

Chapter 5

Cross Portfolio Indigenous Matters

5.1 This chapter contains the key issues discussed during the 2010-11 additional estimates hearings for cross portfolio Indigenous matters pursuant to Resolution of the Senate of 26 August 2008.¹ The following portfolio departments were in attendance:

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
- Department of Health and Ageing
- Department of Human Services

5.2 The committee heard evidence from the departments on Friday 25 February 2011. Areas of the portfolios were called in the following order:

- Closing the Gap
- Northern Territory Emergency Response – Basics card/income quarantining
- Indigenous Housing
- Employment and Economic Development
- Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP)
- Health Issues

Closing the Gap

5.3 The committee queried the use of photos of people, without names, within the Closing the Gap report that was released in February 2011. The committee was specifically interested on whether permission to reproduce the images was sought from the individuals and whether or not it was department policy to not include names. Officers stated that, given the department's extensive experience in this area, the communications area has a policy of securing the rights and necessary approvals to reproduce images. Dr Harmer explained that the department has a broad policy as to whether or not people are named, and if there were a case of some individuals not wishing to be named, this would be applied to the whole report for the sake of consistency.² However in this case, it was determined that the identification of

1 *Journals of the Senate*: No.22 - 26 August 2008, p. 683.

2 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 5.

individuals did not serve any purpose and would have involved additional permissions being sought and further discussions with the individual.³

Reporting

5.4 The committee noted the reports produced for Closing the Gap, including the Prime Minister's report, the Coordinator-General's report and the COAG Reform Council's (CRC) report. The committee queried why the reports are released months apart.⁴ The committee further emphasised that there is confusion in comparing the three processes, where people expect the reports to contain an update of the previous report, and do not realise it is not an equal comparison.⁵

5.5 The department explained that while the reports appear to be of a similar nature, they serve different purposes. The Prime Minister's report reinforces the importance and significance of the anniversary of the apology, the Coordinator-General's report focuses on 29 communities specifically selected by COAG for 'intensive attention' while the CRC's report is the main accountability mechanism, allowing measurement of progress made in reaching the Closing the Gap objective. In addition to serving different purposes, there were logistical difficulties related to the timing of reports as the Coordinator-General's report relies on data such as the NAPLAN testing, the release of which needs to go through state, territory and Commonwealth approval before it can be applied to the report. Officers further explained:

The current Prime Minister's report 2011 updated on a couple of measures where there is new data. Because the CRC will report in June, it will have an update of more of the targets. So the PM's report next year will obviously have more detail and the year after even more detail as we can get a good longitudinal examination of how things are fairing over time...The other thing to bear in mind is that, with the Coordinator-General's report, a couple of the critical indicators, such as school results being a good one, the school results stuff will still only be available after the NAPLAN testing, ACARA, which is the body set up to make sure that we are comparing apples with apples, ministerial sign-off all of that has to occur.⁶

School Attendance

5.6 The committee sought further information on school attendance in relation to the Closing the Gap program. Dr Harmer informed the committee that FaHCSIA has overarching responsibility for reporting and collating the information, but are not

3 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 21.

4 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 6.

5 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 7.

6 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 6–8.

responsible for the six targets within Closing the Gap.⁷ The committee asked officers to detail figures for income management recipients and the breaching provision available if their children do not attend school. Officers explained that the breaching provision is only available in communities in which the SEAM trial is taking place. Where SEAM is taking place in the Northern Territory, as of 1 February 2011, 38 customers have been suspended for enrolment or attendance issues. Officers noted that the suspension of income support payments means that these individuals will still receive any other entitlements to which they are eligible.⁸ The committee asked what processes are in place to follow up on the impact involved in this suspension. Officers replied:

During the period that a person is suspended under the SEAM process, we have a review at the two, four and 10 week stage with our social worker, and they also have ongoing interaction with the education liaison officer during that period.⁹

5.7 Officers also explained that there are times when the affected family may be referred to other organisations, such as appropriate NGOs, to support them during that period.¹⁰

Housing

5.8 The committee sought updates on the figures for the number of houses built, and tenancy agreements in place. Officers detailed the figures on a state and territory-wide basis.¹¹ Dr Harmer reminded the committee that while the department is the funding body, the state and territory governments are responsible for the negotiating of tenancy agreements. Officers informed the committee that, despite a 'rocky start', the program is currently exceeding the targets.¹²

5.9 The committee asked officers to respond to reported claims that houses under construction differed significantly from the original plans and that one-third of the cost of the home was being taken up in administrative costs. Officers stated that it is incorrect that 30 per cent is taken up in administrative costs, as the costs of program management are capped at 8 per cent. The costs are similar to other large scale construction projects, especially considering workers need to be brought in to remote locations.¹³ In response to houses differing from original plans, officers noted this could be attributed to the four bedroom houses that were built originally. The review

7 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 12–13.

8 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 14–15 and 19.

9 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 20.

10 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 20.

11 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 21–22.

12 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 23.

13 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 23.

commissioned in 2009 found that these houses did not solve the problem of overcrowding. The response to this was to provide more ‘modest’, three bedroom dwellings, in close proximity to each other. However officers emphasised that the housing mix will reflect the diversity of the population in each community.¹⁴

5.10 The committee sought further information as to how numbers of bedrooms and houses for each community are determined. Officers informed the committee there is a housing reference group made up of representatives of the community. The Commonwealth and Northern Territory Government regularly meet with the housing reference group from the beginning to the end of the project.¹⁵ The committee asked officers to provide the number of one and two bedroom houses projected to be built between now and the close of the program. Officers explained that there are no set numbers and that house design and the number of bedrooms per house have always been developed in conjunction with the housing reference group for each community, to ensure the housing reflects the diversity of each community.¹⁶

5.11 The committee put to the department that in order to ensure efficiency, building a four-bedroom house would be cheaper than building two two-bedroom houses.¹⁷ Officers explained that this is not necessarily so:

We generate the same amount of rent for a four-bedroom home as for a two-bedroom home, so the matter then becomes how that four-bedroom home is filled.¹⁸

Employment and Economic Development

5.12 The committee noted reports stating that the 20 per cent target of Indigenous employment within the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) has been exceeded and sought further information as to how this is assessed. Officers reported that Indigenous employees currently make up over 30 per cent of the SIHIP workforce, listing the number of Indigenous employees within the total number of employees.¹⁹ Officers detailed the training programs involved and the number of employees achieving these accreditations, highlighting the importance of education complementing the employment opportunities.²⁰

5.13 The committee asked officers to respond to the *ANAO Audit Report No. 23 2010-11 Home Ownership on Indigenous Land Program*, that stated the plans to use

14 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 23–24.

15 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 25.

16 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 28.

17 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 28.

18 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 28.

19 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 38.

20 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 38–39.

CDEP participants were not implemented due to priority being given to completing construction of the houses in a timely manner. Officers responded that statement was in relation to a single large construction project managed by a particular firm that was not within SIHIP, and therefore did not have the specific employment targets that SIHIP is required to meet.²¹

5.14 The committee asked officers to provide further information on the 'Learn. Earn. Legend!' program. Officers informed the committee it is a branding that has been given to a range of activities that involve, among other things, mentoring Indigenous young people at school.²² The Minister further explained:

It is important...in getting kids to school, getting them active in school and making them want to stay in school...It is saying, 'Learn; go to school and get an education so you can earn and get a job and become a legend or a role model in your community.'²³

Health Issues

Dialysis

5.15 The committee sought further information on the department's report into the delivery of treatment for kidney disease among Indigenous people in remote communities in Central Australia. Officers informed the committee that the report covers a broad range of issues, including social and service provision issues, homelessness and projected demands. The report will look at medium and long-term needs and will be circulated to each of the stakeholder states. Officers noted the report will contain a number of recommendations, which the states are aware they will need to respond to.²⁴

Smoking

5.16 The committee queried the smoking rate for Indigenous Australians. Officers informed the committee that in 2002, 51 per cent of Indigenous Australians were smoking. The 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey reports the figure at 47 per cent. Officers explained the National Healthcare Agreement's goal is to reduce the national daily smoking rate for the general population to 10 per cent, and to halve the smoking rate for Indigenous Australians by 2018.²⁵

21 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 40–41.

22 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 45.

23 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 45.

24 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 50–51.

25 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 52–53.

5.17 The committee sought further information on the recruitment process involved for regional tobacco coordinators. Officers reported the following recruitment figures as at 23 February 2011:

- 12 out of a possible 57 regional tobacco coordinators;
- 12 out of a possible 171 tobacco action workers; and
- 22 healthy lifestyle workers.²⁶

Officers noted the recruitment processes commenced at the end of 2010 and are actively ongoing.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

5.18 The committee sought further information on prevention measures in place for FASD. The department informed the committee the 2009 NHMRC alcohol guidelines have been distributed on brochures and posters and are also available on the alcohol.gov.au website. The department is providing \$768,852 for the National Drug Research Institute and the National Indigenous FASD Resource Project to develop communication materials that will help provide a platform to develop more targeted campaigns for specific at-risk communities. Officers noted these materials will be available in December 2011.²⁷

5.19 Officers informed the committee that the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, working with the University of Sydney, have developed a diagnostic instrument that will help clinicians diagnose babies and children affected by FASD which is due to be completed 30 June 2011. Officers also noted the George Institute, Fitzroy Crossing, is working on similar diagnostic issues.²⁸

Suicide Prevention Strategy

5.20 The committee sought further information on the development of a suicide prevention strategy. Officers informed the committee the department is meeting with the Australian Suicide Prevention Advisory Council and the development of an Indigenous suicide prevention strategy is a priority.²⁹

5.21 Officers explained there are measures in place to provide an immediate response, which involve working with state governments and local suicide prevention programs.³⁰ However officers highlighted the Commonwealth's role in long-term

26 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 54–55.

27 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 56.

28 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 57.

29 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 58–59.

30 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, p. 59.

responses, including funding at-risk communities and the collation of research and evidence to ensure more effective responses in the future.³¹

Senator Claire Moore
Chair

31 *Proof Estimates Hansard*, 25 February 2011, pp 59–60.

