

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

This submission has been prepared by Kurrawang Aboriginal Christian Community Inc. Kurrawang is a community of 32 houses located close (18km's) from Kalgoorlie, a major West Australian mining city of about 30,000 people. The community itself houses approximately 130 people.

Kurrawang maintains a policy of no drugs or alcohol, and actively discourages disturbances which are an unwelcome characteristic of many communities. Our aim is to provide a pleasant family environment for people who do not wish to live in a more traditional environment nor wish to live with the social pressures common to many urban areas of Aboriginal housing. Kurrawang plays a vital role in allowing families to lift themselves from the most undesirable aspects of society.

Kurrawang is a recent recipient of a NAHS grant of 3 million dollars, which provided significant improvements to the community.

The Executive Committee of Kurrawang makes the following comments in relation to the areas of interest identified by the Standing Committee.

EXISTING PROGRAMS & SERVICES

The major ongoing programs affecting the welfare of Kurrawang's residents are CDEP and Centrelink services.

1. It is our belief that the recent changes to provide greater opportunity for CDEP participants to access Centrelink benefits, whilst commendable for its aim of improving the lot of CDEP participants, has not been well implemented and in some ways has been detrimental. Participants become fed up with payment delays (e.g. CPS payments), the frequent duplication of information requests, and unanticipated payment adjustments to Centrelink entitlements. The changes have also promoted the concept that "CDEP is work for the dole" in the minds of many participants, which is detrimental to the objectives of CDEP.

Whilst we recognise the need for CDEP participants to liaise with Centrelink with regard to matters such as Health Care cards, Rent Assistance, etc., the service would be considerably improved if:

- a. Allowances were assessed based on information already being gathered and provided by the CDEP rather than treating the participants as welfare recipients;
- b. Simplified access to CDEP program (e.g. by providing proof of income support payment to CDEP, rather than waiting on CDEP Eligibility form to be processed);
- c. CPS payment paid by CDEP with wages rather than from Centrelink;
- d. Reduced impact of CDEP income on entitlements from Centrelink.

2. CDEP participants currently work because they want to. There is little financial attraction, even with the CPS payment, and this acts as a disincentive with the inevitable detriment to outcomes. Recognisable financial incentives compared to “the dole” would result in significantly improved outcomes and allow CDEP organisations to be much stronger on enforcing a “no work no pay” policy. This would lead to CDEP’s only attracting those people who want to commit to working for a living.
3. CDEP is a valuable program which is a sound base to build upon. However, it seems that the views of the people who know how CDEP works in practice (i.e the community coordinators) are rarely acted upon, and many impractical and/or unworkable rules are implemented to the detriment of the CDEP organisations. Over the past 2 years, consultation with CDEP organisations has definitely increased, but this increase has resulted in increased disenchantment by those responsible for keeping the CDEP running, as the outcomes of the consultation rarely seem to take any account of the opinions provided by the CDEP organisations.
4. CDEP would be improved if:
 - a. There was recognition that the informal skills obtained by participants working are equally as important (many would say more important) as the skills obtained through more formal structured training programs;
 - b. Provision was made for payment of supervisors etc. with skills to pass on to other participants. CDEP budgets at present provide sufficient funds for 1 co-ordinator for 50 participants (approximately), but generally this person is so busy with paperwork (which has increased considerably) that they have little time with the participants. If funds were provided for a “second-tier” of supervisors or team leaders (say 1 for every 10 participants) significant improvements would occur in outcomes achieved and skill development;
 - c. There was financial recognition of the benefits provided to society by the outcomes of CDEP (including reduced social costs as a result of the better self-esteem of CDEP participants compared to people “on welfare”);
 - d. There was recognition of the differences between urban-based CDEP’s (where there is opportunity for self-generated income and therefore top-up payments to participants) and community based CDEP’s (which provide a much greater social role but with less opportunity for financial rewards).

HOUSING

Because of Kurrawang’s underlying expectations of behaviour, on average houses are maintained in much better condition than is often observed in other places. We believe that the housing needs for Aboriginal people are best served by:

- a. Providing dwellings appropriate to the nature of the people living in the area;
- b. Enforcement of reasonable expectations regarding number of occupants, health, etc;
- c. Steady growth of dwelling numbers and ensure that appropriate infrastructure grows simultaneously.

Communities like Kurrawang (provided they are well managed) provide an excellent approach to Aboriginal housing, as they offer the advantages of a “community” lifestyle with access to the employment, education, and other opportunities of a major population centre.

EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION, AND TRAINING

We believe education is vital to our youth and every encouragement should be given for our youth to take advantage of the opportunity to learn. Unfortunately, some parents do not share this belief, and we would welcome measures that provide greater enforcement of regular school attendance.

At the same time, the education system must be geared to provide for the needs of the students. All too often educational institutions provide for the “mainstream”, and the disadvantaged, particularly students from homes where learning is not encouraged, are left behind. Special programs should be instituted in schools that provide specifically for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and aim to demonstrate the value of education to the whole family unit.

Vocational training opportunities and subsidised traineeships have assisted many of our people to find unsubsidised employment. These should be continued and promoted.

CDEP should be seen as both a valid method of training (gaining valuable employment skills) and for some people, a valid source of employment for people who do not have the necessary skills to “make it” in the “outside” workplace.

ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

In endeavouring to attain economic independence, one must not lose sight of the need to ensure the future viability of projects prior to commencement and on an ongoing basis. The existing availability of “start-up” grants coupled with assistance on an ongoing basis (reducing over time) is sufficient, but greater effort needs to be put into providing resources for:

- a. Encouraging and developing ideas into sound business plans;
- b. Improving the speed at which funds can be accessed;
- c. Providing access to skilled resources particularly marketing.

Opportunities for Aboriginal people to obtain independence through mainstream employment (as opposed to an “Aboriginal” business) should not be forgotten. Many Aboriginal people are capable of holding a “normal” job if given opportunity. The IEP incentives are one encouragement to employers, but perhaps additional encouragements are required.

SOCIETY

It is our belief that many of the social problems of Aboriginal people are caused by unrestricted access to alcohol, and boredom. Some of the ways these can be alleviated are:

- a. Enforcement of more regular school attendance by children (perhaps by linking family payment benefits to school attendance, thereby making parents more responsible).
- b. At the same time, school must be relevant and cater for the differing needs and capabilities of the students.

- c. Make participation in CDEP compulsory if no other employment is available.
- d. Implementing other schemes to break “the welfare mentality” prevalent among many of our people.

People who are occupied, either as students or at work, have greater self-esteem, less boredom, and less opportunity to create “mischief”. Both positive and negative incentives (i.e. carrot and stick approach) are required, but one rarely works without the other.

SUMMARY

1. CDEP is a good program but would be improved by:
 - a. Making it easier for people to get on;
 - b. Allowing participants to feel they are “no longer on welfare” by reducing the interaction required with Centrelink
 - c. Make funds available to “top up” pays of better skilled workers
2. In all programs there needs to be recognition of the fundamental differences between “community” organisations (whether or not they are remote) and “town-based” organisations.
3. The quality of housing provision is very dependant on the quality of the organisations Executive and Management.
4. Enforcement of school attendance, coupled with provision of relevant education programs, is essential if education standards are to increase.
5. Economic independence can be achieved by:
 - a. Improved education (from pre-school);
 - b. Continued incentive programs to employers;
 - c. Faster processing of funding applications for viable business opportunities;
 - d. Ensuring skilled resources (e.g. marketing, business plans) are easily accessible;
 - e. Allow all programs to provide “reward for effort”.

Signed

Les Tucker
CHAIRPERSON

11 October 2000