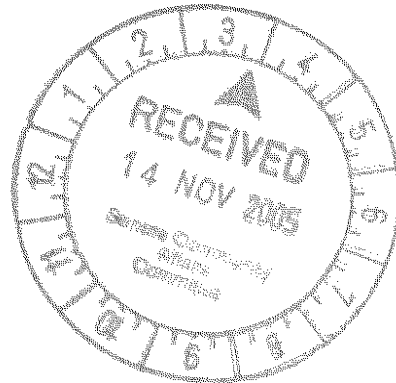


Ref: GE2210/2

10 November 2005



The Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO PETROL SNIFFING IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Please find attached a hard copy of the Alice Springs Town Council's submission which was electronically mailed to community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au on 3 November 2005.

Yours sincerely



Mark Blackburn
DIRECTOR CORPORATE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

**SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS
REFERENCE COMMITTEE**

*Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote
Aboriginal Communities*

Submission by the Alice Springs Town Council

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SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Petrol Sniffing in Remote Aboriginal Communities

SUBMISSION BY ALICE SPRINGS TOWN COUNCIL

Introduction

A most notable former Senate inquiry was held in 1985. The Terms of Reference was largely prepared by Senators Robinson and Kilgariff, two Northern Territory senators who were respectively Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Committee. Although the subject of petrol sniffing has been acknowledged by Commonwealth and State Governments since 1976, there had not been until then been any concerted action taken towards resolving the problem on a national basis.¹

The harm caused by substance abuse is not proportionately distributed across all groups in the population and as a result of historical and socioeconomic factors, Indigenous communities and other disadvantaged groups suffer a greater burden of harm.²

No national studies have been conducted on the specific impact of substance abuse on Indigenous mortality and hospital admissions and the few from state/territory jurisdictions are not recent.³

There continues to be a deficiency in the collection of data on petrol sniffing that has lead to 'a reduced appreciation of the extent of the petrol sniffing and its impact on health, as well as its contributions to death rates. This results in the overall impact of petrol sniffing not being recorded and therefore its full impact is hidden from researchers and policy makers. In 1885, the Senate Committee concluded that there was a strong need for collection of epidemiological data on petrol sniffing and recommended to the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs that it establishes a central point for the collection of data on petrol sniffing.

Recommendation

There is a need to put in place better systems of monitoring and evaluation to provide evidence for the essential development of good policy and interventions.

In 1985, the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation indicated that about 2000 children were sniffing petrol in the central reserve area of the Northern Territory, approximately 10% of all aboriginal children living in those areas.¹ It is most alarming that some twenty years later, petrol sniffing continues to be a significant cause of years of life lost due to disability for Indigenous Australians. It is known that children as young as four years of age are sniffing in Alice Springs.⁴

¹ Senate Select Committee on Volatile Substances 1985.

² Australian National Council on Alcohol and Other Drugs Charter 2005

³ Substance misuse and primary health care among Indigenous Australians – National Drug Research Institute 2004.

⁴ Territory Health Service Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs.

According to the Commonwealth Grants Commission report on Indigenous funding completed in 2001, the Northern Territory's Indigenous population as a whole suffers the highest comparative levels of disadvantage, across all socioeconomic indicators, when compared to other States and Territories.⁵ A key priority area is focussing on substance abuse and misuse.

Governments and non governments within Australia should work collaboratively to reduce the incidence of petrol sniffing. Alice Springs Town Council is a member of the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory which wrote to Minister Abbott calling for a Territory wide roll out of Opal Fuel. Alice Springs Town Council also wrote independently to Minister Abbot expressing concern that if a regional approach was not taken then sniffers could drive into Alice Springs that does not have Opal fuel.

Recommendation

That the Australian Government reviews its decision not to broaden the rollout of the subsidy of non sniffable fuel to all of Central Australia to compliment the initiatives of the Northern Territory Government made under the *Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act 2005*.

Alice Springs Town Council is committed to supporting government and non government initiatives to improve the health and well being for indigenous Australians. Currently Indigenous Australians make up a third of the population of Alice Springs. One of Council's major goals is to ensure a united, supportive and healthy community. Council funds a number of recreation and support programs for young people in the community. Several are specifically targeted programs for young indigenous people, including Croc fest, BMX skills training during Youth Week and BushMob outback adventures.

Alice Springs Town Council has signed a Partnership Agreement with Lhere Artepe, the traditional owners of the land of Alice Springs, and a Memorandum of Understanding with Tangentyere Council to progress the development of our culturally rich community.

⁵ Overarching Agreement on Indigenous Affairs between the Commonwealth of Australia and the Northern Territory of Australia.

(A) The effectiveness of existing laws and policing with respect to petrol sniffing in affected Indigenous communities.

The Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs National Inhalant Abuse Taskforce has been established by the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy to investigate current state and national approaches and policies in relation to inhalant abuse and make recommendations on further action and direction in this area⁶.

Recommendation

That the Senate Committee liaises with the Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs National Inhalant Abuse Taskforce to ensure that they receive the most recent research on petrol sniffing.

Legal sanctions

As petrol sniffing is now so prevalent, a recent coronial inquiry noted there are over 600 petrol sniffers across Central Australia, with addiction linked to as many as 60 Indigenous Australians deaths in the Northern Territory in the past seven years. About 120 people in the Central Australian region suffer permanent brain damage.

The Northern Territory Government has recently introduced the *Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act*. However this is still to be gazetted for enactment. The NT Government has also allocated an extra \$10 million over five years to support this legislation. The *Act* aims to introduce a comprehensive and systemic approach to prevention and treatment of volatile substance abuse.⁷

The *Act* gives police the power to seize petrol when it is being sniffed. It allows police the power to move sniffers to a place of safety, or to the care of responsible adults, of people abusing volatile substances who may pose a risk to the health and safety of themselves or others. The apprehension of sniffers may also be undertaken by authorised persons such as members of Night Patrols. In cases of extended apprehension the *Act* provides for an examination by a medical practitioner.

Alice Springs Town Council considers it is important that the Northern Territory Government needs to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the *Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act*.

Consistent legislation now in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia now makes it an offence to sell or supply volatile substances for sniffing. However, until there are efforts on a regional basis to limit availability of petrol coupled with the current legal sanctions against the supply of petrol for sniffing, those who want to sniff petrol will continue to get it.⁷ The police and the court system will proceed under other legislation when violence, theft or property damage occurs

⁶ Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs Annual Report 2003 2004

⁷ Second Reading Speech Volatile and Substance Abuse Prevention Act - The Honourable Marion Scrymgour, Minister for family and Community Services 2005.

(B) The effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities.

In the Northern Territory some communities are on the verge of complete social breakdown whilst others could achieve greater social harmony and greater economic benefit if their energies were not frequently diverted to the problems of petrol sniffing.

For chronic sniffers, already disadvantaged through emotional or familial deprivation, lack of education can only compound their problems and force them further into a cycle of seeking transient relief through escape. Many chronic sniffers become involved in petty criminal activities, such as breaking and entering, stealing and car theft.

Formal mechanisms exist where individuals abuse volatile substances and commit offences and are dealt with by the criminal justice system.

The Northern Territory Police Force plays a key role in the juvenile justice system. Victim/Offender and Family Conferencing and other youth diversion programs are a priority in the Northern Territory Community Policing philosophy.

Community Based Programs

The development of programs is encouraged in all communities throughout the Northern Territory. Programs need the support of the community and are developed, not only to suit the needs of the juvenile, but to also receive positive acceptance by parents and the community. Programs associated with assistance to the elderly/infirm, sporting group involvement, community projects, job/skills training, lifestyle skills (e.g. typing, cooking), life skills (e.g. conflict resolution, anger management), leadership, drug/alcohol/substance abuse education, culture or education development are the types of programs that are favoured.

Drug, Alcohol or Substance Abuse Programs

The Juvenile Diversion Division may, in consultation with a Northern Territory Government provider or other community or private provider, refer a juvenile to a program or counselling. This relates particularly in circumstances where the juvenile has a drug, alcohol or substance abuse problem eg. Health Services. Programs may also include treatment for 'petrol sniffing' or other inhalant abuse.

Juvenile Diversion Units

Juvenile Diversion Units have been established in Darwin and Alice Springs to coordinate the diversion of juveniles from the formal justice system and to advise and assist all police officers. The units provide the necessary expertise and support to police throughout the Territory, particularly remote police stations. A priority objective of the units is to work closely with remote communities and police in the development of programs that best suit the needs of the juveniles and the community.

In most communities, the Officer in Charge of the local Police Station undertakes the diversion responsibilities with support from the regional Juvenile Diversion Unit. Aboriginal Community Police Officers play a key role in the diversion process within remote communities and are utilised by the Juvenile Diversion Units and local police to

assist communities with the understanding of the diversion process, diversion interventions, and monitoring the development and operation of suitable programs.⁸

Effective diversionary initiatives and community level activities only a small part of the solution.

The effectiveness of diversionary initiatives and community level activities should not be considered in isolation.

Indigenous Australians disadvantage in the areas such as housing, employment and education is a major cause of substance abuse. Health risk factors have a significant impact on health status. These factors include socio-economic factors, living conditions, nutrition, the use of drugs and other harmful substances and the incidence of violence.

A strong relationship has been established by countless studies internationally between low health status and low socio economic status. The generally low socio economic status of Indigenous people is evidenced by a number of factors. The unemployment rate for Indigenous people in 1996 when the last reliable data were available was 23% compared to 9% for other Australians. The number of Indigenous people having tertiary education is only one fifth of that of other Australians. Weekly median incomes for Indigenous people are approximately 75% of that of other Australians. Limited progress towards reducing the extent of disadvantage is being made.⁹

The health of Australia's Indigenous peoples has been diagnosed as mirroring 'fourth world conditions.

Overall life spans of Indigenous peoples are 15-20 years shorter than other Australians, with

- 23 times the average death rate from infections of the kidney,
- 12-17 times the average for diabetes (one of the highest rates in the world) and
- 3-5 times the death rate from chronic respiratory disease.

The National Drug Strategy retains a focus on harm minimisation and an emphasis on the three pillars of demand, supply and harm reduction.

In the longer term demand strategies will have the greatest impact on reducing the harm of substance abuse amongst some sections of the Indigenous communities. They include:

- Programs to increase Indigenous participation in the education system;
- Employment programs
- The provision of housing and other community infrastructure;
- Community development; and
- The provision of recreation facilities and programs.

⁸ Northern Territory Police 2005

⁹ The Health Status of Indigenous Australians - Australian College of Health Executives 2005

In the short term, supply reduction has been used to reduce petrol sniffing. This has been most effective when introduced in conjunction with other interventions. However, its effectiveness can be compromised when petrol remains available from other sources.² There continues to be significant debate about subsidising non-sniffable fuel in regional centres throughout central Australia.

Alice Springs Town Council considers that increasing the supply of non-sniffable petrol to include Alice Springs is an integral component to the uptake petrol sniffing.

The Northern Territory Coroner Greg Cavanagh has called for

Recommendation

A universal roll out of non-sniffable fuel throughout Central Australia,

as he recently handed down his findings into the death of three young sniffers. ‘

Alice Springs Town Council believes that the Senate inquiry consider a

Recommendation

That fuel companies should be encouraged by the Australian government to support anti-sniffing initiatives through both financial and in kind measures.

Central Australian Youth Link –Up Service (CAYLUS)

The Central Australian Youth Link –Up Service (CAYLUS) has supported a broad range of strategies across several communities. CAYLUS has been able to support individual communities as well as providing a range of regional responses. It is imperative that there is an ongoing organisation to support communities and non government agencies combat this problem.

Recommendation

That the Australian Government continues to fund CAYLUS to continue its range of support and community development programs.

(C) Lessons that can be learned from the success some communities have had in reducing petrol sniffing including the impact of non-sniffable Opal petrol.

An evaluation of the Comgas Scheme provided a comprehensive insight into successes of the introduction of non-sniffable fuels. Key recommendations of the Evaluation of the Comgas Scheme were 'The Comgas Scheme should be made available to any community wishing to participate' and 'The feasibility of locating Avgas on highways and towns should be investigated'.

Although sniffers often obtain fuel from other sources, such as neighbouring towns where unleaded fuel is sold. The study found that close proximity to a regular petrol supply reduced the impact of the un-sniffable substitute.¹⁰ This would portray a very dim picture for communities close to Alice Springs should the Australian Government not roll out the subsidy to Alice Springs. A regional supply strategy will enhance the likelihood of success.

The transitory nature of Central Australian residents between communities and the town, petrol sniffing is an ongoing problem.¹¹ There is anecdotal evidence that suggests that petrol sniffers often relocate from those communities where there are substantial efforts to reduce petrol sniffing. The Substance Misuse Priority Group in Alice Springs has reported that there is evidence that Alice Springs is one destination of these displaced sniffers.⁷

The introduction of Avgas and Comgas into communities has been successful but the indigenous population of remote communities is as mobile as any other, with ready access to regional towns and centres such as Alice Springs.

The Northern Territory Parliament's Select Committee on Substance Abuse in the community noted that:

The end result of petrol sniffing other than early death is brain damage which leaves the sniffer in a vegetative state. A conservative estimate of the cost to NT of maintaining an ex-sniffer in this state is \$150,000pa. While there are presently 15 such persons in Central Australia, it is estimated that this could escalate up to 60 in the near future, an on going (and growing) cost of \$9m per annum. These figures argue strongly for action and to curb the practice and stem the damage now.¹²

The fact that the majority of sniffers are young children or teenagers who, in the prime of their growing years, were literally melting their brains by sniffing petrol was the reason why the NT legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory on Substance Abuse selected petrol sniffing as a priority for investigation. This is further evidence to support Alice Springs Town Council

¹⁰ An evaluation of the Comgas Scheme 2004

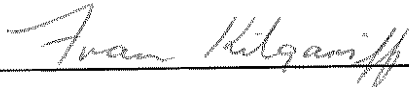
¹¹ Select Committee on Substance Abuse in the Community legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory October 2004.

¹² Legislative Assembly of Northern Territory, Select Committee on Substance Abuse in the Community Parliament of Northern Territory.

Recommendation

That the Senate Committee support the regional introduction of a subsidy of un-sniffable fuel across the whole of Central Australia.

ALICE SPRINGS TOWN COUNCIL



Signed: Fran Kilgariff
Mayor