The NIAA has also supported the development of local pandemic plans in Galiwin'ku and the Gove Peninsula and participated in desktop exercises to test the response to a potential outbreak.

You can see that our support is varied as we take a place-based approach with what we do, to engage the community and address individual community needs.

We will cover COVID in more detail later in today's proceedings when we are joined by our Department of Health colleagues, but at this point I did want to share the latest vaccination figures, which were received this morning. 82.8 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 12 years and older have received at least one dose of the vaccine and 77.7 per cent have received two.

This is a testament the work of many and I thank everyone who is contributing to protecting remote Indigenous communities.

Since October, and as you would be aware, four of the five bills related to our portfolio that had been introduced have now passed and the Agency is hard at work implementing the reforms that follow.

The Territories Stolen Generations Redress Scheme is on track to commence on 1 March and eligible applicants can access free, independent legal advice and financial counselling as they consider and plan for applying to the Scheme. On Monday, in marking the anniversary of the National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, we heard a number of the harrowing stories for which we hope this Scheme will be able to provide some measure of healing.

In support of the development of the new Remote Engagement Program, our Regional Managers responsible for the five trial locations have been consulting locally to identify organisations and community members to be part of local co-design groups.

We expect to have these groups established in the near future and a national co-design group will be set up with the first meeting anticipated in the coming months.

We invited anyone interested to respond to a public discussion paper and public consultations will be ongoing until the new program is introduced in 2023.

Interviews with Community Development Program providers have already commenced and planning for virtual community consultation sessions and roundtables is progressing well. Where possible and where safe, we will plan for face-to-face community sessions later in the year.

For the key initiative of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act amendment, the Northern Territory Aboriginal Investment Corporation, the co-design process through a steering committee of Land Council representatives and the Chair of the Aboriginals Benefit Account Advisory Committee is continuing, with the Corporation due to commence in the second half of this year.

And we look forward to implementing the reforms proposed in the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) amendment bill should it pass the Parliament.

Also since our last appearance before this Committee, the Final Report for the Indigenous Voice Co-design Process was delivered to Government.

The Government has agreed to progress the establishment of Local & Regional Voices, in line with the Final Report's position that this is the next step. The NIAA is engaging with senior officials from state and territory governments, as well as the Australian Local Government Association, about their participation in Local & Regional Voice arrangements ahead of Ministerial discussions.

And work is currently in train to stand up a Local & Regional Voice Establishment Group.

In January, and as discussed this morning with AIATSIS, we were excited to be able to support to the announcement regarding the Government's decision to proceed with Ngurra: The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Precinct, which will become an important institution to recognise and celebrate Indigenous history and cultures.

And of course, on 25 January the Government announced the conclusion of the negotiations with Mr Harold Thomas and the licensees to secure the copyright in the Aboriginal Flag.

We understand the Committee's interest in this matter and we have the relevant officials here today ready to answer your questions. On behalf of the Agency, I would like to thank the Committee for your patience while we worked to achieve this outcome.

When you consider over the last three to four months we have also delivered the National Roadmap to Boost Indigenous Skills, Jobs and Wealth creation, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy, the first two sector strengthening plans under Closing the Gap, the team at NIAA have done a remarkable job and I look forward to continuing this great work as I lead the Agency.

I thank the Committee and welcome your questions.