



**Submission by the Australian Association
of Social Workers to:**

**Northern Territory Emergency Response
Review**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the NT Emergency Response (NTER) Review Board. The AASW is the peak representative body for Social Workers across Australia with currently 6,500 members working in the health, education and welfare services sectors including representatives working in leadership, management, academic, research and direct practice roles in the Northern Territory.

The issues that led to the NTER are complex and we acknowledge that various policy approaches and program delivery models adopted by all levels of government to date have not been fully effective and at times have impacted negatively on Indigenous communities.

The AASW believes that a long term, whole of government, consultative, cross policy approach is required to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in the NT and indeed across Australia. Culturally sensitive and flexible approaches to service delivery are also required to overcome the disadvantage associated with a lack of essential services such as health, education, housing and employment experienced by many Indigenous people living in the NT.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The AASW recommends the NTER adopt the following approaches as a basis for a sustainable and better future for residents of remote communities and town camps in the NT:

1. Reinstatement of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)* and the *NT Anti-Discrimination Act 1993* and subject the NT Intervention measures to the safeguards of NT and Commonwealth equal opportunity legislation.
2. Provide long term commitment and resources to address identified gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the NT
3. Adopt a partnership approach to working with Indigenous communities to meet needs flexibly
4. Adopt a model of support and empowerment to Indigenous communities rather than a punitive model
5. Develop systems to collect reliable and consistent base line data for the purpose of on-going monitoring and evaluation of intervention measures
6. Ensure inter-departmental and cross government collaboration to address issues facing Indigenous communities, with recognition that all issues in Indigenous communities are interrelated
7. Support initiatives that are working well in Indigenous communities and adopt flexible approaches to improving the overall health of Indigenous communities

8. Make quarantining of income support voluntary, except in specific instances where circumstances warrant it and support the development of financial literacy programs for income support recipients
9. Support the development of evidenced based education and employment strategies to encourage Indigenous workforce development and the provision of capacity building opportunities for Indigenous people to train and work in areas such as health, education, housing and other essential community infrastructure in their communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the peak representative body for Social Workers across Australia with currently 6,500 members working in the health, education and welfare sectors including representatives working in a range of leadership, management, academic, research and direct practice roles in the Northern Territory. Social Work is a profession committed to the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society.

Social Workers are concerned with social problems, their causes, their solutions and their human impacts, and work with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. As a profession, social work is committed to the pursuit of social justice, to the enhancement of the quality of life, and to the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society.

During 2008 AASW members adopted a new constitution in which the AASW asserts that “professional social workers are dedicated to:

- a) service for the welfare and self- fulfillment of human beings;
- b) the development and disciplined use of scientific and other knowledge regarding human behaviour and society;
- c) the development of resources to meet individual, group, national and international needs and aspirations;
- d) the enhancement and improvement of the quality of life of people; and
- e) the achievement of social justice.

AASW’s pertinent company objective to this review is:

- To advocate for the pursuit of social justice and changes to social structures and policies in order to promote social inclusion and redress social disadvantage.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

The AASW believes the issues leading to the NTER are complex and there is no ‘quick fix, one size fits all’ solution for all Indigenous communities. The AASW recognises there are a number of serious concerns regarding the health and well being of Indigenous people across the NT and Australia and previous policy approaches by all levels of government have not effectively

reduced the gap in life expectancy and opportunities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. These gaps include:

- A high infant mortality gap and an unacceptable 17 year health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians ((Holt, Y., 16 May 2008).
- Massive discrepancies in literacy and numeracy between Indigenous and non - Indigenous Australians (Hon Kevin Rudd, 7 April 2008).
- 20% higher death rates from smoking in Indigenous Australians than the rest of the community with anti-smoking messages do not targeting Indigenous communities (Thomas, D., April 2008).
- Mortality rates in pregnant Indigenous women are three times higher than the rest of the population due to poor health and diseases such as rheumatic heart disease (King, J., April 2008).
- Indigenous men are ten times more likely to be sexually abused than non-Indigenous men due to factors such as overcrowding, unemployment and drug abuse. (Adams, M., 9 May 2008).
- 7,500 Indigenous school age children are missing out early childhood to senior secondary schooling age missing out on schooling due to lack of facilities, suitably qualified and experienced bi-lingual teachers and engagement of Indigenous parents. Staff turnover is also an issue (Australian Education Union, 26 April 2008).
- 94% of Indigenous communities in the NT have no pre school, 56% have no secondary school and 27% have a local primary school more than 50km away. (The Combined Indigenous Organisations of the Northern Territory, 10 July 2007, p18).
- Remote Indigenous communities have the highest rates of unemployment, widespread violence, endemic alcoholism and substance abuse, lowest levels of education and lifelong morbidity for heart disease, nutrition and lifestyle disease such as diabetes (Langton, M., 2007, p14).

3. NTER REVIEW PROCESS

The Review Board has a mammoth task and it will be difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the NTER measures in such a short time frame. Clear outcome measurements must be built into the initial NTER planning stages and the Review in order to promote a long term 'intervention' strategy, in partnership with Indigenous people, for the improved health, welfare and economic development of Indigenous communities.

In light of this, the AASW considers several pertinent questions need to be raised by this review:

1. What evidence will the government have by the end of the NTER review period that the 17 year gap in life expectancy is lessening?
2. Will there be basic health infrastructure in place in all NT Indigenous communities and other basic services such as clean water, sewerage and housing by the end of the review process?

3. How will the quarantining of welfare benefits lead to a decrease in child abuse and neglect? If so, how will this be measured and in what timeframe?
4. Is there evidence that welfare quarantining will lead to increased skills in handling money, less violence and alcohol abuse in both Indigenous and non- Indigenous communities? How will this be measured?
5. Given the current lack of real job opportunities on remote Indigenous communities, what NTER measures will be put in place for the development of 'real jobs' for Indigenous people?
6. What efforts are being made through the NTER to train and skill Indigenous people in relevant jobs they can perform in their communities on a sustainable basis?
7. Will the initial child health checks in Phase 1 and subsequent follow up ENT intervention measures in Phase 2 lead to a reduction in various childhood diseases and ENT conditions? What baseline data is being collected and made available to the communities for local analysis?
8. What is the plan for regular follow up specialist medical and allied health checks and maintenance of child health problems after the NTER? What is the role of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services?
9. What is the strategy within the NTER to curb the onset of early childhood diseases and high mortality rates of infants?
10. Does the NTER have a strategy for people who wish to rehabilitate themselves from alcohol and other drug abuse? How many alcohol rehabilitation clinics and counselling staff are available in the NT for Indigenous people who wish to rehabilitate themselves from alcohol and other drug addiction?
11. What resources are available to address the pressure on welfare services in urban centers and communities across the border in WA, SA and QLD since the NTER was introduced in the 73 prescribed communities as defined under the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007*?

4. RECOMMENDED OPTIONS FOR THE NTER REVIEW BOARD TO CONSIDER

It is time for all Governments to rethink their policy and implementation approaches to the needs of Indigenous communities, with a focus on a consultative, collaborative, long term, whole of government approach, working across Governments and departments, to manage and resolve the multiple challenges and disadvantages facing Indigenous Australians. This involves:

4.1. A long term commitment to address the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

There is an urgent need for a long-term approach and long-term commitment to address the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the NT and indeed across Australia. Indigenous communities need a major commitment of funding to redress the current gaps in services. Recurrent rather than one-off funding is required to break the cycle of poverty and violence in Indigenous communities. The AASW considers that while 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 is aware of mixed reactions in Indigenous communities to the NTER measures. There is reportedly a lack of understanding, misinformation and miscommunication about the intent and operation of the measures not helped by the 'policy on the run' approach of the measures. Consultation is lacking with many affected Indigenous communities and there is a lack of evidence based reasoned linkages between some of the emergency measures and intended outcomes.

There is a need for commitment to ongoing funding for sustained long-term, social and economic improvements on Indigenous communities and this is supported by feedback from the NTCOSS Conference held 16 – 18 April 2008. Indigenous communities are fed up with short-term projects that lack proper evaluation mechanisms and do not receive recurrent funding resources and go nowhere.

The AASW echoes the Combined Indigenous Organisations of the Northern Territory (CAO) view that:

"There is a severe shortage of concerted long term action by Governments working in partnership with Indigenous communities. Government needs to set a timetable for transitioning the emergency intervention from a stabilisation phase to a community development phase with the development of comprehensive plans with costed financial commitment to address the underlying issues within specific timeframe. In order for alcohol bans and other emergency interventions in Indigenous communities to be effective in the long term they must be accompanied by significant investment in programs and infrastructure in the health sector." (CAO, 2007, pp 1-7).

3.2. Adopt a partnership approach to working with Indigenous communities to meet needs flexibly

Governments need to adopt a partnership approach to working with Indigenous communities to achieve long-term social and economic improvements on regional and remote Indigenous communities. The AASW supports the view of the National Association of Community Legal Centers

that Indigenous communities be consulted and “*put in a position of designing what will work for them.*” (O’Brien, L., April 2008)

Indigenous people should be involved in decisions about service development and policies that impact upon their lives. The AASW believes that “*consumers should be involved from inception of the policy process and not just at the evaluation stage.*” (Finn, D. 2008). Services must be constructed to meet needs flexibly and AASW hopes the review Board will identify ‘what works’ in consultation with Indigenous communities to strengthen local Indigenous governance and capacity of communities to pursue their own solutions.

This view is also supported by feedback from a range of Indigenous leaders. The feedback indicates that many Indigenous people view the intervention measures as a short term, top down, politically motivated approach with little genuine involvement of Indigenous communities in seeking solutions that will work in the long-term for each particular community. Many Indigenous people still do not understand what is happening and why and interpret the NTER measures as another form of the Stolen Generation (NT Writers’ Festival, May 2008)

3.3. Provide greater support to Indigenous communities rather than a punitive model

The AASW considers that punitive approaches do not work in the long term and that approaches aimed at strengthening and supporting each community will have longer-term benefits.

At the same time as the NTER measures were introduced, some communities experienced funding cuts to CDEP programs, women’s centres night patrols, on-the-job training for Adult Educators and Early Childhood programs run through CDEP. These programs were viewed as highly successful in addressing many of the socio-economic problems endemic in some NT Indigenous communities.

The AASW considers that a shift in focus from surveillance to improvements in education, health, housing and economic development, through continued funding for successful and essential services and the development of new services, is more likely to have sustained long-term benefits for Indigenous people.

John Adams from Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs states:

“Indigenous communities need more supportive rehabilitation and family support programs to tackle high youth offending, high rates of recidivism and high numbers of youth in the Juvenile Justice System.”
(Adams, J. 2008)

The AASW also notes a number of issues raised in the 2007 Anderson/Wilde Report have not yet been addressed by the NTER. These are pertaining to the role of communities in the community justice process, reform of the legal

processes, education/awareness campaigns in relation to sexual abuse, employment, and the introduction of offender rehabilitation and family support services. These are the community level, preventative support strategies that the AASW believes will have more positive impact in the longer term on the social and emotional health and well being of Indigenous communities in the NT.

3.4. Develop systems to collect reliable and consistent base-line data for the purpose of on-going monitoring and evaluation

Governments need to commit to ongoing monitoring and evaluation of programs as recommended by the Wilde/Anderson 2007 Report, the 2007 HREOC Social Justice Report and NACCHO.

Linked to this is the importance of collecting good baseline data to be able to judge whether initiatives are working or not. Anecdotal evidence on the impact of the NTER has been mixed. Some communities have reported a decrease in violence and alcohol abuse whilst others have reported an increase or the problem moving elsewhere.

An unintended impact of the NTER has been a shifting of the problems relating to alcohol and violence to urban centers such as Alice Springs which has reported an increase in violence and alcohol abuse since the NTER. As Alice Springs is not one of the 73 prescribed communities under the NTER it does not receive specific NTER funding. Indigenous communities and Town Camps within the greater Darwin urban area are also not part of the prescribed NTER communities and therefore excluded from the investment of intervention funding. Yet urban centres are being called on to respond to an influx of Indigenous people leaving their communities as a result of the NTER Intervention measures. Funding is needed in urban centres as well as in remote communities to assist itinerants with practical access to welfare services and return to country programs.

A rigorous monitoring system is needed to gather evidence to ascertain if stated objectives are being met. Data should be equally available to the 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 answer the following questions in relation to the NTER. Do the strategies of the NTER match its objectives and desired outcomes? How do we know whether there is less child abuse, less incarceration, less overcrowding, less violence, less disease and healthier communities since the intervention strategy? What does each Indigenous community believe is a healthy, functioning community and how do they believe this can be achieved?

3.5. Inter-Departmental and Cross Government Collaboration to address issues facing Indigenous communities

Governments continue to create funding silos in relation to Indigenous issues. It is widely recognised that health, housing, employment, education, law and order and economic development are all interrelated. Improvements in one area, such as Indigenous health do not necessarily occur until there are improvements in other areas such as hygiene, housing and education.

The AASW recommends that the framework for addressing Indigenous disadvantage be re-thought to incorporate an ecological understanding of wellbeing and resilience. This would facilitate a greater understanding of the interrelationships between good mental and physical health with adequate housing, education, employment and social support networks and could inform future policy and service developments in these areas.

Fourteen years prior to this NTER Review process the Commonwealth Office of Northern Development in its March 1994 Final Report *Towards the Development of a North Australia Social Justice Strategy* recommended the pooling of funding on Indigenous communities by using a regional or local community model to plan for funding expenditure on a needs basis. The AASW urges this Inquiry to consider how this strategy can be adapted today to meet the specific needs of Indigenous communities?

3.6. Support Initiatives that are working well in Indigenous communities and adopt flexible approaches to improving the overall health of Indigenous communities

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. There are a number of initiatives that are currently working well. For example:

Communities have raised the need for either family centres or multi activity children's services, where families can come and be with their children rather than send them to separate child care or jet crèche in remote areas. There have been instances of child care centres 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.

Examples of good practice:

At Yipirinya School near Alice Springs, Indigenous language and culture is taught alongside the Northern Territory Curriculum and the elders actively support school attendance achieves good school attendances.

2. Community run Arts Centre Enterprises supported through CDEP in communities such as Titjakala in Central Australia and Yirkala in Arnhem Land have worked well in promoting a sense of community and purpose.

Even though the activities may not be considered mainstream employment they have been shown to assist in curbing the sense of hopelessness and despair that often lead to high rates of domestic violence and suicide experienced in many Indigenous communities.

3.7. Make quarantining of welfare income voluntary unless specific circumstances warrant it and support the development of financial literacy programs for welfare recipients.

The AASW considers that in principle quarantining of welfare income should be voluntary. The Association acknowledges that in rare and specific circumstances, the involuntary quarantining of welfare payments may be necessary. However, compulsory quarantining as currently adopted by the NTER does not take into account each person's circumstances and is discriminatory on the basis of race rather than need. An approach based upon consent of the person or community concerned is more likely to work than one based upon coercion.

The AASW acknowledges that although some Indigenous people have welcomed the quarantining of welfare income, many believe this action contravenes Racial Discrimination legislation. If the Australian government considers that welfare quarantining is a workable strategy, why not make it compulsory for all income support recipients? If the aim of welfare quarantining is to ensure money is spent wisely on nutritional food for families, then what other measures can be taken to educate Indigenous people about financial management and how can the cost of fresh, nutritional food be kept to a minimum in remote communities?

The compulsory quarantining of welfare income is only a short-term measure that does not offer Indigenous people choice or long-term skills in financial management. The AASW considers that more thought needs to be given to the development of innovative strategies that support responsible financial management in Indigenous communities, while maintaining respect for Indigenous people. For example, can the role of Centrelink staff be broadened to include financial management education with welfare recipients? Is it possible for other organisations, such as banks, to offer financial management education to Indigenous communities?

The AASW notes an unintended consequence of welfare quarantining has been an urban drift to the larger urban centers such as Alice Springs and this has created further problems in these centres. Anecdotal reports suggest that elderly Indigenous people have been negatively impacted by having to travel large distances to shop in the larger centres, where they can purchase goods under the welfare quarantining system.

The AASW concurs with the Australian Government that education is an important pathway to employment and economic development. However it does not believe that linking welfare payments to school attendance will necessarily lead to improved school attendance and improved employment outcomes. Policy makers should examine the many reasons why some Indigenous parents do not encourage their children to attend school. Measures should be available to work with Indigenous parents to encourage their children to attend school, ensure the curriculum is relevant to remote Indigenous communities and adequately trained and culturally sensitive teachers are employed in well resourced schools. Incentives need to be

provided for teachers in a similar way that Medical Practitioners are provided with incentives to work in remote areas.

3.8. Adopt and support strategies to encourage Indigenous workforce development

The AASW has found that when CDEP programs have been axed without community consultation and no training programs or relevant jobs are available on the community to replace these programs, young men in particular are left in a vacuum often leading to despair, drug abuse, violence and suicide.

If CDEP is to be replaced then a well-planned, transitional program needs to be in place alongside training in new skills relevant to each community. The AASW believes that all stakeholders (the private sector, relevant Government Departments, Land Councils and Indigenous community representatives) need to be involved in assisting Indigenous people to become skilled to enter the workforce in jobs, relevant to them, on their communities.

Incentives should be in place such as mentoring programs and joint government and private business funding available to train and educate Indigenous people to take on roles traditionally provided by non-Indigenous people in the fields of land management, manual labour, hospitality, health, education, housing maintenance, administration etc on the Remote Communities and Town Camps of the NT. Award wages should be paid for this work.

4. CONCLUSION

Circumstances leading to the introduction of the NTER measures are complex and it is apparent that the gaps in life expectancy and opportunities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians will not be lessened in the short term.

The AASW believes there is insufficient evidence to assess the overall progress of the NTER at this early stage. However reports indicate mixed impacts of the NTER to date and these vary from community to community. On-going commitment and recurrent resources, rather than short term measures, is required utilising a community development, whole of government, interdepartmental, collaborative model in partnership with Indigenous communities to close the well recognised gaps in the areas of health, education, housing, employment and other community infrastructure.

The AASW believes the issues of Indigenous disadvantage are not only limited to the NT and urges the Review Board to adopt a strategic approach to address Indigenous disadvantage across Australia. The AASW believes that until the provisions of the *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and the *NT Anti Discrimination Act 1993* are reinstated and the NT Intervention measures are subject to the safeguards of NT and Commonwealth equal

opportunity legislation the NTER will always be viewed as discriminatory by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

On going evaluation and monitoring of the NTER measures is required to ensure sufficient flexibility and adaptability to each Indigenous community's situation and the intended benefits of the measures do occur. Unintended impacts of the measures, such as strain on welfare services in urban centers and other bordering interstate communities also need to be monitored to ensure any negative impacts do not outweigh the intended outcomes.

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