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Mission Australia

A response to

'Inquiry into Indigenous Employment'

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Affairs**

May 2005

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Background

Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a brief submission to Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs' Inquiry on Indigenous Employment. Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organisation that delivers community, employment and training services in communities across Australia. In 2004, we supported over 220,000 Australians through over 270 services. Mission Australia's goal is to make a positive contribution to wellbeing of Australians, especially those who are disadvantaged and on low incomes.

There is considerable diversity in the living situations, cultural values, social expectations and service delivery needs of Indigenous individuals, families and communities. Mission Australia provides assistance through both its mainstream services, targeting the general Australian community, and Indigenous-specific services. This enables us to tailor services and their delivery to suit particular needs and circumstances.

Nationally, Mission Australia has just over 60 Community Services. Approximately half of these have 10% or more clients who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. In employment we deliver services from over 120 sites across Australia, and our caseloads are approximately 4% Indigenous.

Mission Australia's current suite of indigenous employment and community services includes:

- Structured Training and Employment Projects (STEP) in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia;
- Specialist Indigenous Jobs Placement Employment and Training (JPET) services in Darwin, Katherine and Dubbo;
- Indigenous Youth Employment Consultants through our Job Network Programs in Bairnsdale, Maddington, Kalgoorlie and Palmerston;
- Job Network - 19,000 Indigenous clients since the start of current Employment Services Contract (ESC3). Indigenous clients make up a

significant proportion of clients at some sites, such as Palmerston (21%) and Port Augusta (17%);

- Breakaway Post Release Program (Taree) - 77% of clients are Indigenous;
- Pathways to Prevention Program (Inala) - 20% of clients are Indigenous;
- Youth Withdrawal and Respite Service (WA) - caseload is 18% Indigenous;
- Youth Beat , Night Patrol and the Sobering up Shelter (Darwin) - 90% of clients are Indigenous;
- Dubbo Leadership and Cultural Development Program – 100% of clients are Indigenous; and
- A partnership with Boys from the Bush (Cape York).

Indigenous Wellbeing

Mission Australia acknowledges the critical role of employment in ensuring all Australians can sustain a basic standard of living. However, our experience of working with highly disadvantaged families, individuals and communities confirms that our services must be responsive to their multiple needs, of which employment may be only one.

There is no shortage of evidence showing that many Indigenous Australians are dealing with severe economic and social barriers, some of which are also evident amongst sections of Australia's non-Indigenous community. However, it is clear that at the aggregate level Indigenous Australians feel the effect far more intensely, as indicated by the following statistics:

- Indigenous unemployment is 3 times higher than for non-Indigenous (ABS 2001 Census)
- Life expectancy is 20 years lower
- Infant mortality rates are 4 times higher
- Prison rates are 15 times higher
- School retention rates are half those of non-Indigenous youth.

In 2003, a survey of Mission Australia's Community Services found that common to many of our Indigenous clients were: low socioeconomic background; intergenerational lack of education and unemployment; poor living conditions; alcohol and drug addictions; homelessness; mental/ ill-health; dysfunctional families; lack of opportunity due to stereotyping; problem gambling; fragmented communities; lack of stable adult family figure; low self-esteem; fear of children losing culture; domestic violence; sense of hopelessness; minimal options; chaotic lifestyle; identity crisis; truancy; acceptance of incarceration as a lifestyle etc.

As a result, our Indigenous clients often require a diverse range of integrated services. Common among these are counselling, advocacy, employment assistance, accommodation, legal advice, mental health, alcohol and drug support and education in literacy and numeracy.

Mission Australia would therefore encourage the Inquiry to take a holistic approach when responding to the issue of Indigenous employment and consider the breadth of contributing factors that must be addressed to achieve successful and sustainable outcomes.

Principles informing Good Practice

Mission Australia acknowledges that we still have much to learn in exploring how we might best work with Indigenous Australians and their communities. We do however operate in a number of locations across Australia with a high proportion of Indigenous clients. The experiences and knowledge of our staff at these sites provide insights on the principles of good practice that are relevant to government and non-government organisations. In the words of one of Mission Australia's Community Services Managers:

"We have learnt over the years that you can set up any number of services to target Indigenous communities. Even if they're staffed and run by Indigenous workers, it doesn't mean they will be willing to participate. Things need to be taken slowly, and done in consultation with/alongside the Indigenous community elders. They need to see a reason to access the service, and be comfortable with how it is presented, and how they are treated."

This view was echoed by staff delivering employment and community services. Stressing the need for sound preparation, they identified the following principles as essential factors in achieving successful outcomes for clients and providers.

- **Holistic & Strengths-based Responses**

Acknowledging and reinforcing the importance of Indigenous culture is a fundamental principal underpinning good practice. Our clients are often dealing with low self-esteem, lack of confidence and, in some cases, limited or no knowledge of their culture and history. Building a strong sense of cultural awareness is an important factor in their personal development.

- **Sound Preparation**

In the Northern Territory, Mission Australia's staff selection criteria require potential staff to demonstrate they are accepted by the local Indigenous communities and to provide evidence of this within their work context.

Mission Australia's NT staff, of whom more than 60% are Indigenous, all participate in cultural information sessions as part of their induction.

The delivery of cultural awareness sessions is also extended to include the employers of our Indigenous clients to ensure there are clear expectations between all parties and a shared understanding and positive appreciation of the Indigenous culture and practices of their new employees.

- **Developing Networks**

Our frontline staff consistently emphasise the importance of taking a 'slow approach' when working with Indigenous clients and communities in order to develop trusting relationships and networks.

This begins with an awareness of, and sensitivity to, cultural traditions and practices. It requires a sustained and long-term commitment to address wariness due to previous negative experiences eg short-term programs, one-off funding, high staff rotation.

- **Program Flexibility**

Indigenous communities and individuals, like their non-Indigenous counterparts, are not homogenous. As a result, programs and practices that have achieved a high degree of success in one location may be difficult to replicate or need local input to ensure they are appropriate.

Mission Australia staff indicated that Indigenous specific support/services may be an appropriate model for some individuals moving back into the workforce, while others preferred 'mainstream' options. Neither should be the sole method of delivery.

- **Building Partnerships**

Strong community and business partnerships have contributed to the success of many of our programs. Our corporate partners have shown a willingness to provide a range of supports to assist our clients and have indicated they are keen to focus their attention on the needs of Indigenous communities.

Building partnerships reinforces the notion of mutual obligation, and provides opportunities for companies with expertise, resources and a commitment to their community to work with individuals and communities who will benefit the most.

- **Mentoring and support**

Mentoring and access to ongoing support are also identified as important elements in the success of program delivery and outcomes. According to one

Mission Australia staff member, with long experience working in education and with the Indigenous community:

“Pushing Indigenous kids out [to work] too early - it needs preparation and support or they fall over. It can't be rushed because it doesn't work for the kids or the employers. Their transition needs to be strongly supported and include a mix of study and work”

Support may also need to be extended to include family members – *“after lots of trial and error we find it better to work with the family, not just the individual”*.

Mentoring is considered critical for clients who lack confidence, have limited independent living skills, may be rebelling against their parents and cultural practices, have experienced racism and are unfamiliar with the world of work.

Appropriate training for workplace mentors is critical in the transition process. The development of tailored mentoring programs, as previously mentioned, should include cross cultural training and may need to address workplace practices. Mentors need to be aware of the level of support and appropriate training that their Indigenous employees require and be encouraged to tell how they were supported in their employment, training etc. In addition they must have access to ongoing support from the auspicing service to encourage early intervention if issues or problems arise.

Mentors and the concept of mentoring need to be viewed as mainstream. Aboriginal people are acutely alert to the 'shame' factor and not wanting to be considered different or less capable than others. Every one needs and can benefit from a mentor or a network of support and there is no shame involved. In fact, smart people look for mentors and supporters in every aspect of their lives.

Examples of Good Practice

Several examples of good practice by Mission Australia services, incorporating the principles outlined above, are located in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas and have been operating successfully over a number of years.

a. Regional Environmental Employment Program (REEP)

Mission Australia has operated the Regional Environmental Employment Program (REEP) for approximately 4 years. Based on a partnership model, REEP is delivered at two regional sites in Victoria (Shepparton and Bendigo).

A diverse funding base brings together government, philanthropic, non-profit and business sectors. The program addresses a range of needs (social, economic and environment), as well as identified skill shortages (eg horticultural work and

Cultural Officers). The model is multi-layered reflecting the complex needs of the target group.

The flexibility and creativity of the program helps meet the needs of the participants. For example, the willingness of TAFE to undertake some of its teaching 'in the field' rather than in the classroom and to provide additional literacy support, to more successfully engage with participants, and the inclusion of cultural activities to enhance the participation of Indigenous participants.

Unlike other environmental programs, REEP offers 10-12 young people *12 months of accredited training* (traineeship) that includes:

- One day per week training – TAFE Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management or Rural Operations
- Two days per week experience – land care projects with partners who financially support the program (Local Government, Catchment Management Authorities, Parks Victoria).
- Two days per week work experience with host public and private employers

The skills and expertise of local REEP co-ordinators, who are the main support person for the participants, play a key linkage role with organisations such as TAFE and host employers. In addition, the program attracts support and input from the local community who are familiar with the barriers to the participants' labour force participation. The diversity of organisations involved in the program comes together because of their concern for the wellbeing of local young people. They bring a great range of skills and expertise – including environmental, training, youth support, employment and business.

Six young Indigenous people participated in the 2001/02 and 2002/03 programs. While the number is relatively small to date, all have achieved employment.

b. Structured Training Employment Program (STEP)

Mission Australia has partnered with Australia Post, the University of South Australia and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations to train and employ Indigenous job seekers.

The program commenced in 2002 and won South Australia's Training Initiative Award for 2004, reflecting both the quality of training and the impact on Indigenous employment in South Australia.

Under the terms of the contract, 23 participants participate in the program each year (70 over 3½ years) and to date, participant numbers are ahead of that schedule.

Participants range in age from 15 to 55 years and are involved in an extensive range of employment options including: mail delivery and sorting, administration,

call centres, retail, IT and at the university library. This diversity enables participants to be matched with jobs that suit their interests and capacities.

Mission Australia staff emphasise the importance of including cultural awareness into the training for participants (as an affirmation of their cultural heritage) and for employing businesses, workplace colleagues and mentors.

In addition, the success of the program involves Mission Australia staff devoting considerable time and attention to developing relationships with both the participants and their families and maintaining close linkages at the employment end.

c. Provision of Indigenous Employment Services to the Northern Territory Public Service

Drawing on its own workplace practices and established experience, Mission Australia has successfully tendered to deliver a suite of services to the Northern Territory Government that will attract and increase Indigenous employment in the public sector. These services include:

- Delivering cultural information sessions
- Overseeing Indigenous recruitment
- Providing mentoring for indigenous employees and their supervisors

An important aspect of the service is for Mission Australia's staff to work with senior management to develop strategies for ongoing Indigenous recruitment and workplace support.

d. Dubbo – Integrated Services

A long-term commitment to the Dubbo area has been the basis for Mission Australia to establish and expand its range of services and to develop strong links within the local community. Our programs have both a generalist and Indigenous focus.

- JPET is for young people between 15 and 21 years who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and with complex social and economic needs.

Through partnerships with Reconnect, Outreach TAFE, Department of Juvenile Justice, Adolescent and Family Counsellor & Macquarie Area Health, we are able to provide our young clients with specialised, flexible training and support.

Programs include:

- Go-Kart Small Motors Course - partnership with Outreach TAFE and the Dubbo Go Kart Club

- Young Women's TAFE Course –partnership with Outreach TAFE encouraging young women to re-engage in education (includes modules in first aid, telephone skills, job seeking, video and digital photography, computer/internet skills, personal presentation). A unique aspect of this course is that the young women involved designed the course.
- It's A Girls World –partnership with Family and Adolescent Counsellor and the Dubbo Senior Campus, focuses on mental health issues, life skills, health and self esteem.
- Aboriginal Art Course - JPET Special needs program for Indigenous young people and includes creating artwork on electrical boxes in the Gordon Estate (West Dubbo).
- Vineyard Course –partnership with TAFE Outreach and the Department of Juvenile Justice. Includes seasonal employment and accredited training in chainsaw and tractor driving; irrigation, pruning and the establishment of a small vineyard. This 14 week course had a 98% attendance rate.

- Dubbo Leadership & Cultural Development Program

Dubbo Leadership & Cultural Development Program for young Indigenous students is funded by Attorney Generals Department to assist them to develop leadership skills, culture awareness and stay in school.

Students in Years 8 and 9 from local Junior High Schools participate in educational, vocational, cultural and fun activities. Community members engage informally with students to build their trust and confidence.

A camps program contributes to increasing their cultural understanding, developing positive relationships with Elders and improving their interpersonal skills.

- Post Release Support Program

12 week program provides clients leaving juvenile detention with knowledge, skills and independence that will assist them into education, training, employment and a variety of other programs.

'Lets Be Real Program' run through the Orana Juvenile Justice Detention Centre includes Aboriginal art activities, cultural awareness, relaxation, conflict resolution, interpersonal and living skills.

In Summary

Mission Australia welcomes this Inquiry and in particular its focus on identifying examples of initiatives which are working on the ground. As mentioned above, employment is a key contributor of wellbeing, but is only one of a range of issues confronting many Indigenous communities. Responses which enable holistic responses to individual, family and community needs are critical in enhancing wellbeing. Mission Australia looks forward to continuing to work with Indigenous communities, all levels of Government and the community and business sectors, to enhance the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.