

## Empowering First Nations carer voices

This report presents key themes and insights from two online events hosted by the Carer Knowledge Exchange (CKE): the webinar, '**Empowering First Nations carer voices: Transforming policy and practice**', which took place on Wednesday 26 February 2025, and a follow-up session entitled '**Supporting First Nations carers**', which took place as part of the 2025 annual CKE Research Incubator Event on 28 May 2025. Full recordings of both sessions are available to view on demand on the CKE digital platform under '[Get Involved](#)'.

'**Empowering First Nations carer voices**' explored the need for culturally appropriate and trauma informed services and policy reforms to support First Nations carers. It also reinforced the importance of recognising care as an integral part of culture, Country, and community. It was facilitated by **Judith Lovegrove** (Ngarrindjeri), Department of Child Protection, South Australia (formerly: Menzies School of Health Research) and featured several researchers with a focus on First Nations carers:

- **Professor Tricia Nagel**, Stay Strong Program, Menzies School of Health Research
- **Jasmine Williams** (Wiradjuri/Wolgalu), Girra Maa, University of Technology Sydney
- **Dr Zoe Staines**, School of Social Science, University of Queensland, and
- **Banok Rind** (Badimia Yamatji), Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute, Australian National University.

'**Supporting First Nations carers**' was a yarning session facilitated by former panellist **Jasmine Williams** to draw out First Nations carers' reflections on the themes from the webinar. It featured and featured First Nation carers **Aunty Leonie Dennis** (Gomilaroi), and **Aunty Judy Solomon**.

The structure and questions for both sessions were co-developed with the contributors, who have also participated in the identification and analysis of key themes and the development of this report.

## A holistic understanding of care

For First Nations Australians, care is a practice that is deeply embedded in cultural, spiritual, and communal responsibilities. It extends beyond the Western notion of caring – which typically focuses on individual support – to include care for Country, culture, and community. This holistic view recognises that caring is not just a task but an ongoing part of everyday life. First Nations carers, especially women, often juggle multiple roles, caring for elders, children, and extended kin, while also maintaining cultural practices and community leadership. The care loads carried by First Nations women are exacerbated by the history of colonisation and its ongoing legacy, such as intergenerational traumas from past colonial practices, or the ongoing harms endured by contemporary structures that are built on colonial foundations (e.g. the criminal justice system, or the social security system). Mainstream policy frameworks fail to capture this complexity, often excluding the cultural and environmental dimensions of care and overlooking the harms of colonisation as root causes of high care loads. Recognising and embedding these broader definitions and understandings in policy is essential for systems that truly support First Nations carers.

## Taking a strengths-based approach and recognising traditional methodologies

The need to shift from deficit-based narratives to strengths-based approaches was identified as a necessary precondition for empowering First Nations carer voices. First Nations carers are frequently portrayed through lenses of disadvantage, overlooking their resilience, cultural wisdom, and leadership. Rather, they need to be recognised as experts in their own lives, whose lived experiences and cultural knowledge are assets to be valued. This includes traditional ways of knowledge sharing and learning.

The inclusion of First Nations methodologies in research and consultation processes is central to empowering First Nations carer voices. Yarning is a particularly important, culturally appropriate methodology to capture carers' voices; it honours Indigenous ways of knowing and empowers participants by validating their contributions. A strengths-based framework that incorporates such traditional methodologies can help frame care as a source of pride and cultural continuity.

## Systemic barriers and policy gaps

First Nations carers face numerous systemic barriers, including limited access to culturally safe services, inadequate service funding, frequent contact with the justice system, and restrictive welfare policies. Mutual obligation requirements and activity-tested welfare programs often conflict with caring responsibilities, particularly in remote communities where employment opportunities are scarce. These policies not only undervalue unpaid care work but also create stress and economic hardship for carers. Such systems fail to recognise the full scope of care provided by First Nations women, who often care for multiple family members while also contributing to community wellbeing. Addressing these gaps requires a fundamental rethinking of how care is defined, supported, and valued in policy frameworks. It also requires genuine engagement with how the welfare and justice systems continue to harm First Nations peoples and communities.

## True inclusion of First Nations carers in decision making

To achieve meaningful change, the recognition of First Nations carers' lived experiences, and of their traditional knowledge and methodologies, needs to find a material expression in the inclusion of First Nations carers as decision makers in research and policy making. Meaningful engagement respects cultural protocols and ensures that carers' voices are not only heard but acted upon. First Nations communities are often over-consulted without seeing meaningful change. This extractive approach leads to 'consultation fatigue' and mistrust in mainstream services and participation processes. It is a further symptom of colonial interactions with First Nations peoples and communities, where First Nations peoples' self-determination and right to be recognised as 'policy experts' in matters affecting their lives and communities is consistently undermined.

First Nations carers must be part of the decision-making from the outset, not just as research and consultation participants, but determining research questions and leading consultation processes that are meaningful and have material outcomes. These processes need to be open for communities to define priorities and solutions from the ground up, and to foster trust and engagement. This requires a slowing down of often hastily implemented policy change.

## Sovereignty and self-determination

The challenges First Nations carers face are inextricably linked to enduring processes of colonisation. Meaningful change needs to address this history and present reality, and support First Nations sovereignty and self-determination. This includes the recognition of Indigenous data sovereignty and intellectual property. Research and consultation needs to be conducted based on the understanding that the knowledge shared by communities is sacred and must be respected. Policies must move beyond tokenistic engagement and instead support First Nations-led organisations and initiatives that reflect community priorities and cultural values.

## Remote and regional access

Carers living in remote and very remote communities face compounded challenges due to geographic isolation, limited infrastructure, and underfunded services. Basic services like childcare, health care, and transport are often inaccessible or culturally unsafe. Regional gaps in service delivery disproportionately affect First Nations carers, who already carry significant responsibilities. Sustainable, long-term investment in locally delivered, culturally grounded services is necessary. Empowering communities to define and deliver their own care solutions is essential for improving outcomes in remote regions.

## Recommendations

1. Redefine care in policy frameworks to include care of Country, as well as cultural and community care.
2. Invest in First Nations-led research and services, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).
3. Embed self-determination in policy design by ensuring First Nations leadership from the outset.
4. Reform welfare and social security systems to better accommodate unpaid care work.
5. Improve services in remote communities through sustainable funding and culturally safe, locally delivered services.

6. Promote cultural safety and healing through trauma-informed training and support initiatives, requiring that those delivering paid care services are transparent about their ability to do so in ways that avoid harm to First Nations peoples and communities.
7. Translate research into practice by co-designing resources with First Nations carers and implementing tangible support.
8. Shift consultation practices from tokenistic engagement to genuine co-design and community-led dialogue.
9. Genuinely engage with the past and ongoing impacts of coloniality on First Nations carers, including the ways that this increases their care responsibilities by causing continued harm.

## Useful resources

For more information, please see:

- Klein E., Hunt J., Staines Z., Dinku Y., Brown C., Glynn-Braun K., Yap M. (2023), *Caring about Care* (Commissioned Report No. 7/2023), Centre for Indigenous Policy Research, Australian National University. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.25911/7S8N-8C87>
- CBPATSISP (2024), *Fact Sheet: Social and Emotional Wellbeing*. Available online at: <https://cbpatsisp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SEWB-fact-sheet-EMBARGOED.pdf>
- [Stay Strong website](#): Accessible digital mental health care tools developed through grassroots engagement with Australian First Nations communities
- [Girra Maa Indigenous Health discipline website](#) and [research projects / publications](#)
- *Who cares (Bilingarra) for the carer (Miyan)?: A pocket guide*, developed by carers Corrie Furner and Aunty Lorraine Tye. To order copies, please email [hello@pauseyou.com](mailto:hello@pauseyou.com).

- Carers NSW (2024), *National Carer Survey: First Nations carers*. Available online at: [https://www.carersnsw.org.au/uploads/main/Files/3.Resources/Policy-Research/Carer-Survey/2024-National-Carer-Survey\\_First-Nations.pdf](https://www.carersnsw.org.au/uploads/main/Files/3.Resources/Policy-Research/Carer-Survey/2024-National-Carer-Survey_First-Nations.pdf)

## About the Carer Knowledge Exchange

The Carer Knowledge Exchange brings together carers, researchers, policy makers and practitioners to share their knowledge and learn from each other. It features:

- An online research library for people to search, browse and share knowledge about carers
- A range of opportunities to connect and share knowledge about carers with others, both online and in person
- Diverse networks and communities of practice where knowledge about carers can be shared and developed

To find out more about the Carer Knowledge Exchange, visit [www.carerknowledgeexchange.com.au/about](http://www.carerknowledgeexchange.com.au/about), email [research@carersnsw.org.au](mailto:research@carersnsw.org.au) or phone 02 9280 4744.

To subscribe for regular email updates about the Carer Knowledge Exchange, visit [www.carerknowledgeexchange.com.au/get-involved/sign-up/](http://www.carerknowledgeexchange.com.au/get-involved/sign-up/)