



Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils Limited

Our ref:

Friday, 13 October 2000

Secretary,
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam:

Re: Inquiry into the Needs of Urban Dwelling Indigenous People

WSROC appreciates the opportunity to make submission to this Inquiry and particularly support the emphasis on encouraging the involvement of Indigenous people in decision-making that was made in media releases. We look forward to notification of the hearing(s) with the Standing Committee in our region and will endeavour to pass on this notification to Indigenous people and their agencies at every opportunity.

In recent years local governments in our region have increased their involvement in social planning, doing so through improved community participation in decision making, including that with Indigenous people. Our experience has generally been that Indigenous community participation in policy and planning processes is sometimes difficult to secure, but essential to the formulation of appropriate policies which have the support and commitment of the Indigenous community.

Given the short timeframe for this submission, WSROC has not been able to organise Indigenous community discussion on the issues before the Inquiry. However, the recent consultations alluded to above, do provide some indication of Indigenous views that may be relevant. Accordingly, WSROC has convened a meeting of local government officers responsible for Indigenous consultation in their areas which has developed some recommendations for examination through the Inquiry.

With regard to the timeframe and processes for this Inquiry, we are concerned that there may not be the opportunity for participation by local Indigenous people and smaller Indigenous organisations. We understand that the initial notification of this Inquiry did not occur until September 5th, while the closing date for submission is today, the 13th of October, a little over 1 month.

Our experience is that a realistic period for discussion amongst the Indigenous community, particularly with respect to a broad ranging and important review of

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Commonwealth Government policy, is likely to be a number of months, or longer. In this regard, we do not have details of the hearing schedule, or of any other processes that the Standing Committee is using to secure Indigenous involvement in this Inquiry, and so our concern may be unfounded.

What could further complicate securing Indigenous involvement in this Inquiry is the considerable cynicism expressed by many Indigenous people in our region towards current Federal Government policies affecting them, and what seems to be continuous research and inquiry, but little action. Foremost in people's minds are the recent very negative responses by the Federal Government, and other figures at the federal level, to two of the most significant Inquiries, these being the *Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* report and the *Bringing them Home* Report. This level of cynicism may mitigate against the participation of Indigenous people in this Inquiry

Consequently our first recommendation to the Inquiry is that decisions about changes to policy and resource allocation should not be made unless the Standing Committee is convinced that these decisions are based on detailed input from, and have the widespread support of, the Indigenous community.

With respect to the issues to be investigated through the Inquiry, the following points were raised at our meeting:

1. while it is undoubtedly important to consider the issues of "health, education, employment and homelessness" with regard to young people, this should not deflect attention to their relevance to the entire population.

Low levels of education and employment of Indigenous people are particularly evident in our region, these being amongst the lowest in the State, as documented in recent research and Census Data. New initiatives to address these problems for all age groups are needed;

2. initiatives for improving economic independence could consider strategies that combine capital investment in community centres with Business Incubators and support of Cooperative type organisational structures;
3. we would also support the recommendations of ATSIC with regard to the establishment of Regional Authorities which would, among other things, be able to enter into commercial agreements for the benefit and on behalf of Indigenous people in the region;
4. there is a widespread need for investment in land and buildings for meeting places, offices from which to run services, spaces to exhibit artworks and promote cultural activities and simply to be secure and community "owned" premises where support can be given to Indigenous people in need or crisis. In our region the number of Indigenous services and associations has increased, but there are too few places for them to deliver support for their communities;
5. in addition to resources and premises, Indigenous organisations and associations are generally in need of management support in the form of training and establishment funding in order to create sound management and organisational structures. ATSIC and Commonwealth departments provide funds for a range of Indigenous services, but there is not the management training and support that should accompany these funding programs.



In many instances, there being too few Indigenous people with management skills necessitates the employment of non-Indigenous people in positions of responsibility in these organisations, which is at odds with the community's desire for self determination. The Inquiry could look at strategies that support processes of "on the job" training for potential Indigenous managers.

6. Indigenous workers in Indigenous and mainstream organisation are commonly over-committed and under-resourced for the population and areas that they are expected to cover. This situation leads to premature "burn-out" and consequent high turnover of staff and high staff training and orientation costs, which in turn represents a significant depletion of resources for the delivery of service to the community. More funding and support is required for Indigenous worker projects;
7. more culturally appropriate aged care services, particularly nursing homes, retirement villages and respite care, are needed;
8. youth suicide remains a growing and serious problem, despite funding of support programmes

WSROC would welcome the opportunity to present on these issues to a hearing of the Committee, should there be an opportunity to do so. If you have any questions, please contact me on 02 9671 4333 or email: alex@wsroc.com.au

Yours sincerely,

Alex Gooding
Executive Director