

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Petrol sniffing causes devastation in Indigenous communities. The health impacts include chronic disability and the social impacts include violence, crime and the breakdown of community structures. Tragically, young Indigenous people are dying as a result of petrol sniffing.

For over twenty years petrol sniffing has been the subject of many reports, reviews, coronial inquiries and research projects. The reasons why young Indigenous people sniff petrol, the disruptive impact on Indigenous communities, and the severe health implications for individuals are well known and have been repeatedly addressed in all of the reports. In fact, the evidence received by the Committee echoed the research already undertaken and again pointed to the multiple causes of petrol sniffing including hunger and poverty, boredom and a lack of meaningful employment opportunities.

The lack of progress in implementing recommendations contained in these reports has created much frustration and despair in communities. Evidence from Indigenous community members indicates persistent unsafe conditions for adults and children. The Committee believes that petrol sniffing in Indigenous communities has become so destructive and the need to find effective solutions is so urgent that the Council of Australian Governments must take responsibility for initiatives that address petrol sniffing.

Short-term solutions will not be found to prevent petrol sniffing in Indigenous communities. The key components to solving the problems of petrol sniffing will be a holistic approach: a whole-of-government approach matched with on-going commitment and sustained funding of programs that engage Indigenous communities.

The Commonwealth's Eight Point Regional Strategy for Central Australia, although restricted to a designated region in Central Australia, is an important initiative in addressing petrol sniffing. This Strategy is promising and contains many elements of a holistic approach but with the implementation so restricted, it will take some time to reach communities in need outside of the designated region.

The Committee considers that the supply of Opal is vital to reducing petrol sniffing. Subject to the availability of Opal, the cost of the roll out of Opal would be offset by savings in health care for those disabled through sniffing as well as a reduction in the cost of support services to communities that are dealing with petrol sniffing.

Effective policing strategies and enabling legislation have contributed to the prevention of sniffing and the trafficking of illicit and licit substance abuse. Effective strategies include the provision of 'safe houses', targeted multi-function police centres, a permanent police presence in communities, community night patrols and the recruitment of community members as Aboriginal Liaison and Community Officers to work alongside sworn police officers.

Community-based programs and initiatives in Indigenous communities have proven to be one highly effective strategy in reducing the prevalence of petrol sniffing. The consultation and involvement of Indigenous community members in the development and operation of such programs is vital to their success. Other essential elements for success include adequate and consistent funding and the provision of strong agency support to assist the communities' capacity to run programs effectively. All of these elements need to be balanced and are dependent on community requirements.

The strength of a community and the determination of key members can produce highly effective community-based programs and services such as those operating at Yuendumu and the Mt Theo outstation, the Central Australia Youth Link-up Service and the Yarrenyty Arltere Learning Centre. Indigenous communities have varying levels of cohesiveness and stability and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach can not be applied across all communities. The sharing of information between communities is valuable and can provide critical information on the successful elements of a program.

Much of the information in this report is not new and encapsulates many of the recommendations of the earlier inquiries and coronial inquests. Evidence received by the Committee constantly suggested the same or similar solutions as those which had already been proposed but not effectively implemented. The priority now is in harnessing the combined effort of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments with Indigenous community members to implement strategies that will really make a difference within communities to reduce petrol sniffing. It is time to move beyond petrol sniffing, to renew hope for Indigenous communities.