



Committee Secretary  
Community Affairs Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

**Re: Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing and Substance Abuse In Central Australia**

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) is the NSW peak body representing agencies providing direct services to children and young people, and their families. This year, ACWA is celebrating 50 years of social advocacy, particularly for the Out of Home Care (OOHC) sector.

ACWA has been a member of the Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia Inc. (CAFWAA), which is the national peak body for child, adolescent and family welfare in Australia and has membership from peak child and family welfare bodies at state and territory levels as well as national bodies and major service providers, since its inauguration.

Furthermore, ACWA has been involved in numerous consultations at state and national levels, in relation to child protection, out of home care and children's welfare, including Indigenous children. ACWA has an on-going working relationship with the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (NSW) inc. (AbSec).

ACWA has an interest in preparing a submission to the inquiry into petrol sniffing and substance abuse in Central Australia as a general "well being" issue nationally as well as the author of the submission having had experience working in regional and remote Aboriginal communities, including communities in the Barkly Region and Central Australia, for five years.

In general, the four points pivotal to this inquiry that ACWA would like to highlight in its submission are:

- The roll out of Opal fuel will not address the underlying issues, which lead to petrol sniffing. Unless the causes of the problem are addressed, young people will find another substance to misuse.

Level 4  
699 George Street  
Sydney NSW  
Locked Bag 13  
Haymarket Post Office  
NSW 1240  
ABN: 24 459 406 828

phone 02 9281 8822  
fax 02 9281 8827  
web [www.acwa.asn.au](http://www.acwa.asn.au)  
email [acwa@acwa.asn.au](mailto:acwa@acwa.asn.au)  
[ccwt@acwa.asn.au](mailto:ccwt@acwa.asn.au)

- The problem of petrol sniffing and substance abuse cannot be addressed in isolation from a whole range of other problems that are facing Aboriginal communities in Central Australia and across the nation. Solving these problems require a long-term strategy over a period of 10-20 years with adequate resources, using a whole of government/whole of community approach.
- While delivering adequate youth services in affected area is important to address the current issues, it is more important to focus on prevention by targeting the 0 to 9 age group, before they start abusing any kind of illicit or licit substance, in order to break the cycle.
- Punitive measures such as the quarantine of individual's income as a child protection measure does not lead to a change of behaviour. Instead it increases the individual's resentment to patronising government policies

Should you require further information, please contact Sylvia Ghaly, Policy and Membership Manager, on 02 9281 8822 or email [sylvia@acwa.asn.au](mailto:sylvia@acwa.asn.au).

Yours sincerely,



Andrew McCallum  
CEO

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- **The roll out of Opal fuel:**

- It is important to recognise that fuel is not the only dangerous substance in a community and that unless the underlying issues causing young people to sniff are being addressed, young people will revert to other substances.
- The roll out of Opal fuel would work better as a strategy in isolated communities. Communities who are in close proximity with cities and regional centres would have access to other types of fuel. The same concept applied to alcohol restriction when community members where community members were willing to travel long distances to access alcohol, which also created a market for opportunistic individuals who took advantage of the situation.

- **The need for a long term strategy:**

- ACWA supports the importance of taking into account unimplemented recommendations from previous inquiries and reports including the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the Commonwealth Eight Point Regional Strategy for Central Australia, regional crime prevention plans, instead of reinventing the wheel and spending resources in reports that identify the problem without allocating adequate resources to address these problems.
- 'One size fits all does not work in Aboriginal Communities'. ACWA supports the need for a variety of services, which need to be designed and implemented in consultation with the community. For a service or a program to work effectively in an Aboriginal community, it is important for the community to have ownership over the program.
- ACWA supports the need to review the function of the Commonwealth Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICC) and their role in implementing whole of government policy and coordinating program funding to improve the delivery of government services and programs in regional and remote Aboriginal communities.
- ACWA highlights the importance of depoliticising indigenous affairs, by dissociating funding cycles from election cycles and election promises. Instead, ACWA recommends the development of a clear long-term strategy which focuses on building the capacity of the community and its members, including children and young people, to address the inequities and damages caused by inconsistent government policies over the last 50 years or so.

- The answer to the sniffing and other problems facing Aboriginal communities is to address the big issues such as:
  - Health
  - Education
  - Accommodation
  - Employment and economic development
  
- **The delivery of adequate youth and other services in affected areas:**
  - Young people need to belong and they need to have a sense of identity. Like all teenagers, Aboriginal teenagers are concerned with self-image and have problems with low self-esteem. In an environment where family and domestic violence are striving, young people have no role model to look up to, and in the absence of appropriate parental supervision, they don't have a problem accessing volatile substance, in which they find a temporary escape from their bleak existence. Providing a range of adequate services to young people and their families could break such vicious cycle.
  
  - There is a need for a greater range of on-going education, health promotion and peer education programs to highlight the dangers of sniffing, and for a range of diversion programs to engage young people in useful activities and conquer boredom: sports, arts (including performing arts) and music have proven to be successful in engaging young Aboriginal people and provide them with an opportunity to express themselves in a supportive environment, and help increase their self image and self-esteem and provide them with useful technical and life skills. Some of the successful programs in Central Australia and the Barkly Region (which were not mentioned in other reports) are:
    - The Nyinka Nyinyu Youth Performance Program in Tennant Creek and the Barkly Region
    - Tangenteyre's Dramaton Drumming Program
    - The Youth Development Unit Diversion program in Tennant Creek
    - The After Hours Drop-In Centre (Tangenteyre/Congress) in Alice Springs
    - Bushmob Program in Alice Springs
  
  - ACWA advocates for the need to allocate adequate resources in regional and remote Aboriginal communities, and to implement a strategy to encourage the recruitment and retention of committed and qualified staff. Some of the strategies might include:
    - Make it compulsory for new recruit to work in aboriginal communities in exchange for part of their HECS debt
    - Make it part of the induction program for policy staff who work in Indigenous areas to work for 3 months in a

remote indigenous community (to develop a better understanding of the culture and the problems facing remote communities)

- Establish an exchange system between government and non-government sector with clear professional pathways to enable workers to move between the two sectors which has the potential of reaching the gap between community and government and of implementing a whole of community/whole of government approach

- **Punitive measures do not achieve long term outcomes/don't lead to change of behaviour:**

- The common thread that connects many of the Aboriginal people living in communities these days is the sense of hopelessness, emptiness and despair. With low self-esteem, lack of hope and no vision for a better future, people living in Aboriginal communities have nothing to gain from changing their habits because they have nothing to lose. This is the hardest group of people to motivate. For generations, individual's responsibility has been taken away from Indigenous people and given to government, even under the era of self determination, it was about tokenistic participation rather than building their capacity to respond to present and future challenges. Despite change in government and policies, the patronising and paternalistic approach from government continue to be the threat connecting all of these policies until this day, which is evident in the government's approach to child protection which supports quarantining individual's income rather than investing in building the capacity of struggling families (including indigenous families) to enable them to better cater for their children.
- ACWA is of the opinion that punitive measures do not lead to long-term change in behaviour. Hence, ACWA supports the employment of more community liaison officers and more night patrol workers to support in monitoring and helping community members in addressing the problem.