



**Council of
Aboriginal Services
Western Australia**

“Keep Your Grants and Strengthen Yourselves”

**A State of Knowledge on Systemic Issues
Impacting Aboriginal Community Controlled
Organisations in Western Australia**



"Keep Your Grants and Strengthen Yourselves": A State of Knowledge on Systemic Issues Impacting Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in Western Australia

Abstract

This State of Knowledge paper consolidates evidence from CASWA's statewide engagements with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS), including findings from the recent ACCO Sector Survey (2025).

It identifies systemic issues that constrain the ACCO sector: workforce instability, undervaluing of cultural authority, fragmented service systems, inadequate infrastructure, tokenistic engagement, disconnection from family and Country, and commissioning models that preference mainstream non-government organisations (NGO). Survey results further highlight ACCO strengths, persistent challenges, and priority supports desired from CASWA.

At the centre of this paper is a statement voiced by an ACCO during CASWA's Sector Engagement:

"Keep your grants and strengthen yourselves."

This provocation highlights the need for government to reform its own structures: procurement, funding, workforce, governance, rather than continuing to place the burden on ACCOs.

Key Messages

- ACCOs are inherently strong, grounded in community, culture, and trust. Survey findings reinforce this, with staff, committed leadership, and cultural legitimacy repeatedly named as core strengths.
- Cultural authority is central to safety, legitimacy, and effectiveness but remains undervalued and unfunded.
- Short-term grants undermine sustainability; government must shift to long-term commissioning.
- Fragmentation across justice, health, housing, and education systems perpetuates harm.
- Survey responses highlight systemic workforce stress, including housing shortages and retention challenges.
- ACCOs seek CASWA's support in healing, advocacy, governance capacity building, and grant writing, underlining the role of CASWA as both a collective voice and capacity builder.
- Government must reform itself. ACCOs should not carry the burden of systemic dysfunction.

1. Introduction

In consultations across Western Australia, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations consistently told CASWA that they are not asking for charity or handouts. They are asking for government to step up: to honour commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to reform procurement and commissioning practices, and to treat culture as the foundation of safety and healing.

One ACCO captured this sentiment powerfully: "Keep your grants and strengthen yourselves."

This paper adopts that statement as both its title and organising principle. The task is not to "fix ACCOs." It is to dismantle systemic barriers, reform government practices, and create the conditions for ACCOs to thrive on their own terms.

2. Defining Cultural Authority

Cultural authority is the community-recognised legitimacy to represent, safeguard, and direct matters of culture.

Governments frequently seek cultural legitimacy by engaging with ACCOs, Elders, and communities. Yet too often, they are unwilling to "pay the price", undervaluing, under-resourcing, or expecting cultural authority to be provided for free.

As one Aboriginal leader told CASWA:

"We carry the voice of our community, but government still funds the mainstream mob."

This imbalance devalues Aboriginal knowledge and undermines the very legitimacy governments claim to need.

3. Cross-Cutting Themes

3.1 Workforce Sustainability and Development

Short-term funding cycles and regional housing shortages undermine recruitment and retention. Aboriginal staff face barriers such as criminal history checks, limited career pathways, and inequitable pay. Burnout is common, with staff expected to cover multiple roles.

Survey responses confirm that staff shortages, retention issues, and housing for staff are among the biggest barriers to service sustainability.

"Our staff are doing two or three jobs at once – it's no wonder they burn out."

Implication: Government must fund stability: multi-year contracts, structured Aboriginal workforce pipelines, housing strategies, and wellbeing supports.

3.2 Cultural Competence and Cultural Security

Culture is too often treated as an "add-on" rather than core business. Inconsistent cultural competence among non-Aboriginal staff re-traumatises people. Elders, mentors, and community representatives are often absent from service delivery.

One survey respondent emphasised that services succeed when they are led by matriarchs with deep cultural authority.

"One unit at uni doesn't make a teacher culturally safe."

Implication: Fund cultural authority as core business. Governments must embed Aboriginal-led training, redesign environments around healing, and ensure Elders are resourced.

3.3 Procurement, Funding, and Commissioning

Compliance-heavy procurement processes favour mainstream NGOs. Grants are fragmented, short-term, and fail to recognise the cost of cultural authority.

Survey respondents reinforced that funding remains the dominant challenge, with many organisations lacking grant writing and administration capacity.

"The system is set up for mainstream organisations. They tick the boxes while we carry the community."

Implication: Commission for strength, not survival. Governments must move to 5 -7 year contracts, expand direct negotiation with ACCOs, and explicitly fund governance and back-office functions.

3.4 Integration and System Coordination

- Custodial, health, child protection, housing, and education systems operate in silos.
- Aboriginal People experience repeated questioning and disjointed support.

"Government is a big machine. We can't find the right door to walk through, and even when we do, it closes again."

Implication: Develop integrated, ACCO-led service models with clear protocols, shared training, and properly resourced throughcare extending into community.

3.5 Voice, Agency, and Shared Decision-Making

Aboriginal voices, from ACCOs, Elders, families, and communities are sidelined. Engagement is tokenistic and compliance-driven.

Survey findings show organisations want CASWA to lead in advocacy, representation, and providing a strong sector voice. Many requested more information-sharing and opportunities to connect across the sector.

"We're tired of talking. We've told our stories a hundred times, but nothing changes."

Implication: Embed structural power-sharing. Mandate ACCO and community representation in governance, co-design program delivery, and replace extractive consultation with genuine partnership.

3.6 Family, Community, and Country Connections

Service systems often disrupt or overlook family, community, and cultural ties. Families struggle to stay connected due to distance, cost, and rigid processes.

Survey responses highlighted the importance of community-led healing. Many ACCOs requested CASWA's support to build healing-focused services, reinforcing that wellbeing and cultural safety are inseparable.

"Kids see no reason to go to school when schools don't see them."

Implication: Prioritise keeping Aboriginal people connected to family, community, and Country. Fund ACCO-led, on-Country programs across sectors; support families with transport and access; and embed family and cultural mapping as core elements of case planning, education engagement, and service delivery.

3.7 Infrastructure and Sector Capacity

ACCOs often lack safe, fit-for-purpose environments. Back-of-house capacity (finance, IT, HR) is underfunded compared to mainstream NGOs.

Survey respondents named governance, financial literacy, and admin gaps as major constraints.

"We don't have the back-office resources that big NGOs have, but we're held to the same standards."

Implication: Treat infrastructure as core funding. Invest in therapeutic, culturally reflective environments and ACCO-shared back-office services.

4. Implications for Reform

The evidence across sectors is consistent:

- ACCOs are strong, but systemic barriers undermine them.
- Government must address funding shortfalls, housing pressures, and capacity deficits.
- CASWA's role is twofold: as a shield (advocacy) and as a toolkit (capacity building).
- Healing and wellbeing must be recognised as sector-wide priorities.

The provocation, "**keep your grants and strengthen yourselves**", is both critique and roadmap. Governments must reform their own systems if they are serious about partnership.

5. Conclusion

This State of Knowledge paper affirms that the strength of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations lies in culture, community, and resilience. The barriers they face are systemic, not organisational.

As one ACCO put it:

"Keep your grants and strengthen yourselves."

Governments and mainstream organisations cannot continue to extract cultural authority without resourcing it. To achieve Closing the Gap commitments, they must strengthen themselves: reform procurement, fund cultural authority as core business, stabilise the workforce, and share decision-making power.

When systems strengthen themselves in this way, ACCOs will have the space and resources to thrive. And when ACCOs thrive, so do Aboriginal children, families, and communities across Western Australia.