

CAPACITY BUILDING INQUIRY Submission No.2.....

**Submission to House of Representatives Inquiry into Capacity Building in
Aboriginal Communities**

Submitted by:-

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The views expressed in this submission are mine alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views of my employing organization.

Authors experience with Indigenous issues

- Six years working in an Aboriginal health service.
- Whilst I have not worked in a remote community for an extended period I have visited quite a few, spending up to week and more on occasions and have worked with Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers in these communities.
- I am a Council Member of Kalparrin Aboriginal community located near Murray Bridge
- I have also worked overseas for two years in a developing country as an Australian volunteer and have been a W.H.O. Short Term Consultant in Sri Lanka
- I am currently administering a project which aims to bring more skilled Aboriginal people from the city to work in remote communities, supporting local substance misuse workers.

Other relevant information about the author

- I am a non-Indigenous person committed to assisting Aboriginal people improve their lives, communities and organizations.
- I have worked in the drug and alcohol service delivery field for over 20 years

Andrew Biven
14 August 2002

Obstacles to the delivery of effective community service administration

- Working in remote communities is possibly the most difficult and demanding work that a person can undertake within Australia. However, it is often the least skilled and least qualified people who are filling these demanding positions in health, community administration, education and elsewhere. Is it any wonder that health, community administration, education, essential services etc are lamentably inferior to what is delivered elsewhere in Australia. Community controlled Boards of Management in these communities struggle to oversee the services they are entrusted to manage, particularly if the administrators they employ are less than competent.
- Our education system has failed our Aboriginal people, particularly in remote areas where secondary school education is often available only at great distance from the student's home. High school completion rates for Indigenous students are abysmal (36% vs 73% for non-Indigenous students [ABS 2001]), yet we are looking towards Indigenous people to manage and operate increasingly complex organizations and services. Those few Aboriginal people who do complete high school and go on to tertiary studies are fortunate indeed – in great demand particularly by Government departments – their home communities can hardly compete with the well cashed employers of the State capital or Canberra.
- Whilst acknowledging that there are many highly skilled and dedicated non-Indigenous workers in remote communities, the reality is that there are also many 'misfits, missionaries, madmen and megalomaniacs' who are sheltered in our remote Aboriginal communities. Anyone who has spent time in and around remote communities knows of the oddballs who wander from one community to another – lining their own pockets or merely occupying a desk while undermining what little self-confidence remains in the community until they are finally ejected (often with a golden handshake to avoid threatened legal action) or going on to extended stress leave as a result of some self-induced clash with the local Council or community members. The recent story in 'The Australian' newspaper of a community in Arnhem Land administered by a Maori women who has employed most of her family and friends is unfortunately not an isolated situation.
- For workers in remote communities, the challenges faced are huge - the supporting infrastructure is often tenuous so say the least, the conditions difficult and recompense both financially and in terms of personal and career development marginal. It is well recognised that the teachers in remote schools are often new graduates 'cutting their teeth' in the bush, to be rewarded with a city post for serving their time in a remote community. Education, like other services, is of critical importance in remote Aboriginal communities, yet we entrust it to our least experienced teachers. The same is often true of health services.

- There is no encouragement to specialize in working in remote Aboriginal communities – no professional association of community administrators, health workers or educators exists. There are few university courses which focus on preparing graduates for this type of work. University courses do promote working overseas in developing countries while largely ignoring the needs of Australia's own 'third world' communities. Often there is no specialist training given for workers going into arguably the most challenging positions in this country. For many the work is seen as a stepping stone to more desired work in metropolitan areas. This view is often supported by the health, education and other bureaucracies as well as by the individual workers.
- There is a lack of support for non-Indigenous workers in remote communities. Often there is poor communication between non-Indigenous workers in some remote communities. The local people have their own family and community support networks yet the people who are the 'strangers' have no support networks – this is due in part because some of the 'misfits' prefer it that way, but also it can be the result of well-intentioned workers wanting to become a part of the community they live in – rejecting the society of other non-Indigenous workers is seen as essential to being a part of the 'community'. However, for many, they are not able to integrate into the local community – the locals can be suspicious of new people, having seen so many come and go. Non-Indigenous workers who have strong views about integrating can remain isolated for the duration of their stay.
- The following quote from a 'Remote Recruiting' pamphlet of Australian Volunteers International (AVI) highlights the issues.

"Staff Turnover

The stress of isolation, the difficulty of balancing the demands of the client community and bureaucracy, the lack of career structure, the strain of servicing a multiplicity of roles, poor living conditions and limited opportunities for spouses and school age children all contribute to a high turnover of staff. An understanding of these pressures, a grasp of relevant policy issues and an understanding of development practices will assist workers remaining in the field.

Training Resource Staff

For new advisers there is generally little in the way of orientation courses and for field workers there are no in-service training schemes. Advisers must generally survive on the skills they have when they enter the job. This situation makes it very difficult to remain up-to-date on new programs and be aware of policy changes.

Peer Group Support

With few exceptions advisers work in environments devoid of formal peer group support or ready access to information required in the course of their work."

What can be done

- If we are ever have effective and meaningfully community-controlled services then improving the education outcomes for all community members is essential. Until there is an adequate supply of competent community members who are able to understand the complexities of their organizations and services community control will continue to be a tenuous concept at best. Remote communities need the very best of our teachers, innovative education programs and adequate funding and other support in order to maintain students through to high school and on to further education. Education is the foundation of community recovery.
- The second pillar on which to base community recovery must be measures to address general levels of poverty in remote communities. Wherever poverty is the overwhelming experience of people, corruption, nepotism, inefficiency and indifference are endemic. This is seen not only in Australian Aboriginal communities but is also the norm in many developing countries. Alleviation of poverty is not a simple matter of handing out money – handouts in the past have undermined community resilience and bred a welfare mentality in most remote communities. Poverty alleviation must come from a sustained push for improved education outcomes, skills improvement, income generation and community self-sufficiency projects backed by award wages and conditions.
- We must decide if maintaining our remote Indigenous communities is worthwhile. We must then accept that the cost of service delivery in remote areas is many times higher than in a metropolitan or even a rural setting. Higher wages must be paid to attract competent people, the remoteness adds significantly to the cost of all goods and services and the small size and scattered location of communities means that it is difficult to benefit from the economies of scale that operate where larger populations are served.
- Integrated service delivery in remote communities – health, education, essential services should all be administered by a central body within the community rather than each answering to a different and distant bureaucracy. Levels of support, monitoring and advice available to communities should be substantially increased. Government funding bodies must be held accountable for the services they fund, rather than being able to fob this off to the community in question. In the days when government departments had adequate levels of staffing, project support staff visited their target communities frequently, knew in detail the circumstances, dynamics and personalities in the communities and were able to provide real support and guidance as well as monitor effective use of government funds.
- To support this integrated service delivery, University courses and specialist institutes should be established to promote a whole new career structure. Indigenous participation should be encouraged to ensure they fill the majority of places in these establishment.