



Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS)

Addendum to Submission to the Senate Community Affairs and Legislation Committee inquiry into changes to the Social Security arrangements, and the restoration of the Racial Discrimination Act.

Dear Chair

We wish to take this opportunity to provide some further brief information as an addendum to the original NTCOSS submission. We would like to focus on some possible alternatives for consideration in response to the complex issues raised by this legislation.

RE: FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- NTCOSS welcomes the legislation recently introduced into Parliament by the Minister for Families and Community Services, which gives people the option to change the frequency of their Centrelink payments. Weekly payments can be a very useful budgeting tool for low income and disadvantaged people. Further flexible payment options could also be explored, in an effort to tailor the system to suit individual circumstances. For example, a homeless person might benefit from more frequent payments.
- NTCOSS endorses the use of voluntary Centrepay options. These were widely used in urban areas prior to the NTER, but may not have been fully utilised in remote communities.
- NTCOSS also supports Centrelink's place based initiative – where they work in collaboration with community agencies to operate a mobile service tailored to transient and homeless people in urban centres across the NT. A key function of this service is to ensure that people are receiving the correct type of payment. We understand that there are many people across the NT who do not receive payments, due to difficulties in engaging with Centrelink and other service providers.

RE: EFFORTS TO REDUCE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

NTCOSS believes that the NTER measures which prohibit alcohol being consumed in prescribed areas have only addressed alcohol consumption from the perspective of limiting locations where people are permitted to drink. We note with concern anecdotal reports of unsafe drinking occurring outside prescribed areas, and suggestions that the restrictions have increased the incidence of people driving under the influence of alcohol.

We also believe there is a critical need to address issues of supply such as the price of alcohol products, the number of outlets selling alcohol, and the hours during which alcohol can be purchased.

- NTCOSS recommends the Senate Committee examine the effectiveness of the alcohol restrictions introduced in Alice Springs as part of the Alice Springs Alcohol Management Plan, which pre-date the NTER. The Plan introduced restrictions on the sale of products such as cask and fortified wines until the last three hours of the day. It also uses an ID system to limit the purchase of these products to one per person per day. These restrictions have seen an **18 percent reduction in consumption of alcohol** in Alice Springs compared with the period prior to the restrictions - the two year period commencing September 1995. In Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek,

takeaway alcohol cannot be purchased until 2 pm, a restriction which recognizes that alcohol is an issue for the whole of the NT – and not just Aboriginal people on prescribed communities. By comparison, in the Darwin/Palmerston area alcohol can be purchased from 10 am.

- In addition, NTCOSS suggests the Senate Committee consider the adoption of alcohol free takeaway days as a possible further means to address the high supply and consumption of alcohol in the NT. Many remote communities and community organisations in Central Australia have been campaigning for some time to ‘turn down the tap’ of alcohol consumption.

RE: SCHOOL ATTENDANCE MEASURES

- NTCOSS does not support the practice of applying penalties based on school attendance. We believe that there are already effective models to engage and support communities around getting children to school, and maintaining them there, which build capacity rather than penalise. A prime example is the joint project between Save the Children and the Larrakia Aboriginal Corporation Project in the Top End, which looked at improving school attendance for children from Town Camp communities.

In addition, NTCOSS supports the following solutions which were proposed by ACOSS in its submission (p 20-24)

- Adequate social security payments
- Better employment assistance to reduce long term reliance on payments
- Support services and case management for deeply disadvantaged people
- Voluntary income management to supplement other services and supports
- Alternative mechanisms to improve food security

If you would like further information in relation to any of the issues raised in this addendum, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Morton
Executive Director NTCOSS
Darwin
March 2010