



Response to NIAA Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP) Discussion Paper

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

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Introduction

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the NIAA Indigenous Skills, Engagement and Employment Program (ISEP) Discussion Paper.

VACCA is the lead Aboriginal child and family welfare organisation and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence services in Victoria. As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO), we provide services to vulnerable Aboriginal children, families and communities. VACCA's vision is Aboriginal self-determination – Live, Experience and Be. Our purpose is supporting culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal communities. We believe in the principle of the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination, the rights of the child and we commit to upholding Victorian Aboriginal cultural protocols. Our values are; Best interests of the child, Aboriginal Cultural Observance, Respect, Self-determination, Healing and Empowerment and Excellence.

VACCA's key areas of work are in service delivery, advocacy and training. We work across the spectrum of prevention, early help, early intervention, targeted support and tertiary level services. We deliver programs across Victoria, offering a broad range of services that seek to:

- Ensure child safety and community wellbeing
- Support young people to make positive life choices
- Targeted support for Aboriginal people and families
- Maintain strong connections to Aboriginal culture, and
- Promote culturally specific ways of growing up Aboriginal children.

VACCA's feedback is based on our unique position as one of the largest ACCOs in Australia. Our workforce is approximately 700 staff and growing. We operate in Victoria with office areas covering metropolitan Melbourne: North, West, South, East and has a regional presence in Gippsland (Morwell) and Ovens Murray (Wangaratta, Wodonga). With 48% Aboriginal staff, we are the largest single employer of Aboriginal people in the State outside of Government.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact globally, with some people bearing a greater burden of the arising challenges. Aboriginal peoples are resilient and have survived in the face of colonisation, but its ongoing impacts manifest today in health and socioeconomic inequalities. While times of crisis may create entirely new challenges; they can also exacerbate and entrench some of the existing issues faced by Aboriginal communities. During 2020 there was great success in keeping Aboriginal communities safe across Victoria, with very low rates of community transmission and thankfully no deaths caused by COVID-19. This was largely due to the coordination and advocacy of ACCOs. In 2021 ACCOs have support community to access COVID-19 vaccinations through local ACCHOs, however there are new challenges relating to the emergence of the delta strain and its impacts on Aboriginal communities.



The COVID-19 pandemic has had complex and varied impacts on Aboriginal families and the Aboriginal workforce across Australia, including the ramifications of job loss, housing and financial stress, social isolation from wider family and community networks, Elder isolation, disruption of support services, impacts of home-schooling on children and parents and challenges of working from home if employed.

VACCA is highly concerned about the impact on the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of the Aboriginal children, young people and families we support, and on the Aboriginal workforce as a whole. The trauma, grief and loss that Aboriginal peoples have experienced through multiple generations continue to impact upon the wellbeing and health status of Aboriginal children and young people, particularly those in care, exiting care, or in Youth Justice. The pandemic has the potential to compound and exacerbate existing risk factors and vulnerabilities for Aboriginal families we work with, with serious impacts on their SEWB now and into the future. Our Aboriginal workforce also works on the frontlines, with many essential workers experiencing high levels of cultural load in working with the communities they are deeply connected with, as well as managing vicarious trauma and the impacts of the pandemic on everyday life. It is crucial that in building the capacity, skills, employment and engagement of the Aboriginal workforce, that social and emotional wellbeing is centered in everything that we do.

VACCA's response to the discussion paper questions

How should the Indigenous skills, engagement and employment Program (ISEP) work alongside the new employment services model and the new remote engagement program to build work-ready skills and connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to rewarding, sustainable jobs?

- NIAA is interested in stakeholders' views on whether Indigenous-specific employment investment should target specific cohorts, transition points, regions, industries, barriers, etc.

In recognition of the need to support more Aboriginal people into meaningful, long-term work in Aboriginal organisations, VACCA has developed its own comprehensive Organisational and Workforce Development Strategy. The key focus of the strategy over the last four years has been to embed a learning culture across the organisation, support Aboriginal staff to obtain mandatory qualifications and upskill, and increase the size of the Aboriginal workforce and Aboriginal people in leadership positions. Staff wellbeing is a key focus which runs concurrently to all other workforce strategies. Additional focus areas for the next four-year workforce strategy will be capacity building digital knowledge and skills, strong mental health and health promotion, and retention and succession planning.

Factors that ISEP and potential employers must consider include:

Funding: Commitment to continuity of long-term workforce funding (minimum 5-10 years), to allow for meaningful implementation of workforce development goals and successful employment outcomes.

Qualifications/training: VACCA has found that it is important to retain flexibility in relation to minimum qualifications, in order to ensure that we are both targeting the best people for the job, as well as making our workplace as accessible as possible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For those who have experienced barriers to formal education and training, VACCA seeks to



be able to provide pathways to employment that include training and qualification attainment opportunities in a supportive environment. Our experience has been that training and supporting Aboriginal staff is not a 12 or 24 month journey, that mirrors the current funding arrangements instead a five or six year professional development cycle, where they feel strengthened in their capacity to be experts in their field and can see career progression. Funding should better reflect the longevity of recruitment and sustainable employment, rather than simply focussing on the first year. Funding is needed for organisations to be able to support staff through training and development appropriately and safely. We aim to provide all staff with opportunities for a never-ending journey of growth and development, including qualifications, skills development and leadership pathways. Government should also be incentivising education providers to attract Aboriginal students to the sectors where we know there is such high demand, like child and family services, so that we can create employment pathways earlier.

Structural barriers: A culturally safe workplace must include an embedded understanding of the impact of historical and modern challenges faced by a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including intergenerational trauma, socio-economic disadvantage and negative schooling experiences, and how these challenges can lead to difficulties with seeking and maintaining employment. It is important that all organisations or companies who are employing Aboriginal people avoid making assumptions about education and employment pathways being linear, accessible or easy. Furthermore, in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the difficulties of the labour market and youth employment present additional barriers which must be overcome.

Support: Aboriginal staff should be provided with long-term, culturally appropriate and safe support throughout their employment period. ISEP should provide organisations with workforce funding for mentors/supervisors to support staff in their employment journey.

Young people: It will be vital for organisations and companies to develop partnerships with both educational institutions and internship/traineeship procurement services, in order to provide Aboriginal young people with multiple pathways to employment. ACCOs especially should be proactive in attracting Aboriginal students, through pathways such as internships, traineeships and student placements, and ensuring that their workplaces are set up to be culturally safe, welcoming and engaging for young people looking to start their career journey. All systems to attract, train and retain Aboriginal young people into employment will need to include sufficient funding for additional mentors that are trauma-informed and culturally safe. Aboriginal young people leaving out-of-home-care are also a priority group that should be given specific consideration and attention by the ISEP.

LGBTIQA+: VACCA are working towards Rainbow Tick accreditation in the interests of ensuring that our organisation is not only safe and inclusive for our clients and community, but vitally for our staff who are part of the LGBTIQA+ community. Workplaces must be supported to carry out internal audits of their environments, policies, language use, culture, processes and documentation to ensure that they are safe and inclusive of people who are part of the Aboriginal LGBTIQA+ community.



How could IAS investment be designed to be more flexible and responsive at the regional level, and better meet the needs of the community for Indigenous job seekers and employers?

- NIAA is interested in stakeholders' views on more flexible investment that builds on success factors and leverages partnerships and other investment at the local level, including partnerships and opportunities for co-investment with industry.

ACCOs need to be leading this work, they must be prioritised in the funding rounds and provided adequate support and resourcing to undertake partnerships with other local employers and to, employ, retain and support Aboriginal employees. Funding has consistently been allocated to government and mainstream CSOs to recruit Aboriginal peoples rather than to the ACCO sector. ACCOs should be seen as an employment hub where employment pathways are developed for community by community. As the largest employer of Aboriginal peoples outside of government, VACCA is well placed to lead this work, the ISEP must see invest to strengthen the role of ACCOs in building Aboriginal employment opportunities and pathways.

In rolling out the ISEP there needs to be an awareness of the current and projected challenges ACCOs are facing in relation to workforce capacity, so that a flexible and targeted model can be developed by community, for community. It is projected that there will be a significant increase in Aboriginal service provision across all key sectors in the state over the next decade. The challenge for VACCA will be the ability to recruit, fill and sufficiently remunerate vacancies competitively and retain the quality workforce needed to meet significant service growth demand whilst also meeting increased Government administrative and burdensome compliance requirements, including added mandatory qualifications for the sector. In addition to accelerating external recruitment, more work will be needed in developing internal talent pipelines to meet future needs.

VACCA must recruit Aboriginal staff and maintain a strong Aboriginal identity as an ACCO to deliver self-determination. By being the largest employer of Aboriginal people in Victoria outside of government, VACCA directly contributes towards the social-economic and cultural benefits associated with employment and an individual's confidence to pursue career and professional growth. It is critical for VACCA to continue its focussed efforts to attract, develop, and retain a highly skilled Aboriginal workforce if any of the major Aboriginal reform strategies are to be realised; e.g. Dhelk Dja, Korin Korin Balit Djak, Wungurilwil Gagapduir and The National Agreement on Closing The Gap.

Staff retention/turnover represents a major workforce risk, given the VACCA's growing need for quality staff in a highly competitive employment market. Staff attrition is disruptive to continuity of client casework and costly in terms of recruitment, training, manager time. For VACCA to continue its expanding role in the context of growth driven by new expanded funded programs, it will be necessary to improve staff retention (and reduce attrition) through maintaining a strong and stable workforce ready and able reliably deliver services. Remuneration inequality due to limited funding places undue pressure on ACCO's and affects the ability to retain a highly skilled workforce. VACCA wants to attract Aboriginal staff across all levels of employment from senior management to trainees. VACCA has developed an Organisational and Workforce Development plan to support the workforce through capability building, upskilling, workplace culture and wellbeing, as well as refinements to the associated systems and processes. The importance of Aboriginal culture, community and self-determination will continue to guide all efforts related to our Organisational and Workforce Development Plan.



There are a number of employment initiatives that VACCA has taken part of that we have seen great outcomes both for community and for VACCA, where the project has been successful, it has been due to VACCA leading the project and there being flexibility in the delivery of it. including:

Traineeships: VACCA's traineeship program provides an entry level opportunity for ten Aboriginal people each year to gain 12 months practical work experience, structured on-the job training and a Certificate IV in Community Services. Upon successful completion of the 12-month traineeship, trainees are assisted to find ongoing employment at VACCA. Over the past two years, 20 Aboriginal people have undertaken traineeships and this has led to 16 being offered ongoing employment after the traineeship had completed. Up until recently VACCA has received funding from NIAA supporting this trainee program through the Tailored Assistance Employment Grant, which has assisted in supporting our trainees, however we were advised that the most recent application for renewed funding was unsuccessful. This is an example where federal government funding not providing ongoing flexible funding to ACCOs to support workforce development and employment pathways for community, and the repercussions of this will affect not only VACCA but young Aboriginal people seeking employment pathways.

Student Internships and Placements: VACCA also has a student internship program which sees partnerships with education providers to provide a short-term opportunity to Aboriginal students undertake paid internship with VACCA. In the past 12 months we have seen four Aboriginal student internships translate to ongoing employment with VACCA. VACCA also offers student placements which are unpaid, 24 students (10 of those Aboriginal) have been employed by VACCA subsequently to their placement with VACCA.

Working for Victoria: VACCA took part in the Working for Victoria initiative, which was set up by the Victorian Government to help Victorian jobseekers find work and for employers find suitable workers. This initiative included people who had lost their jobs and businesses who needed workers due to the impacts of COVID-19.

All up VACCA had 20 staff employed under the program with five people progressing into permanent roles at VACCA. VACCA would contend that there was certainly benefit to the initiative but would make the following recommendations:

- The allocation of funding needs to be holistic and flexible to the needs of the ACCO and the employees, in the understanding that it takes organisational capacity to supervise and train staff and provide ongoing support, as well as the reporting required to acquit the funding.
- Flexible funding to allow for transition to working from home if required, so that laptops and phones.

Barreng Moorop Work Ready Program: In partnership with Bridge Darebin VACCA has run a number of work ready program over the past couple of years for 14–18-year-olds. The program was designed to support Aboriginal young people learn skills and information to acquire a part time job. Skills and training included developing your CV and cover letter and preparing for interviews. Aboriginal employment officers from Coles, Bunnings and Bakers Delight come and speak with the young people as well as one of VACCA's Organisational Development team to discuss VACCA's trainee and internship programs. The program runs over six weeks including one week of undertaking a food handling course and work experience at the social enterprise café run by Bridge Darebin 'Moon Rabbit'. The feedback for this course has been overwhelmingly positive, and this model shows a flexible, local partnership between an ACCO and an employer.

VACCA and CERES Fair Food Project: A partnership between VACCA's Northern region and CERES has been developed as a pilot to secure and maintain casual employment for Aboriginal young people aged

17 – 25 years with CERES Fair Food. The purpose of the partnership is for VACCA to recruit and support up to six young people (three initially and then more can join the pilot after three months) over the course of 12 months to undertake casual employment at CERES Fair Food. This pilot project has had to be delayed due to COVID restrictions but will begin as soon as possible.

VACCA sees the inherent value to building up a skilled Aboriginal workforce and continues to look for innovative ways to engage, recruit, support and retrain skilled workers. We understand the value of lived experience and cultural knowledge as being a value add to our organisation, and support staff in obtaining necessary qualifications while working.

How should results of the new ISEP program be measured, monitored and evaluated to ensure investment contributes to closing the gap in employment outcomes?

VACCA has significantly increased its investment in evaluation and research in recent years, with the development of our Research and Evaluation Development Team, recognising the role of Aboriginal people and organisations in determining outcomes and measures of success.

VACCA subscribes to the ethical research best practice contained in the National Statements requiring ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal peoples be based on trust, recognition and values. The core values outlined include spirit and integrity, reciprocity, respect, equality, survival and protection and responsibility.

All government programs should reflect stated principles for working with Aboriginal people. These principles should be the basis of a best practice framework for ensuring that programs deliver what is important to Aboriginal people. They include but are not limited to the following: self-determination, culturally informed approaches, accountability, strengths-based approach and one that is centred on the aspirations of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal-led collaboration and partnership, person centred, community engagement and equity.

The right of Aboriginal communities to exercise ownership and control over data collection, access and management is inextricably linked to self-determination. The ISEP indicators must then meaningfully reflect the intention of co-design. Aboriginal ways of conducting research and evaluation value processes and are directed by the community. In respecting this, the new ISEP program must involve the Aboriginal community at the very initial stage where they have the opportunity to identify needs, have input into the design of interventions and define measures and indicators that meaningfully represent change from their perspective.

Building Aboriginal evidence-based workforce models

Services designed from a non-Aboriginal perspective can fail to recognise the importance of factors such as culture, history, and community connection. Meaningful data collection and evaluation may be understood differently from an Aboriginal perspective compared to that of government or western research approaches. The privileging of mainstream evidence-based programs (e.g. programs that have been evaluated through RCTs) marginalise Aboriginal ways of contributing to knowledge. In order to generate and protect Aboriginal knowledge on a long-term basis, we need to shift from privileging western models of RCTs. Longitudinal research methodologies are more appropriate in evaluating Aboriginal programs, where a case-by-case approach is useful in determining strengths and limitations. In acknowledging the differences between Aboriginal and Western approaches to research



and evaluation, caution must be used not to demote Aboriginal methods assuming they are of less quality and rigor than Western models.

High quality research from the perspective of Aboriginal communities includes Aboriginal Data Sovereignty, protection of intellectual property rights and data governance. The ISEP program monitoring and evaluation plan must allow for this Aboriginal expression of high-quality research.

Strategy needs a minimum data set that has higher order themes and domains that can be added to or adapted to changing operational needs. There needs to be dedicated Aboriginal SEWB indicators and domains. There needs to be a mechanism to capture both process and impact indicators against the plan and any data captured and evaluations conducted must drive reform. An End-to-End Knowledge translation and transfer strategy must underpin this strategy to enable sense making and system change.

Once developed, it will be important for the ISEP program to share a clear program logic which details the timeframes, short-, medium- and long-term outcomes, and indicators of contribution and success. Measurable outcomes should also be developed for different stakeholders to track their progress and impact.

How can we embed shared-decision making in community-based workforce planning?

In order to ensure shared decision-making, the ISEP development and implementation must include a strong commitment to self-determination through Aboriginal-led planning and decision making.

To effectively embed shared decision making through community-based workforce planning, it will be vital to build up the Aboriginal Community Controlled (ACCO) sector. This must include the transferring of resources from mainstream and government services and greater long-term investment in ACCOs to provide safe and sustainable employment or employment assistance for Aboriginal people. This will be particularly important in regions where there are no ACCO or Aboriginal specific employment services available. Aboriginal services and communities need to be appropriately resourced and empowered to design programs and supports that are locally relevant and culturally safe.

To build a partnership approach with local Aboriginal communities and organisations, ISEP must align with existing local and national agreements, and work that is already being progressed. The Closing the Gap *Priority Reforms One: Shared Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making and Two: Building the Community-Controlled Sector*, should drive the commitment from government, industry and community to develop meaningful partnerships and empower Aboriginal people, communities and organisations to design, develop and implement local solutions.

Local Aboriginal Networks (LANs), mainstream networks and communities across the state must be consulted to ensure the plan considers and is reflective of the needs of all those impacted. This must not be a one-off opportunity, but a continuous conversation across local, regional and state levels. How information is disseminated to ACCOs, and the Aboriginal community is also critical to ensuring sufficient input and consultation.

We know that Aboriginal services providing for the Aboriginal community is what works. Community-managed programs are those where an Aboriginal community has decision-making control and

responsibility for the implementation, and the common factors that were identified in successful community-managed organisations and programs include:

- Ownership of and control over decision-making is held by the community,
- Culture, including an understanding of local context, history and community leaders is central to the program,
- Local Aboriginal staff work on the program or in the organisation,
- Good corporate governance exists,
- Aboriginal staff are working on programs and existing capacity is harnessed,
- Trusting relationships with partners are established,
- There is flexibility in implementation timelines¹.

Accountability is critical to ensuring the effectiveness of any proposed strategies. The ISEP design must include provisions for an Aboriginal-led mechanism for oversight and accountability of its implementation aligned to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Priority Reform One: Formal partnerships and shared decision making.

How can the ISEP encourage potential employers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to provide safe and culturally appropriate work environments? How can employers better value the skills and perspectives of Indigenous employees?

It is critical for ACCO's to be able to attract, develop, and retain a highly skilled Aboriginal workforce if any of the major Aboriginal 10-year strategies are to be realised. As potential employers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ACCOs - and also mainstream organisations - must consider how they will attract and retain Aboriginal staff and value their unique contribution and perspectives as a part of their workforces.

Social and Cultural Capital

With the appropriate funding and government commitments, ACCOs could be leading the way in developing safe and supported work environments, with organisational policies and systems that explicitly provide for the cultural safety of Aboriginal employees. It is vital that organisations are enabled to be self-determining. This requires funding and decision making to be allocated to ACCOs, this will ensure that our practices are reflective of the communities they serve, which means creating frameworks, systems and protections for the following at a minimum:

Mental health support (including leave entitlements): Funding and organisation-wide commitment to support of staff through mentoring and supervision that is trauma-informed and culturally safe is vital. Staff wellbeing, resilience and coping is emerging as a high priority area in the workforce, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specific cultural support and mentoring is required for Aboriginal staff, including recognition of and support for the impacts of lived experience and intergenerational trauma, the importance of culture and identity, and the impact and cultural load of living and working in community.

¹ Morley, S. 2015. What works in effective Indigenous community-managed programs and organisations. CFA Paper No. 32.



Family violence support (including leave entitlements): in recognition of the impacts of family violence on work capacity and the need for a flexible understanding of individual support needs. Policies should involve risk assessments with a trauma informed, cultural lens.

Cultural safety: protections and safety must be built into the core foundational documents of organisations, with cultural safety and anti-racism written into Codes of Conduct to set the standard of values and expectations of all staff.

Flexible working arrangements and leave entitlements: taking into account the needs of different types of families, i.e. parents, kinship and foster carers, caring for grandparents or other family members.

ACCOs were established to advocate for the rights and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Alongside the community, ACCOs have been instrumental in the progress that has been made to date, such as the Treaty and truth-telling progress in Victoria. An extension of this advocacy role is the development of data and content which highlights the social and cultural capital held within Aboriginal communities, individuals and organisations.

ACCOs and other employers require continuity of funding in order to ensure that Aboriginal staff can be appropriately supported at all stages of the employment cycle and their communities can feel the positive impacts of individual successes. Strong workforce investment by VACCA in its 300+ current Aboriginal Workforce has resulted in substantial and long-term benefits that are extended well beyond just the individuals, but shared and enjoyed by their immediate and extended family and indirectly the broader Victorian Aboriginal Community. These benefits can be summarised as improved job opportunities, employment, economic participation and empowerment, wide ranging training, personal and professional development, exposure to a myriad of career opportunities, qualification support and upskilling, coaching, daily connection to living culture, effective cultural practice, healing, sharing knowledge and actively contributing to a thriving Aboriginal community.

The Employee Journey at VACCA

It is crucial that employers consider the cultural safety of all aspects of the employee life cycle, i.e. attraction and recruitment, induction and onboarding, training and qualifications, wellbeing and retention, career development and leadership development. Key focuses of strategies should include embedding learning, promoting staff wellbeing, capacity building, digital knowledge and skills, strong mental health and health promotion, retention and succession planning.

At VACCA we have transformed the employment journey to create an end-to-end system of support to prospective, current and previous employees.

Attract staff: our website has been updated and enhanced to provide clear indication of the values, culture, and experience of working at VACCA; our Position Descriptions are written in more user-friendly accessible ways, including capability language so that prospective employees can consider their transferable skills; qualifications and skills are more carefully matched to roles in order to provide flexibility and accessibility for a wider variety of people.

Recruitment experience: we have created a recruitment experience that is more streamlined and provides an end-to-end experience with a hiring manager from the point of application to signing the contract.

Induction: onboarding, program induction, training, supports identified immediately on commencement.



In role: regular supervision is provided to all staff, Annual Performance Development Reviews completed between staff and manager, general and Aboriginal-specific EAP available to all staff, wellbeing program, and regular internal communications.

Progression: as staff continue in their roles and are performing well and wanting more challenges, managers will be having conversations with their staff, through supervision and APDR, about professional development and growth opportunities, either within their current team or elsewhere in the organisation. VACCA hopes to retain staff as they develop their skills and experience, and provides training and support for career progression.

Exit: exit interviews are offered to all staff at the end of their employment journey with VACCA.

Pathways into VACCA

There are a variety of pathways to employment at VACCA that we have cultivated and continue to grow:

- Advertised recruitment: the majority of our employees apply through our advertised recruitment avenues, including our website and EthicalJobs
- Internships, traineeships, student placements: VACCA works closely with Career Trackers, a national program creating paid internships for Indigenous young people, and is committed to continuing to develop our partnerships with education providers in order to create streamlined pathways for Aboriginal students and graduates to obtain work in ACCOs.
- Working for Victoria program: an government initiative since the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led to approximately 20-30% going on to permanent employment at VACCA.

How should the ISEP consider a local focus?

- NIAA is interested in stakeholders' views on whether defined boundaries required for the ISEP, or whether applicants for funding under the ISEP are best placed to determine the local region within the context of a specific funding proposal?

VACCA contends that there needs to be an equal distribution of funding to metro, regional and rural areas across Australia; with a commitment for the funding to be prioritised for Aboriginal community developed, led, implemented and evaluated programs. Local ACCOs are best placed to determine the needs of their local community and the kinds of programs that will work well and obtain the best outcomes for community. The funding needs to be flexible and long term.

NIAA must conduct regular reporting on the program and evaluate how and where the program is being implemented and whether the framework and policy intent are being met on a yearly basis so that changes can be made to ensure the desired outcomes of this funding model is achieved.

For more information, please get in touch with [REDACTED], Director, Office of the CEO on [REDACTED].