



ALPA Submission:  
Inquiry into  
Community Safety,  
Support Services and  
Job Opportunities in  
the Northern Territory

January 2023

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Board of Directors of The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) and in consultation with ALPA's directors, staff and cultural leadership from the Yolŋu communities in which we work.

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## Who is ALPA?

The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation (ALPA) was formed in 1972 as a collective of seven community-controlled stores. ALPA's initial member communities were Ajurumu, Gapuwiyak, Galiwin'ku, Milingimbi, Minjilang, Ramingining and Yirrkala.

In the 1970s ALPA began to realise the importance of training and development for its staff, and with support from the Queensland Retail Training Institute began a program of in-house training. During this period ALPA also started its community support programs, using the modest surplus funds generated from store operations to benefit the community. Financial assistance for ceremonies, education, medical escorts, and community events could be obtained through these programs, which have now been expanded to involve capital investment in business partnerships and business support for independent social enterprise development.

ALPA became a Registered Training Organisation in 1992 and is committed to staff training. Over 1,500 of ALPA's remote Indigenous staff have completed apprenticeships or qualifications through ALPA. This dedication to quality training outcomes saw ALPA recognised as the NT Large Employer of the Year at the NT Training Awards in both 2015 and 2016 and placing in the top three in the same category at the following two National Awards.

In 2013 the Board of Directors made the decision to diversify ALPA from retail, and work with government and industry partners to increase the economic opportunities for our Yolŋu members. ALPA commenced by taking on the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) in the region encompassing our member communities of Ramingining and Milingimbi. The ALPA Board quickly recognised the ability to support positive change in our communities through these programs and over the last eight years our community services footprint has grown to four Community Development Program (CDP) regions supporting over 3,500 participants, five Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) teams, a self-funded community engagement team and programs engaging with young people and families.

By 2014 ALPA had saturated the existing local labour markets so started working in partnership with local families and traditional landowners to develop new enterprises, create further employment pathways and to strengthen the economies of our communities. Today, the Indigenous owned businesses of Rulku Enterprises, Dinybulu Regional Services, Bukmak Constructions and Manapan Furniture all operate within the remote communities of Arnhem Land. They are responsible for the delivery of numerous government contracts and work closely with other indigenous organisations to support the development and growth of the regional economy. Their services include construction, landscaping, furniture manufacturing, automotive repair, Homelands services, hospitality, tourism, agriculture, and cleaning.

These businesses have created over 45 ongoing paid employment positions across four primary communities. These positions have supported community members to become financially independent of government and supported the growth of the economy in East Arnhem Land.

Since then, ALPA has grown to become the largest, financially independent Aboriginal Corporation in Australia and is proudly owned by our Yolŋu members and governed by a Yolŋu Board of Directors. In 2022 ALPA celebrated its 50 year anniversary, a milestone we are very proud of and signifies the importance of our work in remote Australian communities. In 2023, ALPA operates in 28 communities across a 1.2 million square kilometre footprint. ALPA has over 1,000 employees, 84% of whom are local Indigenous people, and last year returned over \$38 million to our member communities in the form of wages for local Indigenous staff, community governed support programs and community infrastructure.

## Introduction

With over 50 years' experience working in remote Northern Territory, ALPA is deeply connected to community.

ALPA communities and members lived through the Northern Territory Emergency Response and Stronger Futures and thus have an intimate, first-hand knowledge of the impacts these policies have had on their lives.

They have equally deep insights into what is needed to improve community safety, support services and job opportunities in their communities.

While community safety may be seen to some as a predominantly law and order issue, ALPA strongly prosecutes that intergenerational and structural disempowerment are at the heart of the challenges faced by Indigenous Australians living in remote communities.

Hence, when we talk about creating safer communities, it is important that we take into consideration what has created a lack of safety, including the need for a principled and systemic approach to empowering and building the capacity of community members to be strong in their identity through building capability in areas such as culture, health, employment, and justice.

Without a consistent community driven approach, the solutions being developed will continue to be band-aid solutions that fail to address the deeper challenges faced by community members.

While there are several other areas that this submission could also address, as per the terms of reference we have chosen to focus on:

- Job opportunities and the Community Development Program (CDP)
- Community and Youth Capacity Building
- Justice Reinvestment Community Services
- Income Management

## Job Opportunities and the Community Development Program (CDP)

Since the inception of ALPA, a primary focus for the ALPA Board has been to support Yolŋu people to be financially independent of government. They are achieving this through enterprise development and job creation, through our retail business and subsidiary businesses such as Rulku Enterprises, Dinybulu Regional Services, Manapan Furniture and Bukmak Constructions.

It was this focus that led ALPA to take on its first employment services contract in 2014 (the Remote Jobs and Communities Program), and now sees ALPA delivering CDP in 4 regions to 10 major communities, over 50 homelands and up to 3,800 program participants across Arnhem Land.

ALPA has been actively involved in the current Federal Government's consultations to replace CDP, and welcomes the shift towards a new program that is focused on generating real jobs and real wages in remote communities. As such, ALPA is about to begin piloting a number of exciting micro-enterprises that incorporate the ALPA Board's priorities outlined in this submission.

In addition to the creation of jobs and industry, it is critical to recognise that CDP is often the largest federally funded program in remote communities. Hence the ALPA Board sees it as

uniquely placed in terms of its assets and resources to support the social and economic change that is desperately needed in remote Indigenous communities.

While job creation must be a key component of any new program, in an economic environment where there are generally significantly more people than there are employment opportunities available - and where participation in the program is voluntary - the ALPA Board believes that the key measure of success of a new program will be to provide a holistic service to community members, beyond the bounds of traditional employment, which is focused on providing tailored supports to each community and individual.

The ALPA Board has identified five key areas for a new program, which have been comprehensively detailed in our 2021 submission to the NIAA's Remote Engagement Program, and will be outlined below.

### **Strengthening Cultural Frameworks**

ALPA believes it is essential for a new program to recognise the cultural responsibilities and obligations of Indigenous Australians, with flexibility built into any mutual obligations to accommodate for these.

The cultural environment that Indigenous Australians operate within is complex, and those in remote communities are constantly required to navigate the conflicting priorities of their cultural responsibilities/law and the requirements of government programs such as CDP.

Furthermore, the ALPA Board regularly emphasises that the strength and health of Yolŋu individuals and communities is largely determined by the strength of their connection to culture and cultural practices. Cultural obligations and ceremony are crucial in keeping Yolŋu knowledge alive and ensuring it is passed on to younger generations, as will be the case in other Indigenous communities.

A new program has the opportunity to recognise important cultural work and ceremony requirements as legitimate and important forms of engagement, even employment, for Yolŋu people.

Importantly, recognising the value of traditional Yolŋu structures will not only strengthen individuals and communities, but it will also mean the program is more likely to gain the trust and support of important cultural and community leaders, who will hold significant influence over how communities will respond to and engage with the new program.

### **Individual Supports**

The complex barriers to employment and engagement faced by many Indigenous Australians living in remote communities mean that tailored, flexible individual supports will be critical to the success of a new program.

In some cases, these supports will need to be wider ranging than simply focused on employment, and require support for individuals to navigate other systems such as education, healthcare and housing. In this sense, a new program represents an opportunity to act as a conduit service between community members and other government services in the regions.

In this kind of model, the ALPA Board emphasises that a strengths-based, person-centred approach is essential to genuinely engaging with community members, with the individual having control over the terms of the engagement. Working in partnership with individuals, their families and other community stakeholders will be more successful as it will truly empower individuals to become active drivers of their futures, rather than being passive participants.

## **Business Creation**

Communities throughout Arnhem Land have a long and proud history of entrepreneurship and trading, and the ALPA Board of Directors know there is a continued interest in business development in the Arnhem Land region, which will enable people to become financially independent of government and achieve self-determination.

A new program should be a key driver of economic growth in remote communities.

Previous iterations of CDP have provided the opportunity for providers and participants to engage in both small and larger scale enterprise development and hence long-term job creation, as evidenced by ALPA's subsidiary enterprises Rulku Enterprises and Dinybulu Regional Services.

Starting a business in mainstream Australia is incredibly difficult without capital support. With the increased costs associated with operating in a remote community environment, what is already a difficult venture becomes almost impossible. Hence the ALPA Board of Directors believes that to give small businesses the best possible chance of success, any future program must consider:

- Including capital investment opportunities for people to access when starting new businesses in the regions.
- Employment and wage subsidies for organisations to support this process.

There are some mechanisms within CDP which would be valuable to continue in order to support new business growth and job creation, such as the Activity Generating Income (AGI) model. Through this model ALPA has supported the creation of the Nuwul Nursery in Yirrkala, which is now generating significant income for its 12 local participants, allowing them the freedom of financial independence. Several of these participants started in the nursery as part of ALPA's Community Work Order project, which through Northern Territory Corrections, provides an alternative sentencing pathway for Indigenous Australians. It also means the participants have not only been diverted from serving potential jail time, but also have access to a steady income.

The crucial element of the AGI model is that it provides a safety net for new businesses and high levels of support for individuals. In Arnhem Land, we believe there is a key opportunity to support the development of a range of small and micro-enterprises in collaboration with community members, through programs such as AGI's.

## **Training and Employment**

Employment is the obvious focus for a new program, and continued and significant investment into the creation of employment opportunities will be critical for Indigenous Australians to become financially independent of government and able to make self-determined choices. ALPA supports the position that any employment program should support real jobs, that pay real wages and offer real benefits to Indigenous Australians.

Fundamentally, a new program should continue to act as a brokering agent that supports participants to enter paid employment, and then continues to provide high levels of support so that people have the best chance of retaining that employment.

ALPA also believes that there needs to be a focus on building the skills of program participants through training and upskilling, so they can be competitive in the employment market and take up roles that are often given to non-Indigenous, fly-in fly-out employees.

A key part of this is recognising that the training needs of individuals living in remote communities are very different to those in the city, and hence priority must be given to developing training courses that are custom built for a remote context – for example, a greater emphasis on practical,

hands-on assessments rather than largely written assessments that require advanced levels of English.

### **Community Based Engagement Projects**

There are many important works and projects needed within our communities, that a new program would be well placed to deliver.

This could include projects such as lawn care and landscaping, furniture building, and the building of ceremony structures to name a few. Projects such as these benefit the whole community and provide an opportunity to empower community members to improve their own situations and to identify local needs that sit outside of funding provided to other organisations.

For example, in Milingimbi it was identified that the cemetery needed a significant upgrade. The ALPA CDP Team supported the concreting of burial sites and beautification of the overall cemetery, which quickly became a point of pride for the community and was subsequently requested by a number of communities across Arnhem Land.

ALPA see community-based engagement projects as an opportunity to create waged positions that contribute to the positive social fabric of the community. It is important to recognise that a large proportion of the work Indigenous Australians undertake is not easily identifiable in a western economic system, however this work contributes greatly to the overall social cohesion and success of the community. In understanding this, ALPA believes that this work should in fact be prioritised and could be considered valid employment in many respects.

As is the case in many First Nations, Yolŋu culture is centred around working towards collective outcomes, rather than for individual benefit. Hence, a program that includes opportunities for participants to work towards the betterment of their families and community will result in higher engagement and better outcomes.

A key priority for the ALPA Board is that a new program includes opportunities, support systems and projects that are designed specifically to engage with young people aged between 17 – 30, who are one of the most disengaged and at-risk cohorts in Arnhem Land.

These will be critical in supporting the future leaders of Arnhem Land to be strong and confident in their cultural heritage, skills and abilities. A purely employment-based program makes these kinds of programs difficult to undertake as they generally are more focussed on social outcomes.

The ALPA Board believes that there is a real opportunity for a new program to undertake meaningful community development within Arnhem Land, which will empower communities and individuals to have a strong sense of self-agency and control leading to self-determination.

### **Other Considerations**

The performance framework for the new program will also be critical, as the parameters for provider performance have a significant influence on how a service is delivered and what areas are prioritised. We strongly advocate that these performance measures be genuinely co-designed with significant community consultation and involvement.

It must also be acknowledged that meaningful community development and business development in remote communities takes significant time, and there must be a shared commitment between both the community and the Government to commit long-term to a new program to ensure its successful implementation.

## Community and Youth Capacity Building

If the root issue of the social, health and safety issues seen in remote communities is the continual disempowerment of local, Indigenous people, then it follows that a critical part of reversing these trends involves building the confidence, capacity and strength in identity of community members.

One way that ALPA has been achieving this in recent years is through the East Arnhem Land Youth Model (EALYM), better known as Gungga'yunga Djamarrkuḷjiny (Helping our Children).

The EALYM began in 2020 as a 2-year pilot and is co-funded as part of a joint venture between The Northern Territory Government, the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and ALPA. In recognition of the power of this program and model, it has recently been funded for a further five years and is being delivered across four identified Yolŋu wards within East Arnhem Land.

Overall, the program is aimed at supporting and empowering young people in their communities so that they become strong in culture, identity and capability and are able to thrive and stand tall in both their own Yolŋu world as well as the Balanda (non-Indigenous) world.

Local Leadership Groups representing each of the four wards in Arnhem Land are the core of the program, and are comprised of individuals who hold the appropriate clan, family and cultural authority in their regions.

Crucially, and in a break from the traditional model of government funding, these Leadership Groups hold autonomous responsibility for deciding on and funding which projects are undertaken in their communities to improve the lives of young people. ALPA's role is to support the leadership groups to build their knowledge and capacity in governance, reporting and measurement and evaluation, and support the administration of the EALYM.

Each Leadership Group has developed a place-based strategy for their community, ensuring that activities are chosen and delivered in culturally appropriate ways and that the community is actively involved and invested in the success. The Leadership Groups have also synthesised these local strategies into a whole of region strategy and developed and designed a Monitoring & Evaluation Framework for the program, enabling them to determine what success looks like and how this is measured.

Over the course of the initial two-year pilot, the EALYM has had a number of positive impacts on the wards in which it operates. What began as a youth focused program has evolved into a much larger program, dedicated to building the capacity of community leaders to make self-determined choices about the investment of government funds. The project provides an ongoing opportunity to continue to build the autonomy of the community and empower leaders to engage with both the NTG and Commonwealth Governments.

We have seen a total of 41 proposals approved and are being delivered across the wards, which have been made up of both organisation led and clan led projects. Each project is discussed and voted on by the Leadership Group before being funded in their respective communities. During and after implementation, the projects are discussed and evaluated to inform future decision making. What has been clear is the preference of clan led activities, with over 31 of these projects being run by individuals or clans independent of organisational support.

Projects range from instructing children on pandanus collection and weaving, through to supporting young artists to attend the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair.



One example is the Raymangirr Homelands Project, which works in a traditional Yolŋu manner to keep kids safe and on the right pathway. Focusing on storytelling, learning about country, fishing/hunting and most importantly passing on knowledge, this project has successfully operated through much of 2022. The program has gone from strength to strength with high participation numbers and incredibly positive feedback from the community.

It is long understood that there needs to be change in the way in which governments fund, deliver and review programs in remote communities, and the following key principles (agreed upon by all parties engaging with the EALYM model) demonstrate a fantastic example of how other government funded services could be adapted in future:

- Yolŋu governance must be enshrined in all levels of decision-making pertaining to the model, as Yolŋu are the ultimate authority for services in the region.
- There must be flexibility within the model to allow Yolŋu decision making to define priorities at a regional and local level and to deploy funding and resources accordingly.
- There must be recognition of Yolŋu-specific sources of social and emotional wellbeing and mental health.

## Justice Reinvestment Community Services

It is well known that NT has the highest incarceration rate in Australia. The 2016 review of the Northern Territory Department of Correctional Services led by former Queensland Corrective Services Director-General, Keith Hamburger, stated that the Northern Territory "imprisonment rate is by far the worst in Australia and ranks with the worst in the world" and "that the unacceptable imprisonment rate, coupled with 85% of the prisoner population being Indigenous people and the high recidivism rate, has a major impact on the current operational state of custodial and community corrections both for adults and juveniles."

Contrary to Closing the Gap Targets, the number of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples in prison continues to grow in both the NT and nationwide.<sup>1</sup> These realities come at a large cost to the community (socially, psychologically and financially), as well as an unnecessary and significant financial and logistical cost to the NT and Commonwealth Governments. In recent years, the annual cost of keeping an adult or juvenile incarcerated has been calculated at \$115,971.45 and \$743,888.25 respectively.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, many communities in East Arnhem Land have also experienced a deterioration in social and health conditions, intersecting with increased levels of crime and social unrest. For example, several communities in East Arnhem Land have experienced concerning increases in the sniffing of volatile substances, self-harm, and youth offending.

In 2017-18 there was a significant outbreak in Galiwin'ku of young people inhaling Avgas. Reports indicate that over 220 Yolŋu young people were involved with ages ranging from 7 to 30 years, with an average age of 14 years.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/prisoners-australia/latestrelease#:~:text=The%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait,up%2030%25%20of%20all%20prisoners.>

<sup>2</sup> Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2017-2018 (2019) Volume C: Justice, Correctional Services, Chapter 8, Table 8A.17. Note: this includes total net operating expenditure and capital costs and Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2017-2018 (2019) Volume F: Community services, Youth Justice Services, Chapter 17, Table 17A.21.

Between January and October 2018, there were over 80 suicides or attempted suicide-related reports to the North East Arnhem Police District, including five successful suicides and 58 substantiated suicide attempts. This represents a 43% increase in suicide and self-harm related episodes from the previous year and is over 20 times the national suicide rate.

Over recent years ALPA has directly observed a large increase in youth offending, break-ins, vandalism and other anti-social behaviours across our businesses in Arnhem Land. This is consistent with feedback we have received in our regular consultations with community elders, that speak of a growing erosion of cultural knowledge and protocols, leading to higher rates of anti-social behaviour amongst young people.

What is clear is that our current approaches to preventing crime and creating safer communities in the NT are not working.

For these reasons, it is a critical priority of the ALPA Board to develop alternative justice pathways for people living in remote communities, including the incorporation of aspects of Indigenous cultural law.

### **Community Justice Fund Model**

In response to this priority of the ALPA Board, and in partnership with the Aboriginal Resource & Development Services Aboriginal Corporation (ARDS) and numerous stakeholders throughout Arnhem Land, ALPA has been part of developing a Community Justice Fund Model.

This model and approach in part comes from the success of ALPA's East Arnhem Land Youth Model, detailed in the previous section of this submission.

The proposed model provides a clear pathway for the Northern Territory's justice system to pilot alternative approaches to dealing with criminal offending, by better engaging with Yolŋu governance and leadership, and providing alternative sentencing options for Indigenous prisoners in remote communities.

As with the EALYM, the unique and critical difference with this model is that it genuinely devolves both financial and program decision making power to local Yolŋu Leadership Groups, who importantly also determine the KPIs of the program, i.e. what success looks like.

In essence, the Community Justice Fund Model is comprised of:

- A local Yolŋu Leadership Group, elected to represent appropriate family groups and lines of cultural authority in each community
- A funding pool managed through a brokerage agreement
- A group of supporting specialists, including permanent secretariat support

The Leadership Groups have two main responsibilities:

1. To work with judges, courts and those in contact with the justice system to discuss specific cases and explore and develop alternative sentencing options for them.
2. To develop and fund diversionary programs that aim to decrease crime and strengthen Yolŋu Law (Rom) structures.

Leadership Groups would adopt a broad lens, focused on family, victim and community engagement. They would draw on the funding pool to fund initiatives directly, or to be given as 'micro-grants' to support community proposed and led activities/programs that are directly related to peace-making or conflict resolution.

Importantly, this model allows for engagement and decisions to be made at both an individual case level, as well as problem-solving at a broader, community level.

The Leadership Groups would also utilise the pool of funding to access specialist support professionals, such as lawyers, social workers and mediators, who can provide advice, training or advocacy on specific cases as requested by the group.

Overall, ALPA strongly believes that this model has the power to reduce the number of Indigenous prisoners in Northern Territory prisons and reduce rates of offender recidivism, while strengthening cultural leadership and engagement in decision making in remote communities.

ALPA and ARDS have a fully developed proposal for the Community Justice Fund Model, which we would be happy to supply to the Committee on request.

## Income Management

The final priority area for the ALPA Board that we wish to address in this submission is around the future of Income Management in the Northern Territory.

Mandatory income management is one of the most significant recent government measures to have adversely affected and disempowered Indigenous Australians in remote communities. It is hence crucial to include in any discussion around community safety and the sunsetting of the Stronger Futures legislation.

As was clearly identified in the 2014 evaluation of income management in the Northern Territory, there was no evidence of changes in aggregate outcomes in child health, school attendance, alcohol and tobacco use, alcohol-related harm and imprisonment that could be plausibly linked to income management. There was also no evidence to indicate that income management has any effects at the community level, nor that income management facilitates long-term behavioural change.

As such, ALPA welcomed the Federal Government's decision to abolish the Cashless Debit Card in 2022, which was something our communities had been advocating for and wanting for many years.

When compulsory income management was imposed on ALPA's member communities in 2007 as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, they were subjected to the discriminatory and false assumption that they were alcoholics, family violence offenders and problem gamblers. There was no consultation, there were no exemptions, and yet another element of control was taken away from people's lives.

As ALPA's Chairman, Rev. Dr Djinyini Gondarra, has stated, the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians depends on them having self-agency, choice and control over their lives. The cessation of mandatory income management would be an important step towards achieving that.

In 2022 ALPA has been involved in consultations with the Department of Social Services (DSS) around the future of the Basics Card. The ALPA Board believes that regardless of what design an income management program takes, participating in the program should always be voluntary, and the program design must be genuinely co-designed with and approved by community.

As a primary food provider in many remote communities, ALPA knows what can work, because we operate a voluntary income management system and have done for some time. The ALPA

Food Card evolved from community consultations in 2004, and is a voluntary system designed, implemented and still operated by ALPA, with zero cost to taxpayers. The underlying principle of the food card was to create a voluntary tool which allowed each individual customer to make their own choice about how much money they wished to allocate to the card. Extensive community consultation determined what could be purchased on the card, which today includes most grocery food items and baby requirements in line with ALPA's healthy food policy.

## Conclusion

The ALPA Board thanks the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs for the opportunity to provide this submission on a number of very important topics.

We hope that we have been able to demonstrate that ALPA is actively involved in a variety of key areas related to community safety and wellbeing in the NT, and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss in further detail the initiatives and opportunities we are part of or see of being a benefit to remote communities.

We strongly believe that the approaches advocated for by the ALPA Board of Directors have demonstrated , and have the potential to, make significant improvements in remote communities both in the NT and in other parts of Australia.

If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact Emma Kelly, General Manager of Community Services, via [REDACTED]