



Artist: Kristal & Jazz from Wilay Designs

“The mural design is about caring for Country, talks about our true history and a hopeful future. We were about to share some of our Great Nans story to start conversations, reflection and hope. It was important for us to have community involvement, so we did this through hand prints. It was a symbol of caring for Country and reconciliation.”



Australian Capital Territory

Budget 2024–25

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Budget Statement

Acknowledgement of Country



The ACT Government acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the ACT and recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

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The ACT Government remains committed to improving the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and supporting the self-determination of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The right of First Nations peoples to self-determination is the underpinning principle of the *ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019–2028 and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

Through this Budget, the ACT Government is reaffirming its commitment, and investing in key actions that support and strengthen the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

This includes the continuing investment of more than \$19 million for the design and construction of a new purpose-built facility for Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation. This investment recognises the impact of Gugan Gulwan as an Aboriginal community controlled organisation on the local community since 1992. The new co-designed and purpose-built facility will support Gugan Gulwan to deliver outcomes for the growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community into the future.

The Government is also continuing to partner with Winnunga Nimmitijah through the construction of a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residential rehabilitation facility as part of the \$49 million Watson health precinct. This significant project is expected to be completed mid-2025 and will deliver culturally appropriate alcohol and other drug rehabilitation to support improved health and wellbeing outcomes.

The ACT's inaugural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People Commissioner, Vanessa Turnbull-Roberts, commenced her five-year term in February 2024, following an extensive recruitment process in partnership with the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The establishment of the Commissioner was a key recommendation

of *Our Booris, Our Way*, and will ensure the voices and perspectives of First Nations children shape decision-making in the ACT. This oversight is critical as the Government continues to improve practice, policy and legislation to better serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the ACT. The Government invested more than \$3.5 million in the 2022-23 Budget to establish the Commissioner role.

In addition, the 2023-24 Budget Review included increased funding of \$1.19 million over 2024 and 2025, commencing in January 2024, to strengthen the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (Elected Body). This funding will provide increased paid time for members to engage with and represent the rights, interests and aspirations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. It funds the continuation of an independent secretariat so the Elected Body can truly represent the community and strengthen the transparency and accountability of the ACT Government. Funding is also included to engage an independent consultant to work with and capture the views of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community on the future of the Elected Body.

The ACT Government is continuing its commitment to and investments in supporting reconciliation and building an inclusive community that recognises and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Government is doing this by funding and hosting the annual Reconciliation Day event, which gets bigger and better each year, and supporting the celebration and practice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures through reconciliation and cultural grants programs. The ACT Reconciliation Council will continue to play an important role in driving this work.

In addition to these ongoing investments, in 2024-25 the ACT Government has committed to a number of new Budget measures including:

Investing in Strengthening the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Sector

The ACT Government recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control is an act of self-determination. This underpins the ACT Government's commitments under Priority Reform Two of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

In the 2024-25 Budget, the ACT Government is committing \$3.86 million over four years from the Healing and Reconciliation Fund to establish a specific fund to support the growth and sustainability of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

The Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Establishment and Expansion Fund (AEEF) will support ACCOs to build organisational capacity and capability, and develop and expand services that improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans.

This investment builds on the ACT Government's commitment to the ACCO sector through the establishment of the Aboriginal Service Development Branch (ASD) in 2022-23, and the strong relationships and recognition the team has built across the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The AEEF will support ACCOs so that they are better placed to deliver stronger service outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and work in partnership with the ACT Government. It will also enable initial work with community to investigate the benefits of establishing an ACCO peak body or arrangement for the ACT.

This work is being led by the ASD Branch in the Community Services Directorate, which is the interface between the ACT Government and ACCOs, providing leadership, fostering joined-up communication and collaborative activities, and strengthening partnership processes across the Government and the ACCO sector.

These relationships will be fundamental to the ongoing success of partnerships between ACCOs and the ACT Government. This funding will allow ASD to continue providing needs-based wrap-around support, including practical advice on regulatory obligations and funding opportunities across ACT and Commonwealth programs.

Through ASD and this investment, the ACT Government is continuing to grow its collective understanding and assessment of barriers, enablers and linkages to improve access to appropriate and culturally safe support and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Investing in Reforms to Child Protection and Out of Home Care

Significant work is currently being undertaken to address the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child and youth protection system. The *Our Booris, Our Way* Implementation Oversight Committee continues to lead and oversee these ongoing efforts by providing invaluable cultural knowledge and expertise, guiding initiatives aimed at enhancing outcomes and reforming systems. The Government recognises there is still more work to do.

The ACT Government will continue to progress system reforms to child protection and out of home care as outlined in *Next Steps for Our Kids 2022-2030* (Next Steps Strategy). Reducing over-representation and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is central to this system reform.

The Government is investing \$9.96 million over four years, offset by \$1.97 million from the Healing and Reconciliation Fund, to support delivery of therapeutic supports in the ACT for vulnerable children, young people and their families.

Investment from the Healing and Reconciliation Fund will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, investing in outcomes that support healing for First Nations children and families while reducing interactions with the child protection system.

This includes new investment in Family Group Conferencing and will provide additional support for parents and families affected by disability, as part of a suite of programs and supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families. There is funding for design work for a kinship / informal carer navigation service.

This initiative builds on other investments in child protection and out of home care services to support and improve the lives of children, young people and families, consistent with reforms underway through the Next Steps Strategy and Action Plan to deliver a contemporary child protection system that strengthens families and keeps children and young people safe.

Strengthening Justice Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

In line with commitments under the *ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-2028* and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the ACT Government is committed to improving justice outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As part of this commitment, we will continue to support vital community programs that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their families and communities to thrive in a safe environment and have equitable access to justice and culturally safe restorative justice, prevention and diversion programs.

The ACT Government will provide \$1.06 million over two years for the continued delivery of Empowerment Yarning Circle programs, currently run by Yeddung Mura, which facilitates meaningful conversations with a clear purpose and focus, aiming to improve the well-being of clients, self-determination and reduce recidivism.

Recognising that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is best placed to develop and implement solutions to challenges they face, these yarning circles provide a safe space for clients to share their experiences, challenges and aspirations. They draw from Aboriginal cultural practices, emphasizing storytelling, active listening, and mutual respect. This process fosters a sense of belonging and encourages positive change, recognising that well-being extends beyond physical health to include emotional, mental and spiritual aspects.

The Government will also continue its support of the Yarrabi Bamirr program as the ACT's first formal Justice Reinvestment project, investing \$833,000 over three years.

This program focuses on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to improve their life outcomes and reduce or prevent contact with the justice system. It particularly aims to support families to reduce transgenerational offending. The program will continue working with Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services, Yeddung Mura and Clybucca Dreaming.

The Yurwan Ghuda On Country program for young people will also continue for another two years with \$487,000 in funding.

This program is based on providing strong cultural identity and connection to culture, which is increasingly being linked to better outcomes in education, justice, health and wellbeing, and employment.

The ACT Government is also investing \$1.03 million over three years to continue the Ngurrumbai Bail Support program. This program, provided by the NSW/ACT Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), provides culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT who are on bail or applying for it. The program aims to reduce re-offending while on bail, decrease court appearances and provide an alternative to remand or incarceration.

Noting the successful outcomes of the program, the ACT Government will continue the Community Corrections Supervision at alternative reporting sites, including Yeddung Mura in Fadden, Winnunga Nimmityjah in Narrabundah, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Belconnen.

In accordance with the underpinning principle to strengthen the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the ACT Government is investing a further \$2.28 million over three years to continue and strengthen the Galambany Circle Courts, including increased Panel members/ Elder payments. The Government has provided a further three years of funding to the ACT Courts and Tribunal for a Community Engagement Officer.

The Justice Housing Program is funded for another two years, which includes the Transitional Accommodation Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, currently run in partnership with Yeddung Mura. This will provide short-term transitional accommodation and wraparound support for those eligible for bail, parole or community-based orders, who otherwise would be incarcerated due to a lack of suitable accommodation or have no alternatives on release from a head sentence.

The Government is continuing to invest in the legal assistance sector to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equitable access to critical legal assistance and advocacy services. This includes funding of \$410,000 in 2024-25 to continue the Mulleun Mura Program run by the Women's Legal Centre, \$313,005 over 2 years for a Legal Aid ACT First Nations Graduate position, \$906,009 over 2 years for the Aboriginal Legal Service to continue providing Care and Protection Legal Advocacy and \$263,445 over 2 years for Canberra Community Law to increase the capacity of the Dhurrawang Aboriginal Human Rights program. The Aboriginal Legal Service will also receive \$299,000 to maintain its Disability Liaison Officer role.

Helping Support Mental Health in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community

The ACT Government has continued to hear from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community about the significant challenges that people face related to mental health and the major impacts these challenges have on individuals, families and communities.

In accordance with the *ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement 2019-2028*, the ACT Government is committed to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience equity in health and wellbeing outcomes.

Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more than twice as likely to experience high levels of psychological distress compared to non-Indigenous Australians. These challenges are driven by factors such as ongoing intergenerational trauma, social and economic disadvantage and systemic racism.

To better understand this unmet need, the ACT Health Directorate recently commissioned the Yulang Indigenous Research consultancy. The Yulang Report highlighted the importance of choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Currently, there are limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led mental health services, restricting options for those

seeking support. The report emphasised the need to develop specialist, culturally responsive mental health services and enhance mainstream community services' capacity to provide appropriate support.

The ACT Government will work to address this gap by investing \$897,000 over the next four years to strengthen service capacity to deliver culturally responsive mental health services specifically designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

This commitment relates to the Territory's obligations under the National Agreement for Closing the Gap Priority Reform 3, which focuses on systemic and structural transformation within government institutions and organisations. In committing this funding, the Government aims to ensure accountability, cultural safety, and responsiveness to the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT.