

Position Statement on Aged Care Reforms



Aboriginal Health Council
of South Australia Ltd.

Introduction

Since the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety was released in 2021, there has been several key initiatives, aimed to improve the quality, safety and rights of older people and provide a framework for improvements and change:

- [Aged Care Quality and Safety | Royal Commissions](#)
- [Transforming Aged Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people](#)
- [New Aged Care Act | Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing](#)
- [National Agreement on Closing the Gap | Closing the Gap](#)

In November 2024, Parliament passed a new Aged Care Act 2024 that will commence November 2025. Although the new Aged Care Act reflects a shift towards a rights-based, person-centered aged care system, there are significant upcoming changes that will impact older people, Aboriginal Communities and the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO) sector. Done well, these changes can deliver culturally safe, accessible and holistic care, however further consideration of the specific social, economic and health needs of our Elders is required.

The Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia (AHCSA), as the peak body for Aboriginal Health in South Australia, calls for urgent action to ensure that the new aged care system upholds the rights, dignity and cultural needs of our Elders. AHCSA is committed to advocating for aged care systems that are culturally safe, holistic, and uphold the rights and self-determinations of our Communities.

Areas requiring careful consideration and targeted action

Despite Government commitments, several areas pose immediate risks to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders:

- **No independent First Nations Aged Care Commissioner.** Without statutory independence, advocacy for our Elders lacks authority and support.
- **Slow response to Royal Commission recommendations.** Four years on, key Aboriginal-specific reforms have not yet been implemented.
- **Financial burden.** Mandatory co-contributions under the new Support at Home risk excluding Elders living with systemic economic disadvantage to receive the aged care services they are entitled to.
- **Cultural safety.** Many mainstream aged care services remain unsafe for Aboriginal people.
- **Lack of engagement and co-design with the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector.** Our sector has the expertise, but has limited resources and formal authority in reform design and decision-making.
- **Fee pressures on Aboriginal services.** Forcing ACCHOs to charge Elders undermines community-controlled principles and reduced accessibility of culturally safe, holistic healthcare.
- **Complex navigation system:** Elders continue to face barriers in accessing aged care services.

Without systematically addressing these concerns, our Elders will be left behind.



AHCSA Recommendations

1. Establish a permanent and Independent First Nations Aged Care Commissioner

The Commissioner must be a statutory, independent office with powers to:

- Investigate systemic issues
- Compel action from government and providers
- Report directly to Parliament
- Conduct ongoing consultation with communities
- Monitor Closing the Gap targets in aged care

This is essential to ensure Aboriginal voices guide reform implementation.

2. Implement the Interim First Nations Commissioner's Recommendations in full

The Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner's Report to Government [Transforming Aged Care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people](#) was released to public February 2025 and reflects extensive community consultation. AHCSA calls on Government to commit to implementing all Key Recommendations and Urgent Actions.

3. Act on The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety Recommendations

Key Aboriginal-specific reforms from the Royal Commission, delivered in 2021, remain unimplemented, including:

- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged care pathway
- Cultural Safety
- Priority provider status for Aboriginal organisations

These commitments must be honoured in full.

4. The Elder Care Support Program (ECS) to become an ongoing program with further expansion and investment

The ECS program has demonstrated proven success in helping Elders navigate a complex aged care system. Our workers provide a culturally safe, community drive, navigation, support and advocacy service, tailored to the needs of Elders and their communities. Current funding is only until June 2026.

To ensure its continued success, Government must:

- Guarantee permanent, ongoing funding, commensurate to the outcomes achieved by the Care Finders program.
- Expand ECS Nationally to meet growing demand and build on its proven success.
- Integrate ECS into My Aged Care pathways.
- Recognise face-to-face support as the preferred access model for Elders. Culturally safe, personal navigation support is essential, not optional and must be recognised as an essential component of aged care reform.



AHCSA Recommendations

5. Sector to lead co-design and implementation First Nations Assessment Organisations

The introduction of First Nations Assessment Organisations to provide culturally safe, trauma aware and healing informed aged care assessments is a welcome initiative, however the process to date has lacked meaningful engagement and consultation with our sector. ACCHOs should be encouraged and supported to become First Nations Aged Care Assessment Organisations, with appropriate resources and staged implementation, grounded in genuine co-design, strong sector engagement, and targeted capacity building, not a mainstream competitive tender process.

6. Protect Elders from Financial Hardship and co-contributions

The Support at Home Program introduces mandatory financial co-contributions for most aged care services, replacing a system where many providers previously waived fees for low-income clients. For those entering the system now, services such as personal care, showering, meal assistance, transport, cleaning and social supports will now require a co-contribution payment, even for those on a full pension.

This will have a disproportionate and harmful impact on our Elders, many of whom:

- Prioritise family and kinship obligations, often putting community before personal needs
- May refuse essential care due to fear of financial stress, risking poorer health outcomes
- May experience lifelong economic disadvantage due to systemic racism and marginalisation (including previous policies eg stolen wages and redress scheme, stolen generation)

The lack of transparency regarding actual costs and failure to acknowledge historic economic disadvantage risk creating scenarios where many Elders will refuse care due to financial hardship.

Co-contributions must not be applied without tailored safety nets for Aboriginal people. This includes:

- Pathways that recognise systemic economic disadvantage
- Exemptions for income from reparations, stolen wages and redress schemes
- Transparent, fair assessment processes across Services Australia and My Aged Care

**In addition, we also recommend a review of how income and assets from reparations such as Stolen Generation Redress and Stolen wages are applied - including a review of the process and clear policy guidance for Services Australia, My Aged Care and other front-line staff.

Without these safeguards, many Elders will avoid seeking care altogether.

7. Exempt Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations from Charging Fees

Charging fees contradicts the community-controlled model and decreases accessibility to culturally safe care. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations must be funded to deliver fee-free aged care to their communities. For many of our Elders, the choice will be between paying for care or going without, which is unacceptable.



AHCSA Recommendations

8. Recognise Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Leadership in Aged Care Delivery

Government must formally recognise the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector as leaders in aged care reform. This requires:

- Representation on all reform governance bodies
- Sector lead co-design of policies and programs
- Long-term investment in ACCHO aged care services
- Support for ACCHOs to become assessment organisations

Elders consistently report feeling safer and better supported in Aboriginal-led services. Government must invest in strategies to enable ACCHOs stay as providers or to expand into aged care, as they are best placed to deliver these services. Investment in capacity building, workforce development, and infrastructure is essential to enable ACCHOs to expand their role in aged care service delivery

9. Recognise and address the unique challenges in Regional and Remote Communities

Aboriginal Elders in regional and remote communities face unique barriers to aged care, including limited services, workforce shortages and geographical isolation. In these thin markets there is a greater reliance on Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as they are often the only culturally safe providers, yet they operate with limited resources and higher costs.

Aged Care reforms must include flexible funding models that reflect the realities of remote service delivery. This means investing in infrastructure, travel support, workforce development, and expanding block funding to ensure ACCHOs can continue to provide care and expand into aged care if interested.

Conclusion

Our Elders are the keepers of culture and community. They deserve aged care that is respectful, upholds their rights and delivers care that is culturally safe, affordable and community led. The Aged Care Act 2024 is a chance to deliver real change but only if government acts decisively:

- **Appoint an independent First Nations Aged Care Commissioner**
- **Implement all Interim Commissioner and Royal Commission recommendations**
- **Invest in ACCHO leadership and aged care services**
- **Guarantee fee-free, culturally safe care for Aboriginal Elders**

This is not just policy reform. It is about justice, equity and respect. AHCSA calls on the Australian Government to listen to community needs and take meaningful action.