

# Improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing

## Local government action guide no. 2

Promoting health and preventing illness in the community



Local governments play a major role in supporting the objectives of the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* by protecting, improving and promoting public health within their municipality. By integrating action across the social, cultural, built, economic and natural environments, council policies and practices can make major contributions to economic prosperity, community cohesion and population health outcomes.<sup>1,2</sup>

Local government also has a particular responsibility to ensure that:

- council contributes to reducing the health gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians
- all community members have the opportunity to access the resources we require to be healthy
- council recognises, values and respects the unique, resilient and strong cultural identity of Aboriginal Victorian peoples and their relationship to Kin and Country.

This guide is one of ten outlining a range of evidence-informed actions that councils may consider when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans and other strategies. The proposed strategies are consistent with national and state health promotion priorities and prevention frameworks, including *The Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2011–2015*, *Life is Health is Life: Taking action to close the gap* and the *Victorian Aboriginal health promotion framework*.

In this resource, the term 'Aboriginal' is used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### Why is improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing a priority?

- The largest health inequality between peoples within a country anywhere in the world exists here in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Compared to non-Aboriginal Australians, Aboriginal Australians experience a significantly lower life expectancy, and higher levels of disease and disability.<sup>4</sup>
- The health gap is largely the result of unequal access to resources and opportunities necessary for good health, such as income, quality housing, education and participation in community activities.<sup>5</sup>
- Aboriginal people do not always receive the same standard of health care as non-Aboriginal people.<sup>6</sup>
- The average weekly income for Aboriginal Australian families is \$395 compared to \$665 for non-Aboriginal families.<sup>7</sup>
- Almost 16 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians were unemployed in 2006, compared to 5.4 per cent of the overall Victorian population.<sup>8</sup>
- 54 per cent of Aboriginal Victorian households live in rental dwellings, compared to 29 per cent of non-Aboriginal Australian households.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2008, more than 90 per cent of Aboriginal Australians reported experiencing racism at least sometimes and two-thirds experienced racism often.<sup>10</sup> The impact of race-based attacks, bias, exclusion and social undermining is associated with poor mental and physical health. In particular, there is an increased risk of anxiety and depression, psychological distress, unhealthy coping behaviours and some chronic diseases.<sup>11</sup>

The health of Aboriginal Victorians is determined by individual behaviours, as well as the broader social, economic and environmental factors that influence health. It is also important to understand the cumulative impact of colonisation and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people.

The *Victorian Aboriginal health promotion framework* details best practice principles for working effectively with Victorian Aboriginal communities, including actions that are:

- inclusive of local historical, social and cultural contexts
- community-centred, owned and driven
- flexible enough to allow for innovation and accountability
- addressing numerous health determinants
- designed with funding and governance sustainability in mind
- evidence-based and utilise a strengths-based perspective.<sup>12</sup>

## A sample council strategy to improve Aboriginal health and wellbeing

### Strategic goal

Council is committed to helping reduce the health inequalities experienced by Aboriginal Victorians and closing the health gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members.

### Objectives and actions

#### Strengthen council policies and practices to provide quality, respectful and accessible services and programs for Aboriginal people

- Develop a relationship with local Aboriginal community controlled organisations, which are best placed to provide advice on local Aboriginal issues.
- Implement regular practices that respect the local Aboriginal community (e.g. flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, celebrating NAIDOC week, opening events with an acknowledgement of country, involving Aboriginal people in land management).
- Address issues of cultural safety, security and respect within council services by developing a reconciliation action plan (or similar policy) and providing cultural competence training for council staff and councillors.
- Engage Aboriginal people in council's advisory committees, policy processes and program development.
- Develop an appropriately sized and well trained and supported Aboriginal workforce within council.

#### Reduce the risk factors for social exclusion, ill health and chronic disease through health promotion action

- Prevent discrimination by following strategies outlined in VicHealth's local government action guide for reducing race-based discrimination.
- Create supportive environments for Aboriginal people in community settings such as council-run or funded sports clubs, childcare centres, and health and community agencies.
- Provide education and information for local schools, workplaces and community organisations that encourage them to work in partnership with Aboriginal members of the community to improve health and wellbeing.

#### Strengthen council's role in facilitating Aboriginal residents' access to employment, educational and economic resources

- Develop an employment strategy to encourage Aboriginal people to work across all areas of council business.
- Provide or fund job readiness programs that offer job skills and training and help overcome barriers to employment.
- Provide or fund mentoring and support to Aboriginal job-seekers, employees and employers.

### References

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- 3 Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2010, *Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health (Final report)*, World Health Organization, Geneva.
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- 12 VicHealth, 2011, *Life is health is life: Taking action to close the gap. Victorian Aboriginal evidence-based health promotion resource*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and Victorian Department of Health, Melbourne