

National Indigenous Australians Agency  
Voice Secretariat  
PO Box 2191  
Canberra ACT 2600  
[Co-designVoice@niaa.gov.au](mailto:Co-designVoice@niaa.gov.au)

31 March 2021

Dear Professors Langton and Calma,

### **Indigenous Voice co-design process**

cohealth strongly supports an Indigenous Voice to Parliament ('the Voice'). We welcome the Interim Co-Design Report and discussion paper and acknowledge the significant work undertaken by the co-design committees. This submission concerns the need for the Voice to be enshrined in the Australian Constitution.

The Voice will provide a long overdue mechanism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have meaningful influence on the laws, policies and decisions that affect them. cohealth's view is that it is critical to enshrine the Voice in the Australian Constitution to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples have a long lasting and durable body that is not vulnerable to changes in government priorities.

cohealth's position is guided by the contents of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which calls for a Voice enshrined in the Australian Constitution. The Uluru Statement from the Heart was developed through extensive consultation and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander peoples across the nation and was unanimously approved by the First Nations National Constitutional Convention. As such, enshrining the Voice in the Constitutional is the model that has been collectively endorsed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves, conferring the greatest legitimacy.

cohealth is one of Australia's largest not-for-profit community health services, operating across nine local government areas in Victoria. Our mission is to improve health and wellbeing for all, and to tackle inequality and inequity in partnership with people and their communities. cohealth provides integrated medical, dental, allied health, mental health and community support services, and delivers programs to promote community health and wellbeing.

cohealth envisages a time where the rights, sovereignty, cultures and lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised and respected by all Australians. Our vision for reconciliation is where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have social, health and wellbeing equity, achieved through an understanding of our shared history, deep listening, ongoing learning and reflection.

As a large primary health service, we understand our responsibility to improve the health and wellbeing inequity that exists between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-

Indigenous people. Over 200 years of dispossession and colonisation have had a significant and well documented detrimental impact on the health and welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people.

cohealth's Reconciliation Action Plan articulates our support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart and our commitment to promoting the Uluru Statement.

cohealth is committed to developing processes and structures to ensure that people who are excluded from decision making are included in the design of the services they use. As such, we support the calls for the membership model for the Voice to ensure previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

In addition to the human rights imperative to ensure people have a voice in the decisions that affect them, it is also clear that autonomy and self-determination are fundamental to good health. Research on the social determinants of health is incontrovertible that when people lack autonomy - when they are not able to be in control of their own lives, rather are controlled or dominated by others or by their social, economic, or political circumstances - their mental and physical health tends to deteriorate, and for those who feel the least autonomous, the outcomes are generally the worst.<sup>1</sup>

This can be changed. Enshrining a Voice to Parliament in the Australian Constitution will provide a sound foundation for addressing the social and economic determinants of health and wellbeing, and for all Australians to work together towards better health and social wellbeing.

cohealth supports the three positions of [From the Heart](#), that:

1. The government must honour its election commitment to a referendum once the model for the Voice has been settled;
2. Enabling legislation for the Voice must be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament; and
3. The membership model for the National Voice must ensure previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

cohealth would welcome the opportunity to provide more information about this submission. Please contact: Rhonda DiBlasi, Program Facilitator – Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Health on [rhonda.diblas@cohealth.org.au](mailto:rhonda.diblas@cohealth.org.au) or Jane Stanley, Advocacy and Policy Manager on [jane.stanley@cohealth.org.au](mailto:jane.stanley@cohealth.org.au)

Yours sincerely



Nicole Bartholomeusz  
Chief Executive

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/26/self-determination-and-indigenous-health-is-there-a-connection/>