

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities

The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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The following submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities, is from Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (South Australia) Inc. (ANTaR SA).

The issue of petrol sniffing in remote Aboriginal communities is a continuing issue of serious concern. We hope your committee can bring to bear influence so as to achieve the level of resourcing that is required for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to be able to enjoy the level and range of public amenity and infrastructure that most other Australians enjoy. Effective initiatives in this direction would go a long way to addressing some of the range of major issues that produce the social conditions which result in too many young Indigenous Australians resorting to problematic petrol sniffing.

Before we make some key points about petrol sniffing, we observe that it seems odd, and unfortunate that the Senate committee did not visit South Australian Aboriginal communities afflicted by petrol sniffing during the conduct of this Inquiry. We think that the deliberations of the committee would be assisted by hearing from traditional owners, elected community level representatives and others of the APY Lands of South Australia, in particular to hear from them what they believe is required to address the petrol sniffing in their communities.

We think that the development of initiatives and programmes needs to be worked out with local communities who are living with petrol sniffing. Governments need to work with local community councils to achieve strong community and culturally sensitive development.

From our contact with Anangu traditional owners of South Australia over the past year in particular, we understand that there is a strong feeling among Anangu that they are vastly under-resourced at the community level for dealing with the issues that arise in their communities from petrol sniffing. (This is not to address the underlying inadequacy of the overall resourcing of these communities, to enable them to address effectively the range of underlying social, cultural, educational, employment, infrastructure issues, which all need systematic, planned and sustained initiatives.) One matter in particular, is an apparent lack of financing for a community programme similar to that at Mt Theo in the NT, where community elders are able to take sniffers away from sources of petrol, and work with sniffers to re-integrate them into their communities.

Some Key Points re Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities:

- In order to have an impact on reducing the level of petrol sniffing in too many Aboriginal communities across Australia, it is essential to recognise that the particular circumstances of different communities need to be carefully taken into account in determining what measures, policies and initiatives might be useful to address petrol sniffing in particular communities
- Underlying causes - as mentioned above (briefly) it is essential that these be addressed for progress to be made in reducing petrol sniffing
- There can not be one, single “solution” to petrol sniffing. The response must necessarily be multi-pronged & initiatives must be worked out with the communities in which petrol sniffing is an issue. Significant resources are essential – although putting off addressing the issue will only result in further spending being necessary later on, as the problems compound. With much larger young populations among Aboriginal communities proportionally, than among other Australians, there is the appalling prospect of the issue of petrol sniffing rapidly escalating.
- 'Non-sniffable' fuel may be part of the solution; however, it can only be part of a solution. If it is to effectively be the only type of petrol available in any particular community, it will need to be the only petrol fuel at fuel outlets in a very large area (so large as to prevent illegal trafficking by profiteers bringing in sniffable fuel), to prevent it being accessible to sniffers of that community. It seems that if the aim is to make un-sniffable petrol the only fuel available for 'remote' Aboriginal communities with petrol sniffing issues, it will need to be the exclusive fuel across such a wide area of Australia, pretty much all of it, as to be very expensive, prohibitively so.
- These communities have faced generations of under-funding, of too little support from all levels of Government. We submit that it would be more effective for expenditure to be made directly with communities where it is most likely to have most effect; properly resourced community development, planned and undertaken consistent with the principles implied by the appropriate recognition of Indigenous Australians rights to community self-determination.

Social statistics abound in their delineation of the huge disadvantages faced by too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. We would like to emphasise that we believe that it is possible to make positive progress in remote (and other) Aboriginal communities, despite the 'track record' of Governments' Aboriginal affairs policies, over recent times in particular. It is fundamentally necessary that these communities be adequately resourced to be empowered to pursue effective community development determined by the communities themselves.