



Australian Association of Social Workers
Submission to the

Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities

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Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing professional social workers in Australia. It is also the accrediting body for all tertiary social work programs in Australia and for the assessment of overseas qualified social workers.

Social workers are employed in a broad range of areas relating to wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Examples include direct service delivery as School Counsellors, assisting Indigenous people at Job Centres and Centrelink Offices, working for Indigenous Controlled Community organisations, undertaking policy research and social policy development, administration, management, consultancy, education, training, supervision and evaluation within different levels of government and non-government services.

The AASW first made a submission to this Committee in August 2008 and appeared before the Committee at a hearing held in Canberra in June 2009. Given the scope of the changes that have been enacted since the last submission was made; and, following the collection of case studies from social workers in the Northern Territory, the AASW is pleased to have the opportunity to again input into the work of the Committee.

The submission will follow up on the questions we were asked at the Committee hearing in June and explore the effectiveness of policies following the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). Specifically, we look at its impact on health, welfare, education and law and order in regional and remote Indigenous communities; and, the impact of State and Territory government policies on the wellbeing of regional and remote Indigenous communities. We make twenty recommendations across five key areas.

Health and Welfare

We refer to our position paper on Indigenous Health and Welfare, which we tabled to the Committee at the June hearing, to highlight the ongoing problems with the provision of health services to regional and remote Indigenous communities. We believe this is strongly associated with health outcomes for Indigenous people.

At the Committee's Canberra hearing in June, the Association was asked about the number of social workers in regional and remote parts of the Northern Territory, and, about the access of Indigenous communities to health resources. Within the social work workforce, the prevalence of social workers in remote parts of the Territory is very low. Of our 1,800 members working in regional and remote settings across Australia, we could only identify 12 members who work in remote parts of the Northern Territory.

These figures mirror the shortages experienced by other professions, with the 2008 Audit of Health Workforce in Rural and Regional Australia reporting that just 109 doctors, 20 dentists, 12 Aboriginal Medical Centres and only one Multi-Purpose Service Location are currently operational in remote parts of the Territory. We also note that the report failed to include social workers in its audit, leaving us unsure of the needs in regional and remote areas.

These numbers highlight the weaknesses in health services in remote communities, workforce shortages; ongoing problems in the areas of maternal and child health; problems with the cultural appropriateness of health services and the inefficacy of mainstream health services.

Recommendation: That support and funding is given to the building blocks of good health, such as awareness and availability of nutrition, physical activity, fresh food, healthy lifestyles, and adequate housing.

Recommendation: That significant investment is made to increase the number of health practitioners, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, working within Aboriginal health settings, and further development and training of the Indigenous health workforce.

Recommendation: That an evaluation is conducted across regional and remote communities in the Northern Territory to monitor and improve the responsiveness of mainstream health services and programs to Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander health needs.

Recommendation: That maternal and child health be targeted and greater support for Indigenous-specific population programs for chronic and communicable disease.

School Truancy

At the Committee's hearing in Canberra, the AASW was asked whether we felt the school truancy measures had been effective, and, if there were other measures that may improve school attendance. We believe a serious barrier to educational attainment in the Northern Territory relates to access.

There are serious weaknesses in education facilities in Aboriginal communities, including lack of access to schools in many communities and an inadequate supply of classrooms and teachers in others. 94% of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory have no preschool, 56% have no secondary school and 27% have a local primary school more than 50km away. These figures highlight the difficulty suffered within communities in simply attending school. We also note that the Council of Australian Governments Quality Child Care program has not been properly rolled out in remote and regional parts of the Northern Territory.

Recommendation: That scoping be undertaken to inform investment in education services and infrastructure in regional and remote communities, with particular emphasis on early childhood initiatives.

The Committee has also asked the AASW whether we know of the number of social workers currently practicing in schools in the Northern Territory. We were recently informed by the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training that there are currently 24 school counsellors working in public schools across the Territory, and, that the Department has required that its counsellors be members of either the Australian Psychological Society (APS) or the AASW. We therefore believe that as the program expands, more social workers will be practicing in Northern Territory schools.

The AASW is pleased that the Northern Territory Government has implemented the School Counsellor Project, but we are nevertheless concerned about the provision of counsellors in remote and regional settings. The Department of Education and Training could not supply us with geographical breakdowns, and we are therefore not certain if any school counsellors are located outside Darwin and Alice Springs. We were also informed by the Department that funding shortages have meant that the program can rarely be extended to primary schools.

Recommendation: That the Federal Government work with the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training to extend the School Counsellor Program throughout the Northern Territory.

In relation to the efficacy of the measures relating to school truancy, the AASW remains unconvinced. The changes recently enacted by the Government to combat school truancy will increase the risk of familial homelessness and impose severe suspension penalties on those who fail to comply. In particular, the compliance measures will remove the ability of families to meet the needs of dependent children. We present the following Case Study as an example:

Case Study

A young teenage boy has not been enjoying school and has been found to have significant learning deficiencies. In recent months, he has become regularly absent from school.

The school has been made aware of the difficulties experienced by the boy, and has agreed to offer some support. Nevertheless, he continues to struggle to achieve and remains regularly absent, despite interventions from his parents.

Tensions have escalated in the household after the school issued the parents with a fine and a warning. Following repeated conflict in the home, the boy's parents sought support after he began talking about leaving home.

With few networks and little support, leaving home is only likely to worsen his situation and isolate him from his family.

This Case Study highlights the ways welfare quarantine can increase the burden of stress on families, illustrating the multidimensional causes and impacts of school truancy.

There is little evidence showing that the withdrawal of payments will promote school attendance. A study conducted by UnitingCare Burnside showed that sanctions have a negligible effect on school truancy (Cowling, 2008) and reported that programs featuring sanctions only recorded positive results when they were combined with case management, support services and financial incentives for attendance or graduation.

Recommendation: The progress towards the objectives of increasing school enrolment and attendance and improving educational outcomes for Indigenous children as part of the NTER is monitored and reported.

The Committee has asked the AASW how school attendance and educational attainment might be improved. At the hearing, we highlighted a number of principles we believe should underpin the provision of education and related service delivery, namely, that the school must come to the community. We submit the following case study as an example of how these principles can be applied:

Example of Good Practice: Yipirinya School, Alice Springs

Yipirinya School caters for Indigenous students because it keeps traditional Indigenous Culture and Language alive. It offers two-way education, bilingual and bicultural. It teaches literacy and numeracy and western skills following the Northern Territory Curriculum, but it also teaches Indigenous languages and culture.

The School is registered as an Independent or non-government school and is governed by a School Council. Its parents cannot afford to pay fees and so the School is totally dependent on Government funding.

In 2007, there were over 200 students at the School. The school features a purpose built Language Culture Centre, and houses the equipment for the production of language resource material.

The school also has offices and work areas for Indigenous literacy workers who are employed to assist the teachers in preparing materials. Space is also dedicated to archival material. The school ensures that regular cultural excursions are arranged for each class and it shares many of its resources with neighbouring remote communities. Four languages are taught:

- Central Arrernte;
- Western Arrernte;
- Luritja; and,
- Warlpiri.

In many ways, the school has served as a community hub, making it more effective in linking children to the community. Its engaging and consultative approach with parents and the community has led to improved outcomes in many areas, such as attendance, health and nutrition.

This example shows that there is a higher uptake of education when schools find innovative ways of making education matter to their students. It also highlights the importance of engaging with Indigenous cultures and communicating with parents and families in achieving better outcomes for students.

Impacts of Compulsory Income Management

The Committee has asked the AASW about the efficacy of income management, and, if we are aware of any problems associated with it. We submit that there is little reliable evidence to show that compulsory quarantine of income support can reduce the availability of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, and it is unclear if it has enhanced child wellbeing. We submit the following case study as an example of how quarantining can have an immobilizing impact and hinder wellbeing:

Case Study

“People coming from outside, they don't really want to come into town. Maybe they don't like to bring their husbands, because they drink, or they don't really want their kids coming in to get involved in drinking and fighting and especially some women they got used to living out in the bush. And yet they come into town, that income management brought them into town to go and see Centrelink. That was their decision instead of going to Alice Springs they wanted to come here. And like shops, I don't know because they usually have shops in the community but I don't know if they're using them anymore.

They just come into Tennant, that's when people stay here. We get a lot of people come here and they want to get back home. It's hard for them to get back out bush. Some of them live 200 to 500 kilometers out. I'm talking about Barkley region too you know in the North East.

There's no services to help them get back home. There's no transport for them to get back home. They have to wait until they see their family, and get some money to fill their fuel up to get back home.

More people living in town camps now, three families living in one house. Some of us we sleep outside. I come here as a visitor I stay outside, three old people sleep in this cage area here they got nowhere to stay because that income management brought them into town and they can't leave. I got car – every time I say to take they come I say “I'll take you back” they say “I got to wait and sort this out first, for money side. I got to go and get paper to get food you know? It's very bad really. Overcrowding is getting worse.”

Brian Dennison, interviewed outside Tennant Creek Centrelink

As we outlined at the hearing, compulsory quarantining removes control from families over debt, spending and saving, doing little to promote the development of living skills and undermining the empowerment of families. In these ways, research in Australia and overseas has found welfare quarantine to be ineffective in the long-term. (Katz, 2009)

We refer to the submission made by the Australian Council of Social Service in outlining the unintended impacts of welfare quarantine. We highlight the following repercussions associated with the regime in the Northern Territory:

- People not accessing all of their social security entitlement by inadvertently disposing of stored value cards with remaining credit;
- Price increases in community stores;
- Lack of consumer choice, with stored value cards only able to be used at large department stores in major towns;
- People gambling or trading store cards;
- People using store cards in department stores to buy non-essential items with these stores unable to regulate what people purchase with store cards, beyond refusing to allow the purchase of alcohol and tobacco;
- Store cards being used to buy gift vouchers which can be used for the purchase of alcohol;
- Lack of flexibility in funds transfer systems. People are relocating or travelling far from community stores to which their funds have been transferred and having difficulties getting funds transferred. In some cases, there have been reports of people having funds directed to stores hundreds of kilometers from where they are currently living;
- A significant burden being placed on small store owners and staff in the implementation of income management and on larger stores in the administration of the stored value card system;
- A loss of flexibility for individuals in the use of payments, including uncertainty about how saving of quarantined funds and repayment of debts will be possible under the new system; and,
- People accumulating large amounts of quarantined funds.

Further, as we indicated in our evidence at the Canberra hearing, the use of cards restricts the mobility of citizens. The AASW believes this is unacceptable in Australian society.

The Committee has also asked the AASW if we believe Centrelink has employed additional social workers to help implement the NTER. After following up with members, we do not believe that Centrelink made significant changes to the social work workforce in the Northern Territory.

Recommendation: That the compulsory income management regime be made voluntary; and, that financial literacy and training programs be rolled out to supplement this initiative

Recommendation: That the activity requirements for remote Indigenous communities be reviewed with a view to enhancing flexibility

Recommendation: That scoping is undertaken to ensure that stored value cards can be redeemed in all affected communities and outside the Northern Territory, and, that food of a high nutritional standard is available

Recommendation: That all Centrelink appeal rights are fully restored immediately.

Training and Employment

The AASW considers that improvements to the education and employment status of Indigenous Australians will not be achieved without improvements to a range of socio-economic conditions in Indigenous communities including adequate housing, sanitation, clean water, availability of fresh food and access to a range of health services.

Indigenous people need sustainable livelihoods. There is a role in some remote Indigenous communities for the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) to provide some autonomy and a lump sum of finance for the community to assist with options for community controlled development programs in areas such as education, housing and other community infrastructure whilst providing Indigenous people with the flexibility and time for cultural obligations. The AASW notes that almost half the Indigenous people counted as being employed in the Northern Territory are engaged in CDEP initiatives.

Recommendation: That CDEP be retained in communities to where it has facilitated work and engagement in community activities for people who are in paid employment.

Recommendation: That CDEP provide support to people wishing to gain paid employment through the provision of meaningful work experience and skills-based training.

Example of Good Practice: Titjikala and Yirrkala Community Arts Centers

Titjikala is a small settlement located about 120 kilometers south of Alice Springs on the edge of the Simpson Desert. It has a population of approximately 250 people, whose primary languages are Luritja, Arrernte and Yankunytjatjara. The community is also known as Tapatjatjaka and Maryvale.

The Titjikala Arts Centre is a community run arts enterprise supported through CDEP. Arts and Crafts are produced by the community and marketed through the Titjikala Art Centre and Gallery. Proceeds go towards supporting the artists and their communities.

The Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre and Museum is in Yirrkala, a small Aboriginal community on the northeastern tip of the Top End of the Northern Territory, approximately 700km east of Darwin. Its staff of ten services Yirrkala and the approximately twenty-five homeland centers in the radius of 200km.

Yirrkala Arts was established in 1975. It is a Yolngu-owned business that pays over a million dollars to the community's artists every year. It is also supported through CDEP.

Both initiatives are community run and have worked well in promoting a sense of community and purpose.

The AASW supports the development of culturally appropriate Indigenous controlled education facilities and increased training and mentorship to assist Indigenous people to be meaningfully employed on their land where they have strong cultural associations. Flexible funding arrangements are also needed to include training and mentorship for Indigenous people as a motivation towards employment.

Recommendation: That the Government explore and support the operation of Indigenous community controlled education and employment initiatives and community based solutions for alternative employment in Northern Territory.

Example of Good Practice: FaHCSIA Indigenous Leadership Program

The Indigenous Leadership Program has been running since 2004. It offers mentoring, training and development opportunities to applicants over the age of 18.

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) has been running workshops in capital cities and regional locations. Delivery is flexible and participants can nominate preferred times and locations.

Areas of development within the Program include:

- Networking;
- Advocacy and representation;
- Conflict management;
- Negotiation skills;
- Financial management;
- Community participation;
- Communication and community engagement; and,
- Conducting community meetings and follow-up.

The program boasts strong interest and a high degree of participation, with over 6,000 Indigenous Australians having already participated since it began.

This example has proven effective because it recognises that feeling positive and having confidence is a pathway towards improving the education and employment status of Indigenous people.

It also demonstrates that initiatives aimed at empowerment and skill development are likely to have a higher voluntary uptake than more punitive or inflexible programs.

Recommendation: That Government operated employment initiatives include the provision of training and mentorship for Indigenous people as a motivation towards employment and leadership, and, that scoping is undertaken to identify

existing Aboriginal owned and operated training and employment. Examples include model adopted by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs in the Indigenous Leadership Program.

Housing and Accommodation

Regional and remote communities, both in the Northern Territory and elsewhere, are experiencing chronic shortages in adequate, safe and culturally appropriate housing. Sixteen communities have been earmarked for new housing and development under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP). We note that Northern Territory Shelter have spoken to representatives from ten of these communities, each of whom reported a lack of consultation.

The number of new houses to be developed under the SIHIP program has not been specified, and the AASW understands that only one community has received notification of proposed refurbishments. However, if development does occur in the earmarked communities, the AASW is concerned about the levels of migration that will occur amongst communities, and, how this will interact other NTER measures, such as income management and the provision of store cards.

Recommendation: That consultation is undertaken in the sixteen communities earmarked for development under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program to begin the construction of accommodation.

Although the SIHIP will go some way to addressing the housing shortage in some affected communities, the AASW notes that another fifty-seven regional and rural communities have been identified under the NTER as experiencing housing shortages. A strategy must be developed to address the housing crisis in these areas.

Recommendation: That a strategy is urgently developed to address the shortage of housing in the additional fifty-seven regional and remote communities experiencing housing shortages.

Monitoring the Northern Territory Emergency Response

The AASW believes there is a need for a long-term commitment and approach to addressing the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory across Australia. Indigenous communities need a major commitment of funding to redress the current gaps in services. Although the NTER has brought some immediate benefits to Indigenous communities, its short-term emergency approach must be replaced by a more sustainable long term approach that builds community capacity and resilience.

The AASW supports the Government's commitment to Closing the Gap, but notes that ambitious targets will only be achieved by working collaboratively with Indigenous people and building on community strengths.

We therefore resubmit the following recommendations:

Recommendation: That a long-term commitment and resources to address identified gaps in service provision between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory be provided.

Recommendation: The adoption of a partnership approach to working with Indigenous communities to meet needs flexibly.

Recommendation: The development of systems to collect reliable and consistent base line data for the purpose of on-going monitoring and evaluation of intervention measures.

Recommendation: The implementation of strategies to ensure inter-departmental and cross government collaboration to address issues facing Indigenous communities, with recognition that all issues in Indigenous communities are interrelated.

Recommendation: That the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1993* (NT) be reinstated; and, that the measures under the Northern Territory Emergency Response be subject to the safeguards of Northern Territory and Commonwealth equal opportunity legislation.

Reporting

A rigorous monitoring system is needed to gather evidence to ascertain if stated objectives are being met. Data should be accessible and available to the affected communities for their own analysis and interpretation. Governments must work alongside Indigenous communities to independently assess the effectiveness or otherwise of not only the intervention measures but all government policies and approaches for working with Indigenous communities.

Good data collection, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be able to establish whether the strategies of the NTER match its objectives and desired

outcomes; the impact of the measures on child wellbeing, education; and, if and how the measures have improved health and wellbeing in remote communities.

Funding and Resources

The AASW believes there needs to be sufficient flexibility in all funding to Indigenous communities to be able to listen to and support what individual communities say is working well in their communities.

The AASW is aware that communities have raised the need for either family centers or multi-activity children's services, where families can come and be with their children rather than send them to separate child care in remote areas. There have been instances of child care centers being built, but not used by Indigenous people either because they are not located close to other community facilities or they are designed on an urban model for child care.

These examples highlight the need to work collaboratively with communities in regional and remote areas.

Consultation

The AASW is aware of mixed reactions in Indigenous communities to the NTER measures. We have received feedback that there was poor communication, and often, no communication within affected areas. This has fuelled anger that attempts were not made to engage with Indigenous communities to find lasting solutions the problems that they face.

It is on this basis that the AASW calls for targeted engagement with the affected communities. This would enable families and individuals affected to express their concerns about the current regime and allow government to assess the efficacy of current approaches.

Recommendation: That a targeted engagement strategy aimed at engaging communities affected by the Northern Territory Emergency Response is developed and implemented.

Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations

The AASW resubmits the following recommendations:

1. **Recommendation: That a long-term commitment and resources to address identified gaps in service provision between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory be provided.**
2. **Recommendation: The adoption of a partnership approach to working with Indigenous communities to meet needs flexibly.**
3. **Recommendation: The development of systems to collect reliable and consistent base line data for the purpose of on-going monitoring and evaluation of intervention measures.**
4. **Recommendation: The implementation of strategies to ensure inter-departmental and cross government collaboration to address issues facing Indigenous communities, with recognition that all issues in Indigenous communities are interrelated.**
5. **Recommendation: That the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1993 (NT)* be reinstated; and, that the measures under the Northern Territory Emergency Response be subject to the safeguards of Northern Territory and Commonwealth equal opportunity legislation.**

The AASW makes the following new recommendations:

6. **Recommendation: That support and funding is given to the building blocks of good health, such as awareness and availability of nutrition, physical activity, fresh food, healthy lifestyles, and adequate housing.**
7. **Recommendation: That significant investment is made to increase the number of health practitioners, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, working within Aboriginal health settings, and further development and training of the Indigenous health workforce.**
8. **Recommendation: That an evaluation is conducted across regional and remote communities in the Northern Territory to monitor and improve the responsiveness of mainstream health services and programs to Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander health needs.**
9. **Recommendation: That maternal and child health be targeted and greater support for Indigenous-specific population programs for chronic and communicable disease.**

10. Recommendation: That scoping be undertaken to inform investment in education services and infrastructure in regional and remote communities, with particular emphasis on early childhood initiatives.
11. Recommendation: That the Federal Government work with the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training to extend the School Counsellor Program throughout the Northern Territory.
12. Recommendation: The progress towards the objectives of increasing school enrolment and attendance and improving educational outcomes for Indigenous children as part of the NTER is monitored and reported.
13. Recommendation: That the compulsory income management regime be made voluntary; and, that financial literacy and training programs be rolled out to supplement this initiative
14. Recommendation: That the activity requirements for remote Indigenous communities be reviewed with a view to enhancing flexibility
15. Recommendation: That scoping is undertaken to ensure that stored value cards can be redeemed in all affected communities and outside the Northern Territory, and, that food of a high nutritional standard is available
16. Recommendation: That all Centrelink appeal rights are fully restored immediately.
17. Recommendation: That CDEP be retained in communities to where it has facilitated work and engagement in community activities for people who are in paid employment.
18. Recommendation: That CDEP provide support to people wishing to gain paid employment through the provision of meaningful work experience and skills-based training.
19. Recommendation: That the Government explore and support the operation of Indigenous community controlled education and employment initiatives and community based solutions for alternative employment in Northern Territory.
20. Recommendation: That Government operated employment initiatives include the provision of training and mentorship for Indigenous people as a motivation towards employment and leadership, and, that scoping is undertaken to identify existing Aboriginal owned and operated training and employment. Examples include model adopted by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs in the Indigenous Leadership Program.

- 21. Recommendation: That consultation is undertaken in the sixteen communities earmarked for development under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program to begin the construction of accommodation.**

- 22. Recommendation: That a strategy is urgently developed to address the shortage of housing in the additional fifty-seven regional and remote communities experiencing housing shortages.**

- 23. Recommendation: That a targeted engagement strategy aimed at engaging communities affected by the Northern Territory Emergency Response is developed and implemented.**

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