

# Nigel Scullion proclaims 'new relationship' with Indigenous Australians

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Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

The Abbott government has proclaimed "a new relationship of engagement" with Indigenous Australia.

The government will on Thursday end months of anxiety for 112 Aboriginal health services, by extending their funding for a further three years at a cost of \$1.4 billion, and will deliver also funding certainty to more than 1000 organisations delivering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion said the approach would set future governments up to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage by simplifying reporting requirements and involving communities more in program design and delivery.

Confirmation that \$860 million had been allocated to almost 1300 projects ends months of uncertainty that has eroded the confidence of Indigenous leaders.

The commitment follows last month's disappointing report card on progress in closing the gap, and calls by indigenous groups for a ramping up of primary healthcare services to build

on successes in detecting, treating and managing chronic conditions such as diabetes and kidney disease.

Health Minister Sussan Ley and Assistant Health Minister Fiona Nash said the funding reaffirmed the government's determination to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage, and was acknowledgement of the vital role played by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations.

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation chairman Matthew Cooke said Aboriginal health services across the country would welcome the security provided by the three-year funding agreements.

"Our services are making the biggest inroads to close the health gap between Aboriginal and other Australians and it's good news that this work has been recognised by the federal government," he said.

The commitment comes as more than 100 health bodies declare their support for constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because they believe recognition will help make inroads on health inequality.

The RECOGNISE HEALTH initiative, will be led by Indigenous health research organisation the Lowitja Institute, will highlight the link between constitutional recognition and health and wellbeing.

"There is significant evidence from health research to indicate that being connected to the wider community, having a strong identity and feeling socially supported all have significant positive impacts on health," Lowitja Institute chief executive Romlie Mokak said.

The money announced by Senator Scullion on Wednesday represents the first round of funding delivered through the coalition's Indigenous Advancement Strategy, under which more than 150 programs have been collapsed into five broad areas overseen by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Senator Scullion said he had personally assessed almost 5000 funding applications and gained "a line of sight in a policy sense that we have never had".

He said the approach was shaped by the strategy that had emerged to improve school attendance by engaging local communities.

"The notion that we have government programs that Aboriginal people are delivering is gone," Senator Scullion told Fairfax Media. "These are Aboriginal and Islander programs delivered through ideas of Aboriginal and Islander people in their own communities."

"This was a reflection of what they wanted and, far more, that is what we are going to see – a reflection of people's wishes on the ground."

He said the approach was not about budget savings but achieving more efficient use of resources by simplifying reporting requirements and directing bureaucrats to work with providers in communities to improve services.

Bureaucrats would be posted to remote areas "not to look over the shoulder of Indigenous service providers" but to help fix problems, he said.

But Senator Scullion played down the prospect of the approach narrowing the gap in the next 12 months. "This is about setting us up for the future, for the long term," he said.