



# Evaluation of the Tackling Indigenous Smoking Program 2023-24 to 2026-27

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**Mid-Term report (July 2023 – December 2025)**

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# LAY SUMMARY

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The national Tackling Indigenous Smoking (TIS) program aims to lower smoking and vaping rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. CIRCA has been asked to look at how the program is going from 2023 to 2027. CIRCA's job is to:

- See how well the TIS program is set up to meet its goals.
- Find out from TIS teams, how much the program is changing what community knows and thinks about smoking and vaping.
- Look for ways the program could improve.

This is a summary of what CIRCA found in the two and a half year of the TIS program, from:

- Interviews and focus groups with TIS National Support stakeholders between October and November 2025
- Interviews with TIS Coordinators between September and December 2025
- Focus groups with TIS staff between September and December 2025
- Online surveys with TIS CEOs and TIS staff between September and December 2025, compared to surveys completed between September and December 2024
- 34 Activity Work Plans (AWPs) from TIS teams in July 2025, compared to AWP's from July 2023 and July 2024
- 33 Performance Reports (PRs) from the January – June 2025 period, compared to PRs from the July – December 2023 period, and the January – June 2024 period
- Progress reports from the National Best Practice Unit (NBPU)

CIRCA's key findings are listed below.

## How well is the TIS program set up to meet its goals?

CIRCA found that the TIS program was set up well to meet its goals.

## **Goal: Reach all communities and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**

- By June 2025, TIS teams said they had reached 74% of all communities across the country. This reach has increased since the start of the program in July 2023. It is a good sign that the program will be able to reach all communities by the end of the four years.
- On average, for each activity, TIS teams reached 21% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in the respective IREG.
- On average, for each activity, TIS teams reached 4% to 6% of people in priority groups (for example, young people, pregnant women, and people in remote communities). This reach has increased over time. Previously, TIS teams reached less than 1% of people in the priority group with each activity.
- By June 2025, TIS teams said that nearly half of their activities reached people who do not attend Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations or Aboriginal Medical Services. This is another priority group for the program.
- Overall, this is a good sign the program will be able to meet its goal of reaching all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- TIS teams said that these things made it hard for them to reach communities and people:
  - It is not always easy to find and keep skilled staff.
  - There can be problems when running face-to-face activities, such as bad weather.
  - It can be difficult to create messages that connect with different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
  - It can be difficult to work with challenging partners.
- TIS teams said the following things helped them reach communities and people:
  - Building and having strong partnerships
  - Planning carefully and using evidence to guide decisions
  - Reaching people through a range of platforms and channels
  - Having enough staff to do the work well
  - Building and maintaining strong relationships with community members

- Providing activities and resources that are engaging, and culturally appropriate to the community
- Having support from organisational leaders

### **Goal: Work with local communities and services**

- TIS teams said they had strong partnerships with local services that help people quit smoking. Teams also said they often worked with community organisations and community members to plan and run their TIS activities. These are good signs that the program is working with local communities and services.
- But the amount of support TIS teams got from the local community was different in each place. Some areas had strong support, while others did not. This is an area where the program could be improved: more TIS teams working with their local communities, so that this goal can be achieved.
- The most important factor in how well TIS teams work with others is TIS staff and the relationships they have with local communities. These relationships can help a lot—but if they are not strong, they can also make things harder.

### **Goal: TIS activities respect culture and reflect evidence about smoking and vaping**

- There is strong proof that TIS activities are culturally safe, and they will achieve the goal of respecting culture. Most activities used local ideas and languages.
- TIS teams also made sure their activities fit each community. They built relationships with community and asked for feedback from community. They also followed cultural protocols, and used local resources.
- TIS teams said the things that helped them run culturally safe activities are:
  - Having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff
  - Having access to a cultural review group
  - Having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples involved in the TIS program – at both a national and local level
  - Having time and capacity to build relationships and trust with the community

- Being able to access local cultural knowledge holders like Elders, artists, and performers
- What made it hard for TIS teams to run culturally safe activities are:
  - Having to deal with resistance or gatekeeping from some TIS lead organisations
  - Navigating community politics
  - Not having enough staff
  - Managing time-consuming logistics
- By June 2025, nearly 100% of TIS activities were based on good research (evidence). TIS teams also helped grow the evidence by talking with communities and doing their own research. These are great signs that the program reflects evidence about smoking and vaping, and will keep doing so through the end of the four years.
- TIS teams said the things that helped them use evidence are:
  - Having staff with previous experience running programs like TIS
  - Having staff with strong research skills
  - Having a team with the learning mindset
  - Having systems in place to collect and use community feedback
  - Having regular team meetings
  - Being reminded to use evidence by the National Support Stakeholders
  - Having access to useful resources and data, such as from NBPU, ANU, TIS website, and ABS.
- What made it difficult for TIS teams to use evidence is: trying to access (1) the most recent data about how common smoking and vaping is, and (2) best practices for e-cigarette control.

### **Goal: TIS teams are supported by their organisations and the TIS National Support team**

- TIS teams got many kinds of help from the National Support team. The most used supports were jurisdictional workshops (meetings of TIS teams from across the

country), and the TIS website (which has resources and information for TIS teams on it).

- TIS teams said the most helpful supports were jurisdictional workshops, NBPU resources and support, and the TIS website. This is a good sign that NBPU offers a range of supports, and TIS teams found them helpful.
- TIS organisations also got help from the National Support team. That help included workshops for CEOs, site visits, newsletters, phone calls, and emails.
  - TIS CEOs said that these activities helped them understand what activities they are allowed to do; how to spend money the right way; how to work with other organisations; what population health approaches are; and that it is important for CEOs to be leaders in tobacco and e-cigarette control. These are all good signs the program is set up to reach its goal for TIS teams to be supported by their organisations; and the National Support team.
  - We also found, however, that some TIS CEOs did not understand the rules about staff arrangements. So, this is an area where improvement could be made.
- TIS Coordinators and staff suggested several ways that National Supports could improve the help they provide:
  - Improve TIS teams' access to other teams, training, latest data and research. This includes information about vaping, local vaping rates, changes to laws, and the health effects of smoking and vaping.
  - More help with adapting activities and messages to suit their local communities.
  - More in-person visits from NBPU so NBPU staff can better understand local situations
  - Ensure that all National Support organisations (DSS, DHDA, and NBPU) are on the same page so they can give consistent advice to TIS teams.
- Overall, TIS teams felt supported by their organisations and appreciated the flexibility they were given to carry out their TIS work.
- TIS Coordinators and staff also suggested several ways their organisations could better support them to do their jobs effectively:
  - Ensure TIS teams have enough staff to deliver TIS activities

- Make information about funding for TIS activities clearer to TIS staff
- In some organisations, provide more flexibility for TIS staff to work outside normal business hours when needed and to travel for TIS activities.
- TIS lead organisations should make sure subcontracted TIS teams have access to the support, and information provided by NBPU.

## **According to TIS teams, how much is the program changing what community knows and thinks about smoking and vaping?**

CIRCA found that TIS teams had good success changing what community knows and thinks about smoking and vaping.

- By June 2025, TIS teams said they had good success in changing knowledge and attitudes about tobacco and e-cigarettes. They said that 70% to 75% of their activities helped improve people's knowledge and attitudes.
- TIS teams used many different types of activities. Some activities appeared to be more successful than others at improving people's knowledge and attitudes.
- There was a difference between what TIS teams said worked best in focus groups and what was reported as most successful in Performance Reports.
  - According to the data in Performance Reports, interactive promotional resources, traditional campaigns, and developing smoke- and vape-free environments appeared most successful.
  - In focus groups, TIS teams said community education was one of the most effective activities. It allowed them to tailor their messages for different audiences. Community education often took place in schools and other settings with regular attendees. This helped teams build relationships and reinforce key messages over time.
  - TIS teams also said that interactive and enjoyable activities were effective. Referrals to quit supports and sharing local success stories from people who had quit smoking were also seen as helpful.



- Although changing knowledge and attitudes can be challenging, TIS teams were able to make progress by being persistent, using evidence to guide their work, and by being creative and flexible.

## **What are some ways the program could be improved?**

Overall, the findings show that the TIS program continues to perform well. Cultural safety remains one of its biggest strengths, and evidence continues to guide program delivery. TIS teams have increased their reach and are helping to change knowledge and attitudes about smoking and vaping. Despite challenges, TIS teams have shown persistence and flexibility and have found effective ways to engage communities.

The following suggestions for improvement are based on the findings.

### **To achieve the goal: Reach all communities and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**

- TIS teams should continue to build and strengthen partnerships to reach more communities and priority groups. Some teams may need extra support to develop new partnerships and manage more complex relationships.
- TIS teams should continue using a mix of communication methods, to maximise exposure and engagement. Examples include social media, mass media, community education, events, and information stalls,
- Most TIS teams already consult with community members. All teams should continue to seek community feedback and conduct research to make sure activities and messages remain relevant and effective.
- Staff turnover and staff shortages can reduce program reach. When these issues occur, teams may benefit from additional support. For example, help with setting priorities, adapting resources from other teams, maintaining key partnerships, and accessing short-term staffing support for events.
- There should continue to be stable funding for the TIS program. This is important so that teams can maintain a strong presence in communities and continue building trusted relationships.

### **To reach the goal: Work with local communities and services**

- Most TIS teams are working well with local communities and services. But this is not the same everywhere. There needs to be more consistent collaboration with local communities across all TIS teams.
- TIS teams should be supported and encouraged to connect more with local communities and services, and to hire and retain staff who have or can build good relationships with local people and organisations.

### **To reach the goal: TIS activities respect culture and reflect evidence about smoking and vaping**

- The current structure of the TIS program, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and representation at all levels, should continue because it supports culturally safe practice.
- TIS teams should continue to have access to current data and evidence, including information about smoking and vaping rates and effective approaches to reduce vaping.
- TIS teams should continue to recruit staff with research and evidence skills, experiences, and mindsets.

### **To reach the goal: TIS teams are supported by their organisations and the TIS National Support team**

- The current range of supports provided to TIS teams is valuable and should continue.
- National Support Stakeholders could provide reminders to CEOs and administrative staff about approved staffing arrangements. For example, TIS staff may need to travel for activities or work outside normal business hours.
- TIS teams need enough staff to deliver activities effectively. Staffing shortages remain a challenge. So, organisations and National Support Stakeholders should continue to focus on ways to support teams to overcome this challenge.
- TIS staff continue to need clear access to information about funding available for TIS activities.

- NBPU should continue to promote the support it provides, how teams can access it, and clarify that the support comes from NBPU. NBPU could also consider increasing support in the following areas, or making it clear how to access such supports:
  - Training on the harms of smoking and vaping, the benefits of quitting, and the effects of second-hand smoke and aerosol exposure, particularly for new staff. Training for TIS workers should continue to be updated regularly with new data and evidence.
  - Up-to-date information on vaping, data about local vaping rates, legislative changes, and the health impact of smoking and vaping.
  - Guidance on adapting activities and messages to meet the needs of different communities.
- National Support Stakeholders should also consider the suggestions made by TIS teams during interviews and focus groups, detailed in the full evaluation report, about how support could be improved.
- Lead organisations should continue to ensure that subcontracted TIS teams receive appropriate support. This includes:
  - Sharing guidance, resources, and information from NBPU with subcontracted teams and clearly identifying NBPU as the source
  - Providing training and ongoing support
  - Actively managing the performance of subcontractors

### **To change what community knows and thinks about smoking and vaping**

- TIS teams are making good progress in improving knowledge and attitudes about tobacco and e-cigarettes.
- Some activities appear to be more effective than others at changing knowledge and intentions. Teams should be encouraged to use these activities where they are suitable for their communities.
- TIS teams should keep delivering consistent messages and creating opportunities for people to engage when they are ready.

## **Promoting the success of the TIS program**

- The achievements of the TIS program should continue to be shared publicly. This will strengthen the evidence base for public health programs and demonstrate the value of Indigenous-led approaches.



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