

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS  
AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

**Question No. 3**

**Senator Siewert asked the following question at the hearing on 23 May 2012:**

**Senator SIEWERT:** I think the next question involves both Mr Innes and Mr Gooda. On the issue of hearing impairments for prisoners, I have no doubt you are both aware of the high rate of hearing impairment for Aboriginal prisoners. I understand that there are some issues with this for prisoners, but in particular Aboriginal prisoners, given their high rate of hearing impairment. We know from the Darwin Correctional Centre that 90 per cent have some form of hearing impairment or hearing loss. Have you looked into the ability of prisoners to access hearing services?

**Mr Innes:** I talked to some people about that when I was in Darwin recently and it does appear to be a problem. There seems to be a distinction between those who are receiving hearing services when they go into the correction system—from the information I received, those services seem to be able to continue—and those who are not. If they are not receiving those services beforehand and it is determined whilst they are in the correction system that the person does have some level of hearing impairment—and as you say, the rates are incredibly high in the prison system—then the services are not available. There seems to be some problem between the relevant departments to be able to access the services.

I think that is a concern, but the greater concern is the point you made in relation to the rate of people with hearing impairment, particularly Aboriginal people in the justice system. One of the conclusions I have been starting to draw is that when a person has a hearing impairment, in many cases unrecognised, it is, I think, potentially disadvantaging them in their progression through the justice system. I think that is a very large problem, as well.

**Senator SIEWERT:** In regard to the effect it is having on them in the justice system and, secondly, the issue about being able to access services, have you raised these issues with Australian Hearing Services?

**Mr Innes:** I have not spoken to Australian Hearing Services since I went to the Northern Territory, but I have had conversations about the issue prior to that time.

**Senator SIEWERT:** Is it your understanding that Australian Hearing Services are considering providing services to prisoners, but particularly Aboriginal prisoners, who I am worried about in this context?

**Mr Innes:** As I said, I have not spoken to them since I have been to Darwin, so I am not sure that I can comment to that level of detail. But it is something I will be taking up.

**Senator SIEWERT:** Could I ask you to take it on notice.

**The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:**

The Commission confirms that it has not had discussions with Australian Hearing Services about this issue to date.