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Northern Territory Council of Social Service



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Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Via email: JSCATSIA@aph.gov.au

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To the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs,

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

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) is the peak body for the Northern Territory (NT) Community and Social Services Sector and is a voice for people affected by social and economic disadvantage and inequality. NTCOSS membership is made up of community managed, non-government, not for profit organisations, which work in social and community service delivery, sector development and advocacy. We represent over 130 members across the NT, including Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), and organisations based in regional and remote areas. NTCOSS's vision is a fair, inclusive and sustainable NT. We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Community Safety, Support Services and Job Opportunities in the Northern Territory.

NTCOSS has previously made submissions to Parliamentary inquiries into JobSeeker and social security payment rates, compulsory income management (CIM) and introduction of the Cashless Debit Card (CDC), the Community Development Program (CDP), as well as domestic, family and sexual violence and children and families related policy issues. We recognise the specialist knowledge of members and external stakeholders with expertise in matters relating to the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry. In particular, NTCOSS supports submissions to this Inquiry by ACCO members and stakeholders, including the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA), Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC), and the Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the NT (APONT).

The community sector plays a vital role in creating social wellbeing for all Territorians and in building safe and healthy communities by providing services that enable people to access and participate in health services, education, employment, economic development, and family and community life. This submission provides a broad response to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

Inequity and the impacts of poverty in the NT

The NT is home to the highest proportion of Aboriginal people in Australia, with more than 100 languages and dialects spoken across the region.¹ Data from July 2022 showed that there are over 23,000 people currently subject to CIM across the region, with 4,000 people at the time on the CDC.² Of these people, the overwhelming majority are Aboriginal Territorians.

Of the poverty rates in Australia, people living in Remote or Very Remote localities experience much higher levels of poverty than those living in urban centres.¹¹ These high rates of poverty are experienced disproportionately across the NT, with Aboriginal people in particular overrepresented in homelessness and unemployment rates, and in poor educational outcomes. As a result, people experiencing vulnerability face further challenges with damaging effects on health, social wellbeing and long-term security, with poverty and disadvantage becoming further entrenched in our communities.

The primary purpose of Australia's social security system is to provide individuals with a 'minimum adequate standard of living'.⁶ This includes adequate food, water and housing and the continuous improvement of living conditions.⁷ Ensuring the adequacy of social security payments to assist individuals in meeting this standard is of critical importance in supporting those experiencing poverty and disadvantage in our communities.

NTCOSS has long advocated, in partnership with the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), for increased rates of JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and other related payments. The low rates of these payments, and the failure of programs such as the CDP and CIM have further entrenched people into poverty and minimised opportunities for meaningful engagement and participation across our communities.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census QuickStats, Northern Territory
https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/7?opendocument
accessed 18th June 2019; Aboriginal languages in NT <https://nt.gov.au/community/interpreting-and-translating-services/aboriginal-interpreter-service/aboriginal-languages-in-nt>, accessed 18th June 2019

² Table 2. Current Income Management participants with an active BasicsCard by state/territory as at 1 July 2022, Department of Social Service, Australia, 'Income management data summary July 2022', sourced on 10 August 2022, accessed at <https://data.gov.au/data/dataset/australian-government-income-management-program/resource/d6404d7b-f3ea-4446-8500-76d54b18215a>

Community leadership and co-design

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes priority reform areas that focus on transforming the way governments work with and for Aboriginal people to improve outcomes. The priority reform areas focus on things such as shared decision making and embedding ownership; developing the capacity of ACCOs; and ensuring government agencies and institutions undertake systemic and structural transformation to better contribute to Closing the Gap, while improving accountability.³

The Territory has been subject to many policy changes over the years that have adversely impacted Aboriginal people's wellbeing. NTCOSS notes member feedback to the Inquiry relating to the sunseting of the Stronger Futures legislation, and the lack of clarity and meaningful consultation with partners and impacted communities on this change. In addition, members and stakeholders provided historical context to the legislation's introduction and its relationship with the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) measures, commonly referred to as the Intervention, and the largely adverse impacts these historical policies have had on Aboriginal people and communities in the Territory.

NTCOSS supports our specialist member services, particularly the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) and both the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the Northern Territory (AMSANT) and APONT, on their continued advocacy and expertise regarding legislative reform regarding the Intervention and related subsequent legislation.

NTCOSS supports the agency of communities and individuals, along with the Closing the Gap principles, as cornerstones of decision making and service delivery. Legislative reform, policy decisions and any related program or service changes, must be informed and led by local communities with the specialist expertise and cultural knowledge of their lived experience.

Remote Employment

The number of Aboriginal people receiving welfare on a long-term basis can be directly correlated with the failure to close the employment gap and address the underlying causative factors of unemployment in remote areas⁴ (i.e. lack of appropriate employment opportunities that take into account mobility, flexible working practices that accommodate cultural obligations, and lack of training opportunities). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found that the proportion of

³ Closing the Gap In Partnership, National Agreement on Closing the Gap: At a Glance, viewed October 2020, accessed at <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement-closing-gap-glance>

⁴ Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, 2019, Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart and Related Payments and Alternative Mechanisms to Determine the Level of Income Support Payments in Australia

Aboriginal people in remote areas who are employed has stalled or is decreasing,⁵ meaning that people are increasingly reliant on government payments.

Not only are these payments severely inadequate,⁶ but CIM does not focus on capacity building and independence and has been attributed to making people more dependent on welfare.⁷

The deficit of jobs in remote communities was further impeded by the CDP. The CDP is a further example of punitive, paternalistic and stigmatising policy that overwhelmingly impacted Aboriginal people living in remote and rural areas.

The CDP model, while widely recognised for penalising welfare participants, did not address the deficit of jobs in remote communities, nor focus on developing the labour market. To assist in addressing the above inequality, NTCOSS supports the implementation of the Fair Work Strong Communities proposal. As noted in evidence provided by APONT to the Inquiry, the Fair Work Strong Communities proposal was developed and endorsed by an alliance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous CDP providers around Australia and other supporters. Fair Work Strong Communities is a proposal that recognises that it is not just the form of labour market assistance that matters, but the extent to which it can be seen as a vehicle for substantive local decision-making, and the rebuilding of local authority.

As opposed to directing spending towards punitive programs with no strong evidence as to their success, the Australian Government needs to invest in programs that are driven by communities and for communities that will result in long term, beneficial outcomes.

Justice Reinvestment

Justice Reinvestment refers to the redirection of money away from prisons to invest in infrastructure, programs, people and communities to address the causes of offending. It recognises that prisons are an investment failure – they fail to rehabilitate offenders or prevent crime and are an extraordinary cost to government and the community. The NT has one of the highest rates of imprisonment in the

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014-15, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4714.0201415?OpenDocument#Publications>

⁶ NTCOSS, 2019, Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart and Related Payments and Alternative Mechanisms to Determine the Level of Income Support Payments in Australia (public); Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), 2019, Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart and Related Payments and Alternative Mechanisms to Determine the Level of Income Support Payments in Australia - Surviving, not living: the (in)adequacy of Newstart and related payments; Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, 2019, Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart and Related Payments and Alternative Mechanisms to Determine the Level of Income Support Payments in Australia

⁷ Bray et al. 2014, Evaluating New Income Management in the Northern Territory

world, almost double the rate in Texas.⁸ Incarceration entrenches existing disadvantage and increases the likelihood of further contact with the justice system.⁹ The state of incarceration in the NT is particularly concerning given the gross overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in prisons and youth detention centres.

The NT is pursuing justice reinvestment through the NT Aboriginal Justice Agreement ('the Agreement'). The Agreement comprises three aims and 13 commitments to transform justice services and the way they are delivered to Territorians, address causes of offending, and reduce crime. Three major initiatives under the Agreement are:

1. the construction and operation of alternatives to custody facilities;
2. the establishment and support of Law & Justice Groups;
3. the establishment of Community Courts;

In the first of its kind in the NT, the justice reinvestment model under the Agreement is being analysed to deliver a detailed cost benefit analysis which will be presented to the NT Government upon completion.

In developing the Agreement, the Aboriginal Justice Unit and foundational partners conducted over 120 consultations all over the Territory. Underpinning these consultations was respect for cultural values and the expertise of Aboriginal people. The aims and commitments of the Agreement were borne out of listening to and hearing the voices of Aboriginal Territorians. This design process gives the Agreement integrity and legitimacy. To be effective and achieve community buy-in, any initiative to address community safety must be developed and shaped by and with the direct beneficiaries of that work through genuine consultation. Genuine consultation means participants are involved from the beginning and have meaningful input into the design rather than presented with a formulated plan or program for minor comment.

Prevention and Early Intervention

Investment in therapeutic, culturally appropriate primary prevention and early intervention models of care and service delivery would ideally assist in improving community safety, through the provision of services that are centred around long term outcomes with intervention earlier on.

While investing in such services, and ensuring models are fit for purpose to deal with complex cases and intersecting drivers of inequity (such as poverty, homelessness, ongoing impacts of colonisation), ensuring continued service delivery at the crisis point is also important.

⁸ The Sentencing Project, State-by-State Data, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/the-facts/#map?dataset-option=SIR>.

⁹ Justice Reform Initiative (2022), 'State of Incarceration: Insights into Imprisonment in the Northern Territory'.

To assist with this investment, NTCOSS recommends the exploration of ways to deliver funding to jurisdictions based on their relative need of their communities, not based on population.

Noting the high levels of poverty, rates of violence, incarceration rates and homelessness in the Territory, there is evidently great need. However, often funding is delivered on a per capita basis or by one-off grants (without appropriate resourcing built into the agreement to monitor and evaluate outcomes) and is not able to be invested on a long-term basis at an adequate level to meet the need of our communities.

Summary

NTCOSS urges the Australian Government as part of this Inquiry and in reflection of the evidence provided, to work to create evidence-based programs, centred around meaningful engagement, and to work in partnership with communities and in line with commitments such as Closing the Gap to:

- Address structural inequality and poverty to create safer communities and better outcomes
- Invest in primary prevention and early intervention initiatives
- Increase investment in programs that are culturally appropriate and therapeutic
- Community led, meaningful co-design – no top-down approaches
- Implement long term funding models based on need, not population size

Please contact NTCOSS if you have any questions or require any further information regarding this submission.

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