



SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO PETROL SNIFFING AND
SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN CENTRAL
AUSTRALIA

MISSION AUSTRALIA

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Profile of Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national non-profit organisation that works within the community, employment and training sectors. Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life. In 2006-07 we had 450 services around Australia helping more than 300,000 people. We work with young people in each state and territory of Australia, operating a number of programs designed to help people develop pathways through a successful youth. One of those programs is the Northern Territory Integrated Youth Services Project, based in Alice Springs, which principally aims to reduce drug abuse (particularly petrol sniffing) and anti-social behaviour among Indigenous young people.

Mission Australia welcomes this Inquiry and commends the Senate Community Affairs Committee for investigating such an important issue. Our submission will focus on the Inquiry's Reference (2) (c): *the delivery of youth services in affected areas*. In particular, our submission will focus on our experience in providing the NT Integrated Youth Services Project (NTIYS), which has generated significant lessons both for Mission Australia as an organisation and also more generally for the provision of services in remote Central Australian communities.

Background to the NT Integrated Youth Services Project

In April 2007 Mission Australia was awarded a \$7.97 million Federal Government contract to provide integrated youth services over a 3-year period to the four communities of Aputula (Finke), Imanpa, Mutitjulu and Kaltukatjara (Dockers River). Three government agencies contributed funding to the project: FaHCSIA (\$6.03 million); DEST (\$444,000) and the Attorney-General's Department (\$1.5 million). The contract defines the target group as young people aged between five and 25 years of age.

Funding is targeted principally at Strategy 4, *providing alternative activities for young people*, of the eight-point plan to combat petrol sniffing in Central Australia. However, the funding also targets Strategies 6, *education*, and 7, *strengthening communities*. The NTIYS initiative reflected an understanding that a new and innovative model was needed in order to achieve more effective services to the client group within these communities. The innovative and challenging nature of this model and the environment in which it was to be delivered created a situation in which there would need to be significant flexibility and in which new knowledge about service provision would be generated.

What we do

Mission Australia's NTIYS provides after-school hours and weekend activities for the target group. The contract also requires Mission Australia to work with those members of the target group who are disengaged from school and attempt to assist them to re-engage with education.

Mission Australia organises a wide variety of activities for young people in the four communities, including football training and matches, basketball, softball, band practice and/or recording, nutrition/cooking, organised pizza night, camel stew nights, rollerblading, BMX riding, hygiene/hair care, cultural activities such as gathering honey ants, and visiting sacred sites with young people and elders. The activity schedule is flexible so that young people's recreational and educational needs are responded to: for example we have assisted football and softball teams to travel to and participate in community sporting carnivals

On some communities our Anangu youth workers operate a school pick-up service each weekday morning, helping to improve school attendance rates. One community council, Mutitjulu, asked Mission Australia to operate a lunch time activities program that encourages young people to stay near the school during the midday break. Afternoon school attendance rates have improved has a result.

We are reviewing and revamping the educational component of the NTIYS. Our Outreach Education Officer is identifying young people needing individual assistance with schooling, training and/or job seeking and is networking with relevant organisations. The partnership approach will ensure young people obtain the services (education, mental health, drug and alcohol, training etc) they need.

Project outputs and successes

The table attached to this submission, taken from Mission Australia's recently established data collection system, provides a snapshot of the level of participation by children and young people in Mission Australia organised/conducted activities. In the early stages of data collection some staff were unfamiliar with how to use the system and consequently are likely to have under-reported the actual level of participation. Staff are now aware of the importance of reporting and why it is required.

Although the target group is specified as young people aged between five and 25 years, some 0 to five year olds also participate. Older children may be left to look after their younger brothers and sisters. Our youth workers will not separate the younger children from their older siblings as doing so could mean leaving the younger ones unattended or the older ones not participating in activities. The period covered by the table includes one week of the NT school holiday period.

The service model: challenges and solutions

The NTIYS contract was the first Mission Australia had been awarded in the Central Australia region, and whilst significant consultation with communities had been undertaken in the period leading up to the tender process, our prior lack of presence in the region together with the difficulties associated with establishing services in remote areas produced many challenges. FaHCSIA has been closely advised of the implementation strategy and has worked with Mission Australia since project inception.

Challenge 1: Service structure and management

Original staffing structures were not appropriate for the service. A team of two workers of equal organisational rank was established on each community. Conflicts and differences arising on community were often not resolved. The absence of a person with decision-making authority on community resulted in too many matters being referred to Alice Springs-based management. Consequently, management attention was diverted toward day-to-day issues while planning and strategic issues were not given the attention they warranted.

Solutions applied

(1) A new staffing structure was put in place. Total staff numbers on community were unchanged but a formal staff selection process led to the appointment of a team leader on each of the four communities whose responsibilities include organising activities and assigning staff to after school hours activities.

(2) A new management structure was implemented. Oversight of the projects on communities was split between two management staff who each attends to two communities. An Operations Manager was appointed to oversee service quality, reporting and planning.

Challenge 2: Establishing relationships

Mission Australia was a new player in the region and, whilst consultations had been undertaken within the communities prior to the service being established, there were few strong networks or relationships to serve as a foundation for building the service.

Solutions applied

Processes to improve engagement with communities were established. Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) meetings are held monthly and their composition was recently expanded to include all key stakeholders present on the community. YACs determine the activities to be conducted on the community. The face-to-face meetings encourage information sharing on issues affecting youth on the community, encourage coordinated responses to those issues and provide opportunity for community input and ownership.

Challenge 3: Accountabilities

Lack of clear direction/control from management compounded the problems noted above. Some staff took advantage of that situation and adopted a 'go it alone' attitude, which is perhaps understandable given the significant isolation of the communities and distance to Alice Springs. Others left the employ of Mission Australia. The high staff turnover hindered the formation of effective working relationships on community.

Solutions applied

(1) The movement of outreach staff and service managers is now coordinated so that in the normal course of events community-based

staff are assisted by at least one Alice-based staff member. Staff feel more supported and less isolated. The improved level of interaction allows management to become aware of and address problems early.

(2) Reporting systems were reviewed and refined and now produce useable data that permits the review of successes and failures.

Observations on the service delivery model

Benefits of infrastructure

Delivering services such as the NTIYS requires a complex set of expertise, systems support and infrastructure. As a national community service provider, with a strong and well established corporate infrastructure (including HR, IT, finance and so on) Mission Australia was able to provide the range of supports required to give the project stability. It is clear that in implementing the new model, these supports have not always guaranteed the provision of quality services and satisfaction of contractual obligations, but when the project went off-track, the organisation had the know-how, determination, experience and resources to find and apply solutions and re-build its relationships with communities and funding agencies. Whilst new to these communities, Mission Australia was able to bring resources from across the country to bear on delivering this new initiative.

Many sport and recreation programs in remote communities are staffed by a single worker (sometimes a youth worker) who is often inadequately housed and who struggles to find resources and funding for basic equipment and supplies to conduct activities. Funds are often channelled through a small community-based NGO or community council. While many organisations struggle to deliver services on remote communities, Mission Australia suggests that service models reliant on the efforts of an individual and/or small organisation are unlikely to survive their struggle and provide service continuity.

Funding and resource levels

The level of funding of the NTIYS acknowledges the true cost of providing sustainable services in remote communities. Our experience in providing the NTIYS has demonstrated that a high level of financial resources is required in order to properly fund the provision of services that will have a sustainable impact on the lives of young people in the remote communities of Central Australia.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Northern Territory Integrated Youth Services has raised a number of issues about the provision of services to young people in remote communities. It has highlighted the importance of:

- Appropriate service structure and management to enable clear decision-making processes;

- Establishing local networks to assist in information sharing, coordinated responses and better relationships with the local community and organisations;
- Accountability, and the need for clear direction and control from management.

The benefits of having a strong infrastructure enabled Mission Australia to negotiate some of the difficulties inherent in undertaking such a significant project. We have learnt from our experiences and continue to improve our services to the remote communities of Central Australia, and to bring to this effort the skill and care that our children and young people deserve.

ATTACHMENT 1: Mission Australia's NT Integrated Youth Services
Breakdown of participation in activities by community, gender and age range

1 month period, end May 2008 – end June 2008

COMMUNITY	0 – 5 yrs		5 – 9 yrs		10 – 14 yrs		15 – 19 yrs		20 – 25 yrs		TOTAL
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
MUTITJULU	12	5	127	103	179	109	69	20	83	4	705
IMANPA	45	133	68	54	182	82	218	50	226	89	1148
FINKE	13	7	54	44	106	45	21	46	8	20	374
DOCKER RIVER	55	63	224	324	371	202	224	207	139	59	1898
TOTAL	125	208	473	525	838	438	532	313	456	172	4125