

Submission to the Australian Senate Inquiry into petrol sniffing and substance abuse in central Australia

My name is Maggie Kavanagh and I employed as the Community Capacity Builder at Balgo community in Western Australia. I recently undertook interviews and collected data on the levels of petrol sniffing at Balgo for *James Cook University's Impact Evaluation of Opal Fuel* in May-June 2008.

I thought it would be useful and timely to this inquiry to provide some feedback about the main issues I covered in this evaluation.

Opal fuel has been in place in Balgo since May 2005. There is agreement in the community that Opal has had a positive impact in Balgo. One comment in particular sums up many people's view about Opal:

Finally with Opal in the community the issue was addressed and something concrete was being done about petrol sniffing in Balgo. We stopped wasting endless time asking why, what can we do. Opal was something that was preventing sniffing. It is a good strategy. We have to be separate from petrol here.

However petrol sniffing still occurs in Balgo when petrol is brought into the community and on occasions other volatile substances are involved. On three occasions this year the police have broken up major outbreaks of petrol sniffing and charged young people with disorderly conduct and referred them to local agencies. Some have had bail conditions imposed on them to attend the health clinic for a check up and/or not to associate with particular sniffers. Without a specific by-law prohibiting petrol sniffing this is the only option open to police.

There is a consensus that the pattern of sniffing in Balgo can be characterised as episodic or opportunistic. Community people also note that within this group there are clear 'leaders' who strongly influence 'followers' who would not normally be bothered with sniffing petrol if they were not persuaded by these leaders. There is a level of concern about the health impact on those young people who do still sniff even if not regularly.

Also noteworthy to the scope of the Senate inquiry are the following observations.

Current status of youth services

For the past 18 months Palyalatju Marpanpa Health Committee has operated a youth service employing 4 full time staff (two Aboriginal and two non Aboriginal) and up to 8 young people on CDEP. This service also covers Mulan and Bililuna communities as well.

The majority of funding for the Palyalatju service – 97 % is provided by private sources – the St. John of God Subiaco hospital campus and CARITAS through its

Indigenous program. Small amounts are provided by the WA Department of Child Protection and the WA Office of Crime Prevention. Palyalatju is half way through its 3 year funded program. The main focus of the youth service is case management, counselling and support, advocacy and running discos and “family nights” in conjunction with Garnduwa. It also runs other activities that aim to develop skills to build up the resilience and self esteem of youth through photography projects, youth nights, digital filmmaking and employing and training young people to work with Palyalatju.

Palyalatju Marpanpa Health Committee youth service receives minimal support from the government and must rely on the Catholic Church for funding. The current funding will cease in 18 months and there has been no indication from government that a youth service will be funded in Balgo. This will also impact on Bililuna and Mulan communities.

Garnduwa is a sport and recreation program that has operated in the Kimberley region since 1991. It is funded from 5 separate funding sources including WA Healthways, WA Department of Sport and Recreation, Department of Communication and Transport and the Department of Health and Ageing. It has operated in Balgo for the last 18 months employing a local coordinator who also has responsibility for Mulan, Bililuna and Ringer Soak communities.

Garnduwa runs a *Be Active Program* that trains up local community people to run their own sport and rec programs. They aim for mainly football and basketball activities for all ages in after school week hours and coordinate school holiday activities and work jointly with Palyalatju to run discos, concerts, family nights, sporting carnivals and other one off events. They can pay some limited top up wages to CDEP participants but also rely on school volunteers to assist. Staffing is reliant on the availability of local people and can be erratic. They have recently acquired funding for one traineeship through DEWR and Job Futures.

Garnduwa sought funding from the Petrol Sniffing Strategy for extra funds to pay the Be Active workers and support for rent for the coordinator. They have been working on the proposal with the Attorney Generals Department but they were recently informed there has been a “change in the process for applying for funding” and have not received the extra funds.

There are not enough organised activities for young people under the age of 14 years. Currently the community relies on school volunteers to run after school basketball for younger kids in conjunction with the Garnduwa program. People would like to see weekend camping trips, a properly funded after school program, school holiday programs and structured activity based programs for younger children.

The other main requests are for a youth centre and swimming pool to be built in Balgo. Most people see these as main priorities given the size of the community, its remote location and the extreme weather conditions. Many respondents noted that other communities such as Jigalong, Yuendumu and Kintore have pools and there have been many positive benefits.

Policing

The Balgo multi functional policing centre is the busiest remote centre in Western Australia. The current policing profile of two officers is a major concern as the centre also covers Bililuna and Mulan communities servicing a population of approximately 850 people. The police service is greatly stretched and particularly so when there are offenders in custody. In these situations the police are unable to respond to other matters until custodial care has been completed as it is not feasible for one officer to be left on duty on their own. Transporting offenders out of the community is a costly exercise and further restricts the policing that can occur.

There is an urgent need for the policing levels to be doubled as per the recommendation in the *2004 Coronial Inquiry into Youth Suicide and Substance Abuse in Balgo and the Kutjungka Region of Western Australia*. Policing has had a positive and major impact on the safety of the community. In particular the actions of the police in dealing swiftly with outbreaks of sniffing in Balgo has been a significant strategy in ensuring that petrol sniffing levels do not escalate and become an entrenched activity. However it is not feasible to expect the two current officers to maintain this level of engagement for prolonged periods.

Opal in Halls Creek and Rabbit Flat

Opal fuel has had a major impact in abating petrol sniffing in Balgo. Despite this opportunistic sniffing still occurs when unleaded petrol is brought in from Halls Creek or Rabbit Flat. This is a major shift from the pre Opal days when petrol sniffing was a firmly entrenched practice in Balgo. However there are a significant number of young people who still sniff unleaded petrol when it is available.

The commonwealth government has been informing Balgo that Opal will be put into Poinciana Roadhouse in Halls Creek since December 2007. Shell has still to make an agreement about supplying Opal to Halls Creek and Opal fuel has still not been established in Halls Creek or Rabbit Flat roadhouse. The community understands that the delay in Halls Creek is due to delays in supply issues. The delay in Rabbit Flat is due to the refusal by the roadhouse owner to install Opal fuel for “philosophical reasons”.

The community feels let down that the commonwealth government has not been more pro active in driving the rollout of Opal into these areas. The community has written to Rabbit Flat Roadhouse and Shell asking them to put Opal fuel in as soon as possible. Balgo community would clearly benefit from a petrol free quarantined region that includes the closest outlets of Halls Creek and Rabbit Flat.

Other relevant issues raised in the community include:

- The need for a by-law for petrol sniffing in Balgo;
- Inadequate and limited housing supply in Balgo greatly affects the lives of young people in Balgo;
- Lack of a dedicated youth space in Balgo;
- High level of truancy amongst school students particularly of teenage years;
- That the Adult Education centre could be better utilised and consideration should be given to starting a night school for youth;
- Concern by a number of people about Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people selling marijuana and other drugs to young people;
- Concern about possible exposure to ice and speed by Balgo youth whilst in Halls Creek and other major towns in the Kimberley region;
- A poor response to mental health issues in the Kutjungka region;
- Currently there are some services but more support and focus is needed on young girls and women in the areas of sex education, protective behaviours education, activities, domestic violence support and parenting programs;
- Would like to see part time traineeships for youth as sport and recreation workers;
- That the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation (WAC) needs to make a plan about how to better engage youth in work activities in the community;
- Need for a full time early childhood program/service and more parenting support and nutrition awareness education for young mothers and fathers;
- There is no school – community liaison program;
- No outside delivered drug and alcohol awareness or outreach programs (currently this only happens through the work of Palyalatju's youth and men's' health projects as part of their work)
- Need to have funding for organised activities for children under 14 years

Conclusion

Balgo is yet to benefit from the central Australian petrol sniffing strategy East Kimberley Implementation Plan. FAHCSIA staff are due to visit Balgo shortly to discuss this plan. This is timely as by the end of August 2008 the community will be out of an ORIC appointed (Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations) special administration. The new directors have recently been elected and there is a real sense that positive change is achievable in Balgo.

Balgo needs more support to build up and sustain in particular the critical areas of youth services, policing, school attendance, the wider rolling out of Opal fuel and in establishing a youth centre. A greater focus by government to assist these needs will be opportune while Balgo moves towards a new and optimistic era.

Recommendations

1. That Opal is immediately established in Halls Creek and Rabbit Flat as a matter of urgency in line with the commonwealth government's *Central Australian Petrol Sniffing Strategy East Kimberley Implementation Plan*.
2. That more police resources are committed to the Kutjungka region as a major priority.
3. That commonwealth and state government departments enter negotiations with Balgo agencies about funding a youth service and youth centre in the community.
4. That a school home liaison officer is funded to the school as a high priority.
5. That more support is given to Balgo for early childhood, parenting, drug and alcohol awareness and nutrition awareness programs.

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Maggie Kavanagh
Community Capacity Builder
Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation