



ANANGU PITJANTJATJARA SERVICES
ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

ICN 1902 ABN 15 470 441 855

PO Box 2584 Alice Springs NT 0871



Chairperson and Members

Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities

Department of the Senate

PO Box 6100

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Chairperson and Members,

I welcome this opportunity to present my knowledge and ideas on what I believe to be a way forward for remote and regional Aboriginal communities, Australia will never 'close the gap' for Indigenous people if services and programs do not dramatically change to these communities.

I speak from having the experience of working in both remote and regional Aboriginal communities and also from the perspective of an experienced community development professional who has always worked in regional and remote communities to build social and economic capacity of such communities. I am currently the CEO of AP Services but my comments are not specific to the communities on the Pitjantjatjara Lands but relevant to all communities.

Without sounding alarmist the situation is very grim for the future of the communities and the individuals who make up those communities but also very serious for regional towns and cities and for social stability in Australia. If we do not want towns and cities from Kununurra to Broome, the towns of the Pilbara and Goldfields, Katherine, Alice Springs or even Darwin, Port Augusta, Coober Pedy, Cunnamulla to Boorooloola even to Cairns, Bourke to Broken Hill from becoming 'hellholes' where fences, guard dogs, security lights become the way of life while mobs of lawless people roam the street destroying property and each other then we need to act with a sense of urgency. We do not want these towns to be like

Port Moresby and I see many similarities, then we need to recognize that the regional and remote communities are like a 'failed states' spiraling downwards. We should not want it for the future of Australia and certainly not for the Indigenous citizens of this country, so we need to respond as we would to a 'failed state'.

The difficulty I have with many government initiatives in response to the future of remote and regional communities is that they are aimed at what I call the 'band aid' end, they are dealing with the serious problem rather than the cause of the problem. While building more dialysis units is vital for the gravely ill Indigenous people with renal failure, the same amount of resources and innovative programs need to be focused on the preventative programs so that we do not need to put people on dialysis. More Police is a band aid response, harsher penalties are a band aid response, and banning alcohol is a band aid response. Policy and programs are focusing on 'closing the gap' mainly through these reactive or band aid responses to the deteriorating conditions in regional and remote communities.

Why do Aboriginal Australians get diabetes, why do they drink to excess, why do they get caught up in crimes, why are communities violent and dysfunctional, when those questions are examined then we design the programs to work at the beginning of the issue the preventative end not the consequence or band aid end. In my experience the structures and bureaucracies charged with the responsibility of formulating policy and delivery of programs are operating from a lack of knowledge, intellect and capacity to understand the fundamentals of capacity building and community development. Programs are developed in isolation and are created to meet the agendas of the department or government not in the context and agenda of the remote or regional community. In many cases the programs fail because of a lack of the basic infrastructure and resources on the ground, resources that should be available in any Australian community, not because the program did not have some relevance to the people involved, there are assumptions made in ignorance in assorted bureaucracies that plan and develop programs. Through years of colonization, neglect, poor policies and program failure there has been a rapid deterioration in capabilities in remote and regional communities, we have succeeded tragically of de-skilling the residents of these communities, so now there is little capacity to respond to any programs or capacity building. Many of us working in such communities call it the 'Zimbabwe syndrome', many know the problems causing the failed state but are just watching letting the misery and dysfunction totally corrode the remnants of culture and dignity and the total destruction of both social and physical infrastructure while many of these communities are ruled by a lawless band of bullies.

It is now time to act with a great sense of urgency to prevent a total disaster for the residents of these communities and the civil society we all aspire to. It needs a 'Disaster Response Model' evoked for any disaster, such as the community re-building being now done in Victorian bushfire communities.

Why is the situation so serious?

1. The model of service delivery is flawed and has been flawed for many years but we persist with it-the 'Zimbabwe syndrome'.
2. Much culture and customary obligations have been lost or corrupted by substance abuse and addiction problems and 'sit-down' money. The inhabitants of these communities have a poverty of spirit, much more serious than material poverty.
3. Most Community Corporations charged with the responsibility of service provision do not have the governance and management capacity to deliver basic service, so they do not get delivered at even the most basic of standards.
4. Due to poor government funding, the ignorance and prejudice of bureaucracies, the most demanding of working conditions and poor salary levels results in low caliber staff in communities. The best people are needed!
5. Many children are conceived as a result of violence and abuse, selling bodies for addictive substances or money and a result of multiple partners.
6. Babies and children born because they arrive not because they are wanted then fail to attach, may have foetal alcohol syndrome, are not nurtured, the result is the basic needs to grow normally into a functioning human being which are universally recognized are not present.
7. The combination of hierarchy of needs not met in childhood, a failure to thrive as infants, the breakdown of culture and custom, substance abuse and violence results in extremely high levels of mental health problems in communities, further causing deterioration in the ability for people and communities to function.
8. A sense of hopelessness and despair pervades communities especially amongst the youth who then cause havoc in either the community or the nearest town.
9. The grandparent, especially grandmother group brought up traditionally and within culture is rapidly departing the earth, they are the last strength within the communities providing most of the childcare, community leadership and community capacity.
10. Aboriginal women are now drinking heavily a trend that started in the 1990's, the result is the section of the community that was functioning and holding the family together is now collapsing at a rapid rate. This is increasing the neglect of children

and old people, the most vulnerable in the communities, it is a myth perpetuated by policy and vested interests that culture will protect and sustain these age groups.

What needs to Change?

1. Municipal Services, Housing and Utilities need to be removed from the shoulders of Community Corporations and provided by a regional and/or Local Government structure. Most of us are not interested in deciding how or why these services should happen just as long as they do. Why are Indigenous Australians asked to take this extra responsibility? My experience is that they are not interested in these issues, just that the service is provided at an approved Australian level, it has been open to abuse and weakens governance capacity. Sadly most of community corporation time is spent dealing with these issues rather than social and economic capacity building which they are interested in and which will most profoundly change community life, a relevant example is Art Centre boards will often have the same board members who will function well on the board of the Arts Centre but behave corruptly or with self interest on the Community Corporation board.
2. The underlying belief that Indigenous youth from communities are different from other youth from regional and remote communities. This belief that Indigenous youth from communities want to spend their lives in the community must be strenuously challenged. I have seen no evidence of that, and I have been involved in programs to relocate them a long way from home to work and enjoy the benefits of the contemporary world. I grew up remotely, I loved my childhood, I still call that place home and will retire there but if someone had told me at 12 that was where I would stay for the rest of my life I would have dropped out of school, started smoking etc and become totally disillusioned, as would be expected. Young Indigenous people are young people first and foremost and need the same responses to education, opportunities, employment and life as all rural Australians.
3. The damage being done by the baby bonus payment. Young women with little or no opportunity to earn an income and see no future life for themselves take an immediate option for money to buy alcohol and drugs or finance a trip to town to let them escape their misery for a short time. I have witnessed many families putting pressure on young women 13+ girls to be partnered off so that another income and the baby bonus can contribute to the family income or buy a new car. Extreme disadvantage and poverty does this to people, humanity becomes lost, witness Dickensian England or see 'Slum dog Millionaires'.

4. The connection between the state of physical and mental health to poor early life experiences, lack of hope and education and employment opportunities is well recognised. To improve health outcomes, to 'close the gap' we must intervene before conception, and from conception to grave with programs that nurture babies and children, that keep them safe, that give a sense of hope which in turn encourages school achievement and a desire for employment and life goals. A whole of life plan needs to be introduced for every Indigenous child in regional and remote communities that ensures policies and programs address these issues, programs that begin to interact with the child's development.
5. Education outcomes must be lifted to an acceptable level. Schools should be open all year except for 3 weeks at Christmas and 1 at Easter. They are the best resources in regional and remote communities and are utilized less than schools in towns and cities. It is not acceptable that children leave school unable to read and write and have no mathematical knowledge or life skills to engage in the modern technological world. Normal curriculum should operate in the regular school year, but on staff development days, school holidays etc, staff should be employed to do reading recovery, cultural and spiritual programs, life skills programs and practical lessons. There are growing numbers of skilled grey nomads, early retirees etc in Australia that could be used as a resource bank to provide the skilled staff for such programs, on a greater scale than Indigenous Community Volunteers (ICV). Indigenous people learn best by doing, so traineeships, apprenticeships and mentoring are the most vital component of employability. My experiences in remote communities is that the children are no sooner back to school and there is a holiday again, so the routine is broken, and they are looking for things to do, they are also safer at school where their health and well-being can be observed.
6. Abstudy needs to be put under review I have had to intervene many times on behalf of families to endeavor to get Abstudy for a student, it is one of the most complex and confusing systems, there is no way a semi-literate or disempowered person could access Abstudy. The rules do not support young people in accessing schools outside their State, this is ridiculous, the aim is to get children to school not worry about state boundaries. Abstudy staff should be required to visit all communities on a regular basis to assist with family support.
7. The connection between delinquency and poor life skills and opportunity is well understood, therefore the connection between arrest and incarceration rate of Indigenous people and poor education and lack of life goals and opportunities should be better understood, but this does not seem to influence policy and

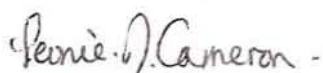
programs. Anti-social behavior arrests and jail are not a deterrent when you have no job or sense of future and believe you can never be part of the broader Australian community. Improved educational outcomes, mentoring and employment, plus restorative justice alternatives must be implemented as a matter of priority for regional and remote communities across Australia.

8. Communities must be made safe and vulnerable people, children, elderly and frail must be able to live in safety. The connection between feeling safe and free from stress and health and well-being and achievement is well known. Communities must be safe before we see an improvement in child welfare, school attendance and outcomes, early parenting, health and life expectancy. Police presence in each community, community policing, increased training of Indigenous men and women to be community police, safe houses for children and elderly in each community. Income management for elderly as well as for vulnerable children, not universal income management. Rewards for positive outcomes, baby bonus maybe for a child well cared for at 5 years of age or for 90% plus school attendance. Income management that has rewards would change human behavior more successfully.
9. A greater emphasis on positive rather than punitive programs in communities and a recognition of social and economic capacity building as the tools of change that will 'close the gap'. A Disaster Response model that drives change through one agency who can direct all other providers. This would change the state of incompetence, malaise and ignorance of the current bureaucracies and stop the absurd silo mentality.

I would appreciate the opportunity to present my submission in person when the committee is scheduled to visit Alice Springs.

I appreciate the time required to read my submission.

Yours sincerely,



Leonie Cameron

3 April 2009