



17 September 2015

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Senate Committee Inquiry: Social Security Legislation Amendment (Debit Card Trial) Bill 2015

Wunan Foundation is a well-established and respected Aboriginal development organisation in the East Kimberley. Our goal is to improve the lives of Aboriginal people in the region by driving socio-economic change, including welfare reform.

Wunan strongly supports the proposed trial of a Restricted Debit Card for all working-age welfare recipients in the East Kimberley. Indigenous people in the East Kimberley are among the most disadvantaged in Australia. The ABS SEIFA data (2011 Census) confirms that the Wyndham East Kimberley and Halls Creek LGAs are in the bottom 10 per cent of all LGAs in Australia. It is well-known that the region has very high levels of long-term welfare dependency relative to the wider Australian community.

The East Kimberley experiences consequent high levels of social dysfunction, including widespread alcohol and drug abuse - much of it funded by welfare payments. Chronic substance abuse in the region has led to a raft of catastrophic social outcomes:

- Family violence is widespread in the Kimberley. In fact, the rate of family and domestic violence incidents reported to police has increased by a staggering 79.1 per cent over the past 5 years – the highest rate of increase in the State by a significant margin. In 2012-13, there were 100 reported incidents of family violence per 1000 people in the Kimberley, as compared to the next highest of 43 per 1000 in the South Eastern region (Western Australia's Family & Domestic Violence Prevention Strategy to 2022, *Achievement Report to 2013*, Department of Child Protection & Family Support). According to the World Health Organisation, excessive consumption of alcohol is a major contributor to the severity and frequency of intimate partner violence (WHO Alcohol Factsheet).

- The presence of domestic violence in a family also increases the likelihood of child abuse and neglect (Tomison, *Exploring Family Violence: Links between Child Maltreatment and Domestic Violence*, 2000). In the East Kimberley, Aboriginal children are being removed from their families due to abuse or neglect at an alarming rate. According to the Department of Child Protection (WA), 100 per cent of children in foster care in the East Kimberley are Aboriginal (*Distribution of Aboriginal Children in Care – Country Districts, 30 June 2015*) and 6 per cent of all Aboriginal children in the East Kimberley are in care.
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is becoming increasingly common in communities throughout the East Kimberley. While health authorities are unable to quantify exact numbers, due to difficulties with diagnosis, they do acknowledge that the rate of FASD in Aboriginal children in the Kimberley is significantly higher than in non-Aboriginal children (*Kimberley: Population and Health Status*, Rural Health West). The *WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey* (2001) found that one in five Aboriginal mothers in the Kimberley drank alcohol during pregnancy.
- There are significant numbers of children who stay awake all night roaming the streets (and sleep during the day instead of attending school), rather than returning to homes where they are unsafe. Operation SHARP (Safely Home with a Responsible Person) was a joint agency initiative led by the WA Department for Child Protection in Kununurra in June 2012, focusing on young people/children on the streets at night, non-attendance at school or disengagement, and parental capacity/responsibility. According to the Department's then Director General, Terry Murphy, over a one-week period contact was made with 125 children who were spending their nights on the street and 35 families were identified for ongoing support (Department of Child Protection, Media Response, 22 February 2013).
- The Kimberley has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. The third highest cause of preventable death for Aboriginal people in the Kimberley between 1997 and 2007 was suicide (*Kimberley: Population and Health Status*, Rural Health West), followed closely by alcohol-related disease. Western Australia has an Aboriginal suicide rate of 35.8 per 100 000 Aboriginal people. In the Kimberley, this rate increases to 70 per 100 000 people. This compares to an overall national rate of 11 per 100 000 people ('The smaller a community, the less likely suicide', *The Stringer*, 25/11/2014).
- The hospitalisation rate for assault in Kununurra is 68 times higher than the national average, as a result of alcohol-fuelled violence (ABC Lateline, 16 July 2015). According to WA Police data, in 2013-14 in Western Australia there were 1456 offences against the person for every 100 000 people. The Kimberley region had offence rates against the person 4.5 times that of Western Australia overall (6500 per 100 000) (from data published at - <http://www.police.wa.gov.au/Aboutus/Statistics/Crimestatistics/tabid/1219/Default.aspx>).

The above data tells the story of highly dysfunctional communities in which children are suffering and communities are unsafe. This situation cannot be allowed to continue. We appreciate that to some – particularly those who do not have direct experience of the social dysfunction in the East Kimberley – the introduction of a Restricted Debit Card may seem a drastic step. However, as one of

the leading Aboriginal development organisations in the region, it is our strong view that without radical change, the circumstances of our people will continue to deteriorate at an increasingly rapid pace.

We believe that a Restricted Debit Card, which will severely limit people's ability to purchase alcohol and drugs, is likely to significantly reduce social dysfunction, including family violence, child abuse and neglect, and crime. In Kununurra, takeaway alcohol is not available on Sundays and local police report that this results in a massive reduction in incidents. Alcohol sales are also restricted on any other day that local police feel is likely to see increased alcohol intake (funerals, football finals, etc.), which has a similar effect. For example, when alcohol sales were severely restricted during a recent Friday night football final, Kununurra Police revealed that there was a 90 per cent reduction in call-out 'incidents' in the town compared with a usual Friday night ('Booze-sale ban slashes cop call-outs', *Kimberley Echo*, 3 September 2015).

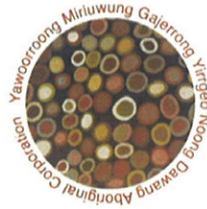
Wunan has been actively engaged in discussions on broader issues of welfare reform in the East Kimberley for several years now. It is our view that welfare reform is the key to moving people from a position of crisis to one of stability – and we know that it is only from a position of stability that people can be supported to make positive and lasting change. As the statistics above indicate, the situation in our region is dire. Too many of our people are living broken lives and our most vulnerable – our children and old people – are paying the price. Without radical reform the future looks grim.

Wunan strongly believes that the proposed Restricted Debit Card trial could be the catalyst we need to break the devastating cycle of poverty and despair in the East Kimberley. We urge all Members of the Federal Parliament to support this measure.

Yours sincerely

Ian Trust
Executive Chairman

Encl. Letter to The Hon. Alan Tudge MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, from Wunan Foundation, Gelganyem Trust and MG Corporation



24 July 2015

The Hon. Alan Tudge MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Tudge

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with senior Officers of your Department in Kununurra earlier this month and for their follow-up letter to us of 20 July 2015.

We appreciate you providing, via the Department, an outline of how the Government's restricted debit card trial would work. The purpose of this letter is to confirm our strong support for Kununurra to be selected as a trial site and to indicate to you that we have met with Halls Creek Indigenous Leaders in the last week to discuss the trial. They have asked us, on their behalf, to also indicate to you their strong support for the trial taking place in their community and we support their request to be included.

One element of the proposed trial that we strongly support is the concept of a local community panel that would be able to vary the amount of payment sent to the restricted card when an individual is doing the right thing and is prepared to enter into an agreement in relation to their ongoing behaviour.

As you know, Kununurra – and the East Kimberley region more generally – has extremely high levels of welfare dependency and severe social dysfunction, including chronic alcohol addiction, domestic violence, suicide, crime, and child abuse and neglect.

As a group of Aboriginal leaders in the East Kimberley, we have formed a clear view that without radical change, including welfare reform, the circumstances of Aboriginal people in our region will continue to deteriorate at an increasingly rapid pace.

It is our vulnerable children and old people who will bear the heaviest burden if this is allowed to occur. Our children will continue to be removed from their families because their families are not safe, many of our children will be born with FASD and never be able to receive a good education, and a large percentage of our people will go to prison and, in some cases, commit suicide.

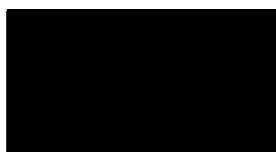
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We acknowledge that agreeing to the East Kimberley being a trial site for the restricted debit card may seem to some a rather drastic step. However, it is our view that continuing to deliver the same programs we have delivered for the past forty years will do nothing for our people and, besides wasting more time and money, will condemn our children and future generations to a life of poverty and despair. As leaders in the East Kimberley, we cannot accept this.

While we understand that there will always be political differences surrounding any significant public policy change, we urge Federal Members of Parliament from all sides to listen to us on this matter and take a non-partisan position in order to allow this trial to proceed. We believe that this trial could be the catalyst for breaking the cycle of poverty and despair in the East Kimberley.

We look forward to engaging positively with you on the details of the implementation of the trial and also finalising our discussion in relation to the associated package of services and economic and social development initiatives to be implemented locally.

Yours sincerely



Ian Trust
Executive Chairman
Wunan Foundation



Desmond Hill
Chairperson
MG Corporation



Ted Hall Jr
Chairperson
Gelganyem Trust

cc. The Hon. Jenny Macklin MP, Shadow Minister for Social Services