

# Summary

In 1999 the National Community Services Information Management Group (NCSIMG) published the National Community Services Information Development Plan. The Plan, which was endorsed by the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CSMAC), identified information development priorities in the community services sectors. The need for high quality data on Indigenous people in community services data collections was identified as one of the highest priorities.

In April 1999 CSMAC (previously known as SCCSISA) accepted the NCSIMG business plan to develop principles and standards for community services Indigenous population data, and granted funding for this project. NCSIMG invited the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Welfare Information Unit (ATSIHWIU) to develop principles and standards that address key issues of self-identification by Indigenous people who use community services and the ownership of the data collected about them.

NCSIMG also requested an evaluation of the quality of the Indigenous identifier in three collections – Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), child protection and welfare, and the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement Minimum Data Set (CSDA-MDS) – as exemplars within the community services sector.

This report fulfils the undertaking given by ATSIHWIU to NCSIMG that a review of the current collection protocols of Indigenous status in community services, and the development of principles and standards for the collection of this information, would be completed by February 2001.

The report presents three interrelated projects:

- a draft Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Services Information Plan;
- proposed principles and standards for community services Indigenous client data, developed from focus group discussions held with the clients, officers and administrators of community services agencies across Australia; and
- reviews of the current collection protocols of Indigenous status in the Supported Accommodation Access Program (SAAP), Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement (CSDA) funded outlets and in child protection and welfare.

The report contains seven guiding principles, established to govern the collection and use of Indigenous client data in community services. The principles provide a broad framework of collection protocols which are given more specific development in the Information Plan.

Focus groups, consisting largely of community services providers and users, were used to investigate the difficulties in collecting information on Indigenous status. The focus group discussions were designed to draw on a wide range of people,

particularly Aboriginal people, to examine their concerns about the collection of Indigenous status from clients.

The results of the focus group discussions, and the questionnaire-based work with SAAP and child protection, revealed a number of concerns that were common to all sectors of community services and felt across all States and Territories. For example, some staff in a variety of service delivery agencies reported experiencing embarrassment when asking clients if they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin while others felt it was inappropriate and intrusive to ask for this information or that by doing so they would upset their clients.

To address the difficulties experienced by some staff in requesting Indigenous status, the report recommends the development of training modules aimed at providing government and non-government sector staff with a thorough understanding of:

- why the information is needed,
- the importance of the collection, and
- the benefits that can flow to communities when accurate data are available.

A sound knowledge of these elements would address many of the concerns agency staff have about collecting Indigenous status.

The primary aim of the investigations into the SAAP and child protection collection protocols was to determine whether the service delivery agencies in these sectors were collecting the Indigenous status of their clients, and if so, how they were doing it. The reviews were based on the results of questionnaires that were circulated to a large number of agencies. Each review examined the consistency of information collected by agencies, staff issues related to asking clients about their Indigenous status, how information was stored and updated, as well as issues of data security, privacy, access and use.

The report acknowledges that community services is a large and complex field of service provision with at least nine sectors spanning diverse fields such as aged care and disability services, juvenile justice and emergency relief and crisis care. Services are delivered by many thousands of outlets of greatly varying size in a range of settings and circumstances that reflect the geographic, cultural and socioeconomic variation between populations across Australia. These complexities result in the need for local arrangements to be developed in order to best serve client needs and the report recognises the importance of developing these arrangements.