

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT)

An alliance of the CLC, NLC & AMSANT

MEDIA RELEASE

APO NT Top End FASD Forum 2018

Communique: “Let’s Make FASD History”

5 June 2018

A landmark Top End Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) forum* was held in Darwin on 30-31 May 2018, bringing together Aboriginal leaders, FASD experts, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, government representatives, medical professionals, and Non-Government organisations. Approximately 180 delegates representing 37 organisations across the Northern Territory.

FASD is often considered to be a ‘hidden’ disability, because more often than not, the physical characteristics of the individual are not easily recognised. Instead, an individual may present with learning and behavioural difficulties, which may present for a range of disorders. As a result, FASD is not easily identified and individuals can go undiagnosed and receive inadequate treatment and support.

The forum heard from the NT Minister for Health and the Attorney General Natasha Fyles, NT Children’s Commissioner, Colleen Gwynne, Professor Elizabeth Elliott, Dr James Fitzpatrick, NOFASD and FASD Hub. The forum also heard from Aboriginal community controlled organisations Danila Dilba, Wurli Wurlijang, Anyinginyi Health Services, Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory and the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency.

Over two days, the forum delegates discussed the impacts of FASD on individuals, families and communities and acknowledged that alcohol misuse and its consequences are an issue for all Territorians, particularly our most vulnerable. Delegates also heard the evidence on how the prevalence of FASD impacts many of our services, including health, education and justice. Delegates learnt that trauma runs deep, and healing and making the right connections is crucial.

The forum delegates agreed that there was an urgent need for action to prevent FASD in our Top End communities, and across the Northern Territory. It is essential that our responses do not stigmatise women or Aboriginal people. It is important that we don’t lay blame, but instead work together, to support our women and young girls. Everyone is at risk of FASD, so everyone must be informed the harmful effects of drinking while pregnant. Our men also need to step up and support our mothers, sisters, nieces and partners, to ensure that we give every child the best chance in life.

The delegates raised the following key messages to be taken into account in addressing FASD:

- **Prevention and raising awareness**

FASD is entirely preventable, much of its impacts are also irreversible. The harms caused by alcohol in our communities are not acceptable and we will all work together to develop prevention and intervention strategies that are culturally appropriate and relevant for our

people and communities. It is acknowledged that current and proposed alcohol control measures in the NT are a critical component of prevention.

- **Collaborative Approaches**

The forum identified an urgent need for Aboriginal organisations, government agencies, NGOs and local communities to work together to develop policies and programs for women, men, children and communities in the Top End communities and to contribute to the development of an NT FASD Strategy. This needs to be Aboriginal community-led by the health, education, justice and child protection sectors.

- **Access to FASD resources**

It was evident that there is a need for more investment in developing culturally appropriate tools and resources for local Aboriginal communities and key stakeholders working on the frontline and also at the strategic level.

- **Assessment and Treatment services**

An identified priority need is for the establishment of multi-disciplinary neuro-developmental assessment and treatment services that are strategically linked with existing service settings, including primary health care, education, child protection and the justice system.

- **Support for children and families**

Research is needed to better understand how best to support children and families with FASD and other related issues that also often affect families, such as trauma. We refer to the Fitzroy Valley as a best practice model, as many strong women and leaders in the community worked in partnership with FASD experts and research institutes.

- **Workforce**

The skilling and expansion of the workforce needed for prevention, assessment and treatment of FASD, particularly the community based remote Aboriginal workforce, was identified as an important need.

From this forum, we have heard the experiences about the high levels of despair and sense of disempowerment and hurt of our people and these are sad stories. We were also enlightened by the enthusiasm, dedication, passion and hope from local communities, all professions and services, that want to do more and can do more to make FASD History!

*APO NT will be producing a full report on the outcomes of the FASD Forum over the coming weeks.

For media comment:

Theresa Roe, APO NT Network Coordinator: (08) 8944 6624 or 0429 991 765

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