



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Poverty and financial hardship

TUESDAY, 29 JULY 2003

DARWIN

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SENATE
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 29 July 2003

Members: Senator Hutchins (*Chair*), Senator Knowles (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Humphries, Lees, McLucas and Moore

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Bishop, Carr, Chapman, Coonan, Crossin, Denman, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Forshaw, Harradine, Harris, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Mason, McGauran, Murphy, Nettle, Payne, Tierney, Watson and Webber

Senators in attendance: Senators Hutchins and Moore

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

1. a) the extent, nature and financial cost of
 - i) poverty and inequality in Australia
 - ii) poverty amongst working Australians
 - iii) child poverty in Australia; and
 - iv) poverty in Australian communities and regions;
- b) the social and economic impact of changes in the distribution of work, the level of remuneration from work and the impact of underemployment and unemployment;
- c) the effectiveness of income-support payments in protecting individuals and households from poverty; and
- d) the effectiveness of other programs and supports in reducing cost pressures on individual and household budgets, and building their capacity to be financially self-sufficient
2. That in undertaking its inquiry, the committee also examine:
 - a) the impact of changing industrial conditions on the availability, quality and reward for work; and
 - b) current efforts and new ideas, in both Australia and other countries, to identify and address poverty amongst working and non-working individuals and households.

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ALLEY, Ms Jane Elizabeth, Executive Director, Northern Territory Council of Social Service

OPIE, Mr Graham Craig, Director, Northern Territory Council of Social Service

CHAIR—I declare open this hearing and welcome everybody who is present today. The Community Affairs References Committee is continuing its inquiry into poverty and financial hardship. The committee is pleased to be visiting Darwin as it will provide a valuable opportunity to hear the views of local organisations and individuals about the impact poverty and financial hardship is having in the Territory. The committee is particularly interested in hearing about the differences and difficulties that the Territory faces in comparison to the major metropolitan centres in other parts of Australia.

The format for this hearing will be fairly informal as we are here to listen to your views. I am pleased to note that today's program includes representatives from a number of community groups. I welcome representatives from the Northern Territory Council of Social Services. I now invite you to make a presentation, which can take the form of a statement summarising your views or highlighting any issues you would like to emphasise to the committee.

Ms Alley—We submitted a submission today and I will take you through it. The key points that we want to highlight are that the level of poverty in the NT is masked and that the NT, on all indicators, would have the highest level of poverty of any state or territory. However, current data, research and analysis often do not reflect this, and I will return later as to why this is. Consequently, there is a need for a comprehensive social profile of the NT and specific research on poverty and disadvantage. The NT has really different demographics from the rest of Australia and, as a consequence of not having that type of profile, government policy and funding decisions often do not reflect the nature of things in the Territory. Current poverty analysis, definitions and indicators are inadequate in relation to Indigenous people; in particular, Indigenous people in rural and remote communities.

Specific characteristics of the NT that impact on and influence poverty include remoteness, a high Indigenous population, geographical distances with a small population spread over a large geographical area and high population mobility, which pose challenges in providing adequate physical and social infrastructure as well as costs for people in the NT. There are particular issues in the NT in relation to access to employment, CDEP, adequate income support, penalties and breaches and Centrelink infrastructure, particularly for Indigenous people in the NT. Particular strategies need to be put in place to address poverty that acknowledge the particular geographical and social characteristics of the NT.

First, we believe that the definitions of poverty need to go beyond income levels and income measures. Current discourses such as inclusion, exclusion and access to citizenship are better. However, when you start looking at poverty in relation to Indigenous people, you realise that the common poverty measures do not really reflect the extent of poverty and dispossession—particularly dispossession of Indigenous people—and so we are suggesting that, in relation to the definitions, discourses and measures of poverty, there needs to be further research done to develop a definition of poverty that effectively reflects the level and type of poverty and

dispossession in Indigenous communities. It does not at the moment pick up things about quality of life and cultural factors that are of high importance and value to Indigenous people; for example, land rights, Indigenous law, spiritual values, as well as the impact of dispossession, disconnection from one's land, community, family and cultural values and stolen generation issues. More work needs to be done with Indigenous people in relation to those issues.

I will give you a quick overview of poverty and social disadvantage in the NT. Poverty is a real issue for the NT. If you take the whole of the NT outside of Darwin and, to a lesser extent, Alice Springs, the communities are recorded by social and economic indicators for Australia as being amongst the most disadvantaged in Australia and the lowest financial quartile. When you see a map, the whole map is red, other than Darwin and Alice Springs, and that is the lowest financial quartile.

Approximately 30 per cent of the population is Indigenous, which is far higher than any other state. The vast majority of this Indigenous population is either not employed or is employed on CDEP. Approximately 83 per cent of Indigenous people in the NT live outside of Darwin, whereas most of the non-Indigenous population live in Darwin, with 53 per cent living outside of regional centres in remote communities with limited social and physical infrastructure. It is different from much of the rest of Australia in terms of Indigenous people living in remote areas.

Other things that highlight the situation in the Territory include approximately 84 per cent of the Indigenous population being unemployed and not in the labour force or on CDEP, according to the ABS census in 2001. The NT has almost seven times the level of recorded homelessness, at 5,203.1 per 10,000 people, with the next highest state being Queensland at 77.3 per 10,000 people. We also have five times the level of youth homelessness in the Territory. With every type of indicator, you probably would say that there are two sets of poverty. You have Indigenous poverty and non-Indigenous poverty in Australia. When you are looking at Indigenous poverty—particularly in the NT—you are looking at conditions that are equivalent to Third or Fourth World countries.

The real level of poverty and social disadvantage are masked in the NT by inadequate ABS and other research data on poverty, as well as by the lack of any comprehensive data and research on poverty and disadvantage in the NT. When you look at some of the research and reports, you see that they use states rather than territories. Large reports that might be dealing with housing or health sometimes leave the NT off completely. Hence, you have a distortion of who is the most disadvantaged. Often the territories are lumped together in reports and in ABS data, so you have the ACT with the NT, which are very different types of communities, and discussions around whether you can break down that data because of the size of the NT population. Without that, you are really missing what is happening in the NT.

Likewise, some of the key measures commonly used to indicate poverty are highly inaccurate, particularly in the case of Indigenous people. One of the best examples of this is the use of Centrelink data on unemployment, those registered with Centrelink being the basis for recording levels of unemployment in Australia. Over the past two years, other than at the time of September 11 and the collapse of Ansett, the NT has come up in statistics for unemployment as being one of the lowest.

We have a chart that we have developed—on page 4—which shows that with Indigenous unemployment and who is in the labour force the situation is quite different. Currently ABS includes CDEP within labour force data and CDEP is really more like a Work for the Dole scheme, in terms of its income levels for people, and was meant to be a training ground for real jobs. When you look at figures as to who is employed in the NT amongst Indigenous people, you see that almost 50 per cent or more is CDEP employment. When you look at 2001 and you put together CDEP and others not in the work force, you come up with a figure of 84 per cent of Indigenous adults in the NT over the age of 15 being outside of the labour force. That gives you a quite different picture. Bearing in mind that 30 per cent of the population are Indigenous, the figures must be wrong and, without that, you are also getting poor planning.

Specific characteristics of the NT that impact on poverty are, first, high Indigenous population and, second, remoteness and geographical distances—a small population base spread over a vast geographical area, which poses challenges for providing accessible services which meet the range of needs at a reasonable cost. Consequently, there are a large number of gaps. Services cost more. Third, there is a high cost of living due to remoteness—the lower the income, the higher the proportion of income spent on basics such as food and electricity. When you go into remote communities the cost of living is higher; the cost of food is higher than it is elsewhere in the NT. The cost generally of living in the NT is higher, consequently placing greater pressure on both working people and the unemployed. Fourth, there is a lack of affordable housing, particularly for low-income families. The NT has the some of the highest housing costs in Australia—housing costs are comparable to those of Sydney and the ACT, particularly three-bedroom houses for families. Over the past 12 months there has been a huge increase in groups of youth homelessness. Youth agencies have reported an approximate increase of 33 per cent to 35 per cent in youth homelessness, including a large number of under 12-year-olds.

Fifth, access to community services is less prevalent than in other states. There are huge gaps. Sixth, over the past five years, although it has been picked up more recently, there has been underspending in the area of community and welfare services, as well as in education, compared to the Commonwealth Grants Commission's report on what is suggested as standardised assessment expenditure for the NT.

Within welfare the NT spent in 2001 only 70 per cent of its recommended standardised expenditure. When you take out the housing expenditure—we have a young population—only 23 per cent of the recommended standardised expenditure was spent on families and children and only 51 per cent on the aged. The 23 per cent spent on family and children is the lowest percentage as compared to the recommendation or benchmark of any state. We have a long way to catch up.

Seven, services are reporting greater funding difficulties and inability to meet demand. When you look at a national survey called *Living on the Edge*, which was done by ACOSS and COSS, you see that the NT continually comes up as turning people away from services at a greater percentage rate than any other state or territory. One of the issues around this is the ability to employ and retain suitably qualified staff. That also has an impact on services being able to function at full capacity.

Eight, there are impacts of high levels of population mobility and migration. There is a high turnover, particularly with the non-Indigenous population, and that impacts on service

infrastructure. Also, there is high mobility amongst Indigenous populations, particularly around the wet season, which poses difficulties for planning and coping with service provision and even in recording Indigenous numbers.

Nine, as to culturally appropriate service models, issues around culture can result in barriers to services. For example, funding and licensing requirements around child care are preventing child-care centres being set up in remote communities because of the requirement to have qualified staff. This all centres around flexibility. Also, if you look at housing and housing design, you will see that family obligations often result in a high number of Indigenous people having failed tenancies, leading to homelessness. There is a need to look at how Indigenous people live, the large numbers in the family and the obligation to support other relatives. There is a need to be responsive to Indigenous culture.

As to access to employment, CDEP and adequate income support, a large number of Indigenous people in the Territory are not getting any form of income, so a large number are not even on welfare benefits. Part of the reason is that in a number of remote areas there is no Centrelink office. Regarding a new community hub or when CDEP is being set up, figures have revealed that about 60 per cent of people have not been on welfare benefits or CDEP before those services come into place.

High levels of breaching are occurring in regional and urban centres which has a real impact on Indigenous families. If families are taken off a benefit, often they do not come back or are slow to come back. They do not appeal and are being supported by families who are nearly all either on welfare benefits, CDEP or have no income. It has a major effect on families. The huge impact this was having kept coming out in our consultations around welfare benefits. The lack of adequate financial banking systems in remote communities means that often a cheque is managed by a store. This happens in urban areas as well. People have no control over their money, often get into debt as a consequence and can end up losing housing as a result.

There is a need for a greater level of Centrelink infrastructure in remote communities. It needs to include employment and training, wherever possible, of local Indigenous people. Working your way around the system is difficult for anyone, let alone an Indigenous person. The Centrelink hub model is potentially good. It could be done on a smaller scale so that there is a greater pick up and understanding of welfare benefits amongst Indigenous people. This could also lend itself to community controlled banking institutions being connected with that. There is a suggestion that Centrelink offices in NT should have access to their own Indigenous interpreter service. We do have an Indigenous interpreter service in the NT but it is really overstretched.

In most communities few opportunities exist for employment, other than CDEP. There needs to be more concerted work done by government to assist communities where possible to create economic development and real job opportunities. When you look at the CDEP, you see that it is often used as a substitute for real jobs, with government often utilising CDEP as the infrastructure to provide needed services because it is there. You might have a HACC service or a child-care service that is provided as a top-up through CDEP. This is a way of assisting CDEP to function well. The question can then be asked: when does CDEP become a real job? There are real jobs in the NT being done by CDEP and there is a need to review that with Indigenous organisations within ATSIIC. There is a need to review the current welfare benefit system to take

into account the special NT regional spatial variation and the high cost of living in outback remote regions.

We believe there are enough issues around how to provide responsive welfare reform to meet the needs of Indigenous communities in regional and remote Australia to do a longitudinal study or some sort of pilot work in that area. The McClure report acknowledged that it never went down that track. The kinds of strategies that are coming out are not that responsive. Community participation agreements, while being a good thing, do not have sufficient funds to enhance what is really a need to do some more regional development in those areas.

There are some suggested strategies for addressing poverty. On page 9 we have noted some general and specific strategies in the Indigenous area. We have suggested the need for a Commonwealth and state government poverty task force to develop a combined strategy. You probably already know that the task force, which has worked well in places like the UK, has placed the poverty agenda under the Prime Minister or leader. The task force reports to cabinet.

There needs to be a planning and research base on which poverty is defined, measured and addressed. This includes ensuring that each jurisdiction has a good social population data on poverty and social disadvantage; improving the collection of ABS data and population data on Indigenous people—recently we lost a lot of money from the grant scheme because there was a higher level of Indigenous population than had been recorded—commissioning some research work on redefining poverty and on developing social wellbeing indicators and poverty measures; and commissioning specific research work on developing an understanding of poverty in relation to Indigenous people.

Then there is a suggestion about developing poverty targets and benchmarks and about poverty strategies or social development strategies being developed by each state as well as the Commonwealth. Some of the more effective ways of addressing poverty have been on a regional basis/geographic place. There is a suggestion of doing regional, social and economic development plans, or at least piloting some of those.

The only way to address poverty in Indigenous communities is in a holistic way and to place Indigenous people at the centre of any solutions. Some of the things that need to occur is the advancing of the reconciliation process, including the development of a treaty; the development by governments with states of social justice statements and partnership agreements; the development of Indigenous impact statements; piloting a regional and/or community approach to addressing Indigenous poverty disadvantage. Such an approach could include the development of social and economic plans targeted at Indigenous communities; the provision of block funding tied to regional, social and economic development plans to enable innovative and holistic solutions to be developed and to move away from the silos; the establishment of agreed poverty/wellbeing targets and performance measures to constantly measure this—they have to be solid because the work that has happened in the Territory around some of those has drifted—and the provision of specific funds to Indigenous organisations and communities which empower those communities to address poverty in the way they see best. There are some innovative examples at the moment of holistic stuff that is happening: the primary health care access program and moving that on to cover other social issues. In the NT some of this work has been done around community controlled schools and making the connection between education and

health. The NT Regional Development Plan is looking at material to do with social and economic development at a regional level and piloting that around a number of communities.

CHAIR—Mr Opie, would you like to make some comments?

Mr Opie—Jan has asked me to talk briefly about the social determinants of health and how poverty relates to it. My other guise is executive director of the Heart Foundation. It is really important to reiterate what Jane has said about taking a holistic view. Within the Northern Territory we have the highest rates of chronic disease in Australia and corresponding mortality—probably some of the highest rates in the Western world. Social determinants have proven to be a key factor.

For people in lower socioeconomic groups risk-taking behaviours such as high levels of tobacco use, poor nutrition and lack of physical activities have proved to be more prevalent. In a recent study it was found that Territorians lost up to 25 years of life from heart disease and that Aboriginal communities or Indigenous people are probably seven to 10 times more likely to die of heart disease.

Taking a holistic view, Jane also mentioned employment and education. A key factor for PCAP and for us, as the Heart Foundation, is education and employment. Reducing the cycle of poverty is obviously a key factor when talking about risk factors. A higher education rate and quality employment mean something to people in remote communities, rather than CDEP or working for the dole.

That is probably all I want to say. It goes a little further than the terms of reference. It is clear, when you look at chronic disease—and the prediction of a boom in chronic disease that is going to happen in the next 10 to 20 years—that poverty is a key issue. When we look at poverty it is not just poverty, there is a range of issues that only a holistic point of view will ever manage to contain. That is all I have to say.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Opie.

Senator MOORE—Ms Alley, much of your report talks about the lack of effective research and data and that is a surprise considering how long people have been looking at this issue. Is there any particular reason there has not been dedicated research into issues in the Northern Territory?

Ms Alley—The best research has been specifically around Indigenous areas and around particular bits of Indigenous matters. The Primary Health Access Project will develop some of that. When you get to non-Indigenous areas there is virtually nothing there in terms of data. It has been a combination of things and a long history of a government which did not have a strong commitment to the social area and so there was not research done within that area. I think the other things arose because of problems with the ABS data. I still believe that there is a capacity to do some work in more exploratory ways and even to break down some of the ABS material. When you are looking at the NT you do not have a very good understanding of what the social profile is.

Senator MOORE—That is quite specialised research, too.

Ms Alley—Yes.

Senator MOORE—In a number of submissions we have received—and in discussions—there has been a suggestion that there needs to be a whole of government approach and some form of summit. You may have read that in the ACOSS national response. I have been asking people what they think of that and how they could make sure that such an activity does not degenerate into a talkfest. When you have a form of summit bringing people together, how do you make sure that practical task force recommendations—as recommended in your submission—do occur? Do either of you have any thoughts on that issue? It has happened in the health area. A number of summits have been held into health. How do you ensure something happens?

Ms Alley—Maybe by some preplanning involving not only a range of players within the field who might have a stake in poverty but also how to facilitate a range of different workshops within a summit: what are the key questions or outcomes and how to get people to those outcomes, as in some targeted questions. I agree with you that it is such a huge area and if you do not have a very carefully structured approach and involve a range of people that could well happen.

Mr Opie—I think also there needs to be a commitment by leaders to abide by the findings of the summit as well and that it will not just be taken on board and dealt with later. The UK model, The Compact, is a very good example of where, despite all the troubles, it has come out with some very good recommendations. There was a white paper released last year by Treasury that was not too kind to the departments within the government—which was very surprising, coming from Treasury—but it indicated there was a political will to see this succeed. I think that is really where it has to come from. There is plenty of motivation from the ground up; it is from the top down as well, I think, that it really has to be duplicated.

Senator MOORE—At all levels.

Mr Opie—At all levels, yes, and using models that are already there. Why reinvent the wheel?

Ms Alley—If you look at Ireland and the UK there have been some quite good results at some levels around addressing poverty, particularly when you unpack it a bit into some practical approaches.

CHAIR—Are your homelessness figures from 1996 broken down into Indigenous and non-Indigenous?

Ms Alley—I can follow that up. Shelter are coming later today and they might be able to tell you whether it is or not.

CHAIR—There is a significant difference with the next state, Queensland, where 30 per cent of the population is not Indigenous—77 to 523—isn't there?

Ms Alley—Yes. Also, a lot of it will be to do with the standard of housing. In the NT there is huge overcrowding in Indigenous houses, so it will be to do with the indicators of what is

satisfactory in terms of housing. Someone was saying the other day that they had read that in Maningrida there were up to 30 people living in a three-bedroom house which is designed for three to four people. You are looking at that as well. With Indigenous housing there is a huge gap in the level of housing needed and the standard and maintenance of housing.

CHAIR—In your suggested strategies, under paragraph 6.1 at the fourth dot point you say:

Commission specific research work on developing an understanding of poverty and well being within an Indigenous context, including identification of specific barriers and appropriate social well being indicators.

Would you like to explain to us what you might have in mind as a specific barrier or social wellbeing indicator. You can consider it and write to us about it.

Senator MOORE—We have not had a submission yet from ATSIC. We are expecting to hear from them formally as an organisation in about a fortnight's time, so I am sure that will be part of the discussions.

CHAIR—Of the people who have spoken on Indigenous matters, we have had very few submissions directly, except from I think the Aboriginal Legal Service in Newcastle. Someone could not make it in Wollongong, and yesterday WACOSS and the Hon. Jonathan Ford—

Senator MOORE—An upper house MP.

CHAIR—seemed to have a bit of a different view about even civil rights, didn't he? He had the view—I hope Senator Moore will correct me—that sometimes children should be taken away from parents.

Senator MOORE—He had experience working in those areas and had been very frightened by what was happening—the social collapse—and he did address his comments in such a way that people may think he is overreacting. I think he should be given the benefit of the doubt.

CHAIR—It was from the heart.

Senator MOORE—He was reacting to the horror of child abuse and in particular, from his experience in the Kimberley area, the impact of alcohol and drugs in that area and the disintegration of the community.

CHAIR—And malnutrition.

Senator MOORE—That was the background.

Ms Alley—Some of the work that the NT government is trying to do at the moment with the regional development plans is around how to measure community progress indicators within a community. There are some real barriers to measuring that at the moment in terms of what is adequate data and ways to collect data within Indigenous communities because of their lack of telecommunication, the level of the workload within Indigenous communities and the meaningfulness of a number of the things that they are collecting. Some of the work that is being done there is going back to some basic things to try and work out some key indicators that will

not be hard to collect. I think you will find the work—even discussions that are happening around the work they are doing—is incredibly difficult. In the work being done in Darwin at the moment around the Itinerant Strategy the government is also struggling with the questions: how do we evaluate this and what are some key indicators to show that we have achieved?

In the discussions that I have had in our consultations with groups around developing our Territory pre-budget submission, what has been continually coming through from people who work with Indigenous people in the health area is, 'We need to have a better understanding of the barriers. We need to understand a bit better. If we had a better understanding of some of those barriers then we might know how to address them.' The struggle is to have a better understanding of the barriers and better ways of measuring them. Generally, I am saying it is an area that needs more research and exploration.

CHAIR—'A better understanding of the barriers'—is that like a policy maker in Canberra has a view about something, or even a policy maker in Darwin has a view?

Ms Alley—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that the sort of thing?

Ms Alley—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that mainly in health? Would you say that health is an area that screams out for attention and probably identifies the Indigenous community as members of the Third World in a First World country?

Ms Alley—Yes. You can almost take health/wellbeing as the main framework. If you take that framework then everything connects. Which thing do you tackle first? Do you tackle family violence, substance abuse, adequate income or employment? What are the real things that are the blockages and how best do we proceed with this?

Senator MOORE—How do you make change?

Ms Alley—Yes, and how do we measure that stuff?

Senator MOORE—Naturally, one of the things that comes up all the time is that large numbers of people who are totally reliant on the Centrelink system are having trouble. One of your comments was that in some remote areas up to 60 per cent of people had not even got into the Centrelink system itself. Do you have any comment on the fact that Centrelink have had Aboriginal and Islander services as an intrinsic part of their structure since it was born and for many years before that, in Social Security, with liaison officers and visiting services and all those things? How then do you have that gap in a community as well established as Maningrida? It is confronting.

Ms Alley—It is true that Centrelink has had those types of services. The issue is the level and extent of the services. Up here we have a very good office in terms of its responsiveness in relation to Indigenous people; the issue is the sheer size of the Territory and the level of

resources that you need to be able to get out to different communities. In discussions with the local Centrelink office here, it is said that the Maningrida model is what we need across the NT.

Senator MOORE—That is the establishment of a dedicated office in a remote locality.

Ms Alley—Yes.

Senator MOORE—How big is the office in Maningrida?

Ms Alley—I think it has three or four workers in it.

Senator MOORE—Normanton has four doing the Cape, so Maningrida would be on that kind of scale.

Ms Alley—Yes. There is some discussion about whether there is something in between. At the moment you have community councils often having to take on that role without sufficient resources being provided to them. It is the sheer extent of it—for example, to train local Indigenous people within those communities and to give them a real job working with communities. To train people at least to do some of that advocacy/explanation role is most effective, so there should be a bit more work done around that. I know that people think the hub model is quite expensive, but maybe there is something in between that could be looked at. But it is that sheer level of infrastructure that is needed.

Senator MOORE—And the department accepts the figures that you have quoted?

Ms Alley—I do not know whether they would accept them. Those are examples of particular communities, or discussions that have taken place with, for instance, the Tangentyere Council and ATSIC.

Senator MOORE—We have had submissions from the Department of Family and Community Services and Centrelink, and it is one of the key issues of how do they make their system work better, because it is the national system. We have the option to refer further questions to them any time, so we will ask them about that particular service model. One of our concerns—and we have raised it everywhere—is people lost from the system. They do not appear in any statistics, and they are being picked up by agencies and families, and are just lost. And the breaching process, which you mentioned, has been mentioned in every location, I think.

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Alley—The number of people not on welfare benefits, without adequate data in general across the NT, is still very much anecdotal—different people saying, ‘This is our experience.’

Senator MOORE—If there is one thing you want to have happen out of this committee, what would it be? What do you want the committee to achieve?

Ms Alley—I would like the committee to achieve some commitment or development of a national strategy around poverty and social disadvantage. In the NT we would love to see a

commitment toward putting a bit more focus on regional and remote areas in the Top End. Some of the issues we are talking about are not just NT but the top end of Australia that misses out.

Senator MOORE—The old Australian and Northern Territory model, ANTA.

Mr Opie—A whole of government approach to this problem. It is not just a solo treatment of poverty, health, education and employment. They all roll into an infrastructure or roll into one.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming along today. It has been quite helpful.

Senator MOORE—If there is anything that you wish to add further, keep in contact with the committee. I often think of exactly what I wanted to say 20 minutes later.

Mr Opie—Thank you.

[2.53 p.m.]

FORSYTH, Ms Elizabeth Mary, Chief Executive Officer, Anglicare NT

MERRETT, Major Kelvin Leslie, Regional Officer, Salvation Army NT

CHAIR—I welcome Ms Liz Forsyth and Major Kelvin Merrett. I invite you to make a presentation, which can take the form of a statement summarising your views or highlighting any issues you would like to emphasise to the committee. Ms Forsyth, would you like to go first?

Ms Forsyth—Thank you. I speak on behalf of Anglicare NT, which is an amalgamated organisation of what was Anglicare Top End and Anglicare Central Australia. The focus of the work of Anglicare NT is very much on empowerment and support for change and less on crisis and care in relation to poverty related issues.

Services that we provide are exposed to the issues relating to poverty, including supported accommodation and counselling, which is particularly for families, individuals and young people; education, in the area of mental health in particular; respite for carers of aged and people with disabilities; specialised employment and day activity for people with disabilities and generalised support, particularly for migrant and refugee services in assisting people in settlement and financial counselling.

We believe that there is a need to define poverty in a different way than perhaps has occurred. It needs to be a community based definition of poverty, seeing poverty as a broader issue than income, including health and disability, access to treatment and prevention, defining of need according to location, access to skills and skills development in the community and capacity to offer support in alleviating poverty. When seen, these compounding effects of poverty are more profound.

The focus of this submission is in relation to the capacity of people to work and issues relating to poverty alongside the income support system that does exist. The distinct client groups that receive Anglicare NT services are youth, families, people with disabilities and their carers, migrants and refugees and, to a lesser extent, the aged. We also provide services to Indigenous people across all the programs, to some extent, with the exception of the migrant and refugee services program.

The core issues that we are identifying relating to the capacity to work are driven by the availability of suitable work; accessibility of that work; the capability of people to participate in that work; the sustainability of that work by the individual and also the sustainability of the work itself; the type of employment available; and the casualisation of the work force and the sorts of requirements, even on services, to deliver flexible services that require casualisation.

Income support related issues are driven by the adequacy to meet needs or not according to the cost of living—which does have industrially-linked relationships; for example, where clients who are not employed are living in a very employed community, such as Nhulunbuy where

accommodation costs are extremely high and income levels are fairly high in relation to the general community, but if you are an individual in poverty it makes access to basics such as accommodation extremely difficult.

Bureaucratic expectations, the expectations of the relationships with Centrelink on individuals who are most disempowered and perhaps less able and abilities to meet expectations in gaining useful access to the services that can be provided by Centrelink and realism in the planning and expectations of Centrelink officers impact on the individual needs relating to their skills base, their mental health, barriers and costs to working, issues relating to key groups of youth, disability and Indigenous people. These particular groups are considered in the submission. Issues identified also impact more broadly on families and migrant members of the community.

As to the inadequacy of levels of income for people under 18, we work with a lot of youth who are under the Reconnect program and are at risk of homelessness, both in Darwin and Palmerston and, more recently, in Nhulunbuy. If, for whatever reason, those young people are needing to live independently or choosing to live independently, the costs are still the same for them to do that. This increases their potential to fail in independent living, with detrimental consequences, including sliding into criminal behaviour or more difficult circumstances such as debt.

There is a great deal of potential for young people to accumulate debt, both through the Centrelink processes and breaching. They have transient lifestyles. Particularly in the Top End, a lot of young people escape or get left behind when families leave the area. Against that, they have limited maturity in approaches to official processes. They tend not to receive mail or ignore processes, do not understand the implications and then fail to receive benefits. We need to move from such a punitive approach to a more incentive and supportive approach, particularly for this client group.

The usefulness and viability of activity agreements to seek work is in question. Young people tend to agree, particularly in the face of officialdom, to poorly understood plans that have limited meaning in their gaining useful employment. More collaboration is needed in that process so that more realistic plans can be developed that are meaningful to the young person for their participation. Anglicare NT is undertaking a small pilot in this area within its youth programs and its local Centrelink office, and that is an example of very locally based collaboration and cooperation that can be very effective.

Wage rates and casual employment reduce the motivation for young people to take up work. Young people see little value to themselves very often in terms of their lifestyle and have very limited understanding perhaps of the longer term benefits of going onto a youth wage or taking up casual employment and resist perhaps the challenge that that offers. There are disincentives to employers to persevere with young people—that they are an easily replaceable employee group—and we need to find better incentives to employ young people and ensure that they are not just replaced when they are moved over into something other than the youth wage.

There are impracticalities for young people taking up seasonal work and, indeed, other people in need of employment. Even where fruit-picking, for example, becomes available, the Job Network is good at linking people to that work, but there are very high costs due to location and lack of transport in the areas where this work takes place and the lack of available and affordable

accommodation makes it very difficult for people to even undertake that sort of step towards alleviating their own situation.

There are very high expectations of workplaces and desire for skilled labour, particularly seen in some of the larger employment projects up here. There is limited commitment to supporting young people develop skills, particularly where it is subcontracted work that is time limited. There is not that longer term investment in people to develop skills, and reduced opportunities. The need for employer education comes out of this and increasing support for young people's transition to an employment environment. Young people are not reaping the benefit of industry developments in the Northern Territory and employment opportunities, due to the largely skilled labour.

There are then negative effects locally. There are concerns growing about some of the projects under way up here increasing costs—private rental accommodation, for example—and creating more crises for young people, or people on low incomes, trying to access appropriate accommodation. I spoke of Nhulunbuy—a mining centre's lack of suitable and affordable accommodation reduces the capacity to leave home in a productive way. There is a need for increased brokerage linking young people and advocacy on behalf of young people to bring employers together with young people to further opportunities of reducing their poverty and moving on from poverty into a cycle of employment.

Another group of people for whom poverty has a significant impact are those with disabilities and certainly their families and carers. We work with both those client groups. Lack of work available and services to support people's access to work available in the Territory is quite significant, particularly in regional areas. There are very limited supported employment services and, again, supported accommodation services to assist people to gain employment and grow their life skills.

There are issues of viability of services to support employment in regional areas. Where supported specialised services could assist, services become unsustainable under standardised funding regimes and measurement systems which are centrally set by Canberra. While I think we have seen a shift in the specialist employment services for people with disabilities, there is still a sense that it is poorly understood. The additional costs of running services in regional areas and the size of services is always of concern. You only get very small services funded and how we maintain those is a great challenge.

The short-term nature of work has the risks of impact on income support and it is a significant issue for this client group and really providing low levels of financial security even if they gain work. Even taking up opportunities may require them to make a financial investment they do not have. There are hidden costs of disability and work becomes unviable and income support is inadequate to make any difference for that. The lack of access to skills development, appropriate systems—particularly outside Darwin—would be significant. Poverty then becomes an expectation of the lifestyle of a person with disability.

We are working in some remote communities with Indigenous people. Again, the difficulty with all of these client groups is the scale to which the problem exists and the scale to which we can offer services. There is a considerable gap. There is a distinct lack of work opportunities in the regional communities and the need for skills and the fact that people have a low level of

schooling. Tennant Creek is a particularly good example where young people with low levels of schooling achieved by Indigenous school leavers makes the transition to work extremely difficult.

CDEP is becoming an institutionalised work arrangement that sustains poverty. It certainly does not offer people strong pathways to move into skilled development and then into other sorts of employment. Indeed, we have seen in some cases that it actually replaces appropriately paid labour. We have had Indigenous staff move into employment in areas that have then been replaced under the CDEP model and a move to see this as a cheap way of getting labour. In a real sense this is really taking us nowhere. Very often doing real work is what is needed in communities, but in areas where it is being undertaken it is being done for substandard wages and therefore is entrenching people in poverty cycles. There are trends to think internally only of employing Indigenous people under the CDEP. It seems to be moving out from the remote areas, where it was originally established, into more urban areas, including Darwin.

Regarding employer education, again, working with this group and people with disabilities and migrants, there does need to be a greater understanding of the value of working with differences within the workplace. That should be sustained in order to give people greater access to the employment market. There is a need to better link the subcontracting of major industrial events—the railway was one example—with locally based labour. There seems to be a strong sense in the communities I have talked to that the labour has not benefited the local community to the extent they would like.

Specialist services are needed to support access to employment for Indigenous people, as well as people in other groups in the community. There is a need for a multilevel approach in breaking the cycle; of people considering employment as a pathway forward and a route out of poverty. Within the communities in the Northern Territory there are many combined effects of disability and Indigenous issues, to the point where it is almost overwhelming. There is the combined impact of either chronic substance abuse or genetically inherited problems, or other forms of disability, alongside the problems associated with Indigenous communities and it is very hard for all of those issues to be seen. Again, it is an issue of there being a collaborative approach in service delivery and strategy to address the combined issues.

Another area of concern which we are encountering through our financial counselling services which are delivered to regional and remote communities is the financial practices and vulnerabilities of individuals living in these communities and the way some of the practices operate on these communities, entrenching people in cycles of debt and expenditure. Certainly issues around inadequacy of their income, according to the cost of living on these communities, is also significant. That is really the core of my submission and, as I am fairly new to the Territory. I apologise for any shortfall in terms of its depth.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Ms Forsyth.

Major Merrett—The Salvation Army in the Northern Territory would be one of the largest providers of welfare and emergency relief in the Northern Territory. With the exception of our aged care programs, all our programs would have as their main clients those who have been affected by poverty and financial hardship. We operate over 20 programs in the Northern Territory. I want to take this opportunity to bring before the committee the local scene for the

Northern Territory and particularly as it relates to our family support services, which is where we do emergency relief work for people coming to us who do not have enough food in their house, not enough clothing for the family et cetera. It is that particular focus I am looking at for this report.

The number of people falling into the category of poverty and financial hardship continues to grow, but at a rate which is quickly becoming unmanageable for the Salvation Army. A growing cluster of people seeking emergency relief assistance is that of single family incomes—that is, two adults plus children but on one income for that family. The ease of credit, the failure of families to budget, the lack of basic life skills are quickly identified as the catalyst for people moving into and remaining in poverty and financial hardship.

The growing trend of people coming to us for assistance with complex life issues is having a negative impact on welfare workers within the Salvation Army who daily are dealing with people with complex needs. Perhaps 20 years ago it was sufficient for people to receive a food parcel or a voucher and that was meaningful for them. Today, though, while that practical help is still very much needed and is still as essential, it does not go anywhere near addressing the real issues of people as they present to us. A simple summary of these people's needs is the lack of basic life skills and the inability to participate in meaningful community life.

The Salvation Army in the Northern Territory is investing considerable resources to upgrade and develop our family support services. We are building new centres in Alice Springs and Darwin so people can be assisted in a pleasant and user friendly atmosphere. We are combing other Salvation Army services so that basic life skills can be offered to clients coming to us with needs—for example, positive lifestyle, which is self-esteem, budgeting classes, cooking classes, communication skills et cetera—basic life skills that many of us take for granted. The ultimate goal of our family support services for people seeking assistance is to move them towards what we call independent living.

There are however, some real concerns that I want to share with you. One of those concerns is our lack of adequate staffing levels. Welfare workers are being burnt out under the constant strain of daily interaction with clients. These clients can sometimes be abusive, are often under emotional pressure and there are no longer quick fix solutions for them. This places a strain on my welfare workers and the strain they are under reduces the quality of care the Salvation Army is wanting to provide to clients. We are not able to always respond to our clients' needs in the best possible way. As a result of that, we have now introduced regular supervision for welfare workers but this has been an increased cost for the programs we are providing. The emergency relief money we receive does not go far enough. It never will, of course, but we must be able to offer assistance in conjunction with practical and holistic support to provide meaningful help to people in need.

The Salvation Army in the Northern Territory receives just over \$10,000 from Commonwealth ER funding. In addition to that we receive a state government grant of \$37,000 to employ staff in Alice Springs. That is a total of \$138,000 of government funding to which the Salvation Army adds \$166,000 to supplement the work. Basically what that means is it is almost costing us \$1 to hand out \$1 of assistance to folk in the Northern Territory.

I mentioned the lack of staffing. In our Alice Springs centre we have two part-time workers. In Darwin I have one full-time worker who works 38 hours per week with six contact hours every day with clients. As you can imagine, over time that puts considerable strain on that person and their ability to respond to people in a meaningful way. In Palmerston I have one part-time worker who works 20 hours per week. Traditionally the Salvation Army has had a great volunteer basis but due to the complex nature of family relief now, we no longer are able to use volunteers in handing out food assistance. They can still do a lot of the background work for us but we need professionals to do the welfare work. Again that is added to the cost of handing out welfare assistance to people in need. By way of example, in our Palmerston centre this year, by November 2002 the allocation of \$20,000 had already been spent. That was an average of \$8.70 per person in assistance. When you are handing out that sort of money it really does not go very far or provide anything meaningful to the people in need.

There are some recommendations I would like us to consider. Almost everyone says there is a need for funding but I want to qualify that by saying that funding be established to enable correct staffing levels to be put into place. I believe that if we were able to do this we would increase the performance outcome of our staff and that would have a benefit on the clients who are coming to see us. We would have more hours for the implementation of life skills for clients by staff. That is the direction we are really wanting to head in. It is not to just hand out the food voucher, the food parcel or the clothing et cetera, but to be able to spend time with these folk, many of whom are wanting assistance to develop some individual case management plans. The Salvation Army, through its community care program, has the ability to be able to offer these basic skills, as I mentioned before, in positive lifestyle, cooking et cetera. Increasing staff to coordinate this would have a very positive effect for the clients coming to us: the development of personal case management and individual work plans. It would also break the cycle of the handout mentality we have. It is unfortunate that today many people consider the welfare handout as part of their budget and rely on it. That is something we have to try and break, and encourage them to look for alternate sources.

The emergency relief funds we receive also need to be increased so meaningful assistance can be given in a case management scenario. For example, the amount of money we receive in Darwin has not increased for a number of years. Over the last 20 years the population of Palmerston has increased from almost zero to 20-plus. We have received no additional ER funding to cope with that. The amount of money we have simply gets smaller as the population increases.

I believe there should be transparency in the allocation of emergency relief funding so that we know who is getting what and what it is for, amongst other providers within the Northern Territory. Also, we need to establish effective and meaningful dialogue with government departments; in other words, government departments coming to us and seeking out what the needs are, rather than the annual allocation of funds without any meaningful dialogue as to how that takes place.

The Salvation Army is the shopfront for many people. Our family support services are in constant contact with thousands of people every month. We are very frustrated in our inability to be able to assist them to the degree that they are wanting assistance; not just in the handouts but in the quality of life they are wanting to achieve and our ability to help them in that task. I

sometimes wonder if perhaps—rather than the summits you referred to earlier, Senator—some pilot schemes could be an avenue that we explore. We could see what works in certain locations.

One of the problems we have in Darwin is that, because of our remoteness, our clients may go to another agency and quickly run out of people to see but at the same time they are not really being helped. They end up in quite a severe poverty trap and next time they come around to us it is with very significant difficulties they are faced with. We do not have the resources or the ability to help them to the extent needed.

Today I received some interesting statistics on our clothing vouchers. Last year we budgeted to hand out \$50,000 in Darwin and Palmerston clothing. When you consider that a piece of clothing costs about \$1, that is quite an amount of clothing. We spent over \$90,000. That represents the growing need in the community. The Salvation Army wants to be able to do something about that but we recognise that we do not have the resources to do it on our own. Thank you.

CHAIR—Anglicare made the point that, as soon as someone goes into Centrelink offices because they have breached their undertakings, they get sent straight across the road to Anglicare in Wollongong. They said they do not have the resources to handle that. Is that an experience you have had here, even though you have not been up here for long? I ask the same question of you, Major Merrett as well.

Ms Forsyth—Our emergency relief program is very small and predominantly focused in two areas, one being youth. It is only a few thousand dollars which is not very great. That would not be sustainable. So, no, but mainly because we do not have that sort of resource. But, certainly, talking to the dean of the cathedral, that is his experience—he is encountering people that have nothing, but he has nothing. We are in dialogue about what we can do and how we can set up services for people sleeping on church steps and needing something acutely. It has not been a strong area of our service development, as I said. That has been more traditional.

CHAIR—In your submission you mentioned that some young people are sliding into criminal behaviour, that they have been ignoring mail and they do not know how to fill out forms. I would assume that on the basis of that summit, a number of them would have been breached. Where do they go if they want some money? They must come to you.

Major Merrett—It is a significant problem for us. There is an automatic kind of pathway from Centrelink to the Salvation Army because we operate out of the Darwin City area.

CHAIR—You must be closer than Anglicare.

Major Merrett—Yes, we are.

CHAIR—Anglicare must be across the road in Wollongong.

Major Merrett—Yes, that is most probably the case.

Senator MOORE—Yes, they share it around.

Major Merrett—And also in Darwin—I think it is St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army who receive the main proportion of ER funding for welfare assistance. That is why they would automatically come to us. But certainly it is a problem and one of the areas we are trying to address is the ability to fill out forms correctly and things like that. They are some of the basic life skills that we have to try and implant on people coming for assistance. What I find interesting is that it is surprising how many people who come really do want the assistance. Some obviously do not but there are a significant number who do not like the cycle they are in and are wanting to get out of it.

CHAIR—The last part of the question I direct to both of you. Major Merrett, you say that the help you are giving out now is different from a while ago. Are you taking on a role that probably government should be taking on?

Major Merrett—I think there would be a view from a number that we do the government's job. In other words, we receive the emergency relief funding but then we have to put the complete infrastructure in place in order for that funding to be handed out to the community. That would be, I think, a valid argument. We are happy to do that, provided we receive the resources to do it. Part of our problem is that the welfare scene is growing so big that we are outstretching our existing resources and putting our existing services under quite a bit of strain. We are not doing it as well as we want to. That is not good for us and it is not good for the client.

CHAIR—Would you like to comment on that, Ms Forsyth?

Ms Forsyth—I think that is true. There has been a growth in outsourcing and the competitive tendering environment that services are now being delivered under. There is this pressure to do more for less. As I said in the presentation, the casualisation even of your own work force means you are not building the support and skill levels. You are not able to build the same sorts of levels of support for your staff and you are not developing the skills within your staff in the same way that you really should be to maintain that kind of standard. While it might have been cost effective for the government to do this, the services are picking up the tab, I think, in terms of how they are having to manage this and the sorts of pressures that they are working under.

CHAIR—It sounds like there are tremendous pressures for your staff.

Senator MOORE—We had the comment from one agency that people had been prepared to hand out food vouchers because they knew that they were not prepared for the complexity of the problems that they are facing now. They were talking about the family disintegration and also mental illness—the increasing numbers of people who are lost and who come with such need. Following on from both your comments, that would seem to be your own experience in your own agency.

Major Merrett—Yes, very much so.

Senator MOORE—That is a cry for help, I think.

Ms Forsyth—I think mental health is underrated in terms of its relationship with people's capacity to work, right through from young people to families and the sorts of stresses and

strains that they are inheriting in the pressures that the families are under in dealing with that. It has to be recognised, worked with and assisted.

Major Merrett—A significant number of mental health patients are now presenting themselves in the hostels as well—dual diagnosis patients et cetera. That is a complex issue for what used to be a simple caretaker, who now has a range of people to try and—

Senator MOORE—And expectations. Both of your organisations provide supported accommodation, and we heard in the previous submission about the increasing homelessness issue in the area. We are having Shelter speak to us later. Is the issue of homelessness and people in need of special accommodation and emergency accommodation something you would like to mention specifically?

Ms Forsyth—Our main experience has been in the area of youth. In Katherine we have some family facilities. Certainly, we have been doing some quite creative things to assist young people. A report that may be submitted to you on homelessness of youth in Palmerston relates to a research project that was undertaken by one of our staff as part of her master's degree. That was not suggesting that it was in crisis, but it was suggesting the issue was complex. It is a matter of finding ways of assisting young people to access the accommodation that is there and things like head leasing—assisting young people to be able to rent successfully and be supported to rent successfully. I cannot remember all the details of that report, but I could get a copy.

Senator MOORE—If we could get that, that would be fine.

Major Merrett—One of the interesting things that Liz has just highlighted is that in Darwin there is an arrangement between agencies that we will not try and duplicate. Anglicare has concentrated on youth, St Vincent de Paul generally is trying to look after the Aboriginal community and the Salvos are looking after the others, I guess. In Darwin homelessness is very seasonal, depending on what the weather is doing. In Alice Springs our hostel is consistently full all the year. Again, it is a preference for a lot of itinerants up here—long grassers—to live outdoors. That is their preference to coming in and using a hostel. We operate soup kitchens, as does St Vincent de Paul. They are well utilised, but it is their preference, because of the lifestyle of Darwin, to live out under the stars.

Senator MOORE—And use your services for other things; not so much a roof, but for food and help as required. You did touch on the other point I wanted to raise, which was the community in terms of the different agencies that provide support and the interaction between them. You talked about the fact that you talk to each other and try not to duplicate. Is it a strong working relationship here?

Major Merrett—It is one that is growing. Some of the chief executive officers of NGOs meet about every six weeks for lunch. It is an informal opportunity for discussion.

Senator MOORE—Do they meet at the soup kitchen?

Major Merrett—No. It would be a good experience, actually. We have met in one of our hostels. It is a good relationship. What makes it difficult, of course, is that when tenders come up it is the same pot of money.

Senator MOORE—Then you are competing. Absolutely!

Major Merrett—We end up competing in that context, but generally we try to have an understanding that there are areas that we specialise in. Darwin and Alice Springs are not big enough for two organisations to be doing the same thing when there is so much need in the Territory.

Ms Forsyth—I think the other pressure inherent in all of this is the recruitment of appropriately skilled staff. Major Merrett was referring to the need to support staff, but you cannot afford to lose staff either, because recruiting and replacing staff is an ongoing challenge to get staff of the skills that are required for the complexity of what we are dealing with.

Senator MOORE—Does the University of the Northern Territory offer social work as a subject?

Ms Forsyth—It does, but people do not necessarily stay in the Territory.

Senator MOORE—A few years ago it was under threat. I was wondering whether it was still in that situation. So far so good!

Ms Forsyth—That is one area. There are other areas of disability as well that are important in terms of developing skills—the sorts of pressures that families are under in terms of identifying appropriate supports to even go out to work, if they have a dependent child or young adult with a disability—and finding people who are appropriately skilled who will continue the good work that is done in schools and enable people to go on growing within the community and also continue to be able to support their family.

Senator MOORE—The layers of pressure.

Ms Forsyth—Yes.

CHAIR—Ms Forsyth, you mentioned financial counselling and, Major Merrett, you mentioned the ease of credit. Would you both like to comment on what phenomenon is occurring there for us on the committee? We are familiar with it, but I thought you might like to make a comment.

Major Merrett—It is so easy now for a family, with the use of credit, for example, to get way out of control very quickly; making the repayments and the principal continues to build up and becomes very quickly unmanageable.

Ms Forsyth—Then there are issues around gambling; promoting responsible gambling and finding ways to support families to not get into that situation. It is an educational process as well as a credit process. I think that families are very genuinely under pressure because costs are increasing and income is not necessarily keeping pace with that.

Senator MOORE—Your submission, Ms Forsyth, mentioned that the economic growth that has been publicised about this area has not necessarily flowed on to the local community; in particular, young people. Is there any partnership with business or partnership with industry? I

was in Gladstone the other day and they had very similar issues. It was chiming in my brain. They are looking at some preliminary partnerships with the large companies to try and address that.

Ms Forsyth—In my experience to date in the Northern Territory, there has not been a great deal of coming together. Kelvin may be able to speak more on that. I am familiar with some of the community/business partnership approaches, and I have not come across some of the large companies. We have tried to work with Gemco, for example, in suggesting ways they could support a counselling program to get established in Nhulunbuy. That is extremely difficult, because there is a very commercial framework around these companies and they do not automatically necessarily have a community focus. Some do. There have been good practices as well, I believe.

Major Merrett—Part of the problem we have with that issue is that Darwin does not necessarily have a corporate office for some of the major businesses, where other capital cities would. We are more of a submanagement here, so the infrastructure is not in place for some of those relationships to be established.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming along today. It has been very helpful.

[3.35 p.m.]

FOX, Mr Mick, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society

MADDEN, Mrs Elizabeth Catherine, Manager, Darwin Centre of Charity, St Vincent de Paul Society

McMAHON, Mr Bill, Former NT President, St Vincent de Paul Society

LLOYD, Ms Jayne, Director, Centacare NT

RONDO, Ms Angela, Programs Manager, Centacare NT

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from the St Vincent de Paul Society and Catholic Welfare Australia—Centacare NT. Do you have any further comments about the capacity in which you appear before the committee today?

Mr McMahan—I am also chairperson of Oznam House.

CHAIR—Thank you. I now invite you to make a presentation, which can take the form of a statement summarising your views or highlighting any issues you would like to emphasise to the committee.

Ms Lloyd—You would be aware that Catholic Welfare Australia, our peak body, has done a written submission which was largely based around the Job Network experience and, to a lesser degree, family relationship services. Centacare in the Northern Territory is less involved in the Job Network and more in family service delivery.

Centacare NT is a member of Catholic Welfare Australia and we provide services throughout the Northern Territory, including Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Alice Springs, and in three remote Aboriginal communities. Our services include drug and alcohol services, family relationship services and other state and Commonwealth programs, including the Personal Support Program; JPET, the Job Placement Employment and Training Program; the Family Homelessness Prevention Pilot; and some emergency financial relief funding throughout our major centres.

Catholic social teaching informs Centacare NT and our mission is that Centacare NT is committed to the Catholic Church's belief in the dignity of each person. In our struggle for a just society, we are called to work with people in ways which strengthen them in community so that we all may experience the fullness of life. Centacare NT sees poverty not merely as lowness of income or as financial hardship. We see that poverty encompasses the whole person. It would be our experience that the perception generally among Australians is that no-one has to be poor, or that you choose to be poor, and that there are services and benefits available for those who wish to make use of them. However, we know the reality is much different.

At Centacare NT we determine poverty through a person's capacity to participate meaningfully in life and in the community. This includes things such as access to a just wage or benefit, access to health or community services that will meet their needs, and the dissolution of barriers such as racism, sexism and other prejudices. Generally, the people we see in our youth programs, the Personal Support Program, or family homelessness programs, are accessing benefits. Often they will not have secure tenure; will have low educational attainment. They may have never been in the work force, and their families before them may never have been in the work force. There are likely to be drug and alcohol issues, violence issues and other associated issues such as large debts, fines and so on. If you are a woman, you are likely to have a number of children.

Significantly, the impacts of poverty are evidenced through a decline in self-esteem and self-worth. Poverty affects the whole person, whole families and whole communities. Frequently, these people are pathologised and their behaviour is interpreted as contributing to their disadvantage. Labels are given out freely by the community and, too frequently, by helping professions—labelling our client group as unmotivated, lazy, resistant to change, as angry people, disorganised people and so on—and these labels stick.

We see our clients buying a carton of beer and a carton of cigarettes when we know there is no food in the house. We see our clients spending \$50 at McDonald's and we know there will not be enough money for the rest of the week. We see a family spend a couple of hundred dollars at the show, which we had last week, and we know that their debt at the Housing Commission needs to be paid. I suppose this is how our client group gets labelled, but examining this more closely is to understand it in the context of low self-esteem, a desire to build a sense of self-worth and a need to compensate for all the other disadvantages that you know your child will face that week—the never-ending feeling of being trapped in poverty.

We recognise the fundamental connection between employment and human dignity and the alleviation of poverty and we recognise that some good has come from the Job Network. However, this is only part of the picture of attempting to eradicate poverty. We know that full-time employment does not always sustain people over the poverty line. Two incomes are generally required to support a modest standard of living for many families. However, for most families that we work with, employment is a future goal a long way down the track. When they get employment, it holds little security of permanency. Uncertain work conditions, when they are available, can cause severe family disruption and hardship and contribute to substance abuse, family conflict and family breakdown.

Again, while employment programs may have helped some of our families, generally the impact has been limited for the families that come in through our programs. Many families remain entrenched in multigenerational poverty. People who access our programs such as JPET, the Personal Support Program and the Family Homelessness Prevention program see themselves as having very few options, and from a very young age become entrapped in a system of disadvantage and hopelessness. This is a circular system or process which threatens self-esteem and reinforces problematic behaviour.

Barriers to participate equally in the education system limit people's chances for achievement, employment and the attainment of new skills. These limitations lead to poverty, create stress in relationships and so on. The cycle is very hard to exit, leads to further disempowerment, and this

can be expressed from a sense of rage in the clients that we work with, through to a sense of apathy and not really caring at all. For workers in the field, the realities of people living in poverty can be overwhelming and many feel ill equipped to deal with it and its consequences, such as unemployment, poor living conditions, the debts, the violence. This leads to services providing a limited focus or again pathologising the family without taking into consideration the social context.

The barriers faced by families experiencing poverty can also be mirrored by workers who feel disempowered by working in a system which creates barriers for participation. Barriers for workers can include working within national frameworks and programs not suitable for small and diverse communities. An example we would give of this is the Job Network in Alice Springs, where you are operating off a national program and trying to fit it into a community where, realistically, it does not work. I think that is the case with a lot of national programs. You are trying to fit them into small communities where there are large Indigenous populations and where there is not employment. You are really trying to make things work that you know probably are not going to.

There is the barrier of inadequately funded programs, the highest needs receiving the lowest funding. An example is the Personal Support Program, where you are dealing with the most long term unemployed people. It is one of the least viable programs that we run that we have to subsidise ourselves but it is the highest need people. Another barrier is working with what seems to be an unjust system with harsh penalties in terms of breaching and Centrelink penalties, and unrealistic outcome expectations in programs.

Further, there is the lack of commitment to investing in early intervention programs or failure to provide adequate services to those most at risk, particularly children and young people. There is a clear connection between poverty and the abuse of children, and poverty and children ending up in the criminal justice system. Whilst poor families do not have a monopoly on abuse, it can be concluded from child protection and criminal justice statistics that families with low incomes, underemployment, overcrowding, homelessness and social isolation will increase risk factors. Seldom is poverty cited as a causal factor for child abuse or juvenile offending. However, the connection between poverty and the experience of families in these systems is clear.

Families have unequal access to supports and services and differing abilities to effectively utilise these resources, which contributes significantly to family vulnerability and resilience. Until a higher priority is placed on the status of children and young people, poverty will continue and will continue to be perpetuated generation to generation. The voices of the marginalised are often silenced as the opportunity and capacity to contribute to any debate is lost or was never there in the first place.

In line with Catholic social teaching, Centacare actively encourages the principles of subsidiarity and preferential treatment to the poor. Subsidiarity supports the dispersal of authority as close to grassroots as possible, preferring decision making to occur at a local level. In pursuit of accountability and outcomes as seen in the Job Network and other national contracts, we sometimes lose sight of the unique situation of every community, family and individual, and, in doing this, stifle the creativity needed to respond appropriately to different client groups.

While we recognise the positive values of business and the marketplace, we know that the market does not always deliver it in a way that maximises the common good, often setting the market up to benefit some people over others. Again, we see the emphasis on outcome and competition driving people to seek out motivated or compliant clients, excluding some people from participation. We cannot be satisfied if some people fall through the net or if some people cannot be helped.

We cannot be satisfied that the prevention of absolute poverty is the only goal. The real poor in our society are those without sufficient means to take part in the life of the community. Outcome based contracts based on competition and profit have, to an extent, contributed to the demeaning or damaging of the mission and intent of organisations seeking to serve the disadvantaged. Market forces reduce clients to the status of a number or an economic unit. This loss has meaning for us as a consumer only of welfare services. Those who will suffer are the poor, the vulnerable and the defenceless.

Centacare NT believes in recognising and acknowledging poverty as a significant causal factor in family breakdown, hardship and so on. This is exacerbated by being part of a minority group. People living in poverty in Australia are unfairly labelled as people who have failed the system rather than the system not meeting their needs adequately. If you are poor in Australia the perception is that it is your fault.

In summary, Centacare NT would like to see (1) poverty named and identified as a significant issue in Australia, (2) a sense of compassion and solidarity with people experiencing poverty (3) funding of programs targeting people with the highest needs (4) early intervention programs targeting families with young children in an effort to stop the intergenerational impacts of poverty, and (5) increased capacity of community input into program design and delivery, particularly for the significant programs that impact on poverty such as the Job Network and family relationship services.

CHAIR—Thank you, Ms Lloyd. Would you like to add anything in relation to that, Mrs Rondo?

Mrs Rondo—No, thank you.

Mr Fox—We have introduced ourselves. I would like to add that Bill is the former president of the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Northern Territory and also President of the NT Mental Health Association. Another member of our group—Val Kirk, the manager of our Bakhita Centre at Coconut Grove—has been prevented from coming this afternoon due to ill health. She has valuable insights to offer on the supported accommodation program that is run there, with a specific focus on rehabilitation for homeless men.

In February this year you received a lengthy submission from the society nationally. I understand it is listed as No. 44 on your web site. We do not intend to present a formal submission this afternoon, but we understand that, as you have travelled throughout Australia, local Vincentians like ourselves have taken the opportunity, at your invitation, to support the national submission to reinforce its contents and, by appearing and talking about our experiences, give the people that we meet every day in the course of our work as Vincentians a human face, whether it is salaried staff members such as Liz and I are—and there are 25 of us

throughout the Territory—or the some 200 or so voluntary members such as Bill, engaged principally in person to person contact with people in need, visiting them in their homes.

Here in the Territory the society has some 10 conferences or branches of voluntary members—Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Palmerston and Darwin—five centres of charity, three hostels for homeless men—two here in Darwin and one in Katherine—and three meal services, one of them a mobile food service which operates here in Darwin CBD every evening. Our members are also involved not only in the regular visiting of the jails in Darwin and Alice Springs, the hospitals and aged persons facilities but also in refugee resettlement and in advocacy and support for asylum seekers. We also have a tradition of linking each of our branches with a conference or a branch in a developing country. One of our Territory conferences here is twinned with the only surviving conference in East Timor. The rest of our branches are twinned with conferences in Indonesia.

We receive Commonwealth emergency relief funding, which has been mentioned by some of the previous presenters, and we significantly supplement that by money generated largely through donations and by the operation of our opportunity shops, again largely staffed by volunteers.

Mr McMahon—As Michael mentioned, I am currently chairperson of Oznam House. That is an overnight crisis shelter. We serve 40,000 free meals there a year. Our main clients are Aboriginal people. We have breakfast and lunch every day there, which are served by volunteers. We see a lot of dislocation et cetera; people come in from the communities. One of our closest communities is Bathurst Island, which last year had 10 cases of youth suicide. Based on a 100,000 population, that works out at 120. The national rate in 1998 was 13. The Territory was 23 in 1998. The only place that has ever gone near 120 was Russia at the end of the Stalinist era, when there were a lot of suicides.

Some of these Aboriginal communities—that is just one I know about—are dying out. We had a conference on Bathurst Island for years and the ladies have all died from renal failure. Some of the strategies we have in place, I think, for invigorating these communities are a waste of time—Work for the Dole et cetera. One community is administering such a project. It is a community which covers 100 square miles. It should be a cattle station, yet the people who are paid CDEP and Work for the Dole are going around pulling out weeds. They could have bought 30,000 cattle with the Work for the Dole money, had the cattle there, and then employed the young fellows to do the cattle and told the government what to do with their money. That is what a lot of communities would like to do. They do not want the CDEP. They would like to have real work and real jobs.

I think the next stage is economic development. If we do not do it, we are going to lose these people because, as has happened on Bathurst Island, social anomie is killing them. Having been involved with St Vincent de Paul for 20 years in the Territory, it is not the day to day feeding of the poor and so on which is the problem. It is the long-term survival stuff which we have to look at; otherwise there will be no poor here to feed anyway. They will all be dead. That is all I would like to say.

Mrs Madden—In my position as social welfare officer at St Vincent de Paul, Darwin, I see a large cross-section of the NT population. People from all backgrounds and walks of life come in

for advice and assistance when they are not able to cope with their financial situation. This usually leads to other problems, such as social pressures, domestic violence and depression. I am not a qualified person to assist, but we generally refer them to other agencies. From my experience, I have learnt that people try so very hard to live within their means. However, due to the fact that they are on such low levels of income, whether social security or the lower wage scale they receive, they often trip up and cannot meet their financial responsibilities.

The Northern Territory is huge in geographical terms but, as you know, the population is very minimal—about 200,000—compared to other states of Australia. Within this population there are large numbers of people on social welfare, including a lot of our Aboriginals, which has been mentioned several times. Sure, everyone has reasonable access to social security benefits, but do these benefits or minimal wages earned by some enable them to have reasonable access to the basic necessities of life, such as health, education and housing facilities?

Our poor—the poor in the Territory—or even throughout Australia cannot really be compared under the same social or economic rationale as the poor in our close neighbouring Asian countries. We here have an overall high standard of living and the expectations of people make them rightly strive to be a part of this better standard of living. People come into Vinnies for assistance as they struggle to provide basics and extras for themselves and their families. Those who budget successfully can have their best laid plans thrown into chaos by the emergence of unexpected expenditure and other emergencies. This can occur simply, say, if a power and water account is higher than anticipated. I can relate hundreds of stories about people unable to pay the extra or, if they do pay, they forgo something else—usually food—or they juggle other bills and these all build up so that it is difficult to get out of a tangled web of debt.

Unexpected expenditure can also occur if an extra child comes to stay, which happens in divided or separated families quite regularly. It seems simple enough having an extra visitor but, when living so within the confines of a budget, it makes a huge difference. If families on welfare are lucky enough to own a car and it requires major repairs, it is almost impossible for them to pay for the repairs. The car waits, they wait or, if they can, they pay the mechanic off and he often has to wait for a payment. School excursions or extra events at school can create lots of financial difficulties. Many parents cannot afford to send children on school excursions, so the children miss out. Not all schools subsidise students in need of assistance. I also see parents who cannot send their children to school because they do not have money for their lunches. They come in to see me with the kids and I will say, ‘Why aren’t the children at school?’ They say, ‘We just don’t have the money to buy their lunch.’

Just today I had a mother requesting help to buy school uniforms as she cannot afford them. This is a fairly new request but it has happened previously this year. At the start of this year there were several requests for me to help with buying school uniforms. It is not an unexpected expense but it is an expense that parents cannot always meet. It makes it difficult for them to access education for their children because they are unable to send them to school well dressed or in the correct uniform; the kids are made to look different.

Emergencies are always arising in the area of health. Unfortunately people, including children, become sick when it is not pay week, pension or unemployment benefits week: no money, no doctor visit, no cures. Dental visits are prohibitive, due to the high cost of a visit to a private dentist. We do have a dental clinic here but it is almost impossible to access, due to the long

waiting lists. A visit to a private dentist can set people back financially for months. These are the kinds of people who are the suffering poor of the Northern Territory.

It is also very sad and heartbreaking to have people come in to see me and say, 'It is my little girl's birthday and I really wanted to buy her a present. Now we can't buy food for the next few days. Can you please help me?' Lately I have had several cases where people cannot afford to buy a present or, if they do, something else is forgone. The income does not stretch far enough.

The major problem with being on a low income, whether social security or low wages, is the lack of ability to access a better quality of life than merely a survival existence. The time has come to stop blaming the victims for this predicament. They are not to blame; there are so many other factors involved here. I will not elaborate on them because they have already been well documented, for instance, in our national St Vincent de Paul submission. These folks, who have less opportunity to access health, educational facilities and low-expense housing, are our poor members of society in Australia today. As mentioned previously, we believe everyone has the right to a good standard of living in our affluent country.

What I have stated in this submission does not even scratch the surface of the situation of the poor in the Territory. Mine is a broadly based presentation aimed at giving you a picture based on my experiences at the coalface.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Mr Fox—There are two other groups I would like to comment briefly on. One is the East Timorese. Of the 1,800 throughout Australia, some 84 or 85 live here in Darwin. These are people who, as you know, arrived lawfully. They applied promptly and validly for protection from our country and had no response to their request, sometimes for up to eight or 10 years. The processing commenced last year and all of them are still waiting on the outcomes of their applications, except for those who are fortunate enough to qualify for another type of visa—spouse visa, close ties or whatever.

Of the 84 who have failed at the DIMIA level and then at the Refugee Review Tribunal, those amongst them who are unable to work—and there are a significant number—for reasons of advanced age, childhood or health issues—and the cross-section is similar to that of the wider community—lose their ability to access the asylum seeker funds administered by the Red Cross. I understand that is pitched at 80 per cent of the social security benefit level. We now have people living in the Darwin community with no form of income whatsoever, surviving on the charity of extended family or friends. Some of them are highly dependent on the wages of their teenage kids' part-time jobs and some of them are assisted by community based organisations such as ours.

I appreciate that their application process seems to be grinding towards a hopeful conclusion—that the federal minister will exercise his discretion and grant protection visas to most of them. The minister himself has anticipated that the process will hopefully be concluded by October this year. In the meantime we have people living in the community with absolutely no income whatsoever.

The second group—this is a growing phenomenon and there is concern about it throughout Australia—is refugees who have come here under the orderly program with subclass 200 visas, which means they are classed as refugees by the UNHCR and the Australian definition as being outside their own country and unable to return because of a well-founded fear of persecution for one of the five convention based reasons. Under class 200 their air fares and their health checks in their country of first refuge are paid by the government.

Arriving here and considering themselves to be fortunate, they want to share that good fortune with family, extended family, friends et cetera. They then propose, for humanitarian visas, these people overseas and they cannot be considered unless they have a proposer here in Australia. The proposer undertakes to be responsible for their travel costs. We had one case put to us last week of a man here with a small family proposing his widowed sister and eight children for travel costs of \$24,500. He can access a loan through IOM but he has to come up with 50 per cent—\$12,000—as a deposit. He has Buckley's chance of doing that. We are seeing more and more people in that situation: they are beside themselves with anxiety and going to extraordinary lengths to raise the money—begging and borrowing, but not stealing yet. By not being able to extend to family members and friends the safety and security they have achieved here, it is worsening the refugee experience they are already recovering from.

I understand the Refugee Council of Australia has just completed a scoping project for DIMIA and made some recommendations about low interest or no interest loan schemes to supplement those that are already in place. It may well need some significant assistance from the government to kick-start the project. My fear is that people here in the community are saving money from their wages or from their social security benefits—whatever—in order to, firstly, support people overseas; and, secondly, save for their travel costs. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Fox.

Senator MOORE—You were nodding when I was asking about social work at the university. Is there something you want to add about the social work at the university?

Ms Lloyd—Only that it has been very tenuous over the last six months. Nearly all of the students are now doing a distance education course through Central Queensland University. Our two placements are currently from that university, although they have just seconded someone from the department to try and run it again. I do not think there would be many students there at the moment. That has had real impacts for us particularly in recruitment and getting qualified staff to do the work. At the moment it is difficult to recruit in Darwin, so you can imagine what it is like in Katherine and Alice Springs. We are in a position, for the first time, where we cannot deliver services because we cannot get the people. It has a big impact, for sure.

Senator MOORE—The question that I put to the previous witnesses was about the statement we had in the previous area of the skill level and confidence of people working in your organisations. The statement we had was that people used to be able to give out food but now they cannot give out the kind of help that is required because of the complexities of the need and also the illness levels of some of the client groups. Would anyone care to comment on that? It is a huge thing for people working in the industry.

Mrs Madden—I would like to make the comment that there is a huge increase in the number of people with mental health problems. They are the ones that we are seeing a lot of us. Naturally enough, not all of us can assist those people, so we do try to refer them on to the appropriate authorities. That is how we operate in Darwin at St Vincent de Paul. We do refer people on to appropriate authorities and those with the skills to deal with the situations.

Senator MOORE—Is there an adequate supply of people? What is the mental health support like in the Northern Territory?

Mr McMahan—It is very poor. It is really hard sometimes to spot the staff from the clients. I am serious; we have such a high breakdown rate among the workers. It is a real problem. I do not know what the answer is. It is similar to the problem we have with kidney failure. Getting staff to carry out the work in that area is another problem. In the mental health area, they used to have two wards: a diagnostic and rehabilitation ward. The rehabilitation ward has been closed and people have been shoved back out into the community very quickly. With schizophrenia and bipolar illnesses, it takes quite a bit of skill sometimes to get the right diagnosis. My friend, who was a lawyer here, was diagnosed as schizophrenic 10 years ago. He moved to Adelaide and now they say he is bipolar. He had been on the wrong medication for 10 years. He had been having terrible psychotic episodes.

CHAIR—Is the closure of this ward the reason for the huge increase in clients with mental health problems?

Mr McMahan—I do not say that. It is probably a diagnostic problem, often. They are not diagnosed properly. We have had a fairly scraggy mob of psychiatrists here and there has been a lot of unprofessional conduct. Obviously, they are not being diagnosed and treated properly. It is a revolving door situation. If you have got them on the wrong medication it is not going to help them much. I guess that is a health problem, isn't it?

Mrs Rondo—There is also a large increase in drug related mental health illness, which has an impact. On top of the mental health there is the use of drugs to combat that, along with low literacy and numeracy skills and skills generally, offending behaviour—staff responding to all of those complexities to work with a crisis or in their area of work, which is for us often housing.

Ms Lloyd—Or trying to get an employment outcome.

Mrs Madden—We also have a lot of people travel here. People with mental health problems travel around Australia. I can vividly remember one person turning up in a terrible state. Where I work is also the overnight men's hostel and because there is very little low-income accommodation in Darwin—very little—a lot end up in our overnight hostel. This particular person was in a very bad state and wanted to suicide. I eventually contacted the local mental health centre because he was threatening suicide, but he was also wanting to move on after a few days. I said, 'I really don't think he should move on before you see him,' and they said, 'Don't worry. Where does he want to go?' I said, 'He thinks he wants to go to either Adelaide or Perth. He's not too sure,' and they said, 'They will know him when he gets there.' So there you are. It is a big problem.

Senator MOORE—Ms Lloyd, can we have a copy of the paper that you presented?

Ms Lloyd—Yes.

Senator MOORE—That would be useful, because you made several quite detailed points about the employment outcomes, which are critical, and we have not heard those in as much detail in other places yet. The dichotomy of the system and the community and forcing people to fit I think are really important, and that was raised in your paper.

CHAIR—You can give it to the secretary. Thank you for coming along this afternoon.

Proceedings suspended from 4.10 p.m. to 4.23 p.m.

EDWARDS, Ms Alison, Executive Officer, Northern Territory Shelter

ACTING CHAIR (Senator Moore)—Welcome, Ms Edwards. Thank you for coming. Would you like to start your presentation. It can take any form you like.

Ms Edwards—Thank you. Northern Territory Shelter is a community based not-for-profit housing disadvantaged peak body. We are linked to Shelters all around the country, so I will not go into it too deeply.

Senator MOORE—You are part of the international group.

Ms Edwards—Yes. And while I am at it, I would like to comment that National Shelter being funded would be a useful lobby group.

Senator MOORE—That would be a useful thing, yes. Get that in early!

Ms Edwards—Rather than go on about the same issues that you would hear all around the country, I would like to speak about recent consultations that Northern Territory Shelter has been doing on behalf of and in conjunction with Territory Housing, the Northern Territory housing body. We have been funded by Territory Housing to travel around the Northern Territory to regional centres—and remote communities when we are invited—to talk to people about housing needs: what housing needs are being met, what housing needs are not being met, how housing department processes and policies can be improved, and basically anything people want to discuss about housing. That varies, depending on who we are talking to.

We have run public meetings, focus group meetings for special needs groups, including disabilities, women's groups, renal patients groups, public housing tenants focus groups. The list just goes on, really. We have run one to one meetings for people who are not comfortable speaking in any sort of public forum, and that includes women who have escaped violence and applied for public housing. We have also sent out 400 survey forms that use the same format as the meetings we have run. Those consultations have been quite successful, except for the public meetings. People do not seem to want to come to our public meetings—which is good in a way! The focus group meetings have been much more productive.

I will talk a little about what has happened. Those regional centres that I spoke of include Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Jabiru, Nhulunbuy, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, and we are heading back to Nhulunbuy and Alice Springs by invitation because people there want to run more focus groups than the ones we ran there, which is pretty fantastic from our point of view.

The issues relevant to this inquiry that have come through our consultations are issues to do with quality of life, access to education and work opportunities, and decision making regarding work opportunities, particularly pertaining to housing issues. In particular, there are a couple of communities that have spoken quite strongly about the fragmentation of their community life because of housing issues and the lack of housing affordability and the lack of housing funding. Those are both mining communities where there is a distinct lack of housing, almost no social housing and very little public housing, and the public housing that does exist is targeted towards

industry housing, which is company housing really. The company rents from the department for public sector employees in public housing. Anyone else who needs it does not get it because it does not exist. People in those communities have been talking very strongly about how that diminishes the community's capacity to grow or to even have any strength whatsoever.

Older people leave as soon as they stop working in the community because there is no housing for them and young people leave because there is no housing for them, and that creates the whole fragmentation of the network. The cost of living is higher because if a family has children they do not have extended family to assist with child care. It goes on and on with those types of issues. People are leaving those communities which they consider their homes. They cannot sustain living there, so they move elsewhere. By the time they leave, the whole extended family unit has broken down.

Up until recently anecdotally people have been saying this was mostly European families. Now it is extending to Indigenous families. Indigenous people are being educated, going back to their communities and wanting to work on those communities. There is no housing and there are no employment opportunities. Therefore, the same thing happens for those families. One of the big issues for those regional communities is the cost of private rental. Because of the lack of public housing, private rental is quite high. In one community the average price for a standard three-bedroom house with nothing special is \$600 per week, which is more than most people in that community earn per week, so it is totally unaffordable.

Another issue that has come up over and over again in every region we have been in is the quality, location and numbers of housing stock. Obviously quality of accommodation impacts on people. The location impacts on people's ability to work, study and participate in the community. Over several years the Northern Territory government has been seen, by the community, to sell off public housing stock. The impact of this, as seen by the community, is growing public housing waiting lists. They have grown significantly in the last three years. Priority housing applications are from people escaping violence and people with special health needs—in theory homelessness but in practice not homelessness. Because of the lack of stock, those people are waiting in some regions up to 12 months for priority housing, which is supposed to be for emergencies.

Another impact of the sell-off of public housing stock has been people's choice of location to live. In many cases people are not able to choose where they would like to live. Simple things like wanting to go to university, wanting your children to attend a specific school or wanting to go to work is not attainable for a lot of people on low incomes because of where they have been allocated housing. In some regional centres there is no public transport. If you live over one side of town and your work or your appointment is on the other side of town, unless you have the taxi fare you cannot get there. This is a big issue for a lot of people.

Another issue that is quite strong all around the Northern Territory is people's decision making regarding work opportunities, particularly pertaining to public housing rent. In the Northern Territory there is rebated rent for people on low income, particularly income support recipients. People are getting to the point of making a decision about whether or not they choose to work, because their public housing rental rate will go up, so their rebate will go down. In many cases it is not financially viable for a member of the family to be working because the rent goes up to a level where their disposable income is less, so people are choosing not to work.

The other issue in amongst all of that is that, if you hit a certain income level, you are no longer eligible for public housing. People are choosing not to work rather than lose what they perceive as their home. A lot of families have lived there for a very long time and do not want to move. That is perpetuating the poverty trap; people are staying on benefits so they can stay in their homes.

Senator MOORE—They have to have somewhere to move to as well. If you were moving out of the public house you would have to have a house ready to move into. Is that an easy thing to find in parts of the Northern Territory?

Ms Edwards—In some parts of the Northern Territory it does not exist or the waiting lists, even for private rental, are very long. For a low-income family moving from public housing into private rental, even in Darwin, private rental is quite expensive. Obviously people are going to take that into consideration before they make the move into employment because it is not affordable for a lot of families. I am sure you will have heard already that the cost of living is quite high here. That is something else that people take into account. Not working is a common option and is one of the things we have heard regularly in our public housing tenants focus groups. People are choosing not to work.

Senator MOORE—It is one more pressure on them.

Ms Edwards—That is right, and it is financially just not viable. I have a list of general issues that impact significantly on people's housing and people's standards of living and the cycle of poverty. Overwhelmingly around the Northern Territory, people have identified the need for living skills programs, particularly for public housing tenants but also for private housing tenants. People are coming in from remote communities. They may not have lived in the style of urban housing that they are being offered and will be potentially moving into. Over periods of time there have been what are known as living skills programs. They give people the opportunity to learn things that are considered essential for public and private housing tenancy. They include budgeting skills, how to look after your property and, for some people, simple things like how to use the stove and how a toilet flushes—really simple things.

At the moment around the Territory we have not been able to identify one specifically funded living skills program. There are some organisations offering those services, even though they are not funded to do so, which is putting stress on those organisations. Overwhelmingly, everyone is identifying the need for those, but they have all been 'defunded' over time.

Senator MOORE—Where was the funding for those coming from?

Ms Edwards—A whole range of different areas. Some were ATSIC funded, some were Northern Territory government funded, some were FACS Commonwealth funded.

Senator MOORE—And they have all dried up?

Ms Edwards—Yes. Another issue that is huge all around the Northern Territory is the lack of transitional and crisis accommodation spaces. Although there are services in existence, all of them are stretched to way past their limit. They have turn-away rates roughly the equivalent of

their capacity. Most of the women's refuges are turning away one family per day; most of the youth services more than their capacity. If they can take 10, they are probably turning away 20.

Over years all of these services have been lobbying for more SAAP funding. When there has been new money come into the Northern Territory, it has been pilot based or specific funding based for sector support services, rather than new services. Or it has been used to assess how to best reshuffle what is happening already, when there is an obvious need for an increase in funding for those services. They play quite an important role in that transition to independent living and have, in the past, delivered services like those living skills programs. Now they cannot, simply because they are stretched to their limit dealing with crisis clients.

My last point is the distinct lack of tenancy advocacy and complaint services in the Northern Territory. A lot of people are complaining, in our consultations, about evictions, or non-evictions where people are being talked into leaving their tenancies because they will be penalised if they are legally evicted; they will not be able to go on the waiting list for public housing again. They are being encouraged to simply hand their keys in and go back on the waiting list. In some places it takes years to get back into housing. There is nowhere to go with complaints about that, except the front counter at the department that just evicted people from, or encouraged people to leave, their premises. All around the rest of the country, in some shape or form, are funded services for this but in the Northern Territory there is nothing.

CHAIR—Thank you, Ms Edwards. You were saying people were choosing not to work because if they earned an income then they had to get out of the public housing area. Do you know what the income is that starts to make them ineligible for public housing?

Ms Edwards—I could not tell you off the top of my head. It all depends on dependants and types of property.

CHAIR—Is it very high?

Ms Edwards—I would think it is not reasonable.

CHAIR—Like \$500 a week?

Ms Edwards—No, it is nothing like that. I can get it to you, if you like.

CHAIR—That would be nice, if you could.

Senator MOORE—We will compare it with other states, too, to see whether it is equitable. Do you have TICA operating up here? It is a tenancy information list, which is used mainly in private housing. If landlords have people's names on that list, it is just about impossible for those people to get rental anywhere.

CHAIR—It is a sort of black list that the real estate agents have.

Ms Edwards—Some real estate agents are registered with that, but most are not.

Senator MOORE—They're not? That's interesting.

Ms Edwards—Most are not. Some of the private real estate agents, particularly in the bigger centres like Darwin and Alice Springs, are quite good and work hard to try to be helpful and equitable.

Senator MOORE—Good.

Ms Edwards—Overwhelmingly, we also hear that private rental agents are by far the most racist and difficult for Aboriginal people to deal with. It is almost a non-market for Aboriginal people to get into, because of that racism.

CHAIR—Probably a bad choice of words by me!

Senator MOORE—It was.

Ms Edwards—Maybe not!

Senator MOORE—Have you noticed the situation getting worse? We are trying to see whether things are changing or whether it is just in a bad state. In your experience, has the situation with housing and homelessness and the issues you are dealing with worsened?

Ms Edwards—Absolutely, yes.

CHAIR—Are your clients changing? We have had evidence from a number of the charity organisations—St Vincent de Paul and others—that the sorts of people who are coming in and visiting them are different from a few years ago. Particularly, they are talking about people who are at work and are seeking assistance. Are you seeing anything you could identify that is different from a few years ago?

Ms Edwards—I would say that generally it is the same sorts of client groups, but the intensity of need is much greater. They are much more high need. If people had been caught five years ago and the issues dealt with effectively then, it would not have snowballed into the depth of problem that they have now.

Senator MOORE—And the levels of problems.

Ms Edwards—That is right. I heard earlier St Vincent de Paul talking about the mental health issues. The client base has got bigger and bigger. That is because of the pressure on people, for a wide range of reasons. The pressure grows and grows, so the needs grow and grow. Another interesting factor that service providers report here is the second or third generation clients, where they have worked with the parents and then they will be working with the children, who now have children, who now have children and it goes on; the same families and the poverty trap, where the kids have not seen anyone in the family work. They have never learnt any of the skills to get into employment, and schooling is often not happening at all or happening in a really lax way, where kids turn up to school sometimes or do not turn up at all.

Senator MOORE—Do you have certain suburbs that are just labelled?

Ms Edwards—Absolutely.

Senator MOORE—If people are in those suburbs they are less likely to be given a chance?

Ms Edwards—Absolutely, and there are generally high rates of public housing in those suburbs. Everyone in the Northern Territory knows which ones they are. One of the interesting things we talked about when we were in Katherine was the impact of the flood. It still seems to have quite an effect on people's mental health, but there is also that effect of good suburb/bad suburb. A lot of people have moved out of the places that were quite low-lying that had a bad impact from the flood physically and bought properties in other parts of town, so that has now become the low-income housing area. The needs there are much greater and, obviously, the housing stock was damaged in the flood and has not necessarily been repaired the way it should have been and it goes on and on. Since those floods, what used to be a reasonable area to live in has now become the bad area of town.

Senator MOORE—That is interesting.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Ms Edwards.

[4.41 p.m.]

VALADIAN, Mr Bernard, Executive Director, Aboriginal Development Foundation

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Valadian. I invite you to make a presentation, which can take the form of a statement summarising your views or highlighting any issues you would like to emphasise to the committee.

Mr Valadian—Firstly, to give a brief background on the organisation and how it came to be, back at the end of the 1960s we were involved with a small group of people who were setting up this organisation in a different light to look after urban problems. I became involved heavily in the early seventies and found there was a bigger need for people living in fringe camps, as it was called, in the Darwin area. They were Aboriginal people from remote rural communities who were not, in a sense, able to, or did not want to, access urban accommodation, but had a need to come into Darwin. Over the years this has continued. It was there before the sixties, but it has continued to develop. Recently the NT government has had a major problem with what it calls itinerants throughout the Territory and is working on a program to try and resolve that.

We have always tried through the organisation to provide minimal accommodation, tried to get people to camp in an area and tried to supervise how they could maintain a small area so that we could apply for land from the NT government and set up permanent sites. Back in the early seventies we were involved in 10 rural communities around Darwin, most of which have now become independent, but we still have four communities over which we have a special purpose lease.

We built what in those days was called very heavy industrialised accommodation, so that large family groups could live in these sorts of houses without the fear of damage and what happens in a normal urban situation, because these people did not have the living skills then—and a lot still do not—to live in normal accommodation.

The main funding bodies to the organisation have been Aboriginal Affairs, and then it became the Aboriginal Development Commission, and in the last 13 years it has been ATSIC. The funding was to deliver municipal services to the areas which we had control over. The people coming into these communities came from many different backgrounds and there were a number of reasons why they came to town.

More recently, there has been a big influx of people coming in for long-term medical reasons. When they are medically evacuated, because of dialysis or other such things, whole family groups come in. You might get 30 people following one person who has a medical problem, so our communities were really overstretched. The ATSIC regional council was never funded sufficiently to cover the cost of this and, more recently, they have been heavily reduced in funds because they have some other idea of how funds should be spent, but people are still living in very bad situations.

As earlier speakers have said, at the same time we are facing some of the problems in the wider community. We have had people who have lived in our communities who have moved into

public housing and, while they have made the attempt to move into public housing because they have children and want them to advance through education, pressures of the urban situation have seen them come back into our communities. Some will continue to move out three or four times to try and gain a different lifestyle.

There was a comment made on public housing being sold off. This has been a big loss to a lot of our Indigenous community people, who come into town and try and take up a public house. With the stock going down, they have to then qualify through home living skills et cetera to be able to gain public housing. Where in the urban areas we had long-term residents—Indigenous people living in a house for, say, 30 years—one of the difficulties we get then is that as the family grows up and leaves the home the mother and father, who become the grandparents, are then under some pressure from the housing authorities to move out of a three-bedroom house into a one-bedroom unit. When that happens, we felt many years ago that that was breaking up families, because when children move away from home they normally come back to mum and dad for Christmas or other such celebrations. There may be a downturn in a marriage or they may have lost their jobs; they still need to go back somewhere. If they do not have the family home to go back to, then the parents are by themselves and cannot assist the groups.

You asked a few a questions before about what happens when people's income starts to rise. I think the Northern Territory government has not taken up what might happen in other states; that credit may be given to the householder. If the children suddenly get a job and the income rises, does it go above the threshold? There is no time given really, or does not seem to be. Give a period of time to see what the young folk are going to do, because I think mums and dads need to look after the kids to ensure they can maintain their jobs and start to save some money before they move out on their own. When the level of income is much higher than it should be, then pressure is put on the people to pay normal private rental market costs, which they really cannot afford, and I think it is unfair for young folk to be pressured. They have started a job, they need their mums and dads to help them along and to get into the routine of saving some money to move out on their own and marry, or whatever they might do later on. We find that it has affected our people.

As was said earlier, some of our people hand the keys back in to the authorities rather than get evicted; in particular, the Katherine region, as we heard at a meeting yesterday. Remote area people come in and live with the people living in the household—the public housing—and because of traditional ties and customs the householder cannot say no to the family groups. Therefore, they become a nuisance factor to the wider community around them and pressure is put on them, so the householder will hand the keys back rather than go through the procedure of being evicted.

They do not always go back to their home communities. Here in Darwin the organisation that we are running has three special purpose leases in town where we develop our communities. A lot of pressure is put on us to take this overflow of people for short periods of time, but there is no money given and it really stretches our work force and our budget. We have a lot of people coming in, sometimes unannounced. They are using the facilities, but there is no contribution to the running of these communities. Therefore, we have a situation where—while we have always tried to help these people, because we set up many years ago to help people out in bad situations and to improve their lifestyle—the money seems to be drying up within ATSIC. They are reorganising their funds, so we are now at a very minimal budget. The pressure to provide the

service is still there. The people are complaining bitterly that we are not providing the service that we have done for 30 years, so now we are finding that we have a lot more hardship in our areas and overcrowding situations at times.

The Northern Territory government has recently developed this Itinerant Strategy and has made very good commitments of money to try and now look at some of those problems. We are currently in meetings negotiating with government and the Itinerant Strategy project group to use one of our communities to set up new living areas so that some of these people can be accommodated. The difficulty is that there are so many different groups coming into town that there needs to be a variety of areas, because not all racial backgrounds can live together.

One of the presenters mentioned people getting jobs. For the past 30-odd years in the five communities that I have—there are four now—very few, if any, of the people have ever had a full-time job. The most difficult part for us is that the young children coming on do not see an older sibling, mum, aunt or uncle in a full-time job. If they do not see one of their family in a full-time job, they have grown through a system where that is what life is about; there is no opportunity for full-time positions.

It has always been, in Darwin, that one of the lowest priorities for gaining a position was an Indigenous person from a remote area. They may not have the skills and the background to convince an employer that they can do the job. We have had people in our communities that, for the past 30 years that I have been involved, have never had a job. We are still going through that. Babies are born. They go to school for a period of time, but at the end of that—if they go through the full primary school—there are no jobs at the end of that, so again they become dependent on government assistance. It is not as though they want that. They are trying to find a way around that, and our organisation has been trying to assist in that area.

The people that we have in our communities come from a number of different areas. While in the past we had people from the northern sector of the Territory, they are now coming in from Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine and areas further down. We have found that, maybe for traditional reasons, some people cannot live in their communities because they have broken a traditional law or something. Therefore, they may be banished, so they must travel somewhere else and we are finding that they are coming up to the Top End and liking, in a sense, that there are not the traditional ties up here which are going to restrict them, but when they do come up the area is not prepared for them.

You still have people coming in expecting a better lifestyle and ending up—as the terminology has been in the Territory—as long grassers. There are a lot of people living in the long grass and they will do that for quite some period of time. Even though some of the elders back in the communities would like them to go home, I think they really cannot go back for long periods without the law catching up with them, and they come back again. It is a problem the NT government is trying to resolve, but ATSIC is going through a reshuffling of how they are going to distribute their funding. We find it very difficult now. Our program has not changed and we are getting more demands upon us, but the dollars are drying up, as with other programs I mentioned before. Where do people go for this money?

With home living skills, we have provided in the past a very strong foundation. We have had workers that would help people to adjust into the type of accommodation provided. With the

housing authorities now providing very modern style housing for our people, which is a very good move on the political side and to help our people, in some of the new houses we are finding that people are not able to handle electric stoves with all the knobs on them. If they had a fire and they were cooking outside, fat would boil over and go into the fire.

An recent example of what is happening in some of the new homes is that one householder was complaining about smoke coming out of the knobs where they turn the dials. We checked the stove out and found it was full of grease. We asked the lady, 'What are you cooking?' She had a big frypan and away she cooks and it all bubbles and settles. It did major damage to that particular stove. We have had other stoves where people have turned the four hotplates on and have gone outside for a period of time, come back in and the whole thing is one big red hotplate and the metal surrounds have even gone red. We have to go back and say, 'If you cook in one pot, put one thing on.'

It is a matter of educating people in this modern style of living. Now with the lack of constant staff that we had on a daily basis, we are finding it more difficult. The use of hot water—there are solar hot-water systems. We have to be careful that they do not turn on the hot-water tap because it is cold to start with and they forget; the child might get burnt. It is trial and error, but how do you help people to move into this sort of situation? In that sense, we try to help people to develop in their own homes, try and get them to budget and accept that in this day and age everybody contributes something for what they get. We are starting to get rent from people, which in the past was never possible. The contribution towards water in the community is another big thing, because people forget that in a remote area you can turn the tap on, maybe it comes from a bore or something and there is no control and no cost, but with town supplied water there is a heavy demand on the payment of it.

Home living skills are very important to help people move forward—for instance, how they can store their food in the house. We have to make sure there is a lock-up area and a fridge where the family can lock their food away at night, because when visitors come who may be drunk they raid the pantry, as they call it, and next morning there is nothing for the kids. The kids cannot go to school because they are hungry and they have not slept that night because of the amount of noise.

There is that complaint all the time—that they are not going to school—but when you look into why they are not going to school, the mothers are embarrassed to send the kids to school without giving them breakfast, to start with, and some lunch to take with them. When they do go to school without lunch they sit in one corner of the yard at their lunch break or recess period watching other people eat their lunches, so the kids do not go because of the embarrassment of that situation.

How do we continue to improve our people's lives? We want them to be part of society and not dependent on society. While these town communities are completely separate to everything else that happens around us, I do not think anybody has been involved long enough to be able to say, 'This is what really should happen.' In Alice Springs there is Tangentyere, in Tennant Creek there is Jalakara and, I think, Kalano in Katherine. Each of the major centres has a similar set-up and has the same sorts of problems, but here in Darwin we find more recently that the pressure of life is making more people financially not able to handle it.

We find that some of the women in the communities are wearing threadbare clothes because they have no way of getting new clothing. We have to look at that all the time. Particularly, large ladies out there find it rather embarrassing to go into a shop and find that nothing is going to fit them, so we try to do it on their behalf; find something nice that they can wear when they want to come into Darwin or to the town.

There are a lot of problems out there. A lot needs to be done. Over a period of time we have had some successes, but the new generation coming on are still bringing in the same sorts of problems that were there. They are coming from the outer regions of their communities, not from the inner circle. We said many years ago that most of the communities were like two circles. The inner circle were those people who were more developed, the outer circle were not developed, and they are the ones that we seem to be getting as the transients or itinerants, coming into town, not able to settle down anywhere but looking for a place that is fairly free and easy. Provided we can give them some assistance, I think we can help to change it.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Senator MOORE—Mr Valadian, you mentioned the kids. We have heard from different people about housing issues, and also the integration, but you referred to the kids going to school. Do you know whether any of the schools here provide food, whether they have breakfast and lunch programs? Some of that is happening in some of the schools in Brisbane at the moment.

Mr Valadian—They did, through an educational program. If the parents contributed some money to this particular project they would supply the kids their lunches. But I think that program stopped. We had one of our communities that was out at Palmerston City going to the local school at Howard Springs and that group of five or six families were doing that. It was not a lot of money they were contributing to the education sector and the kids were able to get lunch. I think that is the way it is. So long as the parents are contributing a small amount, they believe that they are doing something for their kids rather than relying on that being given to the children.

Senator MOORE—There is the involvement with it, as well as the security of the kids being fed.

Mr Valadian—Yes. But there is nothing in the Territory really that does that—not in the areas that we are working in. We are working in the Darwin area, Palmerston and Adelaide River township, which is 100 kilometres down the highway. Parents really do want their children to go to school, but they need a stable home life and some support. To and from the school is their business, they do it quite well, but they want to be able to look after the household, with this outside support that we have been giving them. While, through IHANT—Indigenous Housing Authority of the Northern Territory—money is being given to build new houses and the families look quite pleased to get these houses, still those extra home living skills need to come on top of that, otherwise we are not helping to develop the community or the householder.

CHAIR—Mr Valadian, you did mention the Itinerant Strategy project. I wonder if you could inform us a bit more about what it involved.

Mr Valadian—What has happened in Darwin and other major centres—but particularly in Darwin—is that over a number of years there have been a lot of people coming in from remote areas who do not tie into any of the communities nor any of the urban centres. They will find a place in a park or on a beach or somewhere and camp; that is where they will live. They will more than likely frequent an urban shopping centre. They will go in because the food is there and there is alcohol there, and they will buy their supplies and just sit in the nearest park and become, in a sense, a nuisance as far as the public is concerned. In a lot of these areas there are no facilities like showers and toilets, so it then becomes a health problem, and because of the way they are doing it and the numbers that they are doing it in, it has caused a major concern in Darwin to businesspeople, and even ordinary urban development areas.

Back in the early seventies, when I first started with the organisation, my concern was to have areas of land that people could be directed to go to, but over the past 10 to 20 years, or maybe longer, the authorities have been ordering people off this site to that site and just keep pushing people around. It did not resolve the problem. The NT government has now come to grips with this. They have made a heavy commitment in dollars to look at the whole problem throughout the Territory and to develop programs to try and eliminate the itinerant situation even by, more recently, bringing in elders from some communities to talk to certain people and encourage them to go back to their home communities. If they have been a long period of time away from their home communities, they might find that they will go back for a short period. There have to be the programs out there—which I think the government may be doing.

At the moment, out at Knuckeyes Lagoon, Berrimah, we have an area of land that was always used as a community. We now have a program with the Itinerant Strategy and NT government to develop a portion of that land specifically for some of these people so that they can be given accommodation and take part in activities to get them back into some sort of lifestyle. In the past people were just put on a piece of land and no support was given. It would never work, so the government is now looking at something slightly different, and they are fairly heavily committed on this. The ministers up here are very keen to get it moving and we are hoping, by this wet season, to be able to provide accommodation for, I think it was said at the meeting this morning, up to 100 people at this point.

Darwin can have up to 500 people on the streets somewhere who come in from remote areas, find they cannot go back because they have no money to go back and no means of transport, so they stay longer. If they come in to visit somebody with a long-term illness then they cannot always live in public housing nor any other set of accommodation, so they take up a public area somewhere near where their relatives may be living, and that area may not be suitable. All that ever does is cause stress in the wider community. This Itinerant Strategy and the project that the NT government has up and running are to try to find ways to overcome a situation which has been developing for many years right throughout the Territory and other parts of Australia.

In Western Australia I think one of the parks fairly close to town has an area which some of the visitors, itinerants, can use through the day. I do not know what they do at night-time. In Brisbane they have some parks where they have minimal accommodation so that they can use public parks without being a concern to the rest of the area. Darwin is now just coming to that point, and I think the government at this stage is very concerned about this problem, because it is a major problem. I think the Indigenous population is growing fast. More children are being born every year. Unless there are some other programs to help them in their home community, they

will drift into the major centres, because education these days is to educate people to live in the modern world.

Home communities do not have all the modern technology, the parks, the theatres, the hotels and the clubs and sporting ovals. When they see that in town, they want to come back into town. They may have come in to visit somebody; they see Darwin is a nice place and they come back again; then they find a place and stay. The itinerancy has been happening for quite a period of time. It is only in the last two years that the government has been concerned about doing something definite about it, and we have been involved in that.

CHAIR—Do you think that has been successful?

Mr Valadian—It is developing at this point. We do not know at the moment how successful it will be. Darwin has developed so quickly that land areas that were available in the seventies are not there now, and the government now has to look at resolving some of the issues so that land can be made available. The areas of land that we have at the moment we applied for back in the seventies. We knew that there would be a continuation of this situation. They are permanent sites, but the people are not permanent; they are moving all the time.

When we have three or four permanent areas, the community is very mobile, and what we need to do is make sure that we make the best use of those areas and have the facilities on it to encourage people in. There is no neighbourhood around it, so it is not affecting the neighbourhood. It is so that people can live their lifestyle. They carry the traditional things they want. If they want to have a wood fire to cook their meals, it is not a problem. If they live outside most of the time, it is not a problem. But in an urban housing situation, if 30 people come in and they are living outside and cooking outside, the neighbours do not think it is a good idea. It not really an urban type thing. This is where the problems start. There is the noise factor. A lot of the time they are disturbing the neighbourhood, so then the householders are evicted or voluntarily leave the household, and that then puts pressure back on us again.

We get lots of calls from different agencies, saying, ‘Can you take in this family? They’ve just been evicted,’ or, ‘They’re leaving a house. They need a place for a period of time.’ Often we will say yes—if we can—but if we say no it is because we know there is no space; there are no facilities to handle it. It is a difficult thing. We see a lot of the younger folk now coming through. They are learning what is happening in the modern world but are not able to get access to it, so their lifestyle is what it was 30 years ago for the grandparents.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Valadian.

[5.07 p.m.]

WOLFE, Ms Anne Frances, Coordinator, Coalition of Low Income Earners

CHAIR—Welcome. I now invite you to make a presentation, which can take the form of a statement summarising your views or highlighting any issues you would like to emphasise to the committee.

Ms Wolfe—I would like to say what I see are things that cause problems. There are urban Indigenous people who get into trouble because they overcrowd their houses. Cultural obligations oblige them to take other people in, then Housing says they have to get out because all these people have come in and there is overcrowding, but they cannot refuse to take these people. So that is one reason why there are problems.

In emergency relief I go out on a lot of outreach, I go to people's homes, and there are people sniffing paint and all sorts of things. I guess that is why they are poor, I don't know. There are also a lot of people who accumulate huge debts from the housing commission and once you have a debt and Housing puts you out, you cannot have any more housing. You cannot go into the private market because it is about \$1,400 bond. I think there should be some other way to deal with those debts rather than just throw them out. I don't know, it is for you to work out the policies for that.

It is getting a bit worrying too that there is hardly a doctor who bulk-bills left in Darwin. You need up to \$40 to go and see a doctor. If you have not got it you cannot go. This is just where emergency relief money goes in these areas. For some people my emergency relief goes to rent and bonds. If you come here you have to wait three months to get a bond from Territory Housing but for those three months you have to live somewhere and usually it is a flat. I usually give part bond and they go all over the place getting part bond until they get enough to put into a house. That is a period of three months. We did have crisis accommodation—six flats the Territory funded until just before the Labor government got in here. We also lease from the housing commission four houses at low rent so that we can rent those out to people who cannot get housing, people who might have debts or just aren't eligible. That is called the community tenancy scheme.

I also noticed, when we had that crisis accommodation, that no SAAP organisation would take anybody unless they had the money up front. They were supposed to but they didn't. If someone comes in a crisis we have to take them with no money so they were always a fortnight behind and you cannot get them in anywhere unless you have money up front, so they come for ER to get money to go into a SAAP organisation.

Another problem with urban Indigenous is in child support. You have to find the husband, which is rather difficult because they are usually in the long grass, so that mother then has to wait until that person is found before she can get the full amount and that can take several months.

Senator MOORE—Tell us about your organisation, the coalition for the—

Ms Wolfe—It is just a community based organisation, run by a committee of about 10. Most of the people from the houses are on the committee. There are old-timers like me and a few faithful have been with it all the time. We have monthly meetings and decide what to do, how to pay the rents.

Senator MOORE—How long have you been going?

Ms Wolfe—About 25 years.

Senator MOORE—In Darwin only? Is it a Darwin organisation?

Ms Wolfe—Yes, in Darwin only. It was started by a group of students in Darwin when there was no housing—single housing or any other.

Senator MOORE—And you have kept it going through various governments?

Ms Wolfe—Yes.

CHAIR—And do you find crisis accommodation?

Ms Wolfe—It is sort of crisis accommodation, the three or four houses, but it is supposed to be long term and you find once you put people in these houses they really do not want to move on. It is supposed to be long-term accommodation, the flat was for crisis accommodation. We moved them from the crisis accommodation into a house but we lost the crisis accommodation—it was empty for about nine months and then the Salvation Army took it over. The local health department was trying to find someone to take it over and eventually the Salvation Army did.

Senator MOORE—So at least it is still in the local area—that is useful.

Ms Wolfe—Yes, but it is in there but it is run a different way.

CHAIR—Are you helping more? Finding more requests for assistance?

Ms Wolfe—Yes.

CHAIR—Is it different to, say, the last 25 years? Would you like to comment on that?

Ms Wolfe—Yes, I find it different in that there are people who are working, the father is working and the mother stays home, who often get into some sort of crisis. Younger people who are working for just above the dole quite often get into some crises. If you get a housing commission house you have to get all the equipment—such as fridges or washing machines. There is nobody who supplies that so you have to tell people to save up before they get there. Even if you go to the charitable organisations they have hardly got any and when you do get something you have to pay for the cartage because no charitable place will cart anything from A to B; they do not have trucks like they used to.

Senator MOORE—Ms Wolfe, you have been listening to a lot of the evidence we have been getting, and I have asked a couple of people what they would like the committee to do. Have you given any thought to what you would like to have the committee achieve?

Ms Wolfe—My main concern is housing. A girl I know is on \$35,000. She is a single mother and has three children. She cannot get into housing because she is \$4 or \$5 over the cut-off or something like that; they just take the gross income. At the same time I know of two public servants, earning over a hundred grand, living in a housing commission house. I have another friend: she has welfare making sure she is okay but she really needs domestic help. I go around there and do the dishes but they come around and talk to her. What she really needs is someone to just—

Senator MOORE—Home help. That kind of practical stuff.

Ms Wolfe—I told her we were going to start up a company—her and me. She thinks I am serious.

Senator MOORE—There is obviously a need. Thank you so much for your patience, sitting there all day. I hope you found it interesting.

Ms Wolfe—It was interesting, thank you.

Proceedings suspended from 5.15 p.m. to 5.38 p.m.

[5.38 p.m.]

BEGGS, Mr Duncan Robert, Director, Young Men's Christian Association Darwin

INGRAM, Mr Robert John, Executive Officer, Young Men's Christian Association Darwin

HENRY, Ms Barbara, Executive Director, Young Women's Christian Association Darwin

CHAIR—I now invite you to make a presentation which can take the form of a statement summarising your views or highlighting any issues you would like emphasised to the committee.

Ms Henry—I want to talk in the context of some of the programs that the YWCA runs and what the issues are that relate to the topic of this Senate inquiry. The YWCA in Darwin has a major focus on domestic violence and homelessness. I can leave material about the specific programs. You may be aware that one of the major causes of homelessness is domestic violence. We have an emergency accommodation service, a youth refuge in Darwin. Many of the young people using that service, whether they have been in an environment of domestic violence or not, have very limited incomes. They are usually leaving an environment that fails to support their needs. That is not to say that they are all angels, of course, but it relates to family breakdown by and large.

There are support needs that they have to enable them to live independently, or in supported accommodation. Centrelink provides support for that and I think the new support systems that come through with the direct payments when they are in longer-term accommodation are very beneficial. We are dealing with young people who have a multiplicity of needs. The funding we receive for that program is through the Supported Assistance Accommodation Program, SAAP funding, which provides for support—not for case management, in the role that we take. However, we find as those clients have become more complicated, particularly around the misuse of substances—illicit and legal—and mental health issues, they are the ones who are presenting and making things very challenging for the staff, with their level of training and the level at which we are able to pay them.

In terms of the family crisis accommodation, we have a number of families who have come from interstate, escaping domestic violence. Because they cannot get assistance without a qualification period, we have had to find ways of being able to support them in the community. We have bought a couple of houses to be able to do that.

There are issues around young women who are either pregnant or have children up to 12 months of age. Again, access to community supports is very challenging for them. Very often they have a whole range of issues and income support is just one.

I will not go through every program but one of the things we are trying to do as an organisation is assist the people in our services to break the cycle they are in. We are working closely with other agencies in attempting to do that. Because we have a continuum from young people in crisis to family in crisis, we have been monitoring through our own system who is coming back in and looking at why they are coming back in and where the support systems fail.

The financial support system sometimes causes them to come back into our services because of, often, the lack of knowledge of how you get into that system. I will leave it at that, otherwise I will keep going forever.

CHAIR—Mr Ingram or Mr Beggs.

Mr Ingram—I take this opportunity to thank you for the chance to talk to you like this. Even though the YMCA of Darwin is kindred with the YWCA of Darwin, our operations are quite different. We do not rely on government funding. We do not have the supported accommodation funding, the SAAP funding. This year we did receive from the Territory government a small amount of CAF, which is crisis accommodation funding, which allows us to give refuge to some people seeking emergency accommodation. Because we do not rely on government funding, we obviously cannot offer as much as we want to.

I have found, over the last 10 years I have been involved with the YMCA, we are turning away more and more people who are seeking crisis accommodation. They do not, for instance, fit the programs the YWCA run and we have no programs to support them whatsoever. These people have been either referred to the Salvation Army or the St Vincent de Paul Society or they are sleeping out in the long grass. Recently we have been actively trying to seek some Supported Accommodation Assistance Program funding. We have not been successful at this stage—that will come up down the track.

We have offered youth services that probably catered towards the poverty side of things. We used an outreach service in the satellite city of Palmerston. Certainly a lot of the clients there came onto our books because of poverty and the financial hardship they faced—but by no means all of them. As far as the income support payments and the effectiveness in protecting individuals, I find that a bit of a double-edged sword. I have seen it go the other way also, where it can drive them further into poverty; for instance, if you increase the amount of money they have available for alcohol et cetera. Therefore, if they drink more alcohol they get further down in the mire.

Mr Beggs—I am going to add to what Bob is saying by being fairly candid about the position of the Darwin YM at the moment. We have an asset that has 84 beds. It probably is at a point where it needs a pretty hefty injection of capital into it to either maintain it and bring it up to standard or to say, ‘Okay, if we’ve got to do that, then what is the future for the facility?’ Because we do not own the land, we do not have the ability to go to the financial institutions and put a business case to them. We do not have much in the way of assets. We are said to own the building but we do not have freehold to the land. It is a peculiar way the lease is structured. It is lease in perpetuity. It is not an attractive proposition to the banks.

We are not giving up on that. We have been to the government and said, ‘These are the cards on the table. We’re at a bit of a crossroads.’ We were lulled into perhaps a sense of false security over the preceding 10 to 15 years where backpackers coming through Darwin wanted accommodation and there were workers who wanted accommodation and, together with the YW, we were one of the premier facilities in town. Naturally enough, the board of the YW has been charitably inclined and has used whatever revenue they got from those good days of accommodation to run services at those times in past years.

I will not call it a crisis point because it looks as though we are managing, but we are at a point where we do not have the ability to be kind, to offer the facilities that Bob is talking about that we may have in the past. We are in a position where we have to be bloody hard-nosed about the decisions we make as a board in order to ensure that our organisation continues.

Bob has outlined to you that we are getting people turning up and we are having to say, 'No, we can't offer you anything, much as we might like to.' It is our limited funds that is making us do that. We are in a bit of a quandary as to where we go from here.

Running through the things you are talking about there, we are confronted by just about all those terms of reference you have listed there. Fortunately, it is not all doom and gloom. We do think there is a way through but we are going to need the very strong cooperation of the Territory government services; there are agencies that are involved in this. It is going to be win-win. We are going to offer them something but they are going to have to come into a partnership with us. We do not have immediate access to any federal funding where we might be engaged to provide these services. We are trying to be entrepreneurial. I am not all doom and gloom, but we are restricted in what we can do to assist the people in the areas you are looking at.

Senator MOORE—Are your 84 beds always full?

Mr Beggs—I am happy to say they pretty much are at the moment.

Mr Ingram—At the moment they are but it is only because of the dry season influx of the tourists. During the wet season I run an occupancy of around about 40 per cent. While a lot of establishments around town would love that sort of occupancy, it is not enough for us to break even. The building is at the age now where we need to maintain an occupancy rate of around about 60 per cent to enable us to generate enough income to get some cyclical maintenance happening. The building is 30 years old and it needs that sort of maintenance. At the moment the money is being spent on an as-needs basis. There is no preventative maintenance happening.

We have this extra capacity of beds which we can use for people who need the accommodation but we have to get some money for that. We cannot just give the beds away because we still have to clean the rooms and staff them and supply power et cetera. We need the income. As Duncan has alluded to, it is a win-win situation. We have the excess capacity of beds and we can certainly take in another 60 people but we need the income to go with that. That is what we are negotiating at the moment with the NT government and various other sources.

Regarding the financial costs, the number of evictions I have had to make has increased probably tenfold over the last five years due to financial hardship; they simply cannot afford to pay for the rooms. That is a two-edged sword. If they come to Darwin they might be escaping from something down south. They are being chased perhaps. They come up here and enjoy the good life, they get into the party atmosphere and they drink. Their priority is not for a roof over their head or food; their priority is for alcohol in the belly. They get deeper and deeper into debt and I have no option but to evict them. That is one of the effects of the poverty trap at the moment in Australia.

Senator MOORE—How expensive is your accommodation?

Mr Ingram—By Darwin standards we are very reasonable. For a single room it averages out at about \$115 per week. The rooms are very basic. They are not airconditioned. They just have a bed, a ceiling fan, a fridge, a table, a chair and a wardrobe. The facilities are communal but the rooms are liveable. We used to base ourselves as a residential hostel. That is the area we used to target. Times have changed and now we cannot afford to just target residential, so we have to go for the backpackers and tourists as well.

As far as being somewhere comfortable to live, I lived there for a period of time when I first came to Darwin. I have had one resident there for 15 years full time, which is a bit hard to imagine. To him it is just a bed and a place to live and he is very happy there. Our clients range in age. We have no-one below the age of 18 because we do not accept the responsibility for anybody who is not an adult. The oldest one we have there is 87 years old and is a pensioner.

Senator MOORE—And everything in between.

Mr Ingram—And everything in between; that is quite correct.

Senator MOORE—Ms Henry, with the accommodation you are offering to people, what age group are you looking after?

Ms Henry—The accommodation we have at Banyan View Lodge, which is the property we own, is targeted at the tourist market. With some of our programs, if there are circumstances where they cannot accommodate, they may refer to that facility but generally it is designed for income generation. We have some dormitory type rooms which are \$18 a night, and range up to airconditioned with unsuited, which for a week is around \$250. We have one person who has been there for 15 years but that is the exception. It is mainly people who are passing through. At this time of year we are very busy but during the wet season it dies right off.

Senator MOORE—And is it the same thing, from 18 to over 60?

Ms Henry—From a tourist point of view it tends to be more the older budget traveller.

Senator MOORE—Who knows about the YW.

Ms Henry—Yes, and often connected either nationally or internationally. We aim for it to be income generating. For the last three years it has not been; it is not making the profit it was making, which enabled us to do a range of things we are not funded for from any other source. All the other properties we are associated with—either through having been funded to purchase them by Territory Housing or having been part of their industry program where they own them but we do all the management—all have people in them. They usually contribute around 25 per cent of their income towards living in a place. With the youth refuge, the length of stay varies quite a lot. If they are not there for three or four weeks, you do not get any contribution from them.

Senator MOORE—Is the youth refuge for people aged under 25?

Ms Henry—The youth refuge is for 15- to 18-year-olds. There is a program where we have a couple of houses for young women. The age range there is 15 to 24 years. There is another

program for families and they can be any age. That can be males as well as females escaping domestic violence.

Senator MOORE—That is the only one of your facilities for men as well as women?

Ms Henry—No. The youth refuge has men as well. Last Monday we launched a strategic plan and I can leave you a copy. Although our focus is clearly on women, women live in society and very often in families and they have partners who are male, and sons. We aim to work in the modern-day context but certainly the angle that we come from in many cases is through the female side of things.

Senator MOORE—In both your areas is there a high uptake from Indigenous people?

Ms Henry—About 15 per cent of our staff are Indigenous and most of our programs would have around 40 per cent Indigenous participation. It varies slightly and it is clearly a reflection of having Indigenous staff. It makes a huge difference. We also have juvenile justice diversionary case management up here and that is staffed by Indigenous people.

Senator MOORE—You won that contract?

Ms Henry—That is right. Ninety-eight per cent of the clients would be Indigenous.

Mr Ingram—You beat us. We bid for the same contract.

Senator MOORE—Are there Indigenous people in your facility?

Mr Ingram—It would be less than one per cent of my long-term residents. There would only be a couple of people there that are Indigenous. What I have found over the years is that the Indigenous people do not like staying there. It is not a family oriented place. The Aboriginals tend to like the cluster accommodation where they can all be one family together. The YMCA Darwin hostel does not cater for that. There are single rooms that are almost cell-like.

Mr Beggs—Very much 1960 style single-person accommodation.

Mr Ingram—It does not suit their style of living whatsoever. Aboriginals obviously are welcome to stay but—

Senator MOORE—It is by choice.

Mr Ingram—Yes. They just do not choose to stay. A lot of the long grassers in Darwin cannot afford to stay there because they do not have any money or do not choose to stay in accommodation anyway. The Aboriginals that come in from the communities are usually very well catered for at the Aboriginal hostels.

Mr Beggs—Can I offer a suggestion at the end of a long day? I appreciate you may have already heard from other organisations. In our enthusiasm for tackling the problems we have at the moment, the model I see emerging for us—or what I am hoping we will get to—is a long-term proposal, primarily with the Northern Territory government, whereby they will say, ‘Here is

a need for X number of beds and we need them so many days of the year.' It does not take long to sit down and work out the cash flow from that. We then may go back to them and say, 'We're okay with that sort of base flow or base income coming into the organisation.' We may be able to look at going out and getting another facility in the long term.

If there is a longer-term horizon, where we can be more confident about our cash flow coming in, it might be that we are satisfying this particular need. Part of the deal or contract for getting into that relationship, with the agency responsible—the government—meeting the need, is to also say, 'We will be able to start developing this second facility out here to tackle another area of need.' For the YM—and from my experience on the board of the YM—that is a new approach. Maybe it is a model that could be worked up nationally as a condition for organisations wanting government funding, to say 'Look, there has to be multiplier effect here if you want the funding.'

The people who get involved in boards like the YM generally have a desire to achieve something more than just turning up to the meetings. There is a bit more of a horizon or a view of what is possible in the community on those boards. I like to think that they would accept that challenge.

Senator MOORE—We heard from NTCOSS earlier this afternoon that homelessness has grown immensely in this part of the world and that it is seven times the level of the national figures and five times the level of youth homelessness in other places. The need for someone to address appropriate housing seems to be monumental.

Mr Beggs—I am not plugged into those figures, but my casual observation of being here for 30 years now is that that is correct. I am plugged into some of the figures in the Indigenous area—out in the communities mainly—and it is just enormous. I have high hopes that the Prime Minister's visit next week will be the start of a national addressing of all that. That is a big hope, but we have to start somewhere. I could drive you around town and be fairly sure that I could show you an example here of a lady—an unfortunate case that I have seen—wandering the streets. You see her at different hours and you have a fair idea that she walks that way to where there is a clump of underbrush and that is where she spends the night.

Senator MOORE—What happens in the wet? She can do that now.

Mr Beggs—I have seen that same lady down in Northbridge in Perth, so she seems to come and go. Bob knows who I am talking about.

Mr Ingram—Yes.

Ms Henry—Yes, we all know her.

Mr Beggs—I would think there are half a dozen of those people in Darwin. I go for a walk along the foreshore out at Casuarina—and this time I am talking about Indigenous people who may come in for family at the hospital, which is not far away, or a whole range of things—and it is not surprising to see them picking up blankets at six in the morning and starting to move to where they are not going to get hassled for the day. There is a whole range of issues, but my observation is that the frequency of it is definitely increasing.

Mr Ingram—There is also a core group of people around Darwin—probably up to a couple of hundred—who choose not to live in accommodation. They choose to live out in the open, for a couple of reasons: (1) it probably gives them more money to spend on other things, and (2) it is a lifestyle choice. They are both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Barbara and I were at a seminar yesterday of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. There was a presentation of some research papers and they were talking about housing. Just to get it up to scratch in the Territory, I think, was \$840 million. That would fix the problem now. And the budget is \$40 million. That is not going to fix it in 20 years time. Once again, even they acknowledge that a fair number of people choose to live that way. I think they are doing very good research. How you ascertain whether one chooses to live in a house or not is beyond me, but they seem to have it worked out.

Ms Henry—I know that NT Shelter was here earlier today. Did they talk about the itinerants project?

Senator MOORE—Yes.

Ms Henry—I am involved with one of the committees in relation to housing for that project. One of the issues there is that another government department will say, ‘We’ve identified young people with mental health issues. We would like you to adjust your service to take on this group.’ There are a lot of complex issues. As they get worked with and the current service providers get pointed at and asked, ‘Can you do this? Can you do that?’ and still do what they are currently doing, it puts a hell of a lot of pressure on the system.

Another area is working with under 15-year-olds. We have been asked, with Casey House Youth Refuge, whether we could do that. That changes the whole ball game. It changes the whole dynamic within that refuge, which can accommodate up to eight people, and it changes the level of responsibility, because you then have statutory sorts of responsibilities. There are more and more demands, but the resources have not increased to go with those demands.

As much as people like ourselves actively participate and look for pathways through to support meeting some of these needs, as an organisation we have had to think very hard about what we can do and what we cannot do rather than say, ‘We can do everything,’ when we clearly cannot. We do not want to say we cannot do things either, so it is finding that pathway that we as an organisation have the resources to provide in terms of a skill level and accommodation level. We have clearly spent a lot of time on staff training and now have a very planned approach to staff training.

Senator MOORE—In terms of the community, I have asked a question of other people who have presented today about the relationship of people working in your fields. It is so important that there is a network of all the different agencies who are working, sharing the issues and having the knowledge. How strong is that network in Darwin?

Ms Henry—Today I was at a lunch of CEOs who met to discuss issues of importance. That particular group of CEOs is around the welfare community sector, which includes disability, housing and the whole gamut of things. Also, at a staff level there are some quite strong networks, both in Darwin and Palmerston. In relation to service delivery and people

understanding what is going on out there, from the point of view of those on the ground doing the day to day work, I think there are pretty good links.

It sometimes gets mistranslated from the bureaucracy's point of view. When they look at the service system, they see the tunnels or the silos that they are funding and do not necessarily see that we would not survive as organisations and the clients would be even in worse straits than some of them are now, unless there were really good working relationships. That is not to say that they cannot improve, but the importance of those relationships is the sort of thing that gets talked about at a CEO/director level, as well as at the level of the people providing the direct service.

In some instances, we have formal protocols. In others, we do not. Around mental health, there has been quite an effort put in between the mental health services—government run and non-government run—and the SAAP service providers. They have had a person working for about 18 months who has built the links between the SAAP providers and the mental health services, but it is really stretched by resources because the mental health people will no longer come to our services, for example, or anyone else's and provide an assessment. We have to take them up to the hospital, and that is not always a satisfactory solution.

Senator MOORE—Does that network involve Centrelink?

Ms Henry—Not at the meetings. I have been to a couple of these meetings. I know they go to what are called the Darwin meetings, but I am not aware of their going to the CEO meetings. People generally speak very highly of Centrelink up here. I have not had an interface with them, but my staff have interfaces with them all the time.

Senator MOORE—It is part of the job.

Ms Henry—Yes, it certainly is. Their willingness and readiness to come out and do assessments and things on site is really important.

Mr Ingram—As far as the YMCA go with networking, because we do not have the level of funding we do not tackle the sorts of issues the YWCA tackles. We do not have the same sorts of networks. We certainly network with all the provider agencies of crisis accommodation, like Centacare and Anglicare. We get referrals through the Royal Darwin Hospital and the Tamarind Centre. We were offering youth outreach services some time ago, a federally funded program we were running through DETYA or whatever it is called now. That was very well networked, because we had a steering committee to run the whole JPET program within Darwin and Palmerston. The various organisations had an input into that, and it worked very well, but we are no longer part of that program either.

As far as networking with accommodation providers goes, we certainly correspond a lot with the YWCA, the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul et cetera. I still take referrals from St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army as part of our CAP funding responsibilities. We still take emergency accommodation requests from them as well.

Mr Beggs—I am the lateral thinker of the group, and have a couple of comments. My wife's parents are well into their 80s now. Unfortunately, we can notice the decline and it is a concern

for us. We have the good fortune that we are not subject to poverty and we will find a way through it.

The point I wanted to relay is that, after talking about it and being aware of it for a number of years, my wife went to the Carers Association recently—because she did not want the care of mum and dad coming onto her shoulders—and she knew what she was going to do afterwards. She spent an hour talking to the lady there and was told, ‘Yes, what you are experiencing is the experience of everybody else. You are not alone. Why don’t you try this? What about that?’ and came home with a bucketful of literature. This is an exaggeration, but there was a lot of literature. It took the burden away, provided a course of action and gave her a plan or an approach and also an awareness of what she was considering taking on and what, by implication, I was taking on too.

The argument I want to advance with that example is that if there are similar agencies in the poverty area—and even the carers would be dealing with people who are affected by poverty—the positive effect that they have is enormous, from my own observation of that one instance, and we should not allow such programs to be easily done away with or attacked. In fact, we should look to them to see how better to use them and how much more effective they can be. That is a personal thing. Organisations like the YW and the YM have a role to play in there, I believe.

Senator MOORE—In Wollongong a couple of weeks ago we had evidence from someone who said, ‘Please don’t give us another grant. Don’t give us 12 months funding. It’s too hard. We put the work in, we develop something and then the money is gone.’ The idea is that you build something in that will last. I will always remember that statement from that person.

Ms Henry—I think that is very significant, because we are all now project funded. I have been in audiences where Amanda Vanstone has spoken and she has been very clear that that is how she sees funding going. You do something, it gets evaluated and then if it is worth its salt it gets supported. The reality is that that is not always the case. That is less often the case, no matter how good a project is.

There are not the ongoing resources, whether you look to another level of government or you go back to the Commonwealth. There is real stress put on the community—forgetting it from an organisation’s point of view—because you build expectations, people have a positive experience and they want others to have access to the sorts of experiences that they may have had.

For example, we had funding for a parenting program in Palmerston for 21 months. The money was to finish in February, and in October we wrote and asked, ‘How can we continue this?’ There was no particular funding round or anything of that nature. We applied to all sorts of other places and, as it turned out, we got enough signals to say, ‘Yes, we’re considering this particular early intervention bucket of money, but because no plans have been made yet there may be something that’s going to be around,’ so we held onto that staff person for six weeks. We were about to have to let them go, but we had them filling in around the organisation and then we did get another 14 months funding.

To be responsible to our client group, we had to run them all down. We had to work with other agencies to let them know that we would not be providing this service any more. Because we

managed to hold onto that staff person, we were able to wind it up quite quickly, but that is very stressful for all parties concerned. That person in Wollongong made a very good observation.

Senator MOORE—One of the clear messages coming through from many groups is that it is exactly in that parenting area where there must be concentration.

Ms Henry—Yes.

Senator MOORE—It has come out in all the research and in so many of the submissions that if you can work with people to build skills around parenting—particularly young parents—and families, that is a step. It is not a magic answer, but it is a step if you have a program that is working to pull it back. It must have been very difficult while you were going through that.

Ms Henry—Yes. One of the staff people we have in our family crisis accommodation—people escaping domestic violence—is a children’s worker. She spoke at our strategic launch last week of the evidence about working with children at the time of witnessing or experiencing domestic violence. She even had economic figures in relation to intervention at that point rather than the trauma being built up and hidden for years. It costs you many times more when you have to deal with these issues as an adult. That is the way you have learnt to relate and you become either subject to or a perpetrator of that sort of violence.

CHAIR—Even having breakfast for children; what a difference it makes for them.

Ms Henry—I have not gone into any of that; the whole issue about kids being hungry and it being part of the reason for their offending or the way they are behaving on the street. I know that one of the people in our juvenile justice diversionary program was talking to another staff member who was saying, ‘Just get them something to eat, then you’ll be able to talk to them.’ It is a huge issue. I know there are people who are interested in having breakfast programs and things in schools here, but at this stage that is not going anywhere.

Senator MOORE—It is all money.

Mr Ingram—Backing what Barbara says about the funding and your statement as well, organisations like ours find it hard to convey to the people who provide the money—the various departments—how you gauge success. There is a person alive, so is that a success or a failure? How do you show these departments, when they are in Canberra and you are in Darwin doing all this work? You cannot put it on paper and you cannot convey it. I cannot even properly convey what I am trying to say to you. I can take you out and show you the success but I cannot put it on a bit of paper for Canberra and say, ‘This is what we have done. This is why we need this money to keep coming.’

We were the first people to run the Work for the Dole program up here. It was a fantastic program with so many positive outcomes. It helped so many people, yet we could not prove those outcomes to the department in Canberra and that is why we did not get the contract again. We had it for three years and it was very successful. We helped so many people and I was so upset we lost that. A number of people said, ‘It’s just not the same now you guys aren’t running it. The jobs aren’t coming through. The results aren’t the same. Okay, we’re going out and doing the work but there are no benefits for us. We’re not getting jobs after it.’ There is no jealousy

there because another organisation is doing it. They are just some of the results I am hearing first-hand.

Senator MOORE—How do you justify your results? It is actually proving them, yes.

Mr Ingram—How do you show these people? It is very frustrating for me to say, ‘Look, we know we’re doing the job right but we can’t prove it to you.’ We have people walking the streets and the fact that they are living is our best advertisement, the best advertisement you can have. But you cannot put them in an envelope and send them down to Canberra. It does not work that way.

Mr Beggs—Up until now we have been talking about the government being the source of the solution to the problem. The question I want to ask is: would it be so terrible economically if we made it more possible and more attractive for people to do it themselves? By way of illustration, in my own family there is a female member—I mention that only because I think being female makes it more difficult—who is not blessed with intellectual ability. She is a thoroughly nice person but has not found it possible to win and hold down employment. For at least the last 15 to 20 years there has been a charade. I have been the voice at the end of the phone trying to keep up the self-belief, confidence, enthusiasm and all the rest of it when it comes to going to get employment. Then for very sound, hard economic reasons we have had justification and training programs, and she goes to counsellors. Can they not see they are trying to force her to be something she is just not capable of being?

For one reason or another she has always been able to relate to and be comfortable with people who are 10, 15 or 20 years older. She is good at talking to older people and seems to be able to spend an hour or two with them. There are a lot of old people, some of whom are in the poverty trap, whose quality of life could be enhanced so much, but there is no reward for her to do that. I keep asking myself whether it would be so bad if there was a system, scheme or organisation such as ours which was able to say to her, ‘Look, we will take you on to do a job. We’ve got four or five people that we want you to go and spend time with.’ It would not be work for her. It is something she could do and get some reward out of it. You say to the family members out there, ‘How about we charge you for this person to come around for two hours a day or every second day. Bring the milk—make a cup of tea or whatever—and bread around and spend a bit of time talking?’ If the other person needs to be taken somewhere, you jump in the car and away you go.

The organisation that is employing covers for insurance on the car, workers compensation and all the other things that need covering. You say to the family, ‘That will be \$10 an hour’—or whatever it is; a lot of them will be on a fairly high tax bracket—and allow them to claim that expense off their taxable income. The government are forgoing some taxes—tough—but they are effectively preventing a loss to society and saving on unemployment benefits and on the infrastructure that is having to fund the whole operation.

I am left wondering how much you would reduce the unemployment level if suddenly you could introduce a system or a scheme like that in Australia. I spend a lot of time thinking about that. I am just like Bobby Kennedy—not ‘what is’ but ‘what if’. Would it be so terrible on the economy if we introduced something along those lines? Somehow I do not think so. It could extend to me at home with the garden: it is not done terribly well because I do not have time

from work and my wife does not want to do it, but I could afford to give \$50 to \$100 a week to the unemployed kid down the road. Because tax is 45c in the dollar, I would happily pay it if I could claim it.

It is the government's role to look after people like that. We shunt them all off and the kid down the road loses out on a bit of mentoring—'Hey, you've done a pretty good job here. What are you doing? Why don't you do that?'—and all the other things that go with it. We are talking about exploitation perhaps, but if it were done through an organisation such as ours, or some other organisation—getting back to the Work for the Dole that Bob was talking about—if you really wanted to do it, you could find a way of overcoming all the objections that have been raised.

There are so many people walking around thinking, 'I really don't have much of a role in society.' It is like this family member I talked about: 'What do you do?' 'I go out and care,' or whatever it is. They do something that is considered useful. At the moment it is denied. All they get is failure. They cannot get a job and have to go through the process. It was absolute relief to get her onto the disability pension about five years ago because she was free of all the questions. This is soap box stuff. Sorry.

CHAIR—Thank you for coming in this afternoon. It has been our pleasure to hear from you. We will adjourn until next Monday in Brisbane.

Committee adjourned at 6.27 p.m.