HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO A REGIONAL FUNDING MODEL:

SUBMITTED BY MS GAIL (GAY) SHORT

I make this submission based on my extensive experience working with rural communities in the State of Western Australia with the WA Telecentre Network; Federally with Community Teleservice Centres Australia; and as Consultant to the United Nations (International Telecommunication Union) worldwide but in particular to the Asia/Pacific Region.

OPENING STATEMENT:

It is not possible to make decisions on written submissions alone. It is not possible to sit in Geneva and make decisions for underdeveloped countries around the world. It is not possible to sit in Canberra and make decisions on what is best for Australian Regional Communities. It is not possible to sit in Perth and make decisions for that State's rural communities. It is necessary to provide a hands on model so that the best possible use of Taxpayer's monies is achieved.

Simplification of process sounds good but it can lead to disaster. Monies saved can be lost in repairing damage created through lack of knowledge and understanding.

Establishing a well known and understood process that encompasses all levels, having faith and trust in each level and ensuring there is a strict time line for processing to be undertaken by each level, will ensure the best and most visionary programs are supported. Reaching down to the community and regional level will ensure that proposed grant applications are examined 'face to face' with the proponents, that the content is fully understood by those who recommend/reject the applications and ongoing support and oversight is available for projects where the volunteers are new to such endeavours.

ADDRESSING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE:

This paper seeks to address items 1 & 2 of the terms of reference only:

1. **Provide advice on future funding of regional programs in order to invest in genuine and accountable community infrastructure projects.**
2. **Examine ways to minimize administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers.**
3. Examine the former government's practices and grants outlined in the Australian National Audit Office report on Regional Partnerships with the aim of providing advice on future funding of regional programs (this term of reference will not be discussed in this paper)
4. Examine the former government's practices and grants in the Regional Partnerships Program after the audit period of 2003-2006 with the aim of providing advice on future funding of regional programs. (this term of reference will not be discussed in this paper).

TERMS OF REFERENCE NO 1.

1. **Provide advice on future funding of regional programs in order to invest in genuine and accountable community infrastructure projects.**

Stage 1.   To be completed by the applicant.

An application package that is relevant to a number of levels of scrutiny would be required.

While aspects of the applications will be similar, applications cannot be collectively subjected to a set test and then be expected to be successful. The only way this can be overcome will be to have the applications roots examined at the local level prior to forwarding to the central committee/board.

Stage 2.   Application to be rated for local need/relevance/sustainability by the Local Government Council. If rated highly to be forwarded onto a Regional entity.

Stage 3.   Regional entity. The expertise that has been accumulated by the Area Consultative Committee both regionally and statewide is second to none. This is the most effective selection method I have known during the past 18 years. It is highly recommended that this expertise is retained. This body could rate the application against all other community accepted applications. Those they determine to be applicable would then be sent on to the relevant funding body.

The relevant Regional Coordination group could have a projected annual amount that could be available based on previous needs and in consequence their rigour would be governed by their need to get the best projects approved within this context.

It is essential that Stage 2 and Stage 3 be incorporated in the process. Australia is such a vast country and it is not possible to rate, needs, obstacles , sustainability, community contribution, programs and services from a single central location. Credibility will be compromised if stages 2/3 are deleted.

Stage 4.   Central determination. Currently, one has to realistically plan a wait of 4 – 5 years from project inception to establishment and this includes the endless waiting that takes place as the application moves from desk to desk for endorsement/rejection. In this day and age, video interviews, on-line discussions can take place between the funding body and the applicants. Video conferencing makes it possible to 'eyeball' those whose passion the submitted project is and to ask direct questions concerning anything of concern. The project applicants could be interviewed by the panel charged with making the final decision. Within the local community there are usually very few persons who actually have the skills to write an application. Those who do have the skills will be well informed on community needs and requirements. It is suggested that a meeting takes place during the departmental process and a further one at the decision making level. Ministers are astute people, if they were to interview a nominated Project Representative for a few minutes they would gain far more insight into what they were being asked to fund. Technology is now a part of our daily lives, why not use it?

Stage 5. Projects should fall into two categories. A) Short term one off. B) Long term sustainable programs with self sustainability being clearly demonstrated.

Stage 6. Many projects require ongoing assistance. It does not mean they will not be sustainable eventually but isolation, distance, unexpected trauma's (drought/flood/break-ins etc) can lose a community a vital facility. Provision of regional support will ensure that projects do not fail due to unexpected traumas during the establishment period. Project operators will also help one another if they are networked. The Area Consultative Committee could easily undertake this task as they have extensive knowledge and understanding of their regions.

For example:

VISION EQUALS LONG TERM FINANCIAL SAVINGS. IF OUR COMMUNITIES ARE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO 'PROOF' THEMSELVES NOW, THEY WILL BE READY WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH.

Example: Western Australia has 115 Telecentres. No two are alike. Each one had to be tailored to the needs of the community. This, together with the fact that they have a Support Unit to go to in time of trouble and that they are networked together to allow them to feed off one another, is the reason why they are still operating 16 years later in a sustainable manner and are held up as the worlds' best practice.

Conversely, 128 Telecentres were established federally without ongoing Central Support and without forming a network. Today only 28 centres can be identified, a number of these having joined the WA Telecentre program. This equates to a loss of at least $5,000,000 plus the salaries of the public servants that established the program and all the relevant support that was required to run this program efficiently during the establishment period. The loss of the centres cannot be blamed on the public servants, it must sit firmly with the policy makers, who did not understand the regional and remote requirements. It is hoped that examples such as this will serve to caution the current policy makers and that they will learn from history and avoid making the same mistakes again.

Other: Regional, rural and remote Australia is important and has urgent needs. A time frame needs to be established and adhered to. Having to wait 12 months from the time of submission to the relevant department until you are told you will/will not be funded is not acceptable. Funding bodies also require the applicants to wait until funding is approved prior to commencement. This is right and correct but unfair if years are lost in the waiting. If the culling process in Stages 2 and 3 are introduced, the final decision making group will have a much reduced workload and the waiting time should be reduced.

It is possible to 'proof' our rural communities from the bad times. Our community was in need of a lot of 'tender loving care' 10 years ago. Today, it is something to be proud of and each year we continue to build a town that is more and more capable of sustaining itself and that eventually will be self sufficient. Today the residents of the town own the Super Market, Hardware, Gas and Fuel Depot, Newsagency . We have a fine Local Government Council that listens to the people. A Bendigo Bank is operating successfully on a community basis, and a new Community Medical Centre will soon be built. The hospital has Regional Centre status, aged care and palliative care. The Community Centre is awaiting confirmation of grant monies. During the waiting period the

Community Centre Board (MBCC) has taken over responsibility for the Centrelink /emergency relief functions that were going to have to close due to the fact that insufficient funding was available to rent premises. These programs produce 5000+ contact visits per annum with our staff. The MBCC has now been requested to commence an Outreach Program for Nyoongar secondary school students (mentoring, homework support, afternoon tea, provision of additional assistance required to get the students through their secondary education program.) Other programs are waiting.

This MBCC is an excellent example of need, endeavour, unity of purpose, vision, determination and support, utilization of resources on a multipurpose basis, and sustainability as only a one off grant would be required BUT lack of understanding and knowledge of the diverse needs of our vast regional, rural and very remote land and the stoac communities that keep these isolated communities running has seen funding requests for a one off grant fail.

 The OUTCOME will be 'not for profit' programs and services will continue to operate in substandard 'lean to's' and old halls scattered through the community instead of in a corporate location where expensive equipment/IT could be shared and salaried officers could be multi-skilled to assist one another and running costs cut to a minimum.

TERM OF REFERENCE 2.

Examine ways to minimize administrative costs and duplication for taxpayers.

SEE STAGES OUTLINED TERMS OF REFERENCE 1.

1. Stage one. Applicants download application from the net and complete. **Usually undertaken by volunteers – no taxpayers monies involved.**
2. Stage two – Local Government perusal – **no cost to taxpayers – any costs would be born by ratepayers.**
3. Stage three – The Board of Review normally comprises a wide range of members representing all the major communities. Board members may receive an honorarium but this in minimal. The only people that would receive a salary would be the Secretariat staff. This funding would be taxpayers monies HOWEVER, if an organisation such as the ACC is used, their knowledge and insight would reduce the costs that would occur. If, on the other hand this step is eliminated, the number of applications received by the federal body would be greatly increased , many of which would not be in an acceptable format owing to the fact that they would have been prepared and sent without the scrutiny. This would result in hours of additional work (returning and re-receiving of applications/endless phone calls to and from the central body to frustrated applicants by equally frustrated public servants. The process currently takes approximately a year. It would be reasonable to double this lead time. This in turn results in references and referee's being out of date, huge escalation in building costs where infrastructure is required, change of staff with new staff having to come to grips with projects etc. **Cost to taxpayers would be enormous.**

It is necessary to have the 'keepers of the regions' involved, they will ensure that the provider of the grant gets value for money, the recipients receive ongoing support and the community benefits from the project.   Taking away this level of responsibility means distribution of future grants will, even with the best will in the world, once again become a lottery.