

**Deirdre Finter
Chief Executive Officer
Arltarlpilta Community Government
Council
PMB 86 Atitjere
Via Alice Springs NT 0872**

deirdre@clearmail.com.au

Telephone: 08 8956 9787

1 June 2008

A response to the Northern Territory Emergency Response

Imanpa

In December last year I wrote a submission to Minister Jenny Macklin with a copy to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd regarding the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) otherwise known as the Intervention. To date I have not received a response to this submission.

Since writing the submission many of the problems associated with the Intervention worsened in Imanpa to such an extent that I could no longer function effectively in a community dogged by alcoholism, violence and inundated with ineffective government representatives and 'job creation' projects that replaced an effective CDEP program with widespread unemployment, despondency and associated rise in drinking and anti-social behaviour. In February 2008 I left Imanpa and am now working in another Central Australian remote community, Atitjere (Harts Range).

In the background to the original submission I noted that the Chairperson, Tanya Luckey worked full time as a supervisor for CEA, the company contracted by the government to bring about the Work for the Dole program. She and the other supervisor, Phillip Coombes both resigned from their positions a couple of weeks after writing the submission. They were given very little or no support from the contracted job network provider after having waited months for resources and training. Both had supervised the CDEP program and with the demise of CDEP and the introduction of Work for the Dole their efforts became increasingly futile.

Those working in CDEP had been paid weekly for the hours worked and the community had become clean for the first time in years and CDEP participants were learning about work and enjoying the benefits of working in teams and accomplishing small but important programs. The Work for the Dole program meant that people's income was now income managed and paid fortnightly. Those not working were

getting almost the same money as those working and those who did not work did not receive any loss of pay. In the end the supervisors found it difficult to get people motivated and all work programs fell apart. Income management meant that people could now save some of their income that could be spent on fuel and so grog runs to Alice Springs became more frequent. Along with the proximity of the Mount Ebenezer Roadhouse and the increased ability to get grog in Alice Springs people began drinking every day, with many community members spending all their time in procuring and drinking alcohol.

My position became untenable in that I felt I was simply making it possible for people to live in this way while Mission Australia, who were contracted to provide youth services, were babysitting children while their parents drank.

In the introductory Executive Summary of the report I noted that two families and an elderly man had nowhere to live. In the weeks over Christmas Mavis Staines was able to have her son returned to her from Child Services, but her ongoing homelessness meant that the child was once again taken from her along with another sibling. Xavier Kitson and Pollyanne Mumu are still homeless and Xavier was unable to get his two sons returned to him from Willowra. Early in the year Xavier ran a police roadblock, resisted arrest and was sentenced to five months in jail. During the same period 5 men were arrested for driving drunk while disqualified and three were sent to prison. One has since been released and has reoffended and is again in prison.

The elder, Toby Ginger, was living in a tent, however the extreme weather patterns have destroyed this tent and he is once again living in an abandoned car.

During this period the Government Business Manager, Richard Trevena, came very infrequently to the community, perhaps once every two or three weeks for one night and did not engage at all with the community. By February 2008 he had not attended a Council meeting since August 2007.

The Intervention brought with it so called 'real jobs'. There were four positions in aged care for personal carers and four positions in Night Patrol. The four positions in aged care were very difficult to fill. There was and remains no-one in the community who has suitable training to undertake these roles, despite the good work of the co-ordinator, local woman, Elsie Luckey. Despite the good efforts of two experienced Night Patrol field staff, the four night patrollers were all ineffective, with one publicly assaulting his wife, another losing his licence for drunk driving, one doing grog runs in the night patrol vehicle and the final night patroller, Xavier Kitson, being sent to prison. There were no other people in the community who could take up these positions.

Those bureaucrats and the government departments they represented who came with the Intervention to Imanpa all failed to acknowledge the widespread alcoholism in the community. Serious long term programs supporting alcoholics and their families would have been far more beneficial to the people of Imanpa than any of the proposed Work for the Dole programs.

Along with alcoholism, housing remains the most important issue in Imanpa. Without houses children have no-where to sleep, overcrowding results in despair and serious

health and safety risks. The community clean-up and repairs to housing were very poorly organised with tradesmen arriving unannounced, no local people employed in the work and no temporary accommodation made available to people while their homes were being fixed. When the maintenance program was over the overcrowding meant that many of the repairs undertaken were futile. Houses quickly deteriorated and when I left the community the situation was the same as it was prior to the intervention.

Atitjere – Harts Range

Since February I have worked as the Chief Executive Officer of the Arltarlpilta Community Government Council at the Eastern Arrernte community of Atitjere (Harts Range). This community has never suffered the effects of petrol sniffing and is a successfully dry community as there is no alcohol outlet closer than Alice Springs which is 215 kilometres away.

The Council also looks after four outstations at Mount Eaglebeak, Irrerlirre, Alatyeye and Foxalls Well. The Intervention failed to address any of the issues at outstations. While Mount Eaglebeak and Alatyeye function well, with very small populations, Irrerlirre is in dire need of emergency assistance. There are 13 school aged children living at the outstation which is about 40 kilometres from Harts Range. Due to a lack of transport none of these children has attended school this year. The people who live at Irrerlirre are angry that while they must have their income managed and be part of useless and poorly coordinated Work for the Dole programs, they get none of the perceived benefits of the Intervention. The despair and lack of education among its inhabitants have meant that the outstation is unhealthy and stagnated. The reintroduction of CDEP to the outstation has brought about some small improvements over recent weeks.

Since February I have rebuilt the CDEP program at Irrerlirre, Mount Eaglebeak and in Harts Range in the hope that the Federal Government would resurrect the program. We still have three job network providers attempting to start up Work for the Dole programs currently and prior to my arrival, but as was the case in Imanpa, these programs that are concocted in Alice Springs and beyond are ineffective and poorly organised. Work programs on communities are effective only when they are supervised and run on the community by people who live there. Visiting job network providers often have little or no understanding of the community's dynamics.

The Community Employment Broker who worked at Harts Range for five months had little or no experience of remote community life and caused many problems by doing a lot of talking and very little listening. She promoted the idea of adobe huts, rammed earth buildings, work programs that required literacy and numeracy levels that do not exist in the community and took up a lot of my and others' time. She worked with a job network provider, Tangentyere Jobshop, in promoting a commercial bush tucker farm. The same provider has attempted this project twice in Alice Springs town camps and in a community north of Alice Springs; all attempts have been failures.

The work that I am attempting to undertake in this community is often undermined by such people who not only take up a lot of time, but also engage in promoting unrealistic programs and ideas among local people who out of politeness often agree with proposals while afterwards informing me that they have no intention of supporting the programs.

The level of literacy and numeracy in this community, as in many others, is very low, particularly among the young. I am concerned that in such a climate it is unrealistic to suggest that local people can be trained in time to be able to build their own houses. Many are only able to write their name. This appalling situation seems to have worsened over the past decade.

We have 14 families on our housing list and much of the itinerancy of the population is due to lack of housing and overcrowding which means that children do not get the ongoing education they require. Houses across the territory are needed urgently. To ask a population whose education has been so poorly neglected to learn to build their own houses is cruel and unviable and will result in many years more of overcrowding and homelessness and more children unable to attend school because they have nowhere safe and comfortable to sleep at night.

A more suitable and humane response would be to provide communities with prefabricated homes to enable a normalisation of occupancy numbers and relieve homelessness quickly. The cost of prefabricating, transporting and erecting such homes is about half the cost of attempting to build a house on a remote community. Local people could still be involved in erecting and bringing services to prefabricating homes and education could then be focussed on keeping that home clean and its inhabitants healthy. More resources and time are needed in educating people about healthy living rather than attempting to train people in complex trades that are currently beyond their educational level.

Healthy living programs and enough housing will give this current generation of Aboriginal people the ability to live well and send their children to school. These children and their parents urgently require a break from overcrowding, unhealthy diets and the belief that nothing can be done to make things better.