

Submission from Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi
Aboriginal Corporation

To the Senate Community Affairs References
Committee, Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote
Aboriginal Communities,

November 2005

Introduction

The following is a submission from Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation (Waltja) in response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee's invitation to inform the Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities. It addresses each of the three matters being investigated through this Inquiry.

We have included a copy of our response to NT Dept Health & Community Services in February 2005 regarding the VSAP Bill introduced to Parliament and subsequently enacted later this year as *Attachment 1*.

Attachment 2 is a table summarising the range of responses to VSAP (Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention) Waltja's youth services team has put together to inform discussion by our management committee regarding our organisation's priority areas.

Introducing Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi is Luritja for "*doing good work with families.*" We work with and represent the interests of women and their families from some 20 remote communities in the Central Desert region of Australia mainly in the NT but also including SA and WA. Culture and language remain strong in our region despite well publicised – and genuine - hardships associated with poverty, lack of meaningful employment, geographical isolation, and lack of access to a range of services most other Australians take for granted. Our members are all Aboriginal women living in remote communities who take a strong and active role in improving the situation for all their people and in determining Waltja's strategic objectives and priorities. Waltja's approach in supporting projects and services in remote communities emphasises community driven practice, cultural brokerage, and is characterised by staff and management working well together cross culturally.

Waltja is a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) offering training, support and mentoring across a range of service areas including children's, youth and aged care services, nutrition, and disability. We also operate a Publications Unit which produces *Family News*, a quality, regular magazine as well as innovative reports, handbooks, flip charts and other resources. We have included several of our most recent copies of *Family News* with this submission.

Waltja's commitment to Indigenous employment is evidenced not only in our encouragement of local employment within communities but also in the number of Indigenous trainee positions we have, including in Children's services, publications and Administration/Reception. A number of our current senior positions in the organisation are now occupied by Indigenous workers who started out as trainees within Waltja and who are well respected by community members when they visit.

Waltja's Submission to DHCS regarding the then proposed VSAP Bill (Feb 2005)

In February, 2005, Waltja submitted a position paper outlining our Management Committee's response to consultations regarding the VSAP Bill (NT). It contained 21 recommendations pertaining to various aspects of the proposed Legislation which was subsequently enacted in July this year. Several concerns our members had about the legislation were addressed through this consultation process prior to the Bill becoming Law. However, we still have significant concerns about the new legislation. (*See attachment 1*)

Summary of Recommendations

1: The effectiveness of existing laws and policing with respect to petrol sniffing in affected Indigenous communities

Implementing the VSAPA

- 1.1 **Australian Government policy regarding petrol sniffing reflects the need for holistic service provision and emphasises using a range of prevention and intervention strategies focusing not only on restricting supply (eg, prosecuting suppliers, subsidising Opal roll out) but also on addressing the inequitable and socially unjust conditions that have resulted in people sniffing petrol in the first place.**
- 1.2 **The Australian Government gives a strong and public commitment to finding the resources to support the range of strategies required to prevent petrol sniffing (and related issues).**
- 1.3 **The Australian Government takes the lead role in ensuring ongoing participatory consultation processes occur with remote stakeholders, especially Aboriginal residents in remote communities, and in facilitating whole of government/whole of community responses to petrol sniffing and related issues.**

Viewing VSA as a health issue rather than a law and order issue

- 1.4 **That as well as receiving specific training clarifying powers and responsibilities with regard to policing the VSAPA, ACPOs and Police officers also receive training and community education regarding their discretionary powers in apprehending suppliers and in searching for and seizing petrol.**

Use of Trespass Orders

- 1.5 **Increased resources for Return to Country and other initiatives designed to strengthen families and which operate from local Aboriginal understandings of what this means.**

- 1.6 Provide education for community members regarding support available from statutory bodies such as police and child protection authorities.**

Community Management Plans

- 1.7 The Australian government to extend the level of support required to improve local governance & management, including resourcing ORAC to provide / coordinate the provision of comprehensive, customised training to all communities in our region.**
- 1.8 The Australian government to ensure continuity of funding & hence service provision for projects responding effectively to petrol sniffing and related issues but currently without recurrent funding.**

Monitoring The VSAPA

- 1.9 Whole of government approach adopted in monitoring levels of petrol sniffing, including collecting the following, as a minimum, in our region:**
- the number of people sniffing petrol or other solvents**
 - estimated level of consumption**
 - number of prosecutions for supply of a Volatile Substance or contravention of a Community Management Plan**
 - number of people in treatment services or staying at Outstations, length of stay and number of return visits. Number of these referrals that have been Court Ordered.**
 - number & location of communities with VSA management plans**
 - number and location of communities/other outlets selling only non-sniffable fuel**
 - number of notifications/clients that have come to the attention of FaCS (ie, child protection related cases with links with VSA)**
- 1.10 That the NT Government retains lead responsibility to research and monitor the above in our region, seeking input from Council, community, and Aboriginal, health & other organisations with first hand knowledge.**

2: The effectiveness of diversionary activities and community level activities

- 2.1 That all levels of Government view youth services as essential services in communities and give a commitment to their provision in ways acceptable to communities
- 2.2 That FaCS/ICC work with current providers in our region to investigate adopting Reconnect, as modified by remote providers such as NPY and Waltja and funded at an acceptable level for remote delivery, as a model to support the development of both activity and support based youth services in remote communities.

Maintaining youth and children's services in remote communities

- 2.3 All levels of government agree upon and fund minimum requirements for a youth service in a remote community including capacity for training and employment of local people. Suggested minimum as outlined in body of submission.
- 2.4 Fund and establish a centralised recruiting agency for youth, children's and other related services in remote communities to advertise positions and provide other practical support for Councils in employing and orienting new staff.
- 2.5 Australian Government (FaCS/ICC) to extend funding to the level required to provide professional development, mentoring and other support for remote Outside School Hours Care, child care and similar services.

Research into contextually appropriate and culturally safe youth work services

- 2.6 Australian or NT Governments fund community driven research into contextually appropriate and culturally safe youth services & the development of resources to develop this (as outlined in the body of this submission).

Funding arrangements, especially for new or struggling projects or services

- 2.7 Increase flexibility within all Government funding cycles including simplifying budget variation processes within funding contracts to ensure money specified for remote youth and children's services can be accessed when needed.**
- 2.8 Streamline funding for youth services and projects in communities through appropriately negotiated SRAs**

3: Lessons that can be learned from the success some communities have had in reducing petrol sniffing including the impact of non-sniffable Opal petrol

The impact of non-sniffable fuel in reducing petrol sniffing in remote communities

- 3.1 Support a regional, planned and sustainable "roll out" of subsidised Opal as outlined in the body of the submission.**

1: The effectiveness of existing laws and policing with respect to petrol sniffing in affected Indigenous communities

Current Legislation – the Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act (VSAPA), 2005

In our submission to the NT government, Waltja members stated strongly that they believed relevant issues relating to VSA could be addressed through amending or fully utilising existing NT and Federal legislation. This would include those relating to Aboriginal Land Rights, child protection and illicit drug use, with individual communities still having the power, for example, to implement community management plans as per the provisions in the new Act (VSAPA, 2005).

CAYLUS (auspiced by Tangentyere Council) have also promoted the use of the Trespass Act, NT, 2004 to forcibly evict offenders from remaining in specific locations. Waltja members are cautious about using this approach given the likelihood of ‘the offender’ also having family or cultural ties and obligations with the community or Town Camp in question. Similarly, they did not support the idea of prosecuting people for supplying petrol if it was the result of “family humbug”.

Whilst sniffing petrol in and of itself has not been criminalised, the VSAPA gives Police and “Authorised Others” additional powers to apprehend individuals (eg, contravention of a community management plan, sale of petrol with intend to supply, serving assessment and treatment orders) and to search, seize and destroy volatile substances. Waltja members thought it more reasonable to promote the use of existing legislation or, if necessary, extend upon these to clarify any possible ambiguities and provide greater direction to statutory authorities such as police or child protection. They also thought family or cultural authority & support much more likely to convince a chronic petrol sniffer to “detox” than Police and Court authority via mandatory treatment orders and that this could be achieved through better ‘professional’ support for the family rather than legislation resulting in greater Police powers.

To varying degrees other stakeholders in the region have shared these and other concerns about the VSAPA. However, we recognise that given that the Bill has been passed the best we can do is input into some of the Regulations that are now being drafted and participate in the planned review and monitoring of the VSAPA. Obviously this is within the jurisdiction of our Territory Government but it shapes our response to this Commonwealth Senate Inquiry occurring in tandem with our regional initiatives.

Implementing the VSAPA

Given that the VSAPA has yet to be fully implemented yet across the NT it is too soon to gauge its effectiveness compared with existing legislative options. Notwithstanding the above, Waltja has concerns that the new legislation will fail in its stated purpose of

providing for *“the prevention of volatile substance abuse, and for related purposes”* primarily because it will be insufficiently resourced.

It will also fail if it is not linked well enough with broader initiatives addressing disadvantage within Aboriginal communities that have resulted petrol sniffing becoming a way of life for an unacceptable number of young people. The VSAPA focuses almost entirely on restricting supply (eg, community management plans, mandatory treatment orders, prosecuting offenders), as most strategies have to date rather than deliberately working to also restrict demand (ie, the factors contributing to the person deciding to sniff petrol in the first place). **Attachment 2** contains a summary of a wide range of responses to VSA, some of which are starting to be implemented more consciously in our region. Each strategy is of limited value if implemented in isolation from other strategies and the more that can be actioned simultaneously the more hope we have of making at least an adequate response to petrol sniffing.

The stated position of the NT government has been to place VSA within a “health issues” framework rather than “law and order” – hence the decision to not make sniffing petrol an illegal act. Waltja members strongly supported this view. However young people who chronically sniff petrol can be mandated to attend treatment services or taken to “places of safety.” At the time of passing the VSAPA, there were – and still are – no specialist AOD service for those aged under 17 and “VSA treatment services” in our region consisted of 2 beds available in a generalist Alcohol & Other Drug service for those aged 17 and older and varying levels of support in 3 key Outstations (Mt Theo, Ipurla & Ipolera). There was still discussion about what a “place of safety” might be within the context of a remote community.

The tendering arrangements for treatment services funded by the NT Government have just been finalised at the time of writing this response. Within this:

- current funding will only enable 5 adults and 5 minors to receive detoxification / rehabilitation services in our region
- we have yet to hear any concrete information about the specific model of treatment or rehabilitation to be offered through these “new” services
- there has been only a minimal increase in resourcing for the outstations which currently provide the closest approximation to “detox & rehabilitation” in the region and seem to be the preferred option rather than a service in Alice Springs.
- other than family homes there are no “places of safety” – other than police cells in those communities with a Police Station, which we do not consider appropriate in any case – to take young people affected by petrol to in communities. Without ongoing, intensive support it is unreasonable to expect family members, no matter how strong or authoritative, to take full responsibility for addressing substance abuse and related issues including providing their children with detox and rehab services. In fact, we wonder if this would be suggested as an acceptable response at all if the majority of those sniffing petrol came from one of the more affluent groups in Australian society.

Vibrant youth activity and diversionary programs, along with quality case work is also required to support treatment services. These are discussed more fully in the next section.

Whilst we recognise that the NT Government has already dedicated significant funding to directly addressing VSA, more is required. We understand the budgetary restrictions our NT Government is facing. We remain optimistic that, as primary funder of Aboriginal services and organisations in our region, nationally driven initiatives such as OIPC and COAG will be improving the supply of resources to strategies and services where they can be best used.

Recommendations

- 1.1 Australian Government policy regarding petrol sniffing reflects the need for holistic service provision and emphasises using a range of prevention and intervention strategies focusing not only on restricting supply (eg, prosecuting suppliers, subsidising Opal roll out) but also on addressing the inequitable and socially unjust situations that have resulted in people sniffing petrol in the first place.**
- 1.2 The Australian Government gives a strong and public commitment to finding the resources to support the range of strategies required to prevent petrol sniffing (and related issues) for as long as necessary**
- 1.3 The Australian Government to take the lead role in ensuring participatory consultation processes with remote stakeholders, especially Aboriginal residents, and in facilitating whole of government/whole of community responses to petrol sniffing and related issues.**

Viewing VSA as a health issue rather than a law and order issue

Our members fully supported the NT Government's view that petrol sniffing is to be treated as primarily a health issue rather than a law and order issue and is not to be considered an "illegal activity." However, they were concerned by making the supply of petrol with intent to sniff illegal. They said usually kids broke into plant and equipment to steal petrol or 'humbugged' family members with petrol driven cars until they were given petrol to sniff. They did not want "suppliers" under these circumstances to be charged, seeing the problems associated with incarceration (especially for juveniles) as outweighing those created by supplying petrol.

- 1.4 That as well as receiving specific training clarifying powers and responsibilities with regard to policing the VSAPA, ACPOs and Police officers also receive training and community education regarding their**

discretionary powers in apprehending suppliers and in searching for and seizing petrol.

Court Ordered Treatment

Members are also concerned that government mandated treatment orders specified in the VSAPA will not be effective. This is not to say that they are opposed to family enforced and supported interventions.

Case Study

One of our steering committee members has a nephew who was chronically sniffing petrol in Mt Liebig. On a number of occasions he took his nephew to “sit” with him in another community (near Utopia) in which there was no petrol sniffing and they had family connections. At the time it was unclear to workers whether the nephew was initially willing to go. At times this family also received practical and other support from Waltja Reconnect and possibly other services including CAYLUS. Around the same time, Avgas was also introduced into the community.

It certainly took more than one visit away from community and possibly other interventions helped as well. The young man is now married up and last heard of was not sniffing petrol.

Waltja believes that the money spent locating and transporting unwilling “clients” without family support to treatment facilities in Alice Springs or Darwin could be better spent on upgrading community infrastructure, increasing training & mentoring provided in remote communities, increasing work opportunities, and providing practical or logistical support for the continuation of cultural and ceremonial practices in addition to building more sustainable youth programs as outlined in the next section.

The use of treatment orders needs to be monitored and reviewed along with other key components of the VSAPA. **(See Recommendations 5, 6, 7 re: Monitoring)**

Use of Trespass Orders

There is a high degree of mobility between family groups and communities generally in remote communities, which needs to be supported and factored in to regional service provision. Mobility which supports and strengthens cultural and family ties also supports VSAP prevention.

Community members have identified having strong family, strong connection with country and meaningful work/purpose in life as key cornerstones to leading healthy lives. These factors also serve to prevent or minimise a range of dangerous and/or anti-social behaviours including all forms of substance abuse, inappropriate violence against others (especially women and children) and gambling, as well as suicide and self-harming behaviour.

Often (young) people sniffing petrol from different communities may end up in one community together, having been moved on either by Councils or other community or family pressure. They remain until the pressure builds and they are asked to move on. There may be some attempt made to link the young person with family elsewhere but there might not be, too, especially in remote communities. Undoubtedly, too, it is difficult to “engage” with someone “high as a kite”, especially if you – quite literally – don’t speak their language, like the majority of non-Indigenous staff in communities. Council CEOs or other service providers (usually non-Indigenous) or Council members who are not family for the young person in question are usually only concerned with removing the “humbug” from their community. Family members themselves can be totally overwhelmed by the problems & heartbreak associated with trying to live with and raise someone (or 2 or more) with a chronic petrol sniffing problem and in need of respite.

In general, the motivation for issuing Trespass Orders seems to be to “clean up” a geographical location rather than to assist people to stop sniffing petrol.

Also, because people do have extended family living across a number of communities sometimes it is neither clear nor defensible to argue “that person is not from here therefore we should issue them with a Trespass Order.” Enforced separation either from country or from services only available in Alice Springs without proper intervention to support the young person to re-locate seems to be a response that has the distinct potential to exacerbate the situation that has resulted in the young person sniffing petrol in the first place rather than ameliorating it.

Case Study

A young person’s extended family has a house in Papunya and a house on one of the Town Camps (Abbotts camp) in Alice Springs. There is concern about an increasing number of “sniffers” staying at the Town Camp and a community meeting is called. Young people from this family are incorrectly labelled as “trespassers.” The sole focus of the intervention is to improve the situation at Abbotts Camp. It is proposed to transport the young people back to the community where sniffing is at an all time high, there are no sustained youth activity services let alone professional support for addressing petrol sniffing, and the young person has comparable family support at that Town Camp to that back in “their community” ...

For those, usually older “hard core cases” we consider that Court Ordered treatment, involving FaCS (NT) & Police more in situations endangering child safety, and being prosecuted under the Act for supply with intent should suffice to remove the influence of the few hard core ringleaders who tend to create the most ‘humbug’ in communities or Town Camps.

Recommendations

- 1.5 Increased resources for Return to Country and other initiatives designed to strengthen families and which operate from anangu & yapa understandings of what this means**

1.6 Provide education for community members regarding support available from statutory bodies such as police and child protection authorities

Community Management Plans

Whilst the idea of a community Council having the power to pass By-Laws including those relating to visitor permits and the supply of alcohol and petrol, their inclusion in the VSAPA and the resultant promotion as a key form of supply reduction is new.

Evidence from comparable strategies for limiting other substance abuse, most notably alcohol, suggests that in remote communities

- the level of “grog running” ebbs and flows
- alcohol is more likely to be present at major social gatherings
- few people are prosecuted for “running grog” or being intoxicated
- there are insufficient police to respond to incidents involving alcohol, including family violence
- impounding vehicles of community members often places more stress on women and children, making it more difficult to do even basic things like shopping

Waltja, NPY Women’s Council and Tangentyere Council (via CAYLUS) were recently each “granted” \$60,000 to provide education and other support for a number of targeted communities in developing and maintaining their Community Management Plan. We will be starting this up early next year, working collaboratively. Presumably CAYLUS will be continuing to support communities with ongoing review & monitoring, as will Waltja and NPY as part of our overall youth services and other supports in specific communities. None of our project areas has guaranteed funding beyond June 2007 and apart from the \$60,000 we currently have, Waltja receives no AOD/petrol sniffing funding but supports relevant initiatives through a broad interpretation of funding received for other purposes and supported by our funding body (FaCS – Reconnect).

We are concerned that current funding arrangements may be insufficient to ensure ongoing support for communities in sustaining desired community management plans.

Maintaining community management plans will also depend upon having functional governance structures within communities resulting in strong leadership by the Council and its staff. Waltja communities appreciate the efforts being made to improve leadership, governance and management at local and regional levels, with several of our own Executive members having benefited from governance training provided through ORAC.

Recommendations:

1.7 The Federal government to extend the level of support required to improve local governance & management through including resourcing

ORAC to provide / coordinate the provision of comprehensive, customised training to all communities in our region.

- 1.8 The Federal government to ensure continuity of funding & hence service provision for projects responding effectively to petrol sniffing and related issues but currently without recurrent funding**

Monitoring The VSAPA

The NT Government is establishing & implementing a data collection system to monitor the impact of the VSAPA. The researchers have liaised with a number of regional service providers including Waltja and the proposed data collection instrument and process seem appropriate.

Recommendation:

- 1.9 Whole of government approach to monitoring levels of petrol sniffing, including as a minimum in our region:**
- the number of people sniffing petrol or other solvents
 - estimated level of consumption
 - number of prosecutions for supply of a VS or contravention of a management plan
 - number of people in treatment services or staying at Outstations, length of stay and number of return visits. Number of these referrals that have been Court Ordered.
 - number & location of communities with VSA management plans
 - number and location of communities/other outlets selling only non-sniffable fuel
 - number of notifications/clients that have come to the attention of FaCS (child protection related cases with links with VSA)
- 1.10 That the NT Government retains lead responsibility to research and monitor the above but with input from Council, community, and Aboriginal, health & other organisations with first hand knowledge.**

2: The effectiveness of diversionary activities and community level activities

Diversionary activities and other community level activities already funded in communities

Waltja strongly supports the notion of youth services as essential services in communities and was pleased when Greg Cavenagh, NT Coroner, suggested the idea during the recent Coronial Inquiry into petrol related deaths in our region.

Diversionary and community level activities are essential ingredients in any holistic and potentially successful measures to prevent (young) people sniffing petrol. They reduce demand for volatile substances by providing children and young people with a range of activities comparable to those available in more mainstream communities (eg, living in Sydney or Whyalla) and through tackling “boredom.” Where offered in a culturally supportive way they also include access to Country, bush tucker trips, passing on of cultural knowledge and skills by including older family members, and strengthening family and cultural bonds which also acts as a further disincentive to abuse any substances, including petrol or to suicide/self harm. Living in a remote community does not guarantee automatic access to country – in other words, families need 4WD transport to access a lot of their traditional country, especially where this is a homeland situated near but not within reasonable walking distance of the community they live in, especially during our searing summers.

Youth and children’s activity programs and other community level activities work best when they are truly driven by the community. Examples of these include a community social club operated through a functioning Council that opens every afternoon and evening, community sports carnival, gospel singing, discos, breaking in horses on a local outstation, community BBQs etc.. They are all usually well supported activities that do not cost a lot to maintain once the basic infrastructure is in place and have a high level of participation & ownership from local community members in organising regular events.

More “formal” youth and children’s activity programs such as Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) or Sport and Recreation are generally more difficult to sustain, especially in communities in which there is limited infrastructure (eg, no community hall, no youth centre, no accommodation for a youth worker employed from outside the community, limited equipment, no swimming pool or air conditioning and the temperature is extremely hot) and/or support for any or all workers or volunteers (eg, ongoing, relevant training and mentoring, assistance with writing reports, debriefing and supervision). These youth and children’s programs function best when staff, especially if non-Indigenous or not from that community, work in with community driven events and activities and support them, especially with participating in regional sporting events.

Where they do exist, youth services tend to be activity based sport and recreation and similar projects or extracurricular activities provided by teachers. These cater for a wide age group (4 – 24 with 7 – 15 year olds being the key users) with only one or two

workers usually supervising or driving the activities. Most workers have neither qualifications nor experience in youth work / sport and recreation / community development or in living and working within a remote, semi-traditional Aboriginal community context. Many are non-Indigenous. Some communities encourage employment & participation by locals, including training in sport, recreation, coaching or other skills. Some have a strong group of 18 – 25 year olds helping out with activities and sometimes being paid through CDEP but these are the minority.

Moreover, by far the clear majority of “youth workers” working in communities in our region may provide a range of activities for children and young people but they are **not** “case workers” or “drug and alcohol workers” and they often lack skills and training in working with young people with challenging behaviours. Whilst youth / diversionary and other activities are an important component of reducing demand, the other essential ingredient is some form of ‘professional’ support for the young person and probably other members of their family. This is especially the case in communities or family groups with a longer history of or greater current difficulties related to VSA.

In order to also operate as “diversionary programs” and “substance abuse prevention programs”, community based activities & services also need to be linked well with case management / work, youth / community development and other relevant support services. Our experience in establishing Waltja’s Remote Reconnect over the past 4 years has provided insights into how this works “in reality” including the difficulties in sustaining services. Skilled youth workers such as those employed through Waltja and NPY Reconnect can play a vital role in supporting (young) people and their families when they return to their community after treatment or rehabilitation elsewhere or with other more intensive needs (eg, support after a suicide attempt, better housing options, coping with abuse, etc). Their positions are funded to work collaboratively with a whole range of other service providers both on the community (eg, school, clinic, sport & rec, etc) and located elsewhere, usually Alice Springs in our region (eg, hospital, mental health, alcohol & other drugs, non-government youth services, etc).

Case Study: Collaborative service provision, 2003

There was concern expressed in one community with exceptionally high level of substance misuse, especially petrol and alcohol, that older children and young people would be particularly “at risk” over the long, hot summer holidays. At the time the community suffered under poor governance, with a lot of interference and resulting ill-will flaring up from time to time between Council (especially the Town Clerk/CEO) and other service providers.

Despite the above, service providers from three different organisations – school, World Vision and Waltja – pooled resources to plan for and provide a comprehensive, diverse and regular program of activities catering for both younger and older children over the summer break. It included trips to country for bush tucker and swimming, discos, BBQ, bike building, teenage girls and boys nights, sports competitions, arts and crafts and was well attended. Young people sniffing petrol were asked to leave their cans behind but were welcome to participate in activities when safe.

Whilst the number of people sniffing petrol in that community did not reduce, there were **no new young people or children recruited into sniffing during that time**. This was highly significant in a community in which it is estimated that at that time almost all young people had sniffed petrol at some point, children as young as 8 had been seen with petrol cans and an increasing number of young people from other communities were joining “the sniffers” there.

Whilst established as a family based, early intervention service to address youth homelessness, the Reconnect model, as adapted by Waltja, could serve as a model for the operation of more intensive support services for young people & their families with VSA and related issues. Waltja would be pleased to provide the Inquiry with more information about this model and our way of working within it.

The two biggest difficulties we have had with maintaining our Reconnect service which commenced operations in 2003 have been finding suitable accommodation for Field Workers to live in remote communities and having enough workers employed in order to meet demands without burning them out, especially in those communities with problems related to petrol sniffing (and other substance abuse).

Case Study Two: Access to skilled workers

At one point, for about a year of our operations, we were able to locate Reconnect Field Workers in two of the four communities we were funded to work with rather than having them visit. This facilitated the development of our service much more quickly and led to more immediate outcomes, especially in one community. We were also able to provide much more intensive support including counselling and other personal support, family mediation, income support, assisting young people to stay on at school, participating in joint case work with other service providers and so forth.

The Team Leader and Field Workers were also better able to support and mentor local people employed from the community. Waltja Reconnect contributed to the ongoing provision of activities in communities and established positive working relationships with other service providers both in community and in Alice Springs. They were able to provide this partly from a commitment to work in genuine, collaborative partnership with other key providers similarly inclined in communities and despite the notable lack of support from one community Council in particular.

Due to a lack of funding, changes in community governance structures and the difficulty in finding permanent accommodation on communities we had to revert back to our original model of having Field Workers visit communities. This makes the provision of the full range of supports required by young people and their families at this point in time difficult to say the least.

At present each of the four communities with whom we work requires at least one field worker as well as the capacity to employ and mentor community youth workers. Feedback we received from a range of stakeholders including NT FaCS and a range of

NGO youth service providers as part of our last *Self Evaluation Report* (Sept 2005) indicated that increasing our number of field workers was by far the biggest thing that would contribute to improved service delivery, with all stakeholders praising the work of our current field workers. As we understand it there is no money for expansion of the current Reconnect Program nationally and our request for sustainable levels of funding has been met by “but your’s is an extremely well funded service” and with a lack of understanding of the distances we travel, the nature of the work we do and the level of immediate support required in each community.

Recommendations

- 2.1 That all levels of Government view youth services as essential services in communities and give a commitment to their provision in ways acceptable to communities**
- 2.2 FaCS/ICC work with current providers to investigate adopting Reconnect, as modified by remote providers such as NPY and Waltja and funded at an acceptable for remote delivery, as a model to support the development of both activity and support based youth services in remote communities.**

Maintaining youth and children’s services in remote communities

Funding for youth and children’s services is relatively new vis a vis provision in urban or mainstream Australia for many remote communities in our region, and the concept of what a “young person” is can often be different to mainstream expectations and perceptions. All the community based youth services we are aware of are fragile at best and often rely upon a variety of factors to support their continuance (eg, staffing, budget, sound governance within the community, accommodation for workers from outside the community, etc)

Most youth program funding in the NT is through Commonwealth initiatives, including Sport and Recreation (Ausport) and Outside School Hours Care as per the remote service delivery model negotiated by regional FaCS officers and through ASTIS funded sport and recreation programs. The FaCS funded OSHC program has only been in existence for some 4 years and pays a maximum of \$70,000 per participating community to provide, as a minimum expectation, a range of activities for 4 – 24 year olds for 4 hours after each school and over school holidays. There is little funding available through this or other sources for infrastructure such as staff accommodation or major equipment such as transport, with many funding agencies being reluctant to provide 4WD transport to communities unless there can be some guarantee that it will only be used for intended purposes.

Affected communities currently require support from workers with appropriate skills and knowledge to be able to assist in “growing up” new services in ways acceptable to both community stakeholders and funding bodies. Waltja’s Management Committee is insistent that “good services for our mob”

- operate from anangu and yapa understandings (local Aboriginal cultural norms and protocols),
- seek to recruit, retain and support local workers wherever possible,
- include support for cultural and ceremonial activities and learnings as well as mainstream ones where projects have educational outcomes attached, and
- need proper time to develop.

Waltja members want better consultation with their communities about how they want their services for older children and young people and for anyone sniffing petrol to operate – roles and responsibilities, types of activities, training up local people, which tasks are better done by an external worker (eg, referring child abuse notifications through the Clinic is probably safer than taking it on yourself, especially if you are a local), to name just a few areas.

Waltja has a proven track record of doing such research and consultation to facilitate the development of locally responsive childcare centres and services based on traditional childrearing practices, including mentoring and training for local women as childcare workers. We believe processes such as ours are relevant to all remote communities within our region because they emphasise working alongside community members; not telling them how to run their services but, rather, finding out what sort of services people are wanting and supporting their development.

Partly due to the inability of many community Council staff to implement the OSHC program and structural limitations such as lack of accommodation and infrastructure for staff to assist communities in “growing up” their youth activity services, regional FaCS staff also allocated funding to Waltja from July 05 to provide professional development and other services to OSHC workers/communities, often the only “youth workers” within these communities. The project’s purpose includes supporting recruitment, providing or sourcing mentoring & training in relevant areas including project management, planning, budgeting, reporting, maintaining equipment and supplies, accessing additional funding, problem solving, as well as administering a small amount of brokerage to buy in training or related services otherwise unavailable and providing sports and other equipment on loan to communities in need.

Service outcomes included the expectation that an additional two staff and extra transport capacity would enable a total of 6 staff positions to support the ongoing development of all children’s and youth services funded by FaCS (with the exception of Reconnect) in a total of **17** remote communities. The funding contract was for **6 months only**, with the possibility of it being continued for a further six depending upon outcomes from a change in auspicing and tendering arrangements due to a restructure of that program area within FaCS nationally. We were also threatened with the loss of funding to support children’s services, including child care centres, in remote communities if we did not “choose” to

take on the project. This is an unacceptable way for a government department to conduct its affairs.

The project has also been resourced insufficiently. In a 6 month period, assuming no vacancies in positions and working on the basis of 3 community visits each month with no delays - rain, sorry business, staff vacancies or holidays - this would provide an average of 3 visits to each community. During these visits workers would be working at least a 12 hour day each day in each community, supporting the development of two quite different services. Children's services typically included day care centres operating most school days until mid-afternoon, with OSHC then starting up from about 3.00 – 7.00 pm. This pace would be unsustainable and also leaves insufficient time for resource development, providing workshops, sourcing other training, reporting, etc., as well as visiting communities and providing customised support within each.

Given the difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled staff, Waltja supports the idea of a centralised recruiting & workforce development service for youth and related projects in Central Australia as proposed by Tangentyere Council. The idea is almost identical to the OSHC development grant Waltja is currently in receipt of. We are, however, appalled at the idea of one Coordinator – no matter how skilled or well paid - being responsible not only for recruiting but also for staff support especially for new workers or services as well as training initiatives for local Aboriginal workers across all youth services in remote communities in our region.

We would suggest that

- the recruiting service be funded as a separate service and maybe extended to service a range of program areas in remote communities (health, aged care, child care, youth, disability...); and
- Existing Indigenous RTOs or comparable organisations with a sound track record of actually delivering training, supporting the employment of Indigenous people and with both the skills and commitment to assisting communities to develop services “their way” continue to be resourced to provide the other workforce development components as outlined by CAYLUS and Tangentyere Council.

Waltja would also argue strongly that the amount of funding required to support youth services, especially fledgling ones, needs to be increased to a sustainable level. We recommend streamlining various funding opportunities available to remote communities for youth services to make a viable service possible in each community and to ensure that it not only had the staffing positions but also the infrastructure and equipment to operate well.

Waltja supports the minimum requirement to establish a service as outlined in Tangentyere Council's submission to this Inquiry (2 workers, accommodation in remote communities, 4WD vehicle, recreation hall & other activity infrastructure and reasonable operating expenses). However, to make it sustainable, the expectation that workers not from the community will mentor and support local employment also needs to be factored

in, as does the expectation that all such workers will accept direction from the community regarding culturally safe and appropriate ways of providing youth services.

Recommendations

- 2.3 Agree upon and fund minimum requirements for a youth service in a remote community including capacity for training and employment of local people. Suggested minimum as outlined above**

- 2.4 Fund and establish a centralised recruiting agency for youth, children's and other services in remote communities to advertise positions and provide other practical support for Councils in employing new staff**

- 2.5 Extend funding to provide professional development, mentoring and other support Outside School Hours Care and similar services to a reasonable level**

Research into contextually appropriate and culturally safe youth work services

Waltja currently has an application in with an Australian charitable Foundation for a 3 year project in which to:

- Help develop locally driven, regular, diverse yet sustainable programs of activities for children and young people from 4 - 6 communities during outside school hours & including over holiday periods
- Identify training needs and provide/coordinate the provision of training and mentorship for local people for both “activity based” and “support based” youth work positions
- Train up local projects, especially local workers, in providing new or innovative activities within communities, especially arts and crafts and music, to supplement regular sports activities.
- Work closely with Waltja’s Reconnect and other relevant program areas to research and document what it takes to establish youth activity programs and youth support services in & with remote Aboriginal communities. This would include delineating the duties best undertaken by local workers (eg, might be taking young people out for bush tucker) and those best provided by external service providers (eg, might be mandatory notification of child abuse). Underpinning this would be documenting the principles and features of culturally and contextually appropriate & safe youth /family service provision within remote communities
- Lobby for additional support outside the scope of this project, especially to promote and implement initial findings from our research.

We thought this would provide the opportunity to more thoroughly investigate what it takes to “grow up” youth services and youth worker training within our particular context

and are hopeful that our request for funding will be taken up, if not in this application then as part of other relevant initiatives.

Recommendations

2.6 Fund community driven research into contextually appropriate and culturally safe youth services & the development of resources to develop this as outlined above

Funding arrangements, especially for new or struggling projects or services

Community driven service provision means that generating new services from community development processes rather than government driven priorities and budget cycles. Flexible yet accountable funding processes including being able to reserve funding allocations, within reason, to maximise their availability at times and in ways that support locally driven initiatives are required to facilitate this. Having to return unspent funding within specific timeframes also results in inappropriate services or purchases being made and limits capacity for ongoing service development.

Moreover, different funding sources also require separate reporting and acquittals, all of which places administrative strains on workers, including CEOs, who may not have the skills or the time to do so. In the absence of any better solution, organisations like NPY Women's Council, Tangentyere Council and Waltja play a key role in applying for additional funding and assisting with the reporting required as well as sourcing funding and providing other mentoring. This could be reduced through combining funding sources or at least reducing reporting requirements to requiring only one for all youth services provided in the community as a part of regular, ongoing funding.

Recommendations

2.7 Increase flexibility within Government funding cycles and attitudes towards under-expenditure within project areas to ensure funding earmarked for remote communities actually gets there when needed.

2.8 Streamline funding for youth services and projects in communities through appropriately negotiated SRAs

3: Lessons that can be learned from the success some communities have had in reducing petrol sniffing including the impact of non-sniffable Opal petrol

The impact of non-sniffable fuel in reducing petrol sniffing in remote communities

Our region has now had some years where non-sniffable fuel like Avgas and Opal have been – or are about to be - trialled or implemented, albeit in a sporadic fashion.

It is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of a single strategy like Avgas or Opal in reducing petrol sniffing in any given community over a period of time. We are pleased the NT government is introducing processes to review and monitor the implementation of the VSAPA, including attempting to accurately estimate the total number of people sniffing petrol in our region at any time and the extent of each individual's consumption (eg, occasionally, chronic, etc). Our experience of previous attempts to do this, even by individuals within the same community, is that figures quoted vary markedly.

Case Study

when we had a worker located in Papunya community one of the local police constables showed her a list of all the young people known to be “sniffing” by Police in that community. Our worker's view was that a number of the young people on the list had only occasionally sniffed petrol or were no longer doing so and that there were several others who did not appear on the list.

She was concerned as to what the Police might do with any additional information provided to them since although there was funding for a JDU program including case work, there were no case workers employed or functional programs or activities that young people could be “diverted” into.

It is not always clear that there is a direct and sustainable link between moving across to non-sniffable fuels and a sustained drop in “sniffing” behaviour or an overall reduction in the number of young people sniffing petrol across the region. However, this may well be because Opal has not been rolled out regionally.

There is convincing evidence to suggest an increasing number of young people who sniff petrol are moving to several communities with long standing problems with VSA and easier access to sniffable fuel as well as at least 2 of the Town Camps in Alice Springs. Young people in these situations are characteristically without adequate support and with even greater potential to engage in other risky behaviours, be re-victimised (sex for petrol), lose connection with strong family and culture and enter the juvenile justice system.

What does seem to be clear is that Opal will do little more than shift the problems associated with petrol sniffing to a new geographical location unless it is “rolled out”

- at a regional level as per recommendations made by Tangentyere Council and CAYLUS
- in a planned manner & in tandem with a range of demand reduction strategies in each community
- in a sustainable manner – ie, subsidised until petrol sniffing ceases to be a problem in our region and there is strong evidence to suggest a resurgence highly unlikely.

Otherwise, perhaps more importantly than just “shifting the problem” there is the potential for this re-location to exacerbate the very conditions that may have lead to the (young) person sniffing petrol in the first place.

Opal forms one of a number of essential ingredients in reducing supply. However, to be effective, it needs to be rolled out regionally, including in Alice Springs, road houses, tourist resorts and other fuel outlets along with affected communities. And reducing supply is of limited value if efforts are not also made to reduce demand.

Waltja is concerned by the push to “roll out” Opal too quickly in the belief that “anything is better than nothing” and whilst the majority of responses to VSAP to date have focused on restricting supply without also addressing demand. Waltja is obviously aware of the media’s spotlight on several particularly troubled communities in our region, most notably Papunya and Mutitjulu. We urge the government to introduce Opal in a planned and sustainable manner as a critical part of a suite of strategies encompassing demand reduction as well as supply reduction implemented “in synch” with one another, and to maintain subsidies for as long as they are required.

Recommendation

3.1 Support a regional, planned and sustainable “roll out” of subsidised Opal as outlined above.

Early Intervention in communities without a long history of petrol sniffing

Case Study

In a community in which there is no identified current or prior problem with petrol sniffing, a young woman was seen sniffing petrol. Family members took immediate action, talking with the young woman and dissuading her from continuing to sniff. She was not removed from the community, with family being clear that it was a good thing for her to stay. Word went around the community very quickly with everyone agreeing that it was not a good thing to sniff petrol. The young woman stopped sniffing petrol although she has some other issues (surprise! Surprise!), and workers and family continue to provide support and encouragement.

This is in stark contrast to communities in which the majority of young people have sniffed petrol at least occasionally and in which petrol sniffing has been a problem over a number of years. In these communities young people are seen wandering around openly sniffing petrol. Sometimes family members will confront behaviour but often it has become so entrenched within the community that people simply take no notice unless the person is also behaving violently or abusively. As emphasised elsewhere in this submission, it is neither realistic nor reasonable to expect effective intervention from untrained personnel whether these be Indigenous or non-Indigenous workers (nurses, teachers, activity based children's or youth workers) or family members in many situations, especially where the young person is sniffing petrol, smoking pot or binge drinking on a regular basis.

What may also happen in communities in which there is no-one (or very few) currently sniffing petrol is that the Council (often under pressure from non-Indigenous workers or competing families) may decide to evict a person from the community for sniffing. This results in "spiritual homelessness" and loss of Country for that person which does little if anything to encourage them to change their behaviour, as identified in Section 1 (Trespass Orders). It also decreases opportunities for families or workers to confront behaviour in a positive way and offer encouragement and genuine incentives for sustainable change.

It was particularly noteworthy in this case example that at no stage has it been suggested that the young woman should leave the community. Rather, she was offered support from within the community itself. The potential for young women from that region (Eastern Arrerente/Pitjantjatjara) communities to take up sniffing is always present given that some young people are now engaging in VSA in Alice Springs and others are sniffing petrol in adjacent communities. Waltja's Reconnect Field and Community Youth Workers have been taking young people most at risk out on trips to Country, including for bush tucker with increasing support and demand from the community.

Recommendations

refer back to Recommendations 1.5 - 1.7

Conclusion

An holistic and sustained response addressing the reasons why so many young Aboriginal people are sniffing petrol or engaging in less publicised but equally destructive behaviours - in our region, bringing together community members, key Aboriginal organisations and other service providers and all tiers of government, including local governance bodies in communities is required if we are to have any lasting positive impact on petrol sniffing and similar behaviour in remote communities. The response would also need to address other substance misuse (especially alcohol and marijuana), gambling, violence and anti-social behaviour across the board by all community members, too, irrespective of age or gender. Appropriate legislation forms an essential component of any response to VSA, along with the realisation that new legislation also requires appropriate planning and consultation along with sufficient resources applied in a timely manner for its effective implementation.