



Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee Inquiry Into: the Digital Delivery of Government Services

23 October 2017

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1. Executive Summary

In 2017 communication between government service providers and language speaking Aboriginal people in Central Australia, the Territory and elsewhere in remote Australia remains a significant problem; a barrier to services and development; and a major determinant of multidimensional disadvantage. This statement is relevant to people living in regional centres like Alice Springs, Town Camps and remote communities.

For many years Tangentyere has been tackling the issue of postal services on Town Camps and related issues including the lack of enrollable addresses on the Alice Springs Town Camps. In 2017 many Town Camp residents don't receive mail and cannot use their Town Camp street addresses as an enrollable address for the Australian Electoral Commission. These matters are addressed elsewhere in a submission being developed by Tangentyere for the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee Inquiry Into: the Arrangements for the Marriage Postal Survey. The opportunity has been taken in responding to the postal arrangements for the marriage equality survey to highlight some long standing communication issues in great detail.

The shift to myGov and the reliance of government service providers on digital services is leaving many Aboriginal Australians from the Territory further behind. For Tangentyere this shift is particularly frustrating when we have been unable to resolve (through extensive advocacy) more basic issues of communication including postal services. At times in the history of Indigenous policy and development making decisions by government there has been the recognition that language speaking Aboriginal people need different types of services to achieve equality with mainstream Australia. Examples of such services include bilingual education and interpreter services. The diminishment of services for individuals in receipt of income support in favour of a homogenous digital platform is an example of equity and assumes that everyone starts with the same level of advantage. It is widely accepted that Aboriginal people in the Territory and elsewhere are facing multidimensional disadvantage, such disadvantage can be measured through a consideration of the social determinants of health. The increasing reliance by Centrelink and other agencies on digital service delivery at the expense of client services and support will widen the gap between those who are disadvantaged and those who are not.

2. Background

The Town Camp Movement was catalysed by the displacement of people from their traditional lands; the repeal of the Welfare Ordinance Act (1964); and the Equal Wages Case (1968); and steadily built momentum from early 1974 with the incorporation of the first Town Camp Housing Associations.

The Town Camp Housing Associations and Tangentyere Council were formed by Town Camp residents to support their efforts to gain access to land, housing, water, electricity, municipal services, community services and to address the shared experience of disadvantage. Tangentyere was incorporated in 1979 as a service provider and umbrella organisation for the Town Camp Housing Associations. The 16 Town Camp Housing Associations and Aboriginal Corporations are the Corporate Members of Tangentyere Council.

Today 16 Town Camps exist within Alice Springs. The conservative service population estimate for Town Camps is between 1,950- 3300, 70% are permanent residents and 30% are either visitors or homeless (Foster et al, 2005).

In 2009, 14 Housing Associations entered into tripartite Alice Springs Living Area Subleases with the Executive Director of Township Leasing (EDTL) on behalf of the Commonwealth and the CEO of Housing on behalf of the Territory. The EDTL then entered a Housing Management Agreement (underlease) with the Northern Territory Government making the Department of Housing and Community Development (DoHCD) the Housing Authority for the Alice Springs Town Camps. The Alice Springs Living Area Subleases expire in December 2049 but the Housing Management Agreement (HMA) expired in December 2012. Since the HMA expired in 2012 it has

continued as a periodical agreement being extended from month to month. The periodical HMA undermines certainty and the capacity for future planning.

The periodical status of the HMA means that there is a lack of strategic long term planning with respect to housing management; municipal services; and the development of housing and infrastructure. In addition the short term nature of the HMA and related subcontracts also undermines attempts by Town Camp Housing Associations to engage external parties in community led interagency responses to develop strategies for improving community safety.

2.1. Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation

Tangentyere Council is a community controlled Public Benevolent Institution delivering human services and social enterprise activities for the benefit of Aboriginal people from the Town Camps, Urban Alice Springs and Central Australia. Tangentyere Council was first incorporated in 1979. Between 1979 and August 2015 Tangentyere Council was incorporated under the Northern Territory Associations Act (2008). To comply with the Commonwealth Government requirement for Indigenous organizations to be incorporated under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 (CATSI) in order to receive Indigenous Advancement Strategy funding in excess of \$500,000, Tangentyere Council transferred incorporation to the CATSI Act. Tangentyere Council transferred incorporation on the 14th August 2015. The organization was a finalist in the 2016 Reconciliation Australia, Indigenous Governance Awards and is estimated to be one of the 15 largest Aboriginal Corporations in Australia.

Tangentyere Council was formed to assist the Housing Associations to gain legal tenure and in order to obtain water, electricity and housing. From 1979 Tangentyere Council operated as an Indigenous Community Housing Organisation (ICHO) and service provider. The Corporate Members of Tangentyere are the Housing Associations and the members of these Housing Associations are individual members of Tangentyere. Today, Tangentyere has 625 members. The Tangentyere Board of Directors is composed of the elected Presidents of the Alice Springs Town Camp Housing Associations and Aboriginal Corporations.

Tangentyere Council is no longer an Indigenous Community Housing Organisation but provides a broad range of Human Services including the following:

- Child Protection and Wellbeing;
- Aged and Disabled;
- Youth;
- Employment and Training;
- Family;
- Community Development;
- Community Safety and Wellbeing;
- Town Camp Secretariat Support;
- Chronic Disease Care Coordination;
- Family Violence Prevention; and
- Social Enterprise Development.

Tangentyere is committed to the engagement, participation, capacity development and employment of Central Australian Aboriginal people.

2.2. Alice Springs Town Camp Associations and Aboriginal Corporations

Tangentyere Council has 16 Corporate Members as follows:

Figure 1: Town Camp Housing Associations, Incorporation and Tenure					
Association/Aboriginal Corporation	Alias	Incorporation Date	Tenure	Lot Number	Granted
Ilperle Tyathe Association	Warlpiri	17/11/1978	SPL-450	5149	30/01/1979
Aper-Alwerrkng Association	Palmer's Camp	17/04/1977	SPL-459	5180	25/07/1979
Mount Nancy Association	Mount Nancy	16/07/1974	SPL-409	5135, 5123	16/07/1976
Anthelk-Ewlpaye Association	Charles Creek	16/07/1974	SPL-426	3702, 3704	12/08/1977
Nyewente Association	Trucking Yards	6/02/1975	SPL-449	5152	28/12/1978
Akngwertnarre Association	Morris Soak	14/11/1974	SPL-438	5150	22/12/1977
Ewyenper-Atwatye Association	Hidden Valley	11/08/1977	SPL-473	5189	30/01/1980
Yarrenyty Arltere Association	Larapinta Valley	17/11/1978	SPL-536	5195	23/06/1981
Anthepe Housing Association	Drive In	8/03/1974	SPL-412	5146	8/11/1976
Inarlenge Association	Little Sisters	28/02/1978	Crown-1112	3701	11/06/1973
Ilyperenye Association	Old Timers	22/08/1977	SPL-550	5708	14/09/1981
Ilparpa Aboriginal Corporation	Ilparpa	25/10/1979	SPL-493	5713	2/07/1980
Mpwetyerre Aboriginal Corporation	Abbotts Camp	25/10/1979	SPL-543	2664	4/07/1980
Karnte Aboriginal Corporation	Karnte	11/07/1983	Crown- 1111	7850	1/02/1988
Lhenpe Artnwe Aboriginal Corporation	Hoppy's Camp	6/08/1986	SPL-426	1733	12/08/1977
Irrkerlantye Aboriginal Corporation	White Gate	28/10/1992	n/a	n/a	n/a

3. Digital Delivery of Government Services

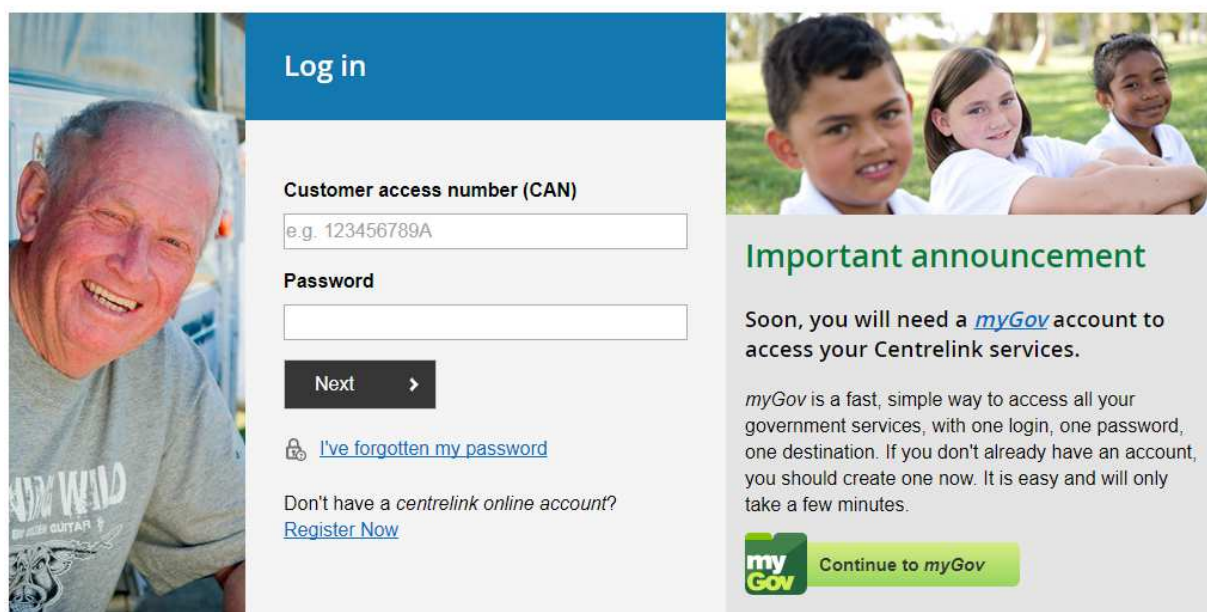
3.1. Centrelink

Centrelink has increasingly moved toward the use of online services for people in receipt of income support. In Alice Springs both the main Centrelink office and the Centrelink agency at Tangentyere Council rely heavily on self serve computer kiosks with staff present to provide some level of support to customers accessing these services.

To date the internet and computer kiosk user interface has been the Centrelink Portal which is not particularly user friendly for language speaking Aboriginal people, many of who have poor literacy and numeracy. Now however things are set to deteriorate further as the Department of Human Services is planning to move from the Centrelink portal to myGov. There are many criticisms of myGov for example the reliance on users having email addresses and mobile phones.

The following screen shot is from the Centrelink website and outlines the proposed transition to myGov:

Access online services - step 1



The screenshot shows the Centrelink login interface. On the left is a photo of an elderly man smiling. The main area has a blue header with 'Log in'. Below it are fields for 'Customer access number (CAN)' with the example 'e.g. 123456789A' and a 'Password' field. A 'Next' button with a right arrow is below the password field. There are links for 'I've forgotten my password' and 'Don't have a centrelink online account? Register Now'. On the right, there is a photo of three children and an 'Important announcement' section stating: 'Soon, you will need a [myGov](#) account to access your Centrelink services. myGov is a fast, simple way to access all your government services, with one login, one password, one destination. If you don't already have an account, you should create one now. It is easy and will only take a few minutes.' At the bottom right is a green button that says 'Continue to myGov' with the myGov logo.

3.1.1. Urban Alice Springs and the Town Camps

From our perspective this transition is very concerning. As a whole the residents of the Alice Springs Town Camps have better access to many services than individuals living in communities further from regional service centres like Alice Springs. Despite the presence of internet and phone services it is our view that myGov and the emphasis on digital service delivery by Centrelink present a significant issue for the majority of our members and clients.

Tangentyere has worked closely with financial institutions through programs including the Integrated Case Management Service (ICMS) which amongst other things assisted individuals with proof of identity documents (the Tangentyere Card) so that they could access banks and other services. Through the collaboration between the ICMS and the banks Tangentyere has learned of the reservation of many financial institutions about the use of internet banking by individuals with poor literacy and numeracy. From their perspective the use of

electronic banking puts individuals at greater risk of exploitation. Tangentyere Council considers that banks are right to have these concerns. Tangentyere asserts that the use of myGov will make business very difficult for many individuals. Language speaking Aboriginal people with poor literacy and numeracy will be at best reliant on third parties and at worst open to exploitation. Such a circumstance will result in increased numbers of individuals in remote areas receiving breaches or without income support.

In reality the majority of Central Australian Aboriginal people living on the Town Camps and many Central Australian Aboriginal people living in urban Alice Springs do not have strong literacy and numeracy or strong computer literacy. In addition access to computers, internet and mobile phone retention are also an issue for the use of myGov.

3.1.2. Remote Central Australia

Tangentyere has received feedback from service providers based in remote communities with respect to myGov and its usage by Centrelink. This feedback is summarized below:

The movement of Centrelink services online will have serious implications both for remote Aboriginal clients and for the service providers who remain on the ground in Aboriginal communities. The majority of users in many remote communities require support to use online services. The primary barriers for accessing digital services for residents of many communities in MacDonnell, Central Desert, Barkly Regional Councils and other localities have been outlined below:

- Services that are text based, in English and scaled to fit on a small screen fail to recognize that the majority of the adult remote Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory do not speak English and do not have functional literacy in English¹;
- Clients who are on benefits have limited, if any access to computers or to the internet. In Utopia for example people have to travel from outstations to have access to the mobile network. The use of personal computers is not part of everyday life for many people in remote Aboriginal communities and Town Camps. Their options are to seek assistance in the offices of service providers such as schools, clinics, regional council offices and/or human services providers. None of these providers are trained or supported by Centrelink;
- Clients are expected to create email addresses that they are unlikely to access. It may be that users have multiple email addresses created to access services such as banks and Centrelink. If they forget passwords their only option is to create a new account. Assistance to access existing accounts due to forgotten passwords is limited;
- The development of online services that require people to read emails poses a severe challenge for people in the sense of compliance. Presently most people ask a service provider to tell them if they have to do anything about letters that they receive. Many people cannot tell if they have received a bill or a statement. People with multiple email addresses that they cannot access are at risk from a practical breakdown in the effective working of the system;
- Access also refers to vision and hearing. Many Aboriginal people from remote Central Australia experience trouble hearing on the telephone. In addition many older people have trouble seeing writing clearly on a computer screen;
- Due to issues of homelessness and mobility many residents are unable to keep ordered personal filing systems. Additionally limited access to computers, scanners and printers means that individuals cannot submit digital forms online.

¹ <http://www.cdu.edu.au/newsroom/indigenous-literacy>

It was observed that there is a poor understanding of the ways in which government systems work. This limitation in understanding extends to individual rights, responsibilities and entitlements. It has been observed that remote Centrelink staff demonstrate some understanding of these issues and on this basis the withdrawal of services in favor of myGov represents a failure of Centrelink to fulfill a duty of care to such clients. Tangentyere has received the feedback that the withdrawal of frontline services by Centrelink has been interpreted as a form of cost shifting to the third party organisations remaining in remote Australia. The difficulties that people already have with compliance will be magnified, resulting in increased multidimensional disadvantage.

3.1.3. Breaching Income Support Payments- Impacts

Recently Tangentyere provided a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee for the inquiry into the appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community Development Program. In this submission we identified that research undertaken by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University (ANU) demonstrated that Aboriginal people living in remote and very remote areas are breached from income support payments at ~56 times the rate of income support recipients in urban areas. During this submission we identified that the primary reason for this level of breaching was related to the significant level of participation required from remote income support recipients in 'Work for the Dole' and other mutual obligation activities. Whilst the activity requirements for remote income support recipients are far higher than that of urban job seekers we would now like to suggest that the use of the Centrelink Portal and myGov may also be significant contributors to breaching rates amongst Central Australian Aboriginal people.

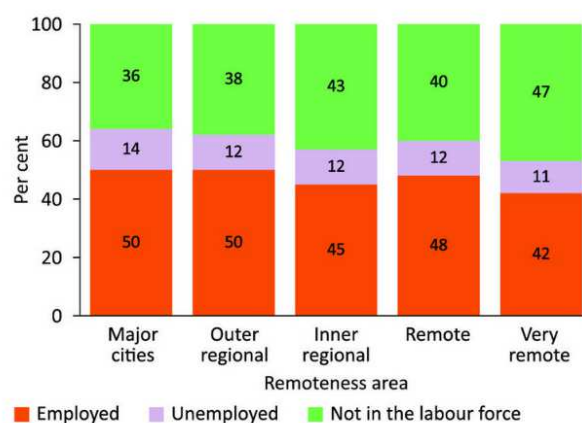
The rates of breaching and the number of people not receiving income support means that the income support safety net is failing. The failure of this safety net impacts significantly upon children, families and other areas such as tenancy sustainability. When a recipient's income support payments stop (even temporarily) all Income Management/Centrelink deductions stop. Stopped deductions result in debt including housing debts as rent deductions stop. This system can lead to significant additional financial stress on families who are already struggling financially, compounding other significant stressors they are often facing.

According to the following table only 42% of Aboriginal people aged 15-64 from very remote areas are employed, 11% are unemployed and the remainder are not in the labour force. Tangentyere is concerned that many people designated as 'not in labour force' simply don't receive any income. Once again these figures and the following table have been outlined in our submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee for the inquiry into the appropriateness and effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Community Development Program but it is also felt that these numbers have been exacerbated by the use of the Centrelink Portal and myGov.

■ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
■ Non-Indigenous Australians

Source: ABS and AIHW analysis of 2012–13 AATSIHS and 2012 SEW

Figure 2.07-3 Labour force status of Indigenous persons aged 15–64 years, by remoteness, 2012–13



4. Australian Electoral Commission

The Australian referendum held on the 27th May 1967 saw the overwhelming majority of Australian voters endorsing the amendment of the Australian constitution in a manner that recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as part of the census and allowed the Australian Government to make laws for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Before 1967, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could not participate in Commonwealth, State/Territory and Local Government. Despite the result of the 1967 referendum there are many structural barriers to the participation of Aboriginal people from the Northern Territory in Commonwealth/Territory and Local Government elections. These issues will be investigated further in our submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee Inquiry Into: the Arrangements for the Marriage Postal Survey. We intend to explore only one aspect of this issue in the context of this submission and that is the online functionality, accessibility and appropriateness of the Australian Electoral Commission's online facility for amending enrolment details.

4.1. Enrolment and Postal Addresses

As discussed briefly in the Executive Summary, Town Camp street addresses are not recognised as enrollable addresses by the Australian Electoral Commission. The reason for this is because of a tenure reference

included on the NT Department of Lands, Planning and Environment (DLPE); Integrated Land Information System (ILIS). The tenure reference listed against individual administrative parcels within Town Camp Special Purpose and Crown Leases in Perpetuity is 'vacant crown'. This is despite the fact that these individual parcels are also linked to street addresses, tenancy agreements and in receipt of postal services (12 Town Camps receive postal services and 3 do not). Because of the tenure reference of individual administrative lots being 'vacant crown', Town Camp enrolment addresses are limited to individual Town Camps (i.e. Larapinta Valley) rather than street addresses. Not having a street address means that with the exception of residents with a separate post office box no resident receives mail from the Australian/Northern Territory Electoral Commission. This in turn leads to reduced enrolments, outdated enrolment details and poor rates of participation.

Tangentyere has been advocating for a change in this circumstance for several years and has now developed a sophisticated understanding of the underlying causes of this circumstance.

4.2. Updating Enrolment Details Online

In September 2017 we undertook a thought experiment that went as follows:

- (1) Town Camp street addresses are not enrollable addresses for the electoral roll;
- (2) Individuals can register postal addresses including post office boxes;
- (3) Town Camp street addresses may be acceptable as postal addresses

In September a Town Camp resident with good literacy and numeracy; good computer skills and a current driver's licence accessed the Australian Electoral Commission website and proceeded to update her details. She later received confirmation that her new address details had been accepted. As far as Tangentyere is aware she is the first Town Camp resident who has managed to have her physical street address accepted as a postal address. This is a positive development but the process was complicated; time consuming; required access to computer and internet; and would be difficult for the many language speaking Aboriginal people in Central Australia and elsewhere in the Territory.

Using this function on the Australian Electoral Commission website required the completion of the following steps (see <http://www.aec.gov.au/enrol/change-address.htm>):

Step 1: Enrolment
Step 2: State or Territory
Step 3: Citizenship
Step 4: Evidence of identity
Step 5: Name
Step 6: Personal details
Step 7: Current residential address
Step 8: Postal address
Step 9: Contact details
Step 10: Declaration
Step 11: Submit
Final step

4.3. Proof of Identity

The 12 steps required for amending an enrolment are problematic for language speaking Aboriginal people with poor literacy and numeracy. These steps demonstrate a low tolerance for variations between entered text and information on the electoral roll. This lack of tolerance is problematic as there can be significant variations in nomenclature and addresses. People often have aliases due to a number of reasons including cultural reasons and bureaucratic errors related to spelling and assumptions about the relationship between skin names and surnames etc. Addresses vary due to the high levels of mobility between localities in the NT and due to functional homelessness of many people.

Aside from the issue of inflexibility the online reliance on the use of driver's licences and/or passports for identification is prohibitive for many due to a lack of driver's licences and passports.

Tangentyere Council developed, implemented and continues to operate a community proof of identity card, the 'Tangentyere Card' for this reason. The Tangentyere Card was inaugurated in 2008 primarily due to the implementation of the Commonwealth Anti-Money Laundering and Counter Terrorism Act. The implementation of strengthened proof of identity procedures by local banks in 2008 requiring the use of photo identification documents meant that many people faced the risk of financial exclusion. To date Tangentyere has issued 10,208 since March 2008 and of these the majority (6,422) have been renewed and are current at the time of writing this submission. The Tangentyere Card is widely accepted by agencies including the NT Motor Vehicle Registry, Department of Business, NT Police and Centrelink. Tangentyere can provide more information about this service and the proof of identity issues of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory on request.

5. Conclusion

In the first instance the transfer from the existing Centrelink portal to myGov needs to be halted. Future service delivery should not oblige individuals with poor literacy and numeracy; limited English; poor computer literacy; limited access to information technology; and limited internet to access Centrelink services via the internet. Individuals should not be obliged to create email addresses or purchase mobile phones unless they have the capacity to use and maintain these devices and services in a sustainable manner that is not open to exploitation. Centrelink in particular needs to continue to operate Centrelink agencies in remote areas and for language speaking Aboriginal people in a manner that is appropriate and accessible. Improving service delivery and reducing compliance may require some consideration of ongoing reporting requirements and compliance monitoring for remote clients (in short a more flexible approach may be required for individuals beyond to reach of meaningful service delivery by Centrelink). Individuals should not be penalised where the government is not prepared to provide an appropriate and accessible service.

The use of the online application process for updating electoral information is not accessible or appropriate for the majority of our members/residents of the Alice Springs Town Camps or for many other Central Australian Aboriginal people from remote communities or urban regional centres. The reliance on online mechanisms is clearly reflected in the significant downsizing of Australian Electoral Commission operations in the Territory. It is our understanding that the Australian Electoral Commission presence has been reduced from 16 to 3 individuals based in Darwin. Whilst the Northern Territory Electoral Commission has a greater presence it does

not control the electoral roll and Tangentyere feels that this circumstance requires consideration. We also need to acknowledge that whilst the lack of recognition of Town Camp street addresses is highly problematic for our members the situation is far worse for individuals living on family outstations, remote communities and many Town Camps elsewhere in the Territory. Our members are within sight of being able to enrol using their street address assuming that the tenure reference for individual administrative parcels can be changed from 'vacant crown' but elsewhere there are no gazetted roads, street addresses or postal services to people's houses. It also needs to be acknowledged that written correspondences whether in the form of a letter or email are not appropriate when individuals cannot read them.