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Senator Claire Moore
Chair
Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator Moore 

I refer to your letter of 12 October 2005 on behalf of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee to the Minister for Central Australia the Hon Dr Peter Toyne MLA, inviting a written submission from the Northern Territory Government to the inquiry into petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities. As the responsibility for various volatile substance misuse prevention and intervention programs sit within my portfolio of responsibilities Minister Toyne has asked that I respond on his behalf.

I note that the Australian Senate recognised the efforts of communities and the Australian, State and Northern Territory Governments to reduce petrol sniffing. I also welcome the Australian Government's allocation of Comgas Scheme subsidies of \$19.6 million over four years to encourage communities to supply Opal.

The Northern Territory Legislative Assembly's Select Committee on substance abuse in the community inquiry, in 2004, identified some of the unacceptable harms that can result from volatile substance misuse - social disorder, crime and violence, family disruption and individual injury and disability. More importantly, the Committee also made 17 recommendations about ways to reduce the level of misuse and address the harms associated with this misuse.

The Northern Territory Government subsequently announced a package of measures to tackle volatile substance misuse. Central elements of this package are the new *Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act* and an additional \$10 million over five years for programs to support the Act.



In summary, the new Act provides a range of strategies, including:

1. providing Police and authorised persons with the power to search people and seize and destroy volatile substances that they are inhaling;
2. Police and select authorised persons being able to take people who are at risk to their family, other responsible adults, a place of safety or as a last option to a police station for protective custody;
3. enabling the Minister (following a request from the family, health practitioner, Police or an authorised person) to have a person who is abusing volatile substances compulsorily assessed for their suitability for treatment; then having the application for compulsory treatment heard by a court;
4. enabling residents or community councils to apply for the declaration of a management area with a management plan to control the possession, supply and use of volatile substances (with penalties under the Act for breaches of that plan);
5. protecting informants' identities; and
6. continuing the prohibition on the sale or supply of volatile substances for 'sniffing'.

The Department of Health and Community Services and Department of Justice, along with other agencies such as Police, are urgently developing operational policies and procedures to enable the Act to commence. Support, including funding, is also being provided to various community and alcohol and other drug agencies to establish new or strengthen existing services for people who are misusing volatile substances.

It is planned that a review of the Northern Territory's mix of strategies will be conducted after these new and expanded programs have been in operation for at least one year. At that time we will be able to report on the effectiveness of the new laws and policing activities; as well as the effectiveness of community level prevention, intervention and supply control activities. In the mean time, I would refer the Community Affairs References Committee to the Select Committee's 2004 report on its Inquiry into petrol sniffing in remote Territory communities. Should your Committee require information about specific Territory programs, Ms Joanne Townsend, Director, Alcohol and Other Drugs Program of the Department of Health and Community Services would be most willing to provide this detail. Ms Townsend can be contacted on (08) 8999 2780.

The effectiveness of non-sniffable Opal, the Department of Health and Ageing's 2004 report into its evaluation of the Comgas Scheme confirmed that supply control measures can play a major part in the mix of strategies communities and governments can use to tackle volatile substance misuse. I would be surprised if Opal, which is even more accepted in communities than Avgas, would not achieve results at least comparable with those achieved with Avgas.

All levels of government – Local, State, Territory and Australian – are working with communities and local agencies to reduce volatile substance misuse. The Northern Territory has initiated an imaginative, innovative and targeted program of measures to respond to local problems and is collaborating with other jurisdictions where appropriate. Clearly, there is no single, universally applicable solution; what is required is a balanced mix of approaches which can be tailored to the specific needs, circumstances and capabilities of individual communities. Supply control measures, such as removal or substitution of those substances which are misused, can be very effective. The rollout of Opal is not the complete solution but there can be no solution without it.

It is the position of the Northern Territory Government that Opal should be rolled out across all regions prone to petrol sniffing as soon as possible as a matter of course. This includes Alice Springs where the local council supports such a move.

While the costs are significant they remain a tiny fraction of the \$12 billion the Commonwealth receives from fuel excises. It should be noted that the excise revenues received by the Commonwealth from the sale of Opal remain well beyond the subsidies provided. Any reduction in petrol sniffing will result in significant savings for Commonwealth, State and Territory and Local Governments across the board.

I wish the Senate Community Affairs References Committee every success with its inquiry into petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities and look forward to hearing about the findings, some of which I would hope will further inform program development in the Northern Territory and elsewhere in Australia.

Yours sincerely



DELIA LAWRIE

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