

**SUBMISSION TO THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS -
INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY STORES IN REMOTE
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

**Prepared by
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DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES**

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The Western Australian Department for Communities (DfC) was established in 2007, bringing together a diverse range of functions and services that aim to strengthen communities and the social fabric of Western Australia. DfC incorporates strong policy focuses on communities of interest through the Office for Youth, the Office for Women's Policy, the Office for Seniors and Carers, the Family and Domestic Violence Unit, the Volunteering Secretariat, Children and Family Services. In addition, the Department incorporates strong support for children and families through child care licensing, children services policy development, practical on the ground support for delivery of children's services, and a range of universal parenting programs.

This submission provides a response to the terms of reference of the Inquiry into community stores in remote Indigenous communities from the perspective of Indigenous women, children and families in remote communities of Western Australia. It also contains the views of Indigenous women from rural and remote communities throughout Western Australia including members and their constituents of the Indigenous Women's Congress.

Community stores are the main, often sole, source of food in remote communities. The quality, cost and availability of food can have a significant impact on the health, wellbeing, education and economic outcomes of Indigenous communities. Women are often the primary providers of food in these communities and play a key role in the type and quantities of food consumed within a family household. Insufficient nutrition and health at a young age has a demonstrated impact on a child's growth and development, educational capacity and life-long eating patterns.

The submission herein provides a response to terms of reference 1 and 3 of the Inquiry.

Overview

The role of community stores in Indigenous communities in providing access to healthy, affordable and quality food is acknowledged as one important component in a range of public policy measures that support the health and wellbeing in Indigenous people living in remote communities. Food is a fundamental human need. Without access to food, individuals and indeed a community of people cannot survive. In many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Western Australia access to food is not necessarily a certainty, particularly fresh food.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women play a key role as providers of food and preparation of meals for the family. Without sufficient food to nourish and provide to families, women are faced with a dilemma in carrying out their inherent role of caring for children and family members and ultimately the survival of their children and elderly people.

The Department for Communities (DfC) has staff in key regional centres throughout WA that provide support services to remote Aboriginal communities. Often these are delivered in partnership with other government departments and non government agencies. Additionally DfC funds eight occasional child care services in the Kimberley region. Services include providing information, advice and support in relation to setting up child care and playgroups and Best Start for young children and information about parenting and the importance of the early years

TERM OF REFERENCE 1: Food supply, quality, cost and competition issues

Delivery and supply of food products

Remote regions of Western Australia are characterised by large geographic areas, with towns and Indigenous communities isolated by distance and accessibility. This has an impact on the delivery of food and its quality to communities living in these areas.

The weather is a major factor impacting food supply and quality in remotes areas. This is particularly an issue during the annual cyclone season between December and May. At this time, floods can led to roads becoming impassable and thus, trucks are unable to deliver goods and products. It is not uncommon for communities to be cut-off for weeks and months in these situations.

Once food is successfully delivered, many communities do not necessarily have the infrastructure and operating equipment to store and refrigerate the food, both fresh and frozen produce. Further, this is often impacted upon by intermittent supply of electricity (and thus, refrigeration capacity) and the availability of service technicians to resolve electricity and phone service problems.

The needs of a remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community for regular service delivery of fresh, essential food and other products is vital for the people living in these communities, as it is for people living in regional towns or the city.

Recommendation:

- That the needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in terms of access to food, water, shelter and services is considered in the same light as it is to a regional town, city suburb or rural community.
- It is further recommended that members of the Inquiry standing committee visit a remote community for at least a week to get first hand knowledge and a clearer perspective on the issues Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face on a daily basis.

Quality of food

Overall, remote communities have low levels of fresh, nutritious fruit and vegetables available at reasonable cost. However, it is acknowledged that the quality of the community stores varies considerably. Some actively support healthy food options, and assist with local programs such as breakfast clubs and Food Bank lunches. Often this is a response to the culture towards food in the community itself, for example where the people are participating in traditional hunting or fishing activities, there is often an emphasis on "growing children up strong".

There is very limited provision of fresh food in the form of fresh sandwiches, rice, pasta, cheese, yoghurt and salads in most stores. However these items are very popular in communities where they are provided as part of a breakfast or lunch prepared by the parents at a Breakfast Club or through the Home and Community Care centre. Instead there is a high proportion of pre packaged and instant style meals which are usually high in fat and sodium, and high in profit making ability. Pies, pasties, fried chicken and chips are the key take away meals provided for adults and school children.

Traditional foods are a very important source of nutrition that supplements other food sources and there are positive aspects that contribute to the sustainability of culture as well. There is however one barrier and that is the available transport or vehicle to be able to travel to the hunting grounds. The contemporary changes in lifestyle today allows for consistency in practicing traditional food practices and in accordance with the seasons.

Recommendation

- That the value of traditional food practices are recognised and encouraged in support of Indigenous communities continuing these practices to provide a valuable source of nutrition to Indigenous people.
- That a community development program is implemented to support the above recommendation.

Geographical Access

The work of this Inquiry is important to place in the context of geographical accessibility to community stores. It would be incorrect to assume that community stores operate in each remote Indigenous community and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in these areas are able to purchase good quality food on a daily basis. This is not the reality for all remote communities in Western Australia. For example, in one community in the Murchison Gascoyne region of Western Australia the closest store is 300km away. The cost of transport to travel that distance significantly reduces the amount of money left to purchase goods and services. The Burringurrah Aboriginal Corporation was recently placed under special administration after a failure to meet elements of its constitution. The Corporation, which operated under a special act of Parliament, provided services to 300 residents of the Burringurrah community, located 450km east of Carnarvon who will be impacted by this situation.

Recommendation:

- That a review is undertaken to investigate the reasons for the closure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stores.

Accessibility

Access to stores that exist in remote communities also depends on the opening hours. In city suburbs and many regional towns, stores open for the whole day. Opening hours of community stores in remote areas are frequently restricted to a few hours in the morning and evening only, making it difficult for people to purchase food during the day according to their requirements. It also has a flow on effect to retention of children at school. Anecdotal evidence reveals that limited opening hours can result in children leaving school to go to the store when it opens and not return to class afterwards.

Access also relates to being able to enter the store. An example was cited from the community of Aboriginal women being banned from shops because they didn't meet the personal hygiene standards of the non-Indigenous shop owner. In some cases women have also been banned because of stealing history. Stealing is a criminal offence and should be dealt with through the criminal system not by limitation of access by the store owner. This is a punishment towards the woman but also a barrier to her capacity to purchasing food to provide for her children. To deal with this, another family member will attempt to buy the food required however the shop owner has then been known to also ban family members.

Recommendation:

- That a review is conducted on the practice of banning people from stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- That non-Indigenous people who either own the store or manages the store in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive cultural awareness training to ensure the local Indigenous community are not disadvantaged in being able to purchase what is needed to feed their families.

TERM OF REFERENCE 3: Impact on health and economic outcomes

Remote Indigenous communities face a multitude of issues affecting their health and economic outcomes, the issues around food stores must be considered in this context. Fixing the issues for remote community stores will not fix all the issues being experienced in these communities. However, access to fresh, nutritious food options that are appropriately priced does form one important factor that contributes to enabling positive choices about individual health and wellbeing, which directly impacts on educational potential and economic outcomes.

The delivery and supply of quality food to remote community stores has a huge impact on the health of the community members, in particular children who require a consistent source of nutrition to give them a positive start to their growth and wellbeing.

Economic outcomes cannot be fully realised without access to education, which is also affected by the distances, infrastructure and services provided in remote communities.

Recommendation:

- That agencies, local government, service providers and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities work collaboratively to ensure that the supply and sustainability of quality food and related issues such as health, nutrition, education is addressed.

Children

DfC staff have identified a number of issues of concern that impact on the future health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children. Access to nutritious food containing essential vitamins and minerals is of also of particular importance for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

Critical nutritional pathways are laid down in very early childhood which will impact on a child's later development in adolescence and adulthood. That is, the types and variety of food available to a baby and toddler will impact on their later consumption patterns. Further, socialisation experiences in the family and in other settings impact on the types and amounts of food eaten by children. Playgroups and child care centres in many communities find it very difficult to implement a healthy eating policy and guidelines. The healthy food is too expensive, not fresh or very hard to access. This can result in failure to meet mainstream licensing standards.

Ownership

A key issue in relation to community stores is ownership. Consultation conducted with Indigenous women in Western Australia revealed a concern and lack of understanding about issues such as who owns the store, whether community shareholders involved or whether ownership is private or franchised.

A key example illustrating the complexity of these arrangements is the instance of a relationship/marriage between a non-Indigenous man and a local woman that led to a store being run under the woman's Indigenous name but controlled by the non-Indigenous spouse. It is vital thus that owners and managers of remote community stores hold the necessary qualification and experience to operate a store including knowledge of the policy on health standards and cultural awareness.

Recommendation:

- Ownership of remote community stores to be reviewed and clarified with the communities themselves.
- That the recruitment and selection process includes ensuring managers are qualified and have experience in operating a store including cultural awareness training.

Employment

The workforce operating the stores should reflect the composition of the community. Quality employment opportunities should be provided to the Indigenous community by the store. This is an important component of fostering a sense of ownership in the community and also for the storeowner to 'give back' to the community.

Clarity is also required about the relationship between owners and the food suppliers. The consultation highlight concern that large corporate companies providing supplies make deliberate choices to send poor quality or out-of-date stock to the communities. The focus should be on the health, wellbeing and economic potential of the community but is often driven by sales and profit margins.

Recommendation

- That traineeships in store management are available, offered and delivered to interested local Indigenous people, supported by the store manager, to transfer practical skills and experience.

Layout of stores and design of food location

The layout of stores and its products is a key marketing strategy by the business and food companies involved in the store. The lack of competition in remote communities allows design to be dictated by companies with vested interests in selling their products rather than facilitating healthy choices. Junk food, such as soft drinks and chips are frequently sold more often than fruit and vegetables. This is due to accessibility and promotion but also pricing.

Pricing

It has been observed that in some community stores there are often two prices - one for the local Aboriginal population and one for the non-Indigenous visitors and tourists. The cost of items of goods in community stores are often well above what is paid for the same item in town or city store. It is understandable that the price will be higher due to transport costs but how accurate this is reflected needs to be examined. An article in the Sydney Morning Herald in August 2008, cited Mulan, a tiny Aboriginal settlement at the top of the Tanami Desert, as one of the most expensive places to buy food in Australia. Prices documented in the article included potatoes at \$1.50 each, \$14 for half a pumpkin. Indeed, the high cost of food severely limits capacity to eat a health diet. It is also reported that most of the 160 people in the Mulan community do not own fridges and therefore cannot buy food fresh or in bulk.

The cost of food is always higher than in the nearest town due to freight costs. An example was provided that the cost per truckload for delivery to communities such as Balgo is \$11,000 from the supplier in Alice Springs. However many stores that do not have such large costs still implement price hiking on common food or household items; powdered milk for \$20 per tin (normally \$7.00), baked beans \$4.00 (usually \$1), grapes \$29.00 per kilo, capsicum \$12.00 each.

Reports were also provided of stores selling cigarettes individually at huge profits and cheap clothing imports being sold for many times their value.

Recommendation:

- A review is undertaken to compare the price of food in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stores to city prices and the difference in costs to the customer.

Centrelink and Income Management

Income Management (IM) is a child protection measure managed by the Department for Child Protection (DCP) in WA. It is legislated under the *Commonwealth Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Act 2007*. The initiative occurs in three departmental Districts – the East Kimberley, the West Kimberley and the metropolitan Cannington District. Under this measure, DCP can refer parents to Centrelink for IM where it has been assessed that neglect is occurring, where the parent's use of available financial resources is contributing to the neglect and IM is in the best interests of the child. In addition, the measure can be used as part of a reunification plan to enable a child to return home safely. This measure is applied on a case by case response, not at a community-wide level. IM restricts the availability of monies for alcohol, tobacco and purchase of pornography.

The consultation revealed that it is common practice in many remote communities for store owners to hold peoples cards and money as credit for purchases. It is understood that in some cases Centrelink payments are sent to the store by CDEP and the manager then deducts the costs, holds their cards and deduct without

approval. This initiative raises questions about the implementation of income management in the Kimberley. There was concern raised that the implementation of IM will support stores even further to hold onto and control or manage people's income.

The booking up practices also has flow on effects where families are extended credit but get into debt and will then be refused entry to the store. This impacts on vulnerable family members such as babies and young children who then have no access to food and can become malnourished or are diagnosed as "failure to thrive" babies. Anecdotally, it is reported that some stores will cash large cheques for community residents. They then insist that the majority of the money has to be spent at the store and only provide the resident with a small amount of cash.

The cost of living is continually rising including the costs of rent, water, electricity, gas and interest rates. As a result of this many families are facing poverty and crisis situations. The cost of living in a remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is even higher due to the cost of transport and delivery of food to the communities and many are facing malnutrition even starvation.

Recommendation:

- That there is a clear process for the implementation of the income management and roles and responsibilities of store owners in this initiative are clarified and clearly documented.
- That, Centrelink payments are increased for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities to cover the high cost of food and utilities.

Summary of Recommendations

The quality, cost and availability of food can have a significant impact on the health, wellbeing, education and economic outcomes of Indigenous communities.

The role of community stores in Indigenous communities in providing access to healthy, affordable and quality food is acknowledged as one important component in a range of public policy measures that support the health and wellbeing in Indigenous people living in remote communities.

Consultation with service providers in remote areas and members of the Indigenous community throughout Western Australia reveal that access to nutritious food options is severely compromised in remote areas for a variety of reasons discussed in submission.

This submission recommends:

- That the needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in terms of access to food, water, shelter and services is considered in the same light as it is to a regional town, city suburb or rural community.
- It is further recommended that members of the Inquiry standing committee visit a remote community for at least a week to get first hand knowledge and a clearer perspective on the issues Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face on a daily basis.
- That a review is undertaken to investigate the reasons for the closure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stores.

- That a review is conducted on the practice of banning people from stores in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- That non-Indigenous people who either own the store or manages the store in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive cultural awareness training to ensure the local Indigenous community are not disadvantaged in being able to purchase what is needed to feed their families.
- That agencies, local government, service providers and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities work collaboratively to ensure that the supply and sustainability of quality food and related issues such as health, nutrition, education is addressed.
- Ownership of remote community stores to be reviewed and clarified with the communities themselves.
- That the recruitment and selection process includes ensuring managers are qualified and have experience in operating a store including cultural awareness training.
- A review is undertaken to compare the price of food in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stores to city prices and the difference in costs to the customer.
- That there is a clear process for the implementation of the income management and roles and responsibilities of store owners in this initiative are clarified and clearly documented.
- That, Centrelink payments are increased for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities to cover the high cost of food and utilities.