

**House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Family and
Community Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra**

**Late Submission to the Inquiry into Substance
Abuse in Australian Communities**

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Capacity Building to Combat Substance Abuse and Violence in Rural and Remote Aboriginal Communities

My submission is based on over 21 years professional experience in working with rural and remote Aboriginal communities across Australia both as a government officer and as a private consultant.

Proposition One:

To significantly and to permanently reduce substance abuse and violence in rural and remote Aboriginal communities requires economic initiatives in addition to health programs.

It was encouraging to read recommendations 21 and 22 of the *Health is Life* Report prepared by this Standing Committee, whereby pilot programs of local food production were recommended to ATSIC. However, given the failure of the current Commonwealth Government to respond to the report it is difficult to gauge if these recommendations have been followed up in any meaningful way.

Food costs have escalated in rural and remote Aboriginal communities due to the introduction of GST and the recent fuel price rises. I would refer the Standing Committee to the following reports for evidence to cost of food in rural and remote areas of Australia:

- Market Basket Survey 2000 by the Territory Health Services of NT Government;
- Healthy Food Access Basket 1998 by Tropical Public Health Unit for North Queensland;
- Food Supply in Rural South Australia: a Survey on Food Cost, Quality and Variety by the SA Department of Human Services, 2000.

Furthermore, I would argue that the ability of Aboriginal communities to supplement store-bought food with bush tucker has been greatly reduced due to introduced pest such as the cane toad, commercial fishing and land clearing by the pastoral industry. Even in the Northern Territory where Aboriginal people control 50% of the land area the ability to supplement the household food supply by bush tucker has greatly decreased in recent years because of the loss of traditional skills due to the provision of welfare payments.

The shift in life style of Aboriginal people from semi nomadic hunters and gathers to dwellers in settled communities reinforces the need to move to non-traditional forms of food production.

ATSIC's CDEP scheme should be encouraging community organisation to have self-sufficiency in food production as one of their priorities. However, ATSIC's management of the CDEP scheme has been less than initiative with few participants receiving training and accreditation in new skills least of all in food production techniques. The \$800 per participant in training funds allocated in the Commonwealth Budget (22 May 2001) to work-for-the-dole scheme such as CDEP will afford ATSIC the opportunity to address this participant training need. However, the availability of vocational education training (VET) courses in remote areas is a concern as well as the some number, which are available by distance education that will suit communities with low educational levels.

ATSIC's CDEP project officers possess few skills in community development and little genuine monitoring is done to see if workplans achieve their objectives or dovetail with any overall community development plan. A community visit by an ATSIC field officer will last one or two days and is generally restricted to the monitoring of financial reports and audits of CDEP participants to ensure they are not double dipping with Centrelink payments.

I believe ATSIC, State Departments of Agriculture and the TAFE network could be doing far more in a strategic manner to follow up on recommendations 21 & 22 of the *Health Is Life* Report. The work of the Horticulture Skill Program at Northern Territory University (Djama and VET Report 1998) needs to be commended and more adequately resourced by the Commonwealth Government

Depending on climatic location, Paul Sommers' Low cost farming in the humid tropics or Bill Mollison's Arid-Land Permaculture are two publication which could be workshopped with CDEP organisations to encourage local food production. However as the experience of the horticulture skills staff of NTU shows it take a considerable number of visits to support and encourage Aboriginal community members to actively engage in food production.

A much overlooked longitudinal study by JW Cox (Journal Pediatric Child Health, 1996, Vol 32, Pages 99-102) entitled "*The Social and Educational outcomes of a cohort of rural children in relation to racial and socioeconomic groupings of their parents*" would testify the role of meaningful employment in improving the educational and social success of Aboriginal children. I would recommend the study to members of the Standing Committee.

Proposition Two:

That ATSIC's \$11 million National Art and Craft Industry Support Strategy (NACISS) which provides financial support for Aboriginal art and craft centres has unintentionally been one of the best diversionary programs in combating substance abuse and violence in rural and remote Aboriginal communities which have an art and craft centre.

The 1997 review of the NACISS by Professor Colin Mercer highlighted the financial benefits to individual Aboriginal artists and communities, which are active in the production of art and craft products. Furthermore, any program which encourages Aboriginal people to use their time creatively and constructively should be

encouraged because of the resultant reduction in substance abuse. Unfortunately, ATSIC recent decision to relocate the administration of this small program from Canberra to Alice Springs will only reinforce the view in the market place that only Aboriginal art from the central desert area is authentic. This view of which ATSIC should have be aware makes it more difficult for Aboriginal Artists from North Queensland for example to sell their products. A recent visit by David Huggonson to the art galleries of Cairns found extremely little local Aboriginal art on display.

ATSIC is to be commended on the recently publication "*The Art and Craft Centre Story : examples of best practice from Aboriginal art and craft centres in remote Australia*" which will provide coordinators of art and craft centres with examples of ways to improve the commercial viability of their centres and increase the return to their artists. However, the above-mentioned program should be recognised by the Commonwealth Government for its benefits in reducing substance abuse as well as the commercial returns it provides to Aboriginal artists and communities. The Telstra Indigenous Art Award and the NCISS has done much to foster and preserve Aboriginal culture and art but the benefits of such programs need to be recognised by Health Departments for their effect on community well being and their role in the reduction of substance abuse. A research study needs to be undertaken to substantiate the anecdotal evidence that pro-active Aboriginal art and craft centres assist in reducing substance abuse.

Proposition Three:

That the *National Commitment to Improved Outcomes in the Delivery of Programs and Services For Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments on 7 December 1992* has totally failed.

Conditions for Indigenous people in rural and remote Australia in the past ten years have become worse not better despite the above national commitment.

I would cite the following reports and studies as evidence for proposition three:

- Violence in Indigenous Communities by Paul Memmott, Raxchael Stacy, Catherine Chambers and Catherine Keys, University of Queensland, 2001.
- Children in out-of-home care Australia by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra 2000.
- Collins Report on Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory, NT Government.
- Aboriginal Education in Rural Australia : a Case Study in Frustration and Hope by Dr Anne Eckermann, Australian Journal of Education Volume 43, No1, 1999

The increasing desire by the Commonwealth Government to involve itself in areas which were originally state responsibilities such as Health, Education, Land Management and since 1967 Aboriginal Affairs has caused resentment by the State Government and their departments. State Governments firmly believe that they are best equipped to deliver services and resent Commonwealth grant-in-aid programs,

which by pass them and provide funding direct to community organisations. This is one of the root causes behind the lack of cooperation between State Health Services and Aboriginal Medical Services.

With regard to the National Commitment there was a reluctance even from Commonwealth agencies to recognise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) as the coordinating body to oversight the improved outcome which were to flow from a more strategic and cooperative approach to program and service delivery.

This lack of recognition of ATSIC's coordination role was reinforced by the establishment of the Office of Indigenous Affairs which more recently has been expanded to the Department of Reconciliation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

Recent administrative changes at ATSIC, which have divorced policy formulation from program management, have seen ATSIC adopt more of an advocacy role than a source of independent policy advice to the Minister or the Commonwealth Government. Furthermore, ATSIC commitment to empowering their regional councils and fostering a regional framework has worked against the development of holistic community development plans and their implementation. In my view, Australia least of all Indigenous Australia, hardly needs a fourth sphere of Government.

Proposition Four:

In 1998, despite a lack of independent evidence as to their long-term effectiveness Aboriginal residential rehabilitation centres, still received 50% of the Commonwealth substance misuse funding. Other Aboriginal Services attempting to develop initiative program within their home communities were under resourced and their staffs are poorly trained. Aboriginal community-based organisations are provided with little information about the variety of treatment options for substance abuse and successful preventative programs in operation in other part of Australia or the world.

There is an urgent need to develop a capacity building program for Aboriginal organisations providing services to reduce substance abuse or the level of violence in their communities. The first step in this capacity building program is the development of a holistic community development plan, which incorporates the following guidelines

- a means of collective decision making;
- where the process of formulation is as important than the product document;
- a dynamic and flexible ongoing process;
- a way of clarifying direction, objectives and strategies;
- innovative and looking for new opportunities;
- a training plan for staff;
- an implementation strategy;
- specified time frame.

The proposed community development plans should have the input and commitment of all Aboriginal organisations, which operate in any given geographical community, including the local government council, and state agencies such as the police service and the local school.

The Community Services Training Package (CHC99) is a suitable national accredited vocational educational training package for Aboriginal organisations which are providing services to combat substance abuse and community violence. However, few educational institutions have developed the package so it can be delivered by distance education.

The Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and the Australian National Training Authority should jointly fund a project to tailor the Community Services Training Package to meet the needs of Aboriginal Community Organisations delivering a service to combat substance abuse and community violence so that it can be delivered nationally by distance education. The effectiveness of the proposed training should be reviewed at the end of a twelve-month period.

There is an urgent need for the workshopping of research findings with substance abuse prevention workers and Board of Directors of Aboriginal Organisations to inform them of initiative and effective programs which are operating in Australia and other western countries. Far too often research findings are published in an academic journal and do not reach workers

Proposition Five:

That in the Northern Territory and Queensland where an Aboriginal Community Government Council may operate a wet canteen, the income from these canteens may be counted in calculating the salary of shire clerks, which can be geared to council income. This fact may encourage greater sales of alcohol rather than encourage restrictions on sales and opening hours of wet canteens.

The operation of wet canteens, which limit the hours of opening and set a limit on take-away sales, is a preferred option to total prohibition, which only plays into the hands sly grog merchants and greatly inflates the price of alcohol.

Proposition Six:

Aboriginal communities which impose bands on alcohol simply transfer the problem of binge drinking to their nearest service centre and cities such as Katherine, Cairns, Alice Springs, and Mt Isa are experience increasing social problems cause by itinerant Aborigines from outlying communities. Local Government Councils and service organisations in these service centres are under resourced and ill informed of methods to deal with itinerant binge drinkers.

To the best of my knowledge the 1995 ATSIC/Australian Local Government Association funded national workshop conducted by the Australian National University was the only attempt to address this issue in a collective way. Funding was never provided so that the national workshop could be followed up with training for Aboriginal Community Development Workers employed by Local Government Councils and local strategies developed.

My recommendations to the Standing Committee

(1) That the Standing Committee recognize that to reduce substance abuse and community violence in rural and remote Aboriginal communities requires the development of economic self-sufficiency as well as health programs.

(2) That all Commonwealth and State Government agencies involved in providing programs and services to remote Indigenous community should adopt a strategic approach to encouraging self-sufficiency in food production to the maximum that climatic conditions will allow.

(3) That ATSIC assist all rural and remote Indigenous communities to develop over a six-month period a holistic community development plan and implementation strategy and that ATSIC Regional Councils and National Program Managers provide financial support based on the priorities established during the community planning process.

(4) That Commonwealth and State Governments commit to supporting a bottom-up approach to community development and provide financial and technical resources to Aboriginal community-based organisations based on their holistic community development plan rather than the program guidelines of individual government agencies.

(5) The Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health develop a best practice information package suitable for workshopping with substance abuse workers and Board of Directors of Aboriginal Organisations to inform them of initiative and effective programs which are operating in Australia and other western countries.

(6) The Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and the Australian National Training Authority jointly fund a project to tailor the Community Services Training Package to meet the needs of Aboriginal Community Organisations, which are delivering a service to combat substance abuse and community violence so that the training package can be delivered nationally by distance education. The effectiveness of the proposed training should be reviewed at the end of a twelve-month period.

(7) That the Standing Committee commend the ATSIC Board of Commissioners on their program of assistance to Aboriginal Art and Craft Centres and encourage them to fund a comparative study to investigate whether Aboriginal Art and Craft Centres help reduce substance abuse and community violence.

(8) That in the Northern Territory and Queensland where an Aboriginal Community Government Council may operate a wet canteen, the income from these canteens should not be counted in calculating the salary of shire clerks.

(9) That the Commonwealth Government through the National Office of Local Government fund Local Government Councils which are service centres to outlying Aboriginal settlements to develop strategies to cope more successfully with itinerant Aboriginal binge drinkers and that training programs be established to train Aboriginal Community Development Officers employed by Local Government Councils in methods to combat substance abuse.