



Submission to Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee in relation to the
Social Security Legislation Amendment (Remote Engagement Program) Bill 2021

About AHNT

Aboriginal Housing NT (AHNT) Aboriginal Corporation became an incorporated entity in August 2019. This was celebrated at the AHURI Conference in Darwin. Since then, AHNT's journey has progressed, with the recent launch of its strategic plan and the signing of a historic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with NT Shelter. The first of its kind in Australia between a mainstream housing peak and Aboriginal Community- Controlled Housing peak body.

AHNT currently sits alongside other NT Aboriginal peaks and is a member of the APO NT Alliance. We wish to acknowledge and lodge our support for their Submission to the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Remote Engagement Program) Bill 2021. APO NT is a member of the Coalition of Peaks and members of its Executive sit on the Joint Council on Closing the Gap.

On 13th July 2021, AHNT and NT Shelter signed a MOU. This agreement enables NT Shelter and AHNT to work constructively together to tackle the Northern Territory's housing and Homelessness challenges. Through collaboration we are stronger than working separately.

AHNT has a membership of strong leaders and Aboriginal organisations across the NT that represent Town Camps, Outstations, Homelands and Remote Communities and is the Territory's new leading voice on Aboriginal Housing reform.

AHNT is governed by a Board of 12 Directors and five Associate members who are supported by Aboriginal organisations, Land Councils and Regional Councils from across the NT.

According to the National Provider Register there are currently five registered Community Housing Organisations (CHO) in the NT. Three of the five (60%) are Aboriginal community controlled:-

- Anindilyakwa Housing Aboriginal Corporation based in Alyangula
- Central Australian Affordable Housing Company Ltd based in Alice Springs and now trading as Community Housing Central Australia (CHCA)
- Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation based in Darwin.

The YRHAC CEO, Ms Leeanne Caton is also the Chairperson of AHNT.

Three of AHNTs' member organisations are in the process of going through the assessment processes to be registered under the National Regulatory System of Community Housing (NRSCH) .

AHNT is currently negotiating with the NTG for the transfer of public housing stock to ACCO housing providers, once they have attained national registration and one year of compliance, stock will be transferred over. This will provide a multitude of jobs in the regions, both skilled and unskilled enabling CDP participants to transfer to full time jobs.

Overview

The main cause of unemployment throughout our remote communities is lack of available jobs.

Lack of opportunity to work and, through that, to acquire skills and employment experience, entrenches long term poverty and social exclusion.

Remote Aboriginal communities need more jobs so that more people can secure work and the benefits work brings, including contributing to the Northern Territory economy. This is particularly the case for young people many of whom are leaving education with no option other than 'working for the dole'.

There are approximately 1,000 Secondary students from the NT who are on scholarships interstate, many at the best secondary schools in the country. Eg: Scotch College, Melbourne Grammar to name a few.

What are these kids coming back to? If Indigenous Economic Development (real jobs) are not put in place.

In the near future we will start to see the erosion of culture as this demographic may not choose to return to country.

While this Bill is described as enabling program 'pilots', it includes only one possible option.

Shared Decision Making

In most regions the majority of people who will be included in a future scheme are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Over the last few years many decisions that have been made about remote employment programs have been made by government officials – sometimes without warning, and usually without listening to what Indigenous people and their representatives are saying.

Both national and local decision making processes for the new scheme should reflect the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This includes:

- Shared decision making about program design and development, including any proposed changes to the scheme;
- Sharing of data and information.

In line with the concept of CTG there is a need for systemic change e.g., policies affecting Aboriginal people should be developed with people with lived experience and basically, Aboriginal people are not consulted until after the *'horse has bolted'*.

There is no mechanism for genuine shared decision making with Indigenous people and their representatives, as is required under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Better Systems designed for Remote Areas

Complex IT and administrative systems mean that providers spend too much time and money on administration. A new remote program must be designed to allow provider staff to spend more time on community development and individual case management and less time in front of computer screens. Providers should be given the opportunity to put forward a radically simplified approach to administration that allows more time working in communities.

My Gov

The Australian Government continues to assume that the entire NT has internet coverage, which is not the case. This disadvantages Aboriginal people even further particular for those who have to report to Centrelink via mygov. This system is fraught with problems and therefore should have Centrelink representation in the larger communities, which would free up the CDP providers from a huge portion of administration.

According to data available from NIAA, the NT has 40% of the National 40,000 participants in the CDP scheme. This equates to approximately 16,000 participants across 22 regions and 19 providers in the NT.

Under the current system there is limited succession planning for Aboriginal people to step into the CDP Coordination roles across the NT. Perhaps there is room for more cost effectiveness, under a revised provider processes, which should also include a review of the job networks.

Any national employment programs affecting Aboriginal people should include entitlements including the same conditions as other employees working in similar programs across the nation. eg; superannuation, long service leave and any top-up supplements should not be income-managed.

Despite public statements in relation to co-design and piloting a range of options this Bill has been tabled without discussion with Indigenous representative organisations, and includes only one option to be piloted – ***an additional income support payment***.

AHNT supports the recommendations from APO NT to oppose the Bill, as this bill would enable the government to create another class of “worker”, whose income support is benchmarked against the minimum wage, but who would not have access to the normal entitlements of minimum wage employees across this country.

In line with the APO NT recommendations, AHNT also urges the Commonwealth Government to negotiate an agreement over the development of a replacement scheme for CDP in accordance with the National Agreement with Closing the Gap.