



Government of Western Australia
Department of Health
WA Country Health Service

RECEIVED
23 FEB 2009

Submission No 39

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Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

New Inquiry – Remote community Stores in Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities

Access to affordable, nutritious food for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is a key strategy to "close the gap" in life expectancy for Indigenous people.

Kimberley Aged and Community Services delivers Commonwealth and State programs for the frail aged and younger disabled populations in Remote Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley Region. We have worked with approximately 30 different communities over the past 15 years and continue to work with many communities.

We provide assessment, support and advocacy for the client group. We work with communities to enable their support of frail aged and younger disabled community members mainly through the Remote Aged Care services which provide meals on wheels service plus a scattering of other supportive direct care service types.

Access to a competitive and healthy food-source is essential to these community development type projects.

In all the communities we work in there is only one community store.

Effective remote community stores include the example of Yakanarra.

Quote direct from Kimberley Aged and Community Services staff member:

*The Yakanarra store Mangunumpi Mangarra or "Mang Mang" as its affectionately known is Community owned and run.
As such it has a no sugar (mostly except for occasional treats) & no glass policy
It buys great fruit & veg (better quality than Tarunda in Fitzroy) and sells these at a subsidized price to individuals AND to the school.
It is able to subsidise the Homemaker food bill. The Homemaker provides one healthy cooked meal to around 20-30 school kids and community members – often the only healthy meal kids get during the day.
The store donates food toward Christmas parties, Council Meetings and so on.
It crucially maintains one of the Community Vehicles which is used for loads of Community business.
Community members do CDEP in the store and learn retail skills.
Kids who help out stacking are "paid" in fresh fruit and a juice!

The store circulates the CDEP monies which go toward bookdowns ensuring people have food every fortnight.

In short, the store forms one of the 3 pillars of the Community: Strong Council & Administration, active school and successful Store!*

More commonly we experience stores that undermine good nutrition, community enablement, empowerment and skill development. Issues include prices, health and nutrition, lack of competition and choice, and the power that the store holds over the people in the community.

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Quotes direct from staff at Kimberley Aged and Community Services:

1. *My concern is the price of fruit and vegetables is so prohibitive for community people to buy and nutrition is the basis of good health - so if we can't get that right for the community we are fighting an uphill battle in ensuring we are making a long term difference to the health of Aboriginal people.*
2. *One issue is the cost, expensive for people on low incomes. Should be more healthy alternatives to sweet drinks and fatty foods.*
3. *Store at Mowanjum closes if they have had any break-ins----- Last week I was out there and wanted to get some supplies for a respite client, no one answered door at shop, I went to the office. They rang the store, the store keeper was actually in the store ,she attended to me then shut up shop again despite community people wanting to go to shop....Not fair on residents in community. Apparently this has happened on several occasions according to community members.*

[This has also recently happened in Balgo, the Community Council deciding to keep the store closed until the culprit was found.]

4. *Stores sometimes hold clients money and they can book up food. Store manager keeps an eye on what is spent and lets clients know when they are running out of funds. Potential for financial abuse as often elderly clients have no idea what the balance of their account is.....*
5. *Cost of food can be expensive, not as wide range/ variety of fruit and vegetables available.*
6. *Some stores have no displayed pricing. So when we are trying to teach people about budgeting (essential skill when you are on a low income and food is expensive) we cannot do any practical exercises with the students in the stores. People give up on trying to budget because they have no idea what the prices are until they get to the cash register and are told to take the items back because they do not have any money. I asked a store staff member one day why they do not price items. They responded that it was ok the Aged care "staff can just come to the counter and I will tell them what they have to put back".*
7. *In one community there was a beautiful vegetable garden but none of the food was made available for purchase in the store. To purchase you had to enquire at the office, we waited for over an hour for someone to assist us but we had to leave. There is no connection between local production and supply of food in the rare situation when there is a community garden.*
8. *Many people on these communities do not have appropriate storage, eg. fridges, freezers etc. Hence these families are relying on the store as a constant source of food.*
9. *Unreliable food supply due to extreme weather and road conditions. Mulan, Billiluna and Balgo are over 100km down a dirt road from Halls creek. Kalumburu has to wait some time for the barge from Darwin.*
10. *In community stores we know that there is absolutely no competition with purchasing from a different store, most people do not have vehicles so cannot or do not group together to go into town together to do grocery shopping. Cost and distance I would say is a very big factor. We want to encourage our people to eat properly but with most of our clients on CDEP and very low wages this together with the cost of food makes it very difficult for our people,*
11. *Due to road closures there are no fresh fruit and vegetables available in Mulan yet the prices remain undiscounted for expired foodstuff.*
12. *Prices in Balgo store (Outback Stores) 19/02/2009:
Quarter cabbage \$3.50
10 plums \$10.56*

*(The same staff member had previously paid \$7 for half a cauliflower.)
Variety in pricing in same store on same day. Priced on 13/2/09 plums, 2 trays, 2 different prices per kilo, \$12.70 per kilo and \$16.40 per kilo.*

Outback Stores

Have an increased range of frozen vegetables which is an excellent substitute for fresh vegetables.

Attempting to include low sugar foodstuffs, could have more.

A nutritionist is employed by Outback Stores which is very positive but this position needs to consult with the communities about food and nutrition.

Attachments:

- 1. Making a Difference in Indigenous Health some cost effective recommendations**
- 2. Town where families can't afford to eat**
- 3. Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Access to the Food they need for health**
- 4. Costs turn eat healthy message into a farce**
- 5. Kimberley MP demands food price explanation**
- 6. NT stores "better run" than in WA**
- 7. Aboriginal Store ripoff "widespread"**
- 8. Fresh ideas on remote gardens**
- 9. The Kimberley Market Basket Survey**
- 10. Town where families can't afford to eat**

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Feb 20, 2009

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