

30 May 2008

Submission to:

Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities to Inquire into the Effectiveness of Australian Government Policies following the Northern Territory Emergency Response

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Services (UCCYPFS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this important inquiry into overcoming the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people living in regional and remote areas. Intergenerational abuse, including the sexual abuse of children, continues to undermine the fabric of many regional and remote ATSI communities making it necessary for all levels of government and organisations to work together to develop and administer effective policies that bring about real change for ATSI people.

The Children, Young People and Families Services Group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT is part of the Uniting Church in Australia. Our concerns for social justice and the needs of people who are disadvantaged inform the way we serve and represent children, young people and families. UnitingCare Burnside, UnitingCare Unifam, UnitingCare WESTS and UnitingCare Harris Community Centre are all members of UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Services and, together, form what is arguably the largest provider of services to support children and families in NSW.

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Services has a record of working successfully with the ATSI community particularly in regional and remote areas of NSW. The programs we have developed to address the needs and concerns identified by ATSI children, young people and families with whom we work include our ATSI supported playgroups in Wyong, the DOORWAYS outreach program for homeless youth in Dubbo, and our work with ATSI families participating in the Brighter Futures program in Coffs Harbour. Our commitment to consultation and partnerships with ATSI communities informs the basis of our service delivery in ATSI communities.

Our submission to the Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities focuses on the critical need to support Aboriginal children living in regional and remote communities in NSW and, in particular, to reduce the high incidence of child sexual assault. It highlights the urgency for the state and federal governments to fully implement the recommendations of reports such as *Breaking the Silence*.

Term of reference 1(b) the impact of state and territory government policies on the wellbeing of regional and remote Indigenous communities

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Services considers child sexual assault prevention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to be a priority concern that should be a focus of the Select Committee's current inquiry. The following recommendations relate to the Aboriginal Affairs policy framework of the NSW Government and the Australian Government in addressing child abuse and neglect in NSW Aboriginal communities and are drawn from the work of the NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce (ACSAT).

The *Breaking the Silence* report (ACSAT 2006)

In 2006 the NSW Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce submitted a report titled *Breaking the Silence: Creating the Future: Addressing child sexual assault in Aboriginal Communities*¹ to the Parliament of NSW. The report was the result of extensive consultative research with Aboriginal communities across NSW. It made 119 recommendations for changes to the state and federal policy frameworks to ensure that child sexual assault is addressed in every NSW government agency.

The *Breaking the Silence* report identifies the following concerns with the current policy framework for child sexual assault prevention in NSW.

- There is no NSW state-wide policy framework that specifically addresses child sexual assault in Indigenous communities.
- Child sexual assault is not addressed in the *Two Ways Together – NSW Aboriginal Affairs Plan (2003-2012)*² or the resulting regional plans.
- The way the NSW and Federal Governments work together to address child sexual assault needs to be clarified and the links strengthened.
- Child sexual assault prevention is currently not on the agenda of local community plans. The NSW Government can assist communities with the development of child sexual assault prevention strategies that are specific to local issues.
- While the Federal Government has developed a policy framework for preventing child abuse in Indigenous communities, it does not specifically address child sexual assault.
- Child sexual assault prevention has not been included in the current Bilateral Agreement between the Federal and NSW Governments.

To date there has been insufficient action toward addressing the above-mentioned concerns.

The NSW Interagency Plan to Tack Child Sexual Assault (NSW Government 2006)

We recognise the NSW Government has developed a five-year policy framework for addressing Aboriginal child sexual assault. This framework was titled the *Interagency Plan to Tackle Child Sexual Assault in Aboriginal Communities 2006-2011* and was released in response to the *Breaking the Silence* report.

However, the failure of the NSW government to allocate new and specific funding to meet the objectives of the Interagency Plan is to be decried and has occurred despite a June 2006

¹ Ella-Duncan, M et al (2006). *Breaking the Silence: Creating the Future*. Published by the Attorney General's Department NSW for the Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce.

² NSW Government (2003) *Two Ways Together, NSW Aboriginal Affairs Plan (2003-2012)*.

commitment by the Federal Government to match any State or Territory commitment to improve social problems in remote areas (up to \$130 million over 4 years).

The NSW Police remain the only government department with a formal policy framework to specifically address the actions required by the Interagency Plan.

Urgent action to fully implement the existing policies of the state and federal governments is required, including the provision of necessary funding.

In view of this we make the following recommendations:

1. That administrative and accountability processes, which include formal consultation with the non-government sector, be set in place within state and federal governments to ensure a true interagency approach to delivery of services for ATSI communities.
2. That the NSW Government work with the Commonwealth to jointly resource and implement a comprehensive, preventative strategy to reduce the risk of neglect and poor school attendance for ATSI children as a first alternative to income quarantining. This strategy should be characterised by the following features:
 - The use of trained, experienced and culturally appropriate counsellors and child and family support workers.
 - The involvement of local communities, ATSI communities and experienced service providers in the design, development and implementation of the strategy.
 - Increased resources for effective long term, sustainable programs and services that are proven to reduce child abuse and neglect with a particular emphasis on the provision of more child protection and early intervention services.
 - Increased resources for approaches that focus on the early years such as home visiting and early childhood education.
 - Support for the voluntary and individually tailored use of Centrepay.
3. That the NSW Government and the Commonwealth determine whether mandatory child health checks will be introduced in NSW and how the provision of follow-up support will be articulated with long-term planning for the development of service capacity.

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