

## **WONGATHA REGIONAL COUNCIL**

### **SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

The Wongatha Regional Council thanks the Committee for meeting with Council in Kalgoorlie on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2000. Further to the matters discussed at that meeting, Council also offers the following views and comments on the matters covered by the Terms of Reference for the Committee's Inquiry into the needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

#### **General Statement**

The Wongatha Regional Council feels strongly that a significant increase in government funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services is urgently required to enable a concerted effort in addressing the economic and social disadvantage faced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia.

While \$2.3 billion is identified as Federal Government expenditure on Indigenous specific programs, this funding is spread across a wide range of service areas and is not a large amount when considered against such needs as the housing and infrastructure backlog. ATSIC's current funding allocations for housing are not able to even keep pace with population increases, let alone reduce the backlog of need.

Increased recognition and acceptance of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by the WA State Government would mean that Federal funding that is currently directed through ATSIC to meet the costs of infrastructure, essential services and municipal services in town reserves and remote communities in WA would be freed up for programs and services which could address other areas of disadvantage (eg the specific needs of youth).

The Wongatha Regional Council feels very strongly that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth require particular attention as their needs are currently left largely unaddressed. This is a reflection of the current government emphasis on basic areas of need such as health and housing but the lack of attention to youth is of concern given that the Aboriginal population has a particularly youthful profile. While it is accepted that these basic needs must be met, it is essential that there be a more holistic approach to addressing the overall needs of disadvantaged indigenous people.

The Wongatha Regional Council strongly believes that the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are best met by programs and services provided by Aboriginal people themselves and that ATSIC with its elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives is uniquely placed to administer such funding for the government. Council considers that instead of reducing ATSIC's funding as occurred in the past, the government should be increasing ATSIC's funding to properly resource it. When ATSIC's global budget was reduced previously, the Board was effectively forced to eliminate program areas despite their importance in addressing the needs of ATSIC's clients. As a result the Training and Community and Youth Support Programs were terminated and no other agency has been able to fill this gap.

## **Term of Reference One**

*The nature of existing programs and services available to urban dwelling indigenous Australians, including ways to more effectively deliver services, considering the special needs of these people.*

The Wongatha Regional Council stresses the importance of Aboriginal control of programs and services for Aboriginal people as Aboriginal people best understand the issues involved. Council considers that it is important for grassroots indigenous people to identify the needs of indigenous people and to design and deliver appropriate programs and services.

ATSIC, with its elected indigenous representatives, is able to ensure that this occurs within the parameters of ATSIC's funding programs. While mainstream organisations (both government and non-government) may be suited to program delivery from an administrative point of view they are not the most appropriate bodies in terms of cultural understanding and other community development aspects. Council considers that many other programs and services currently provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could be more effectively delivered by ATSIC.

The Wongatha Regional Council considers that it is vital that such programs as ATSIC's CDEP program remain with ATSIC given their huge importance to participating organisations and ATSIC's ability to service these organisations and their projects with its network of field staff. ATSIC is uniquely placed to respond to the cultural and social issues associated with service delivery to indigenous organisations and the special needs of its clients are recognised and given priority as a result by both the administrative and elected arms.

## **Term of Reference Two**

*Ways to extend the involvement of urban indigenous people in decision making affecting their local communities, including partnership governance arrangements.*

The Wongatha Regional Council considers that it is necessary to encourage city and shire councils to involve Aboriginal people more fully in local community decision making, even if it is an informal sub-committee level where the views of the indigenous population are sought to assist in the councils' decision making processes.

Another way of extending the involvement of indigenous people in decision making affecting their communities is to extend ATSIC funding programs as ATSIC's Regional Councils fund indigenous organisations and communities to deliver and administer projects in their communities, both remote and urban.

### **Term of Reference Three**

*The situation and needs of indigenous young people in urban areas, especially relating to health, education, employment, and homelessness (including access to services funded from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program).*

The Wongatha Regional Council considers that the needs of indigenous youth are generally not accorded a high enough priority across the board. There are enormous needs in the areas of education (including far greater support for Aboriginal students at school), health, employment, housing and in the area of youth support. The high suicide rates for indigenous youth are a strong indicator that society is failing them and that they need far more support and attention.

Council feels very strongly that sport and recreation services for youth at all skill levels is critical in helping to address some of the issues facing youth, particularly in terms of self-esteem and also as a preventative and diversionary approach from the justice system where indigenous youth are grossly over-represented. While acknowledging the need for support for elite indigenous athletes, Council stresses the need for good quality recreational programs for children and youth at the community level. Council considers that ATSIC is grossly under-funded to handle the many areas of need it seeks to address, including youth support.

In terms of education, Council considers that far more could be done to assist students while at school and to assist prepare indigenous youth for employment (for example more pre-employment courses for indigenous youth who have not completed schooling). Council also considers that indigenous students would be supported to a much greater degree in the state school system if there was more recognition and support for the Aboriginal Islander Education Officers. This recognition and support should be extended to a formal qualification to provide them with professional standing in the education system.

Council also considers that improvements should be made to the Abstudy scheme, particularly in the requirement to have paid course fees before application for Abstudy can be made. Many students are unable to afford to do this due to their low incomes and require the Abstudy allowance first so that they can pay the fees.

In the area of health, Council considers that improvements could be made by ensuring that indigenous health workers, who are out-posted to smaller urban centres, are adequately resourced for their role. As health workers provide a vital link with the mainstream health system for many indigenous people, it is critical that they are provided with the support and resources to do their jobs properly. Such resources include access to a vehicle for home visits, access to private consulting rooms to ensure client comfort and confidentiality and access to appropriate medical supplies.

#### **Term of Reference Four**

*The maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in urban areas, including, where appropriate, ways in which such maintenance can be encouraged.*

The Wongatha Regional Council feels very strongly that urban dwelling indigenous people generally have a lack of visual cultural identity in the eyes of the wider population. Council considers that this could be addressed through a variety of ways including a greater involvement of indigenous people on city and shire councils (possibly on sub-committees for relevant issues) so that Councils not only took into account the indigenous population's views and attitudes but also so that greater emphasis was placed on recognising the cultural identity of the local indigenous population in practical ways, such as parks, special symbols, signs and support for indigenous museums and cultural centres.

#### **Term of Reference Five**

*Opportunities for economic independence in urban areas.*

The Wongatha Regional Council considers that while there are varying opportunities for economic independence depending to some degree on the particular location, all such opportunities for indigenous people require greater support. This support would involve far greater resources being provided for mentoring (particularly for indigenous businesses and enterprises in their initial development and establishment stages), financial advice, advice regarding possible pitfalls in business opportunities, and assistance with research into business opportunities. Easy access to all such services is also essential.

#### **Term of Reference Six**

*Urban housing needs and the particular problems and difficulties associated with urban areas.*

The Wongatha Regional Council considers that urban dwelling young indigenous people face a very difficult situation as in many cases their incomes are low, private rental housing is often very expensive (as evidenced in Kalgoorlie) and public housing is very limited and requires long periods on waiting lists. Young people, both single and with families, are often required to live for extended periods of time with other families in very overcrowded houses. This situation results in many additional social and economic problems which impact on most areas of their lives. Council considers that there needs to be far greater availability of public housing in recognition of the extremely difficult living conditions faced by many urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of all age groups.