

Indigenous Digital Inclusion Efforts Must Be First Nations Led and Adequately Funded

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) Indigenous Steering Committee has called for investments in First Nations co-designed local solutions and dedicated funding for more digital skills training in a submission to the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)'s Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan Discussion Paper.

Established after ACCAN's 2021 Indigenous Advisory Forum, the Indigenous Steering Committee guides ACCAN's work so that it is genuinely representative of the interests of First Nations peoples.

"Any digital inclusion efforts within the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan need to be developed and led by First Nations peoples and community-controlled organisations in order to achieve genuine progress," said ACCAN Indigenous Steering Committee Chair, Dr Heron Loban.

"For example, expanding the inDigiMOB program which was established to help bridge the digital divide, would be a good place to start."

The Steering Committee's submission to the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan recommended that the Federal Government fund programs to upskill local First Nations peoples and community-controlled organisations to provide culturally appropriate digital ability information.

"Giving First Nations peoples the chance to develop and lead initiatives that are targeted at increasing digital inclusion is key when it comes to making sure that the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan is culturally safe, locally relevant, and appropriately representative."

The Steering Committee highlighted the interconnection of the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan and steps required to meet Outcome 17 of the Closing the Gap Agreement, as well as other Closing the Gap outcomes that are dependent on the level of digital inclusion.

"It's important that resources are put into establishing robust baseline data so that the Gap can be measured, and progress assessed," explained Dr Loban.

ACCAN has long advocated for available, affordable, and accessible communications products and services, regardless of where people live. Similarly, the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan must cover all First Nations peoples, from those living in remote regions, to those living in capital cities. This would bring it into alignment with Outcome 17 of the Closing the Gap Agreement which does not discriminate between remote and urban First Nations communities.

"We know that when people are online, they are more likely to have better access to healthcare through telemedicine, better access to education through online learning, and improved access to government services that are increasingly being offered digitally," said Dr Loban.

"Improving the digital inclusion of First Nations communities will support greater equity for First Nations peoples more broadly," explained Dr Loban.

ACCAN's Indigenous Steering Committee also recommended further industry engagement, suggesting that NBN Co work with stakeholders to bolster shared community Wi-Fi services over Sky Muster. Additionally, the group has called for Telstra to continue to maintain its public phones and for the ACMA Payphone Guidelines to be updated to reflect recent changes in public phone call charging arrangements, while maintaining clear guidance for assessing the impact of public phone removal.

“There are benefits for everyone when First Nations consumers are able to get and stay connected. Investments in telecommunications infrastructure, digital access and devices will help to support First Nations peoples in becoming more active participants in today's digital society.”