ECONOMIC JUSTICE AUSTRALIA
For a fair social security system

Economic Justice Australia submission to the First Nations digital inclusion Roadmap

About Economic Justice Australia

Economic Justice Australia (EJA) is the peak organisation for community legal centres providing specialist advice to people on their social security issues and rights. Our members across Australia have provided people with free and independent information, advice, education and representation in the area of social security for over 30 years.

EJA provides expert advice to government on social security reform to make it more effective and accessible. Our law and policy reform work:

- Strengthens the effectiveness and integrity of our social security system;
- Educates the community; and
- Improves people's lives by reducing poverty and inequality.

Introduction

EJA welcome this consultation to further develop the Roadmap for First Nations digital Inclusion. Our response is informed by research we have undertaken into how the digital divide affects First Nations people in remote and regional Australia particularly in relation to their access to social security entitlements. The findings of our research align with those of the Advisory Group's initial report.[1]

Our research indicates that digital inclusion of First Nations people in remote and regional Australia is affected by a range of complex issues such as:

Digital ID and authentication processes relating to digital identity authentication lock some people out of services because devices are shared or unavailable.

Poverty and insecure housing make access to devices unaffordable and access to a computer or internet connection.

Trust in government and government services is lacking, noting a reluctance of many First Nations people to entrust their personal information to government officials if they have had adverse experiences of government welfare interventions.

Illness, mental health and disability impede affected First Nations people's access to online services.

Family and domestic violence can significantly disrupt access to devices and internet connections and heightens the risk of non-consensual use of devices and accounts.

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[1] first-nations-digital-inclusion-advisory-group-initial-report.pdf (digitalinclusion.gov.au)

Income management and Centrepay are currently problematic, with digital connectivity needed to monitor balances and payments, and use of shared devices exposes people to risks of non-consensual access to their information and social security payments.

Services Australia resourcing is largely inadequate, with lack of appropriate and accessible service provision in remote areas compounding issues of access to social security.

Digital mentors and access to social security

EJA supports the Budget measure to provide digital mentors in remote community centres. However, it is essential that there is cross-portfolio coordination to ensure that mentoring and outreach are facilitated to enable people to access social security. In addition to promoting basic digital access, digital mentoring should be expanded to assist people to make and complete social security claims and better engage with government.

The National Agent and Access Point (NAAP) program[2] currently funds 354 Centrelink agents and 213 Centrelink access points across Australia – all are in regional, rural, remote and very remote areas, except for 2 agents. The NAAP program funds community organisations to provide self-service digital equipment including phones, WIFI, computers with internet connection, and scanning equipment to upload documents.

EJA receives reports from NAAP-funded organisations that the funding they receive is not sufficient to keep the services operating, let alone meet the community's need for access. Community organisations also report that when people seek assistance with digital access or a social security issue, they are directed to use a computer where there is no assistance available.

> **Recommendation**: Increase funding for community organisations providing the NAAP (National Agent and Access Point) Program to mentor people in the use of online services.

Mentoring and outreach initiatives should be conducted in partnership with community-controlled organisations to ensure the services are relevant and appropriate for the community. Leadership from and the support of community-controlled organisations is essential because they are experts in understanding the how online services may support the needs of their communities.

> **Recommendation**: Ensure that all digital mentorship initiatives are community-led, and they prioritise a holistic approach to digital access including, but not limited to, access to social security entitlements and support

Many First Nations people are unable to access social security entitlements because of digital exclusion. Community Legal Centres play an important role in helping people access social security rights but lack the resources they need to meet the demand for social security representation, let alone assisting people with online services. It is crucial that First Nations people have access to specialist social security legal assistance.

> **Recommendation**: Increase permanent core funding for EJA's member centres to provide specialist social security legal assistance to First Nations communities

> **Recommendation:** Allocate additional funding to enable Services Australia to extend the Community Partnership Pilot.

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[2] https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/closing-gap/national-agent-and-access-point-naap-program-services-australia

Identity authentication and Digital ID initiatives

First Nations people can experience significant barriers satisfying online identity verification requirements, including for myGov and Digital ID authentication due to lack proof of identify (POI) documentation. Pathfinders National Aboriginal Birth Certificate[3] program estimates that there are approximately 160,000 First Nations' people whose births were never registered with the relevant state Births, Deaths and Marriage bureau. There is a pressing need for efforts to address this issue, which continues to have significant impact and causes long-term and serious consequences for people who are most vulnerable, including people who go without social security payment for months or years solely because they cannot navigate POI requirements.

> **Recommendation**: Expand initiatives like Pathfinders to ensure that more First Nations people can obtain documentation.

> **Recommendation**: Services Australia to use its information gathering powers to access required documents held by other government departments, including Births, Deaths and Marriages, to proactively assist First Nations people to satisfy POI and other documentary requirements

Access to reliable, connected individual digital devices is a significant barrier for some First Nations people in regional, rural and remote areas. Multi-factor authentication processes can be problematic when First Nations people do not have access to devices or online accounts where passwords have been stored. Multi-factor authentication generates a code which is sent to a previously linked mobile phone and this requirement regularly excludes people from accessing their online services.

There is a need to ensure that people with accessibility issues are consulted in the design of Digital ID verification processes to prevent inadvertent risks or harms. Identity verification systems should be designed with a practical understanding the accessibility problems experienced by First Nations people.

> **Recommendation**: Additional safeguards are needed for people for whom the creation and ongoing use of a Digital IDs and identity verification processes are problematic

> **Recommendation**: Inclusive design should be adopted for identity verification processes and authentication processes.

Case study

One community had one phone and one computer. The phone was down for a week and the computer was down for 12 months with no one who could fix it. They couldn't do things to notify Centrelink, couldn't use income management to buy food. It is hard for Centrelink offices or people in major cities to understand this.

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[3] [Pathfinders National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program (PNABC) | Pathfinders National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program (PNABC) During March and April, the PNABC program will be conducting birth certificate sign... | By PathfindersFacebook | Facebook](#)

> *In First Nations communities, one person in the family may be receiving payment because it is so difficult for the rest of the family to stay engaged because they can't meet mutual obligations, don't have internet, and can't find a job because the nearest town is 200k away.*

First Nations people experiencing family and domestic violence are put at further risk when experiencing digital exclusion. Firstly, without reliable, private access to digital equipment and connection is difficult to seek social security information and assistance. This can lead to a victim-survivor being forced to choose between violence or poverty.

Secondly, First Nations women are at significantly greater risk of technologically facilitated abuse.[4] EJA receives reports of First Nations victim-survivors being subject to non-consensual use of digital systems such as myGov and online social security systems to gain control, cause harm, and monitor. For example, having Centrelink loans (advances) being taken out unknowingly under their name through digital platforms, having bank account details non-consensually changed and coercive nominee arrangements being created through digital platforms.

> **Recommendation**: Ensure that the eSafety Commissioner's Safety by Design principles are implemented within the social security system's online platforms[5]

> **Recommendation**: Ensure that the First Nations Digital Inclusion roadmap is informed by the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2023

Affordability

The 2023-2025 budget initiative to provide $20 million over three years, starting from 2024-25 to provide free community Wi-Fi in remote communities through a contestable program is welcome. However, it does not address the basic problem of affordability. First Nations people receiving social security are on low incomes and payments can be disrupted due to suspensions and cancellations. Consequently, they are more likely to pay bills on a weekly or fortnightly basis. These options are generally more expensive than long term options, e.g. pre-paid mobile data plans rather than household fixed broadband plans.

Poverty exacerbates the digital divide, leaving people with outdated devices and unaffordable data plans. The expense of upgrading to the latest devices exacerbate affordability barriers. The extreme levels of poverty experienced by First Nations people in regional, rural and remote communities means some people are being forced to choose between food or online access.

The Centrelink telephone allowance of $35.60 per quarter is not enough to cover basic mobile or internet service costs. It is important to implement the Advisory Group report[6] recommendation 1.5 for Centrelink telephone allowance be increased to a monthly payment rather than the current quarterly payment. This recommendation aligns with a similar EJA recommendation and should be considered by government as an important step to improve digital inclusion for First Nations peoples.

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[4] eSafety, Adults' negative online experiences, eSafety, 2020.
[5] https://www.esafety.gov.au/industry/safety-by-design
[6] first-nations-digital-inclusion-advisory-group-initial-report.pdf (digitalinclusion.gov.au)

> **Recommendation**: Establish a Digital Allowance (i.e. reworking and expanding Telephone Allowance) to assist all people receiving income support to afford mobile phones and data.

The retirement of the 3G network has created an urgent need for a systematic approach to providing people in remote communities with 4G compatible devices. The Advisory Group recommended a National Device Bank and the adoption of this, or similar approach, should be pursued. Although sharing of devices through device banks can be problematic from a security perspective, it is a measure that help fill some of the gaps in access if they are properly managed.

> **Recommendation**: Engage in an urgent exercise to provide 4G compatible devices to people in remote communities.

Digital Ability and Online safety

Due to low digital literacy and ability, First Nations people in remote communities are vulnerable to misinformation, scams and fraud. Reliance on the English language for communications also contributes to the risks of fraud because there is a lack of equivalent information that has been translated into Indigenous languages.

As AI becomes more ubiquitous, it is likely that it will compound these existing risks to online safety. This necessitates consideration of the ways that AI may contribute to problems with online safety for First Nations people who do may have high levels of digital and/or English language literacy.

> **Recommendation**: Add AI safety education as an element to the ongoing First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap consultation.

Contact

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