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Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee o
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
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NEEDS OF URBAN DWELLING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER PEOPLES – COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENT INQUIRY

Summary Statement

Contemporary health and social issues endemic within the indigenous communities of Australia can be largely attributed to the effects of colonization, marginalisation, disempowerment, dispossession and endemic poverty. Any initiatives must move beyond the consultation process, which can potentially be reduced to tokenism. Active participation of the indigenous community in all matters relating to their communities, welfare and well-being must be solicited through the vehicle of community controlled bodies.

1. Existing programs and services

Despite the many attempts of government bodies and agencies, services appear not to be reaching the most in need. This can be attributed to any number of causes, but what seem to be lacking within service providers is visible (or existent) advocacy services for clients or communities. If advocacy services do exist, then they need to be effectively and appropriately promoted and made accessible to the community.

2. Extending services

The process of extending the involvement of urban indigenous people in decision making must recognize that the communities must have meaningful and active participation in the origin and development on any initiatives. The impetus must come from the grass-roots, and be 'bottom-up' driven, as opposed to a 'top-down', paternalistic approach. A common view of the problems and initiatives being offered must be solicited from communities. Whilst this can be potentially painstaking activity, it may ensure the acceptability of the initiative in latter stages of development.

Any programs or initiatives must have quality improvement built into the structure and activities. Also a recognized audit of systems would assist in promoting best practice of any agencies associated with the delivery of services to the indigenous community. Organisations or services that operate within the conceptual framework of continuous quality improvement must

demonstrate a commitment to being client or community focused and driven. This would ensure community accountability.

To promote proactive and meaningful decision making by the community, decision making processes must be open, participative, accountable and transparent to the community.

3. Situation and needs of young people

The underlying problems of young indigenous people are often masked within the indigenous community. Young indigenous people no doubt experience alienation and largely do not access services, this is particularly evident amongst young men. Services for youth need to be appropriately promoted and tailored to the needs of young indigenous people.

Youth specific programs are usually small scale, ad hoc and the funding is spasmodic. Much research has been done into the 'why' and 'how' of the problems, but funding now needs to be made available for implementation of research findings.

Indigenous youth are falling through the gap, into the chronic unemployment cycle. Truancy amongst indigenous school students is consistently higher than their non-Aboriginal peers. This is pattern of behaviour becomes blatantly evident in year 8 and peaks by year 10. Very few students are going on to years 11 and 12 and accessing university entrance by this method. This leaves the option of TAFE colleges or CDEP programs. In recent times, TAFE colleges are more directed at the 'adult learners' market, which is not appropriate for young indigenous people who have history of school attendance problems. Although it is difficult to guess at the success or failure of traineeship programs, it is likely that a well developed work ethic necessary to successfully complete a work based traineeship will not be apparent in young people that have fallen into the truancy cycle. This opens up a service need within this target group, which as yet is not being addressed.

Homelessness is a problem that is particularly masked within the indigenous community. Any problems at home may result in young indigenous people seeking to accommodation elsewhere. Unlike non-Aboriginal youth, the indigenous young person is likely not to access mainstream emergency accommodation, but rather source accommodation within the extended family network. While this maybe culturally appropriate, it undoubtedly places a strain upon the resources of another family unit.

4. Maintenance of indigenous culture in urban areas

The issue of promoting cultural maintenance seems to be too unwieldy to conceptualize let alone articulate. Any cultural maintenance promotion must be cognizant of the diversity within the indigenous community and the terms

of reference that operate within communities. Factors that may influence these issues include family history, dynamics within the community, individual characteristics of the community, and history (both contemporary and colonization).

What is evident however, is the lack of a service or client focused approach to this issue. Most services are not responsive to the needs of clients by being dictated by the terms of reference set down by bureaucratic guidelines and protocols. Organisations that do respond to this need usually do so on their own initiative and at their own expense. An example of this is funeral support.

5. Opportunities for economic independence

The opportunities for economic independence are very little. Longer term strategies to encourage this initiative are limited by the restriction of government cycles and policy. An option that could be explored is the development of small business opportunities attached to non-government organizations that have proven track records and stability. A 'profit-making' arm of an organization could promote economic independence of an organization and potentially make it less dependent of government funding. The process could offer opportunities to the indigenous community by providing training and employment.

6. Housing needs

The problems that revolve around housing in the urban areas are complex. Social problems that are often evident include family breakdown, internalised oppression, racism, inter-family conflict, cultural boundaries, diversity, marginalisation, fringe communities and endemic poverty. Social problems spiral into chronic addiction patterns, 'granny burnout' and family conflict.

Urban families are often faced with the constant influx of visiting families from outlying areas, and by the nature of family obligation are not able to refuse accommodation requests or limit the time or terms of visiting family. Houses inevitably become crowded, damaged and the rent payments falling into arrears. The Ministry of Housing is in the unenviable position of trying to minimise costs to damages of infrastructure and rental arrears. This often results in eviction of tenants, who have accumulated debts of many thousands of dollars and subsequently barred from accessing other government accommodation. The 'homeless' seek refuge with other family, and the cycle spirals ever downward.

There has been numerous surveys and research about the nature and type of housing that is suitable to the needs of the indigenous community. Sadly, the findings of the research or the success stories that are uncovered are not generalised to the broader indigenous community.

A demand from many indigenous communities is to own and control their own community housing projects. Indigenous housing bodies could implement appropriately designed houses, deal more appropriately with issues of tenancy and management of properties, and promote a sense of ownership of the process and resource allocation by the indigenous community.