



Couple volunteer for controversial 'rations' trial in bid to get ahead

DAWN GIBSON

Paula and Shannon Jimmy are not bothered by the prospect of Centrelink controlling how they spend their welfare money. On the contrary, they welcome the idea.

The young Kimberley couple were among the first people to sign up for a controversial trial which began in Kununurra and Cannington last week, under which Centrelink clients have up to 70 per cent of their income quarantined so it can only be spent on food, rent and other essentials.

While people who neglect their children will be forced to comply, others like the Jimmys have voluntarily opted in as a way to get ahead.

Ms Jimmy, who lives with her partner and their two children at the Molly Springs settlement on the outskirts of Kununurra, said she had

been aware of how the scheme worked because her mother had been placed on income management in the Northern Territory. "We're getting our own house next year and I want my own things in there, like a fridge and a washing machine," she said.

"We are also hoping to save enough money to buy a car for Shannon and that would help him find a job in town. Maybe I will learn to drive too."

The WA Aboriginal Rights Coalition has lambasted the trials as paternalistic, labelling the concept as the modern version of flour and sugar rations.

However, early figures from Centrelink show that, of the first 10 families and individuals placed on income management, seven were volunteers.

Centrelink clients are given a BasicsCard, or green card as it has

become known, which has credits for the purchase of day-to-day goods. Items like alcohol and tobacco cannot be bought on the card.

Federal Human Services Minister Joe Ludwig said Centrelink expected a rush of applications for the card over the Christmas period and had plans to meet the demand.

He said the Government was committed to making the scheme work to ensure welfare payments were spent in the interests of children.

Families Minister Jenny Macklin said the operation of the scheme in the Northern Territory had delivered tangible benefits, including a significant increase in the purchase of healthy food, more male involvement in family budgeting and fewer cases of people scrounging money from relatives.



Opting in: Paula and Shannon Jimmy, with Zontae, 1, and their BasicsCard.



Food cards right step to protect the kids

Paige Taylor

EACH weekday morning, 50-year-old Sue Roberts gets up at 5.30am, wakes her grandchildren, drives them to daycare and school, and then starts her job as a delivery driver.

It is a routine Ms Roberts thought she had seen the last of when her three children grew up, but then her 24-year-old daughter fell into the grip of an amphetamine addiction.

The grandmother says it breaks her heart to think how her daughter, who is now in jail after snatching a bag, would sometimes forget to feed her own children.

Ms Roberts, who lives on the outskirts of Perth, believes the Rudd Government's trial of in-

come management, which begins today in nine Perth suburbs and in the Kimberley town of Kununurra, is the right step.

"I think the Department for Child Protection should drug-test all the parents on their books, and if they test positive, they should be given food cards, not money," Ms Roberts said.

Until now, income management has been restricted to Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

The trial allows Centrelink to quarantine, or manage, up to 70 per cent of welfare payments and 100 per cent of lump-sum payments if a child protection officer recommends it.

State Child Protection Minister Robyn McSweeney, a former

child protection officer, said up to 1500 parents in the trial would be given a basics card that could only be spent on food.

"I hope parents can be helped to learn how to manage their finances and provide better lives for their children," she said.

"Families subject to income management will also have access to advice and guidance from Australian government-funded financial counsellors."

Ms Roberts said that even though she approved of the basics card, she was sceptical.

"I worry the parents who are on drugs will find a way around it they'll sell their food card to buy drugs," she said.



Hands full: Susan Roberts at home with her three grandchildren



Anti-alcohol dole payment scheme a hit in the Kimberley

JESSICA STRUTT

Almost 80 parents in the Kimberley have voluntarily signed up for a controversial scheme that requires them to spend welfare payments on essentials for their children rather than alcohol and cigarettes.

But while the scheme has been popular with families who want better control of the family budget, only seven people have been forced on to income management after coming to the attention of the Department for Child Protection.

Under the scheme, which started in Kununurra and Cannington in November but has since been rolled out into other communities, people registered with Centrelink can have up to 70 per cent of their benefits quarantined to spend on food, clothes

and other essentials.

Child Protection Minister Robyn McSweeney said yesterday that income management was designed to target parents who neglected their children by ensuring their welfare payments were used to feed and clothe their family.

She has directed her staff to ensure that families who ask the department for financial assistance twice in a short period of time are interviewed for placement on income management.

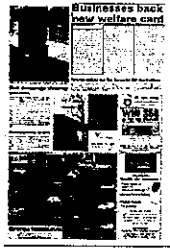
Mrs McSweeney said she supported the alcohol bans already in force in the Kimberley and believed that together with income management both initiatives would improve the wellbeing of local families.

"Because Centrelink income is not being spent on items such as alcohol, there is less domestic violence and

therefore an improvement in the home life of families," she said.

The scheme has recently been extended to Halls Creek, Balgo and Broome and will be rolled out across the rest of the Kimberley, including Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Kalumburu, Oombulgurri and the Dampier Peninsula next month. People who sign up are given a BasicsCard, which can only be used to buy day-to-day goods but cannot be spent on cigarettes, alcohol and pornography.

Department for Child Protection figures show that 77 people in the Kimberley, mostly from Kununurra, Halls Creek and Balgo, have volunteered for the scheme. Seven from Cannington and the Kimberley have been forced on to income management.



Businesses back new welfare card

By CHRIS HINGSTON

BROOME businesses are coming online as part of the Federal Government's income management trial - where participants swipe a key card to access portions of welfare payments quarantined for spending on basic goods - with some local businesses already giving the trial the thumbs up.

The Commonwealth trial has commenced in Broome, Kununurra, Halls Creek and Balgo and is being rolled out in the rest of the Kimberley this month.

Under the trial, child protection authorities identify and refer cases of child neglect to Centrelink for income management and support. Welfare recipients can also volunteer to be income managed.

WA Child Protection Minister

Robyn McSweeney said so far 77 people in the Kimberley had volunteered for income management, with only seven cases referred by child protection authorities.

The system uses a BasicsCard, able to be used at businesses such as Coles and Woolworths, with up to 70 per cent of welfare payments able to be quarantined for essential items like clothing and food.

So far 10 Broome businesses are accepting the BasicsCard, with another eight signed up to come online.

Joe Scavo, spokesman for Federal Human Services Minister Joe Ludwig, said since October last year there had been 300 successful BasicsCard transactions through Broome businesses.

BP Reid Road manager Jane Melhuish said her business was regularly completing BasicsCard trans-

actions. "I see them coming through every day, it is getting popular," she said.

"There is no shame with it, they hand it over like a regular key card."

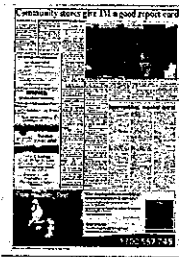
She said she was mainly selling basic food stuffs. "I think it's going to be good ... it's a long time coming," she said.

Broome Barrells manager Darren Pryor said the surfwear shop had signed up to use the BasicsCard system before Christmas.

He said the business had only seen a few BasicsCard transactions, but he was impressed by the trial.

"It's a great idea ... it stops them wasting their money on rubbish and helps them spend it on general needs," Mr Pryor.

He said he believed the system, with its personal key card and pin approach, would be hard to cheat.



Community stores give IM a good report card

By KIERAN FINNANE

A majority of the first 20 stores licensed under the Intervention are reporting that Income Management (IM, also known as "quarantining") has had a positive effect on their community.

Interviews took place after IM had been in place for between three and five months.

Fifteen out of the 20 operators interviewed deemed the effect positive; three saw it as negative; two were neutral.

All 20 commented that IM had increased the capacity for people to shop for food every day - customers were buying better and more food.

And all 20 had observed a positive attitude amongst customers, saying there was less conflict or arguing about what to buy, particularly between husbands and wives.

Two operators commented that young men and teenage boys were learning to shop - a new life skill for them.

Some operators reported as positive whole families coming to shop,

more money being spent on children, and some money being saved for things such as white goods and plasma TVs. One said the store had becoming a community social centre, where people came to talk and look at the new range of goods on sale.

In the negative were difficulties of elderly people in understanding changes, complaints from some men who were not happy about the changes from political and financial standpoints, and in the case of one community, residents feeling shamed to be part of the Intervention.

A majority (14 out of 20) reported that IM has had a positive effect on the store, with increased turnover allowing them to stock more and varied foods, to employ more community people, and to stock hardware items requested by residents, such as flood lights.

Three operators said residents had complained that they could not buy cigarettes using IM funds, while two reported that the sale of cigarettes had halved.

However the positives had come at cost, particularly of time, with 13 out

of 20 rating the transition to IM as difficult to very difficult.

A majority (17 out of 20) said their customers' shopping habits had changed, and of those half deemed the change to have been great; the other half, slight.

With 14 out of 20 reporting customers buying more fresh fruit and vegetables, their orders for these had significantly increased. In one case vegetable orders had risen from four palletes a week to 10, and were expected to go higher.

Three operators said there had been no change to their customers' habits as they had already established, over the long term, good purchasing practices, understood the impact of good food, and supplemented their diet with bush tucker.

Eighteen operators commented that by the time community residents had used the IM process on a few occasions they understood how to purchase goods.

Women and children were the most satisfied with the new system, while men were slowly adjusting to the changes.

Thirteen operators commented that residents were purchasing more clothes and shoes, and more specifically, children's clothing (seven reported no

change in the amount of clothing purchased).

Thirteen reported that their turnover had increased, three of these by more than 30%, while seven reported a decrease, three of these by an unknown amount (as operators were new to the store).

One store operator said his store had a 100% increase in turnover.

Another, at a community near Alice Springs, cited a decrease of 10%, owing to the distribution of Coles and Woolworths cards, taking custom from the store.

All 20 operators were experiencing an increased workload, with 16 of them saying it was taking up to an extra three hours per day to reconcile Centrelink payments.

The four operators most affected by the extra workload thought that Centrelink should pay for the extra time, or for an extra staff member.

One operator said store cards for use at Coles and

Woolworths were being sold for cash, often at lower prices. This cash was being used for alcohol and gambling.

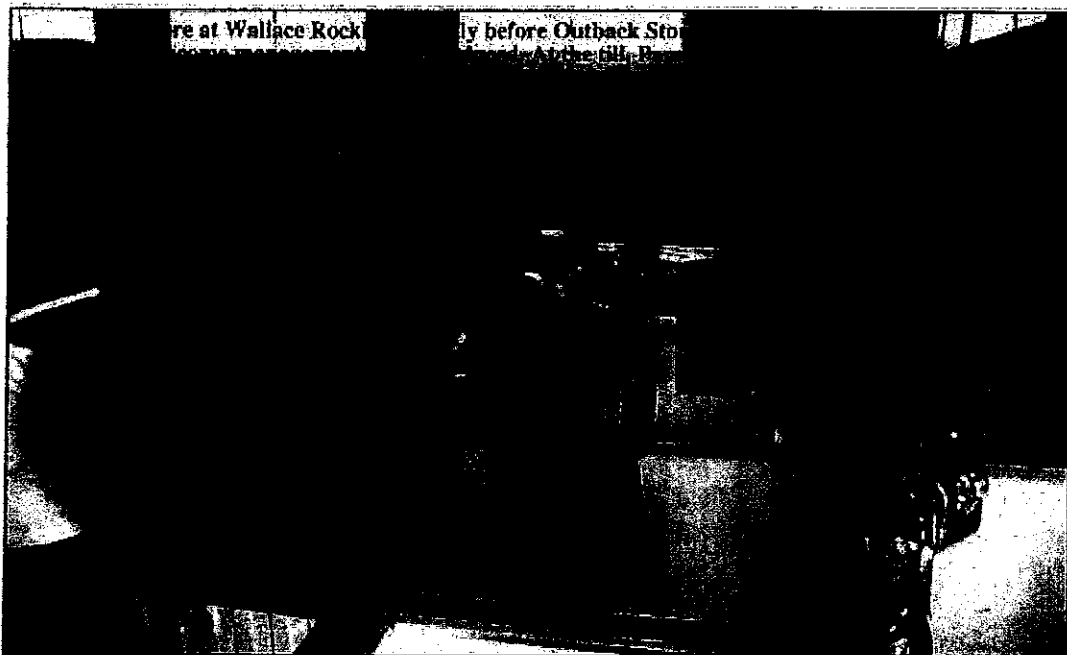
Customers were using IM funds to fill vehicles with fuel on Fridays and driving to Alice Springs to convert cash cards, spending weekends in town. As a result the operator of this store reported weekend trading at record lows.

Operators said they were being asked to make, at their cost, numerous calls (10 to 50 per day) to Centrelink to check customer income management balances.

The stores interviewed for the monitoring report include, in the Centre, Apatula (Finke), Mutitjulu, Titjikala, Areyonga, Papunya, Finke River Mission and

Ntaria Supermarket at Hermannsburg, Santa Teresa, Wallace Rockhole, Pempimenarti, Palumpa, Kaltukatjara (Docker River), Kintore and Mt Liebig.

A total of 68 community stores are to be licensed.





Hunting and fishing for a better future

Padraic Murphy

WHEN Eddie Deemal, 82, was growing up early last century, children on Cape York didn't think of themselves as Aboriginal.

With no power and roads impassable for much of the year, Mr Deemal just lived, and was taught by his parents to hunt kangaroo and spear fish on the white sand bars that ran along the coast north of Cooktown.

"This was all we knew. We never really thought of living another way," Mr Deemal said. "Now the children have so much other stuff, so many problems; it's not the same."

After almost half a century of alcohol abuse and welfare dependency, communities across Cape York have seen a remorseless erosion of traditional customs, with some children now barely conscious of hunting techniques that fed their parents.

But a radical pilot program being run by the Family Responsibilities Commission — a welfare reform initiative being tested in four Cape York communities Aurukun, Coen, Hopevale and Mossman Gorge — hopes to reconnect dysfunctional fam-

ilies with their heritage and restore their sense of Aboriginality.

Under the plan, FRC commissioner David Glasgow, along with recently appointed community commissioners, will be able to order children and parents to be taken out bush by elders to experience traditional hunting, or face quarantining of their welfare benefits.

The program is believed to be the first time a body with quasi-judicial powers under Queensland legislation will be able to order Aboriginal people to learn about their own culture.

While the intention is partly to encourage families to come closer in a setting away from their often overcrowded homes, the orders also intend to reinforce the Aboriginal identity to many who have been ravaged by welfare dependence, violence or alcohol.

Mr Glasgow, a former Queensland coroner, said he would be disappointed if there were not tangible results within 12 months.

"Part of this is saying to parents that they must take responsibility for children not going to school, and not just their own children but others.

People talk about generational change, but I hope within 12 months it becomes unacceptable to see a child wandering around a community when they should be in school," Mr Glasgow said.

The FRC has been set up specifically to wind back welfare dependence in Cape York communities and to improve behavioural standards. The FRC will also seek to deal with the dire housing situation on the Cape, and promote enterprise.

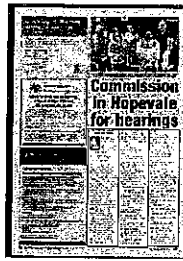
The FRC includes commissioners from each tribal community, and will deal with families whose children do not attend school, who fail to pay rent, or who flout behavioural standards.

In extreme cases, the FRC will be able to take over a family's finances, but Ms Glasgow said he hoped to help families with more proactive approaches such as the men's program.

Hopevale commissioner Brian Cobus said that taking dysfunctional families hunting would help give many in the community a sense of pride that had been lost as traditional activities had been swamped.



Live tradition: Eddie Deemal, left, teaches 11-year-old Ashley Jack how to fish



Commission in Hopevale for hearings

By Cairns Correspondent
CHRISTINE HOWES



THE response to the first Family Responsibility Commission (FRC) conferences held in the Cape York community

of Hopevale appears to have been generally positive, despite some funding and communication concerns.

The community, just north of Cooktown, is one of four on the Cape trialling a raft of controversial changes known collectively as 'welfare reform' legislated by the Queensland and Federal governments.

The FRC's role is to enforce and support four new obligations to welfare payments around school attendance, child care, social behaviour and responsible tenancy. However, critics say the reforms don't do enough to address underlying causes of community dysfunction.

The FRC is supported on each community by a co-ordinator and up to six commissioners, local Elders and other respected community members who work with former magistrate Commissioner David Glasgow at each sitting.

On Wednesday, three Hopevale cases were heard in the first of what will become fortnightly FRC conferences.

Media are prevented from publishing any case details that might identify participants, so Commissioner Glasgow said it was difficult to be too specific about the Hopevale hearings. However, he said they related to historical child safety notices.

"The commissioners just gave them some advice about what they could do to further stabilise their relationships and

make sure their children were fine," he told *The Koori Mail*.

"In each case the couples decided that it was a good idea and two of the fathers involved have entered into an agreement with us to go to anger management.

"If you take that in broad terms, these are very positive things for both those young families.

"The third case was a very historical order. We brought them in just to make sure that things were going okay and it was, and we decided to take no further action at all."

The Commission can issue warnings, direct individuals to support services and/or to establish what should happen to welfare payments, should they receive a referral from an agency that believes the obligations have been breached.

'Not threatening'

Hopevale FRC Co-ordinator Priscilla Gibson conceded that the first local conferences were held before scheduled community information sessions, but said she hoped that the process would not be seen as threatening.

"I for one would not want the community to see this as a threatening intervention program," she said. "It certainly isn't. There are a lot of good things that are going to happen through it."

Hopevale commissioners who spoke to *The Koori Mail* were also upbeat. One, Doreen Hart, said she had been surprised at how well the conferences had gone 'given the stories and the hype that have built up around FRCs'.

"Our people came along, all attended, and the recommendations were

accepted and adhered to," she said.

"I think it's going to be another avenue for them to take in getting more help for some of the problems they're experiencing - there's more people for them to talk to."

Commissioner Estelle Bowen said the training she and others had received, along with Commissioner Glasgow's experience, had helped.

"I'm looking forward to working with my community again because this is the only way we can help them," she said.

"This morning was a really exciting thing for me, to sit in with our client here.

"I felt that she needs us and we need to help her. It was new to her but at the end she was excited and we came to common grounds together," she said of one of the day's clients.

Commissioner Des Bowen said he was surprised that the recommendations he and his fellow commissioners put up were 'exactly what the people themselves had worked out. I think it will go from strength to strength'.

Hopevale Mayor Greg McLean, speaking after a community meeting attended by more than 250 people held late on the first day of the FRC hearings, said the initiatives needed more State Government support.

"The way we do it now is to make sure that communication gets better, (and) money from State does hit the ground to do consultation with the community," he said.

"I've been after this for the past three years. We all knew changes have got to happen and the only people who can make changes are our own people."



Hearing at Cape York makes legal history

Padraic Murphy

TWO families struggling with child abuse yesterday became the first to appear before the Families Responsibilities Commission the next stage in welfare reform in indigenous communities.

The FRC hearing on Cape York made legal history by being the first deliberative body with the power to quarantine welfare payments and take control of an individual's finances.

It is hoped the initiative masterminded by Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson to improve behaviour in four Cape York communities will be rolled out across the country. Sitting in Coen yesterday with two local representatives, Commissioner David Glasgow denied the measures were paternalistic.

"I'm unaware of any body with our powers sitting anywhere in Australia," said the retired magistrate who heads the FRC.

"People have to remember this system was designed by indigenous people and agreed to by indigenous councils. People who

say it's paternalistic really do need to have a look at what is happening on the ground."

FRC hearings are held in camera and identifying parties or details of why they are before the commission is against the law.

The families who were referred to the FRC by the Department of Child Safety attended the closed hearing yesterday in Coen, a community of about 300 people in the middle of Cape York.

In each case the families included young women who had been the subject of child protection concerns.

Mr Glasgow said that far from being punished, yesterday's hearings were more about making sure that children were reintegrated into the school system.

"We want to make sure the people are receiving the benefits they are entitled to, that they are aware of the services available, and that they are in contact with those services," he said.

The hearing came less than six months since the FRC was granting funding by the Queensland Government. The FRC is being

trialled in Coen, Aurukun, Mossman Gorge and Hopevale, the hometown of Mr Pearson, who is expected to be briefed on progress in Aurukun on Thursday.

Along with Mr Glasgow, the FRC has employed 24 indigenous commissioners across the communities, two of which attend hearings at any one time. One who sat yesterday was Gary Port, a builder and a member of one of Coen's most respected families.

Mr Port said there was considerable community suspicion about the FRC, but he expected that to ease once the monthly hearing were under way.

"A lot of people think the FRC wants to take their children or money away," Mr Port said.

"Rumours start and things that are hard to stop. But we're here to help, so I think the more hearings we have, the more people will realise that."

Opposition indigenous affairs spokesman Tony Abbott, who is working in the local school at Coen for three weeks, attended a debriefing on the hearing.



Welfare reform: David Glasgow with residents including youngster Denzel Liddy, up close, and elder Peter Peter, after yesterday's hearing in Coen

Pictures: Lyndon Mechelsien