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SENATE

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Poverty and financial hardship

WEDNESDAY, 6 AUGUST 2003

TOWNSVILLE

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SENATE
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE
Wednesday, 6 August 2003

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

Substitute members:

Senator Murray to replace Senator Lees for the committee's inquiry into children in institutional care

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

Senator Greig for matters relating to the Family and Community Services portfolio

Senator Allison for matters relating to the Health and Ageing portfolio

Senators in attendance: Senators Hutchins, McLucas 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.

WITNESSES

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Subcommittee met at 9.23 a.m.**CLARK, Mr Geoffrey Wayne, Chairman, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission**

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing and welcome everybody who is present today. The Senate Community Affairs References Committee is continuing its inquiry into poverty and financial hardship. The committee is pleased to be visiting Townsville and other regional centres around Australia as it will provide a valuable opportunity to hear the views of local organisations and individuals about the impact of poverty and financial hardship and how it is affecting their local regions. The committee is particularly interested in hearing about the issues and difficulties affecting Townsville and the North Queensland region.

The format for this hearing will be fairly informal as we are here to listen to your views. I am pleased to note today that this program includes representatives from a number of community groups. Firstly, I welcome Mr Geoff Clark from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. I invite you to make a presentation, which can take the form of a statement summarising your views or highlighting any issues that you would like to emphasise to the committee.

Mr Clark—Thank you, Chairman, for this opportunity. I think that it was proposed that I present with another commissioner, Mr Kim Hill, but he cannot make it and he sends his apologies. I have handed out a copy of our submission for your information—

CHAIR—You realise that we received the submission yesterday, even though the inquiry has been going since February. I do not think any of my colleagues have had an opportunity to read it.

Mr Clark—I apologise for that. It is there for background and I intend to cover some of the issues. There are eight main points with a bit of an opening statement. I would like to make some comments and then proceed to some questions. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the confronting issues that Indigenous people in this country have in relation to your inquiry. It is etched on the collective psyche of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today that social and economic exclusion was arbitrarily enforced upon us. The ramification of this exclusion has set the platform for the tragic circumstances experienced by people in Australia. Some continue to live in absolute forms of poverty.

White settlement was predicated on the dispossession of Indigenous people and the transfer of our property rights and natural resources away from us. This theft of resources has produced a profound structural disadvantage for Indigenous people that continues today. In addressing poverty for Indigenous people it is critical that governments focus on strengthening the social fabric which binds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families. There must be provisions for cultural expression to encourage appropriate forms of development to enhance our future. Governments must nurture our aspirations through a transition towards the social development of our people to increase self-sustainability and to rebuild local economies while reinforcing our cultural identity.

The challenge lies ahead for governments to adopt solutions created by Indigenous people for their communities in ways that are suitable for their local circumstances. There is a need for governments to provide an enabling environment for our people and to find imaginative and innovative ways to solve problems that have remained for our people across generations. Lots of our issues are intergenerational. Government policies and programs must provide a scope of flexibility that can accommodate new ways of planning and thinking, which is what is required to overcome the circumstances experienced by our children and families on a daily basis. At ATSIC we are trying to invigorate energy and open our communities to work with governments and the private sector to bridge the gap in economic and social circumstances of Indigenous people to attain the expected quality of life experienced by wider Australia.

There are a number of recommendations and I will just make a few points on each one. Recommendation 1 recommends that issues of poverty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people receive priority attention and that the issue of why poverty is worsening in Aboriginal families be investigated further. Furthermore, we recommend that all governments work in collaboration to develop a formal commitment and integrated approach towards eliminating the causes of poverty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Approximately 30 per cent of Indigenous householders live in poverty and are three times worse off than non-Indigenous people. Indigenous people are at greater risk of all forms of poverty. Worse still, there are absolute forms of poverty which are levels of poverty that threaten the survival of our people, with high child mortality rates and life expectancy of Aboriginal men and women 20 years less than other Australians. Indigenous children tend to have the worst health problems, which carry through and can affect the rest of their lives. Overall, Indigenous people experience lower levels of access to health services than the general population. The profound effect that poverty can have on Indigenous child health is one of the most important social issues facing communities and government. Trying to measure Indigenous poverty is problematic. The Commonwealth Grants Commission report into Indigenous funding in 2001 indicated that there needs to be an improvement in the quality of data in respect of the social and economic circumstances of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The idea of partnerships is fundamental to the development of whole-of-government service delivery and the model currently being negotiated with people living in Indigenous communities—that is, the COAG agreements. I am pleased to say that ATSIC has been involved from the start in that particular project, and we hope that that will find some of the solutions. ATSIC remains of the view that land rights are capable of making a significant contribution to alleviating poverty for Indigenous peoples. The recognition of Indigenous rights to and interests in areas of land and sea can provide a foundation of fundamental importance for Indigenous economic, social and cultural development.

There has been lots of talk about the rights of Aboriginal peoples to land—the native title area. I think that some of the disappointments that have been experienced in native title, for instance, and land rights regimes can be overcome by critically analysing just what it is that may be wrong with that system. There is an opportunity to classify Aboriginal land into the various classifications, including freehold and the ownership of some resources within the land tenure area. I believe that it would be an encouragement to joint venture partners, state governments et cetera and developers if we were to freehold some native title rights in strategic areas along the coast and in some of the hinterlands, whereby Aboriginal people could turn those native title

rights into an economic interest. The inability of Aboriginal people to create wealth and transfer that wealth is one of the fundamental failings of native title.

Recommendation No. 2 is:

That the Committee point out to Governments that young people should be a high priority when developing policy and programs to improve employment and education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Close to 70 per cent of young adults are not fully engaged in work or education. The proportion of Indigenous teenagers not fully engaged in work or education is three times that of non-Indigenous people of the same age. When you look at the graphs in our submission you see that the largest area of our population is the 15- to 24-year-old age group. While there are positive changes in numbers attending school, tertiary education and full-time employment are only increasing very slowly. This suggests that the policy should focus on youth, and particularly on strategic ways to ensure that the health and wellbeing of young people is improved so that educational and work opportunities can be maximised.

We find that there has been a different attitude within the mining industry and that job opportunities are being made available through a range of industries around the country, but it is difficult for young people who have not had proper nutrition and nourishment. Sometimes training is an issue, but more often it is health. They cannot work a 10-hour shift. We are now creating opportunities through goodwill and the reconciliation program, but the fact is that the food supplies, the stores and the general infrastructure of clean water, sewerage, housing et cetera are impacting upon those job opportunities. It is a critical point that jobs hold the key to overcoming poverty.

Recommendation No. 3 is:

That the Committee advocate the need for governments and the private sector to establish partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to develop ways to improve local economic growth and social participation in both remote and urban environments. In addition, that governments collaborate to provide a range of incentives to stimulate the growth of industries and employment to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

That needs some creative thinking with local agencies and particularly with state governments, which control the land tenure system in the country, and the federal government. I believe that the COAG test sites provide a unique opportunity to use some of the solutions that have been tried in Canada, America, New Zealand and other places. We could and should look at creative ways in which tax incentives or tax breaks, or free trade or tax-free zones, could be brought in for some of those COAG sites.

With land tenure arrangements, as I indicated earlier, there could be some freeholding of land for economic purposes. While in New York at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples, the attraction of working on Aboriginal land was explained to me. One of the fundamental hurdles that we have in terms of Aboriginal people attracting quality staff to their communities is that there is no tax exemption or tax freedom in relation to that resource. Therefore, you could stretch your dollar further and employ a greater number of people if there was a tax incentive to go and work in Aboriginal communities.

There could also be some creative thinking regarding detainees in detention. Rather than them wasting away in detention camps, maybe an audit of those people's skills could be considered and they could then possibly serve some time in Aboriginal communities, if they have the desirable skills. It would enhance their understanding of the country. I do not think it would interfere with their application to stay. We could educate those recent migrants. There has been a historical problem in the past whereby people come to Australia and do not understand the tenure system, particularly Aboriginal culture and law, and do not have an understanding of the environment of this country. There could be an exchange of knowledge between our peoples and the newly arrived peoples.

Strengthening living arrangements based on subsistence hunting and gathering and observing customary practices and forms of cultural expression have been integral to supplementing our family livelihoods and local economy. A concerted, imaginative and proactive approach is required by Indigenous representatives, government and industries to identify market opportunities. That issue is fundamental rather than making criminals out of Aboriginal people who want to continue to use the natural resources of their lands. You would have thought this would be a traditional cultural right that they would be given an opportunity to develop. I know that we have had some involvement in the emu, kangaroo and crocodile industries. Whatever it may be, we should be included and there should be a positive approach rather than a negative one to that particular matter.

Under that recommendation ATSIC has been looking at Indigenous people's access to banking and financial services. There has been a lot of keycard fraud and that fraud has contributed to the misery and the lack of budgeting and capacity of Indigenous people to save. They live from pension to pension, day-to-day. We need to look at a positive initiative, and some steps have already been taken, including the establishment of an Indigenous credit union.

Recommendation No. 4 is:

That the Committee recommend that Community Development Employment Program participants have access to the full range of assistance available under the Australians Working Together package in order to increase social and economic participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We have been working on mutual obligation programs for the last 26 years and, while CDEP aims to promote the transition to mainstream employment, 65 per cent of CDEPs operate in remote Australia where labour market opportunities and Job Network coverage are non-existent or limited and access to training facilities is problematic.

Indigenous unemployment rates are affected by CDEP participation. They are well over twice the rate of unemployment for Indigenous people in cities and regional centres. The average weekly payment for remote CDEPs is only \$211, and for non-remote CDEP projects it is \$190 per week, but when you go to some of these communities a loaf of bread is probably \$5, a carton of milk is \$2 or \$3, if they have that luxury, and fresh fruit is often difficult to get. So the cost of living is very high. It gets back to that cycle of poverty where you then find health and nutrition problems because there are not the necessary resources to even have proper nutrition. We need to concentrate on how we can be more creative with the CDEP program and work towards full-time employment. There is no substitute for jobs in Aboriginal communities.

Recommendation No. 5 is:

That the Committee propose an increase in resources commensurate with population growth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to reduce homelessness and overcrowding by making available suitable housing, essential services and local infrastructure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, particularly where poverty is most prevalent.

Seventy per cent of Indigenous people are housed in some form of rental property. Indigenous families are more reliant on community and public housing than other Australians, and rates of ownership for Indigenous families are less than half those for other Australians—31 per cent as against 70 per cent. Can I just say on a positive note—I would like to continue to introduce some of the positive things that we have been doing—that the Army project, such as the one over at Palm Island, is a very good program that has lacked publicity and some attention. I believe that the services that they deliver, including the additional services of screening, immunisation, dental work and animal health, are the sorts of things that should be promoted. There is lots of goodwill that comes out of those particular programs.

However, in relation to housing in Aboriginal communities, I once made the statement—and I will make it again—that maybe the houses should be granted to the Aboriginal family so that it becomes an ownership issue rather than communal ownership. The community controls the law and order and the authority in communities, but there may be some other creative ways where, rather than just have a grant and a non-ownership of some of these facilities, ownership could be taken. There have been examples around the country where the self-esteem of the people has been lifted, and I think we need to concentrate on that as one of the solutions to the overcrowding, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The report *Health is life: report on the inquiry into Indigenous health* in May 2003 reported that a significant proportion of the Indigenous housing stock was in poor repair, with people sometimes living in rough shelters directly beside shells of uninhabitable houses. You only need to go down to Happy Valley, down the road, to see that situation. Roads between communities were found to be poor and water services were inadequate or were only interim arrangements. Sewerage systems in some communities are a source of illness rather than a benefit for the community.

Recommendation No. 6 is:

That the Committee acknowledge the link between substance abuse and criminal behaviour in perpetuating poverty and the need for rehabilitation programs and post-prison release assistance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

You only needed to look at the newspaper reports on the weekend to see the problems that compound in a place like Townsville. The fact is that you have a major prison, Stuart Prison, and people being released do not have the assistance to go home. You need to consider that while Indigenous people comprise only one in every 40 Australians, they represent one in every five people incarcerated. The Australian Institute of Criminology reports an imprisonment rate for Indigenous offenders more than 15 times higher than the rate for non-Indigenous offenders. Another disturbing trend, which is a very disturbing trend, is that the number of Indigenous women incarcerated has risen by 255 per cent over the last decade.

It costs \$55,000 to incarcerate a prisoner, and only \$300 is invested in post prisoner release. Look at the assistance with training, employment and resettlement. Look at the associated costs of the tragedy and the rehabilitation. If there is any opportunity between the families, mostly it is the male or female member who stays at home and provides for the family for the duration. The fact is that people come out and then have to start from scratch again. If those associated costs were to be calculated, I think you would find that the incarceration costs of \$55,000 would probably double or even triple when you looked at the needs of those people when they get back into the community—whether it is their getting job ready or remaining healthy, or programs to bring them up to an employable rate.

Recommendation No. 7 is:

That the Committee recommend that governments agree to the establishment of a National Indigenous Education Advisory Body, which will examine the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy to ensure appropriate cooperative strategies are in place to improve the educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Only 31 per cent—less than half—of Indigenous students are completing secondary schooling, compared to 76 per cent of other Australians. If Indigenous education outcomes are to be improved, we need to implement a number of measures. Indigenous families should be involved in decision making; the curriculum needs to recognise Indigenous history and knowledge; there should be greater investment in Indigenous educators; we need to provide support to students where they live; and education should be seen to be an element of a holistic approach to community and economic development.

Recommendation No. 8 is:

That the Committee recommend that special provisions be made in the process of welfare reform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to ensure that they do not become more greatly impoverished by expectations of mutual obligation when access to labour markets are severely limited. Special provisions should not only apply in remote areas, but need to extend to urban areas where access to mainstream labour markets are also limited.

Preliminary information from Centrelink on Indigenous clients and CDEP participants indicates that 50 per cent of Indigenous adults are reliant on some form of welfare payment. Indigenous people living in remote and very remote areas are on low incomes and are at greater risk of poverty, due to poor service delivery and lack of opportunity.

I want to conclude by making some other relevant comments. A lot has been said about the rights agenda and the rejection—or, possibly, the perception of a rejection—of that agenda. I believe that we have a right—an equal right—to have a safe and secure home. This has always been a policy of ATSIC. We have a right to security of person. Children have rights in communities, and so do females. You need a right to good health; you need rights to a job; you need rights to land and resources; and you need a right of choice. I think that you need a right to how and by whom you are represented by your peoples. You need a right to choose and a right to a belief system, whether it be beliefs or a religion. I believe that a right to be different needs to be recognised. I suppose it is only appropriate that the right to reject those rights is something that the political system has some sort of right to.

I believe that there is much said about the social dysfunction in Aboriginal communities. I believe that we need to open the terms of reference on the question of violence in Aboriginal communities to include those things I mentioned earlier about keycard fraud amongst Aboriginal people and the discrimination that continues to exist in the broader community—whether it is in hotels, housing, jobs or cafes. I believe that the saloon bar syndrome is all too prevalent in Australian society; that is, to be able to select the good Aborigines and reject the rest. I believe that I could give you numerous examples of how that occurs. Probably the best example, if you were to want first-hand knowledge, would be to visit my upcoming court case on the so-called pub brawl. You will get first-hand knowledge of a situation where the saloon bar syndrome exists in this country.

I also believe that we need to trace the transfer of wealth in this country. We need to break down the institutions and look at how people come about their wealth, how that wealth is transferred and how they hold positions of power. The wealth of the media barons is increased by the 10-point plan, yet it is no secret that that transfers to a capacity to develop a perception that further discriminates against, isolates and denigrates Aboriginal people—not to mention its leadership. Therefore, you may need to question the media agenda of this country, how they report on Aboriginal people and the demonising of Aboriginal leadership. You can couple that with the leadership of the Muslim community and the union movement—those people who consider that they have rights. The myth of children overboard, the myth of Aboriginal people hitting their babies—all that is designed to create that perception that is further pushing down the capacity of Aboriginal people to walk proud in their country.

There are many strong Aboriginal women, leaders in Aboriginal communities—many of them are capable of being national leaders. Maybe the task of nursing the trauma and tragedy in Aboriginal communities is too great for those people to have the time and the luxury of enjoying positions like I have. I think that to turn your back on what has been occurring in the general debate since the close of reconciliation is a fundamental factor in the direction of this country, and I think it contributes to the poverty—not only the poverty of Aboriginal people but the poverty of non-Aboriginal people in coming to some resolution about issues that most affect Aboriginal people; and the main issue is Aboriginal people living in poverty.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Clark. In your opening statement, you call for an improvement in the quality of data. Do you want to expand on that for the committee in any specific areas you are referring to in relation to that statement?

Mr Clark—It was pulled from some of the reports, and I think it is probably difficult to get accurate information from the various agencies and communities. I do not want to sound critical of governments as such, but \$450 million was taken away from community based organisations. I believe that community based organisations are the best ones to represent Aboriginal people's aspirations and to collect statistics, knowledge et cetera. That capacity has been diminished. Aboriginal people living on Aboriginal communities would be familiar with the situation where, when the white car pulls up out front, everybody runs to the bathroom or out the back—whatever the reasons may be. I think it is probably a combination of the historical factors in this country. Therefore, the best people to conduct research and collect statistics is, in some cases, Aboriginal communities themselves—who are severely underresourced.

CHAIR—Has this changed over the last few years?

Mr Clark—It has, because of the impact of the cuts to those organisations. I believe that that has also contributed to some of the rise in domestic violence and a whole range of abuses in communities. I believe that maybe there needs to be some analysis, and I have certainly attempted to do that as chair—to try to get some analysis as to what effect a massive program cut has on Aboriginal communities.

CHAIR—Does that mean that information is no longer being collected?

Mr Clark—That is right. It is no longer being collected.

CHAIR—What sort of information is not being collected now that previously was collected?

Mr Clark—I am not quite sure. I just know that that is the situation of the interface between Aboriginal people and those people who work in the collection agencies. I know that that is a barrier to good collection of information.

CHAIR—You mentioned also the problem of keycard fraud. Do you want to expand on that for the committee?

Mr Clark—There are situations around the country, particularly in more rural areas, where Aboriginal people are often asked to give someone their keycard. Certainly it is prevalent for taxi drivers, for instance, to hang on to the keycard so that, until the next pension or the next CDEP payment is made, they direct debit. They actually have access to the PIN so that they can deduct their bill from the recent payment, and therefore they hang on to the card.

CHAIR—This is for the taxi fare, is it?

Mr Clark—It can be for a taxi fare, it is done in stores, it is done in hotels. There are many hotel owners around the country who hang on to the keycards of Aboriginal customers, and those are held from week to week. That is something that was raised 12 months ago, I think, but I am not quite sure what has been the result of the issue being raised.

CHAIR—So, figuratively, we might imagine that you could walk in to some store or hotel which has got maybe dozens of keycards with the PIN numbers on post-it notes put there?

Mr Clark—Absolutely. That is a situation that I think severely disadvantages those people who do not have a capacity to budget and organise their lives. So they are further disadvantaged by that. If you are going to pay for a grog bill of \$200 out of a \$300 income cheque, you have not got much left to feed the kids.

CHAIR—Is that because the store and the hotel are the only facilities available to them?

Mr Clark—Possibly it would be. I think there are limits of choice, but also unless you befriend one of these people it is often hard to get credit. Living on such a low income, lots of Aboriginal families and community members live on credit, and unfortunately that line of credit is taken to another degree. There is nothing wrong with lending some support, whether someone is getting meat from the butcher or bread from the baker. But the fact is that you then start to contain the very instrument that can provide the resource, which is a dangerous practice.

CHAIR—Yesterday we had the opportunity to go to Palm Island. One of the issues that were raised was individual home ownership. Is that a significant issue in the communities?

Mr Clark—Yes, it is. We have a program, which has been wound back somewhat, of giving 25 or 30 per cent as an incentive to purchase homes. Our home ownership program is a very good program—probably one of our best programs—but we do not have enough cash reserve to create further opportunities. I believe that it is a difficult process where those Aboriginal community members do not have the actual deposit, in lots of cases, even though they have been renting homes in communities for some 10, 20 or 30 years. So there may be some particular program designed whereby they could have easy access and somehow pay the deposit as part of their rental recovery, for instance.

CHAIR—Finally, at least from me, I would like to go back to the keycard matter. Have you had reports from the community that the store owner, the taxi driver, the publican, have dipped into their accounts? Have they said, ‘I’m a bit short this week and I will take \$10 or \$20 out of yours’?

Mr Clark—There are plenty of situations—even in my own community, where you would have thought that in such a well-urbanised area of Victoria it should not be the case—where there is a dispute about just how much you actually owe the publican, for instance, or the storekeeper. It is often his notes that are the notes that are relied on as to the amount that is owing.

Senator McLUCAS—I want to go back to the question of data. It is my understanding—I may be wrong—that people who are on CDEP are not counted in unemployment data in this nation.

Mr Clark—Yes. It makes our unemployment nationally well over 50 per cent—52 per cent. In some Aboriginal communities it is 70 to 80 per cent. When you include some 36,000—possibly 38,000—people who are unemployed but who are not included in those statistics, that is another fault of the collection system. There are anomalies in the way in which you classify, if you like, whether or not people are unemployed.

Senator McLUCAS—If you look at Cape York Peninsula, for example, the level of employment, according to the statistics, is very high. But when you see that 90 per cent of these people are basically on Work for the Dole and have been for 20 years, you see that we have skewed the information so that it actually does not tell you the real story.

Mr Clark—That is right. I apologise again for our submission being a bit late, but I think it contains some explanations.

Senator McLUCAS—The other issue I wanted to talk to you about is one which you raise on page 20 of your submission where you make the point that the on-costs that are given to the CDEP program are less than what are provided for under Work for the Dole. Could you explain that for the committee a bit more?

Mr Clark—I am not quite familiar with the amount but certainly the Work for the Dole program gets an incentive—I think they are called incentive payments—whereby the agency is

given, say, \$500 or \$1,000 per participant as an incentive to find some employment. The CDEP program has a lesser rate—whatever the amount is—whereby they can use a capital investment fund or a management or training investment thing. So those Aboriginal communities who are administering CDEP programs are disadvantaged when it comes to the general Work for the Dole program.

Senator McLUCAS—I understand there was a cut in the on-costs five or six years ago. Is that your recollection as well?

Mr Clark—I am not quite sure what the amount was, but yes.

Senator McLUCAS—The other question I have is how CDEP numbers are allocated to the various communities. Is there a cap on the number of CDEP places that ATSIC can manage? Is that the way it works?

Mr Clark—There is a national cap. There is a flexibility whereby the numbers can now be moved. It was inflexible at one stage, which created the problem. It represented returning some of the vital resources under that particular budget item. I believe now that there is a flexibility where, on a monthly agenda, it can be regulated and moved across the country even, from area to area.

Senator McLUCAS—But there is still a national cap?

Mr Clark—There is still a national cap, yes. We have made submissions to the Prime Minister on a number of occasions to increase that, and he has, on a couple of occasions, given an additional 1,000 places, I think.

Senator McLUCAS—I go back to the on-costs question. Have you made representations to the government to lift the CDEP on-costs—

Mr Clark—Yes, I am not sure whether that is in some formal submission, but we certainly took that up with the PM when we discussed an increase in the CDEP positions I think three years ago.

Senator McLUCAS—And the response has been negative?

Mr Clark—Yes.

Senator McLUCAS—What was the argument that the government put to say that CDEP Work for the Dole participants did not need as much as—

Mr Clark—I am not quite sure what the arguments were, but the situation still exists.

Senator McLUCAS—I would be interested to know what those arguments might be.

Mr Clark—That is a task for the inquiry.

Senator McLUCAS—Given that CDEP participants are operating in rural and remote places, then surely the on-costs would be higher than for someone doing Work for the Dole in a major city.

Mr Clark—That is right. The cost of materials, for instance, for a CDEP program are going to be higher in rural or remote areas than would normally be so.

Senator McLUCAS—The other question I have is about your comment about freehold country where native title is found to be inexistent or, as we have in Queensland, deed of grant in trust. It is an issue that was raised with the committee yesterday at Palm Island as well. How do you see that working? I would find it interesting to work out how it would work legally.

Mr Clark—If this government can create a 10-point plan to give advantage to those other than Indigenous people, there can be some creative legislation to create a category of Aboriginal land. Currently there is some difference and there are some creative models being created. One is called the Indigenous Protected Areas, and there are a number of them around the country with Environment Australia. That is a combination, for example, of Aboriginal freehold land and crown land in some cases. A third of that land could have an economically sound generational activity which has an economic base. A third could be set aside for environmental purposes and a third could possibly be for people to live on and you could vary the activities you have on it.

For example, where I come from down in Warrnambool at Yambuk we have an Indigenous Protected Area. We now have a proposal whereby there are World Heritage listings under Ramsar for the swamp area for birdlife et cetera. One of the industries being proposed is wind farming. Wind towers could be put in, providing that they meet the environmental regulations and the Aboriginal community is satisfied that they are not going to disturb their own cultural activities and a whole range of heritage values.

I believe that native title is so tight and stagnant that if you were to be granted a native title area, which is normally crown land—and there is lots of that on the coast—all you would be able to do is sit on the beach and enjoy the sunshine and you would not necessarily enjoy the economic activity. There could be a situation where parcels of that land could be used for Aboriginal values—for instance, burial sites, and there are lots of those on the coast. It could be just like any other situation in this country where there are surf clubs, yacht clubs, restaurants, shops, developments for aged people and boat clubs et cetera. You could also have environmental areas with protection of wildlife et cetera. I believe that there needs to be some creative thinking to give Aboriginal people the opportunity, as I said, to create and transfer wealth. At the moment, under land rights and native title, there is not an ability to develop wealth out of property rights. Most other Australians enjoy that ability.

Senator McLUCAS—You are suggesting that freehold title would be a transferable title?

Mr Clark—These things would have to be negotiated with the Aboriginal people. There are things like freehold leases in London, for instance—which I am not really familiar with—where the lords still own it and somebody rents it. There is an economic gain or return for the actual ownership of that land. There could be a combination, as I say, and there needs to be some creative thinking.

One of the obstacles in the past is that people wanted to protect the lands that Aboriginal people own. They fought very hard to get recognised and I endorse that principle. But I also understand that we need a certain amount of flexibility, I think, to encourage investors. There are golf course developers and a whole range of other people whose activities are environmentally friendly, if you like, which could generate an income. This would not have such a negative impact on a native title area.

Senator McLUCAS—The issue of being able to gain economic benefit out of a recognition of native title rights—

Mr Clark—It should be for all people. It would not only benefit Aboriginal people; it would benefit non-Aboriginal people in this country as well. It could be a very creative way of developing a reconciliation model, if you like, for native title which is somewhat in the negative at the moment. There is a situation, as you are well aware, of the CERD committee finding that there are elements of discrimination and disadvantage for Aboriginal people in the current native title regime. That is one of the matters that I spoke to Professor Thornberry, a CERD committee member, about on my recent trip to Ireland—about how we might overcome the political impasse. Those are the sorts of ideas that we discussed.

Mr Clark—It should be a factor for a people. It would be of benefit not only to Aboriginal people but to non-Aboriginal people as well in this country. It could be a very creative way of developing a reconciliation model, if you like, for native title, which is somewhat in the negative at the moment. You would be well aware of the CERD committee's finding that there are elements of discrimination and disadvantage for Aboriginal people in the current native title regime. That was one of the matters that I spoke to Professor Thornberry about on my recent trip to Ireland—he was a CERD committee member—as to how we might overcome the political impasse. Those other the sorts of ideas we discussed.

Senator McLUCAS—Thank you. If there is any time at the end I will come back and talk about housing.

Senator MOORE—Go ahead with that now.

Senator McLUCAS—Housing is an issue that is raised wherever we go—for Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities. But I think the reality that Indigenous people face, especially in more remote places, with overcrowding of homes just would not occur in other parts of Australia. We would not tolerate the level of home occupation where there are 20 people living in a house. Have you got any data over time on what money the Commonwealth has provided to ATSIC for housing? It may be in your submission but I have not found it.

Mr Clark—It may be in the submission. It is quite a detailed submission and hopefully that will be contained in it. Can I just say in relation to housing that it has only been recently that we have addressed—you have seen the Army project, I gather, in Townsville?

Senator McLUCAS—Yes.

Mr Clark—and turned our mind to the actual design of housing, the layout and the planning, and the environmental factors that surround it as well. It is pretty easy to incorporate in a design,

in taking into consideration the short-term problem that we may have of overcrowding, an ablution block that is outside the house, or a kitchen area or a facility that is attached which people can actually use, because people do turn up and camp for short periods of time. So I think we can be more creative in the design of Aboriginal housing and the layout. Some of the perceived malfunctioning in Aboriginal communities can be attributed to the layout.

If you have had experience of going to lots of Aboriginal communities, you will have seen that they are laid out in almost suburban blocks, and if a dispute starts in one house it just steamrolls down the street. There is no reason why you cannot look at having—and it has worked in some communities—cluster homes for family groups to strengthen the family relationships et cetera, whereby the uncle, the auntie, the brother, the sister or the sons and daughters start to live in clusters which therefore have a stronger cultural link and strength. I think they are some of the planning issues that could be and need to be incorporated. I also think there is no question that if you were to own your own home and you create some wealth you would transfer that to future generations. That is just the norm in society. That could possibly be an area that the government could increase. Home ownership is politically neutral, in terms of the political divide that may exist in this country, and therefore it could provide some short-term solutions through a massive increase. We estimate that there is some \$3 billion shortfall in housing in Aboriginal communities.

Senator McLUCAS—Three billion dollars?

Mr Clark—Three billion.

Senator McLUCAS—And that would bring it up to our level?

Mr Clark—Bring it up to proper standards.

Senator McLUCAS—A level that was acceptable.

Mr Clark—Yes. But I believe you need to incorporate some of those other ideas I have as well, because there are some social problems with some of the plannings. When you consider that a lot of Aboriginal communities, particularly in a rural and remote areas, are historical missions based on the old colonial backyard and fence.

Senator McLUCAS—It is interesting at Mapoon on the west coast of Cape York where we have got a situation where people have gone back to their community and there was a real struggle because they did not want to live in the suburban style, and they won that battle.

Mr Clark—Absolutely. You can create an environment with greater peace of mind and greater security, as I indicated earlier in my submission. Security in the home can be brought about by proper planning in some cases.

Senator McLUCAS—Thank you.

Senator MOORE—Mr Clark, your submission talks about some work that ATSIC is doing with Centrelink at the moment to try to clarify data and also to work together, which is really positive. We were talking with people in the Northern Territory last week about the

establishment of Centrelink offices staffed by local people in the community as opposed to liaison people and a significant increase in the numbers of people receiving payments as a result of that. It confuses me that, in 2003, after all these years, we had people effectively lost from the system up until quite recently. Do you think that is happening elsewhere in the community? We know it for the people on the payments. I am interested in your comments about people's understanding of the system and whether people are actually receiving their appropriate payments even today.

Mr Clark—This is probably the wrong example to give but the Aboriginal communities own farming properties. We are farmers in our own right in some situations. It has only come to light recently in my community that there are 130 grants available to farmers. It is no different in Aboriginal communities. As I indicated earlier, some Aboriginal community organisations are somehow seen as a political threat in lots of cases where Aboriginal people control their own organisation or services. I think we have to dispel that myth because there are advantages with those organisations being able to create awareness amongst their own community. As the submission points out, that is a strength rather than a weakness of Aboriginal communities. The proper entitlements from things like Centrelink and health facilities et cetera can be acknowledged and accessed. At the moment if you do not have those types of services—and those services are, I believe, under threat as specific services—we have a breakdown and people do not have an opportunity to enjoy their entitlements, if you like.

Senator MOORE—For the committee's information, what kinds of community organisations? Can you name a couple, without exposing too many.

Mr Clark—Cooperative organisations that are establishing communities. They could be sporting clubs, women's groups or youth clubs. We lost the community youth support program. Those sorts of programs were most affected and they were programs that provided access and information to the youth, females and other people of our community. There has been an enormous impact and I do not undersell it. And I do not make that as a political point. It is a very valid situation which the committee may want to have a look at.

Senator MOORE—When we were talking yesterday we heard about people wanting to break the cycle and set up their own businesses. A couple of people referred to programs within ATSIC which were business incentive programs that they felt were difficult to access and provided more disincentive than incentive. Would you care to comment on that point?

Mr Clark—I share their frustration. There is no doubt an impasse there which is probably compounded by what I indicated earlier was a perception of misuse of funds in Aboriginal communities. The more we have sensational stories and media focus on those sorts of situations the more we have tightening up. I do not for one minute suggest that there are not some issues of merit in relation to that or that there should not be investigation if there is misuse of funds. The fact is that that perception leads to greater regulation and greater tightening of those regulatory things. What should occur is a greater flexibility of regulations, like our business funding programs and our housing programs so that people have more access. We are going to have programs that are designed to alleviate poverty in those situations but that are in fact being strangled by the bureaucratic red tape.

Senator MOORE—I have asked a number of our witnesses this question. There have been recommendations—and I am sure you have read them from the inquiry—or a proposal for some kind of national task force to come out of this inquiry and a regulated program to address the issues of poverty across the community. I would like to get some feeling from you as to whether you think that would be an appropriate mechanism. The key point is: how do you stop something like that being just another talkfest where lots of people have the chance to put their views but nothing really comes out of it?

Mr Clark—I probably made a couple of calls for you to further investigate a number of things and endorsed that earlier. There needs to be some continuation, and we need to ensure that it does not become just another report that gains dust. I am in some way encouraged by the fact that, if you look back over the last decade, an enormous number of people in this country—particularly Aboriginal people, but also people in business, in industry, in governments and in community groups—have been supporting reconciliation of some description. I believe that those people are waiting on the doorstep to grasp that opportunity if we could put aside some of the regulations and be creative in designing something like the proposal I put forward for native title or there was a reassessment of support for organisations to advocate on their behalf. If a group of people or a committee could go and explore some of those things, I am sure that there would be great benefit. I would have thought that there would be mutual gain not just for Aboriginal people but also for non-Aboriginal people, and there would be long-term cost benefits to this country.

Senator MOORE—And ATSIC would be part of something like that?

Mr Clark—ATSIC would be very willing to be part of that.

CHAIR—Mr Clark, this might be something you want to take on notice for us. You said that 50 per cent of Indigenous adults were on some form of welfare payment. We were told in Tasmania by TASCOS that 42 per cent of Tasmanians were on a health card or pension concession card.

Mr Clark—Non-Aboriginal people?

CHAIR—Tasmanians. I am sure that figure would be a little higher for the Aboriginal community. Is it possible for your organisation to take that on notice and advise the committee if that figure is available?

Mr Clark—You will probably run into the issue raised previously: the number of people entitled to it as opposed to those who actually have the card. From our experience there may be an enormous discrepancy between the figure and what the actual need is, but I will take that on notice.

CHAIR—Thank you for coming along today, Mr Clark.

Mr Clark—Thanks very much for the opportunity. I appreciate being able to spend time with you. Again, I am sorry that I could not produce the information a little quicker, but we are a little bit rushed at times.

[10.24 a.m.]

DODD, Ms Kay Therese, Manager, Community Services, Lifeline North Queensland

PARFITT, Ms Brenda-Anne, General Manager, Lifeline North Queensland

CHAIR—Welcome. 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 Parfitt—I will take up the terms of reference for the committee and give a thumbnail sketch in relation to some of the issues presented. I can talk across the region that covers North Queensland, which is roughly Mornington Island to Cardwell, south past Boulia to the Northern Territory border—a big area, about the size of Victoria—but because Mr Clark has so eloquently presented the issues in relation to Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders I will not speak on those issues. Certainly our experience is across rural communities, farming communities and, in particular, the sugar industry and the drought affected industries. I can also talk about issues of women, children and young people living on stations. Oftentimes people think that people living on stations have an experience similar to that of people living within a township like Hughenden or Julia Creek, but the experience is totally different.

With regard to poverty and inequality—and I really do want to give a thumbnail sketch—little things really make a big difference in rural communities. For example, Mount Isa hospital caters for a very, very large community. The health department provides some money toward moving families in to Mount Isa if they need an operation. Women who are prenatal are expected to come into town two weeks prior to and two weeks post the birth of their child. This is a major thing, because it can sometimes take seven hours for a woman to come in from a property to Mount Isa, assuming the roads are passable. And if the woman is leaving children at home, that affects the farming and the agriculture, and the work that is produced on the farm. There is a need for access to health care and to child care. If a woman is going to bring her younger children in, it makes it very difficult, because often there are no child-care places to look after the younger children and the children's schooling is disrupted. There is the issue of what is going to happen at home, because generally the mother is also a working partner on the farm, preparing all the meals for the stock hands and those sorts of things.

Access to health care, education and domestic violence services is really quite perilous in remote and rural communities. That is exacerbated by poverty. So, if we have got issues like the market in cattle dropping, the rate of the dollar making it difficult for exports or for sales or the dramas in the sugarcane industry, we are actually talking about poverty compounding with environmental and sociological issues. It is a fairly major area of the kind of work that we see as being really necessary. Kay and I have spent quite a bit of time in researching the difficulty in implementing policies across rural and regional communities, where there is no infrastructure to support them. For example, we may have some decisions based on child care or health or domestic violence—state issues—but if there is no infrastructure to support those, they are just not going to get across.

One of the things that I would like to point out is that, for a huge part of the area that we cover, not only have there been drought ravages for quite a long time now but also we have got the sugarcane industry changes. While Lifeline does not take a position on the political process there, nonetheless the environmental factors are really quite critical.

My knowledge of the communities up and down the coast and inland is that farmers, both in the cattle growing country as well as in the cane growing country, have traditionally supported community activities—for example, they have been the ones to build the old-age homes; they have been the ones to provide for the fishing clubs and the elocution and the speech and drama. Where those people are now reducing or completely discontinuing their support for those activities there is no-one left in the community to provide it. What is happening to those communities is that not only is the money drying up but the talent and the support and that psychological sense of community is actually disintegrating.

It is of grave concern to us that not only are the structures drying up and potentially crumbling but the people there who have kept them together are suffering—the people who coach soccer in the afternoon, who hold scout and guide groups together. I guess we think of them sometimes as the little people who do the unseen stuff. This is the stuff that holds communities like Julia Creek, Hughenden, Mount Isa, Burdekin and Ingham together. When you have the effects of federal policy, external conditions, the rate of the dollar and globalisation all compounding at the same time as an industry downturn or industry change there are massive implications for communities.

Our position is that if those kinds of issues are not addressed in the federal sense and at a state level as well we are going to find communities and individuals within those communities shattering. That is going to have a major impact. It is not about youth employment; it is about whether youth believe that they are going to live past 25. It is not about these massive issues that we hear about; it is just about whether a young person feels that it is worth while getting up in the morning.

I know we have these issues in urban areas but in these communities you have young people who have seen their family build up the community and be involved in the community and give thousands of dollars in both time and money every year to the community and then suddenly their parents withdraw from that. When that happens, they lose their former prestige, I guess; they lose their former place. The young people get really deeply affected by that.

I can tell you of older members of the family in their 50s who have actually walked off farms because they cannot cope and they cannot cope with seeing what is happening with their younger people. They have moved, in poverty, to other rural centres which are also in poverty, trying to find another role. We need urgently to recognise the sociological impacts—the disaster—of what in fact is happening. Personally, I have grave concerns for the rural communities in the sugar areas that are drought affected at the moment.

Ms Dodd—To add to that, one of the other problems with the smaller communities—particularly the more remote ones—which compounds what Brenda-Anne has been saying in terms of the availability of services is the fact that those smaller communities find it very difficult to attract professionals. There is a major issue of quality of service there. Springing to mind are the hospital services, for example: the level of expertise of the pathology services and

those sorts of things. I have come across this very often. I am only using pathology as an example; I am not targeting pathology. If people in Mount Isa need to know and want to have confidence in their pathology results they have to come to Townsville. It is as simple as that.

Senator MOORE—Has that always been the case?

Ms Dodd—Since I have been working in the north here, which has probably for 23 years, yes. Having worked across various government departments—that is in both federal and state spheres—I know from the other side the difficulties of attracting quality people to those areas. There has to be inducements for professionals to go to those areas.

One of the really simple things is that the living costs are so much higher. You are adding heaps and heaps to your costs. If you are going to work in Normanton, you are paying huge amounts for your groceries and for fresh vegetables which are trucked in once a month. Just working with that cost of living is very difficult. If you are living in one of those centres and you have a decent wet season, you are looking at stocking up for three months before you may be able to get out—this is in Birdsville, Bedourie and all those sorts of places. People now are finding that they are unable to do that traditional stocking up because they cannot afford the outlay. I have forgotten the price of a kilo of meat when it is airlifted into places, but it is extraordinarily dear, and that is just a small example.

I think the quality of services is equally important if there is going to be equality between the urban areas and the regional areas. The flavour of the month is rural and regional but there have to be some real services put into those communities. I was not at the hearing for the previous speakers but I think the need to provide real services is extraordinarily important in the Aboriginal and islander communities, particularly in the Torres Strait Islands and in, say, the western areas of Doomadgee and places like that where poverty is extreme—not just poverty in a financial sense; it is in housing, social structure and services: the whole lot.

CHAIR—You were about to say something, Ms Parfitt.

Ms Parfitt—I was going to say it is about \$8 for a cauliflower. One of the points we would like to make is that this is not about throwing money into rural communities; it is about capacity building in rural communities. Unfortunately it is really difficult for organisations like ours, or any of the other helping organisations, to get money to put into capacity building. Our local government does it extremely well, and I think that perhaps in some ways local government—in our part of the world, anyway—is underutilised. But capacity building is certainly what we are talking about. The people we work with are extraordinarily proud, extraordinarily resilient and extraordinarily good-humoured in a really heartening way. In communities where there is significant external change and internal pressures, we need to assist by giving them the tools to develop the capacity to meet the challenges and to deal with and move on from the grief of the change. We are talking about three or four areas: older people, the middle-aged—I do not want to use that term; I will say very young 50-year-olds—early parents and young people. They all have their own issues that unfortunately are not being addressed.

The communities themselves do not necessarily have the resources. Teachers do an enormous amount of work to help the resilience of the community and bring that into the schools, but we really need some major capacity building. That comes down to the second point in Kay's

opening statement, where she spoke of the impact of industrial conditions changing. Generations that have had a role in a social and industrial sense in a community really need to be assisted into that change. From my experience and my discussions with them they do not appear to have received that assistance—and I have lived in this community and worked in the areas. It is sometimes very difficult to find that your whole experience of life and that of your peers and friends and the people you went to school with is one of a social and industrial place. To change that is extraordinarily difficult—moving a family around, let alone moving an entire three generations around.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Ms Parfitt—It is not insoluble. The rural counselling system that the federal government has been funding for quite some time is due to be finishing off shortly, but I think it is a really under-utilised area. We work very closely with the Department of Primary Industries here and with their farm financial counsellors. The rural counselling scheme is one of the really big successes. It worked very well during the dairy industry deregulation. Unfortunately, Far North Queensland has not been able to attract workers. But that kind of system can bring workers in at a very reduced rate. You are not bringing in infrastructure or management, you are just bringing in workers. The issue about doctors is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of trying to get professionals in. But if we can link them with existing services that have the capacity to, in some cases, underwrite them, there is a really big sense of potential within that program.

Senator McLUCAS—I wanted to go to the question about how you actually deliver those capacity building strategies. Is it through a Regional Solutions type of program? Where are the programs that are working and that have been effective? Are there models we should be looking at to assist communities in getting over enormous change? I am thinking of the Atherton Tablelands in particular, which have been through enormous changes. I have seen the town where I grew up change from a strong community to one that feels extremely vulnerable.

Ms Parfitt—Kay is probably better placed to give you a formal response to that. But certainly from my experience—and it comes from being at heart a deep sociologist and seeing the need to strengthen communities—I think we could deliver those strategies by supporting local government to oversee a regional development kind of model with a strong, community based, community work model where you are actually integrating both sides of it. It is actually much easier to work on the nuts and bolts of industry change, business change and that sort of thing. It is very difficult to do just community development because you are talking about sociological, social and psychological issues. But, if you combine the two, they can often be very successful. My feeling would be that you cannot do one without the other, because you are leaving the other behind.

Ms Dodd—I am just racking my brains trying to think of where there are some very good pilot programs. They are on the eastern seaboard and in the major cities. They are quite sophisticated. One of them is the Supportive Environment for Active Living project—SEAL. That is an experimental project. It is a highly sophisticated one which takes in community building from the physical environment right through to establishing capacity building in the social and psychological activities, like arts and community type things.

I think what we are looking at in the poverty that exists across the top part of Australia in particular is much more basic than that. We need to look at very simple things like diversification prior to industries dropping out of those small communities. Local councils should be encouraged and perhaps underwritten to drive those things in the small communities, and inducements should be offered for industries to establish. I am not just talking of tourism, which is the big catchcry and is fairly dependent on world conditions and things like that; I am talking about fairly solid sorts of developmental industries, like high-tech industries. These communities really do need, in many respects, rebuilding from the ground up because one of the basic industries that has really nosedived is the housing and building industry. I think in Ayr, Giru and places like that housing prices have actually halved in the last 12 months.

Ms Parfitt—In fact, you cannot get a loan unless you come up with 40 per cent of the starting price, and we are talking about houses in the region of maybe \$60,000 or \$70,000—banks will not lend it. It is really quite chronic and, of course, these are the communities where we want to encourage people into home ownership.

Senator McLUCAS—I want to seek a point of clarification on that: 40 per cent of the total is required for a deposit for a purchaser in a rurally depressed area?

Ms Parfitt—Yes. That is certainly so in Home Hill.

Ms Dodd—And that locks into the other side of the difficulty too. The banks are not taking on as borrowers people who are not fully employed. So if you say to the bank, ‘I work 50 hours a fortnight,’ or something like that, you cannot get a loan to buy a house. That sort of compounding thing flows into the smaller towns, and the subcontractors, major hardware stores, corner stores et cetera really go down when there is a major bite in any of the industries that are always embedded in those small towns.

Ms Parfitt—I have not had any contemporary information from Ingham, but I also know that you cannot fund a new business in the Home Hill area. They will not lend money for a business. In fact, a local business was up for sale and somebody was really interested in buying it. There are still niche businesses you can buy in these communities that will do fine but you cannot get bank loans for them.

Senator McLUCAS—Is that because the lending institutions are nervous about the future of those towns?

Ms Parfitt—I would say so; that would be my opinion. I do not know what they would say about it, but it is certainly putting the squeeze on rural communities when you have the local business people trying to gee it up and you find people are saying, ‘All right,’ especially young people who want to get in and open up a small bookkeeping or corner store that sells fish and chips. You cannot get it into, and of course that has a knock-on effect down the road. They say, ‘If I can’t open it up here, I might go to a larger centre and see how I go.’

Senator McLUCAS—Is that fairly broad across the North?

Ms Parfitt—I would be surprised if there is only one area that is experiencing it. As I said, I cannot give you contemporary information from places like Julia Creek or Mount Isa, but I know that it is happening in the Burdekin region.

Senator McLUCAS—Because of the change in sugar—

Ms Parfitt—You used the word ‘vulnerable’. That is how communities feel. Communities feel vulnerable, individuals feel vulnerable and children feel vulnerable. Kids will display the parents’ kind of stuff, so kids are afraid of their future. Parents are afraid of their children’s future and their own future, and the grandparents are distraught that they have made a poor decision that is leaving nothing to their families. People often talk about wealth—and I am talking here about farming communities, whether you are farming cows, cane, bananas or anything else—but the reality is that you have invested. You might own some flats but that is in fact your retirement. You plan on those sorts of things; it is not because you are wealthy. It is just that that is where you have put your money, or you have ploughed your money back into the farm. So, if you suddenly find that, in the Inkerman area, the Invicta area, there are 162 places up for sale, you think: ‘I haven’t got a chance; I’ve made all these bad decisions. My son has walked off the farm; the kids have gone.’ We have the highest level of older male suicide in the world. How can we be surprised when we are taking the traditional world of people?

Senator McLUCAS—When you say ‘we’, do you mean North Queensland?

Ms Parfitt—Yes, North Queensland—extending to the cape. It is certainly one of the highest.

Ms Dodd—It is one of the statistics that applies to this area.

Senator McLUCAS—Thank you and good luck.

Senator MOORE—You talked about the infrastructure and the communities being vulnerable and at genuine risk. What is the community response to that in terms of the number of agencies that are in place and have been in place to work in this field—the usual suspects: you, the Salvos, Centacare and all those? I am interested in the way that those organisations cooperate and whether you have been able to maintain that community of professional support and cooperation?

Ms Parfitt—Lifeline actually has 12 regional areas, and we maintain really good connections with all the support agencies in the community. One of the knock-on effects of the general environment is that, because you have the people who have traditionally been on the management committees withdrawing, being unfinancial, being unable to participate or simply selling up and moving on, your community is further drained of talent to actually run and meet all the legislative and financial requirements of a committee of management. So you are putting further and further drain on fewer and fewer resources, which means that there are more communities which are more stressed and therefore looking outside. It is not Lifeline’s intention to take over small community organisations, but certainly it is really tough to see them struggle the way they do. I think, again, there is an over-reliance on committees and non-profit organisations in local communities to do what was traditionally done within the community without any formality, without any formal structure.

I think there is a double whammy that communities are having. They have fewer people to call on. If your banks and police stations are closing down and your accountants are moving out of town because there is nobody around, those are the people who actually ran the committees. And as they reduce their input or, in fact, leave the communities, you have fewer people with the capacity to take on what is, in fact, an increasing level of fiscal-legal work, and that is a major thing for drawing extra services down, because that is what departments are looking for. They are looking for strong, active, participatory communities that can put up those sorts of committees, and that is really tough when everybody is exhausted and really concerned about whether they can feed their family tonight when they have been the ones who have been out there and they have given \$1,000 last year to the old people's home for a new bed, or whatever. Because we are relying more and more on the community to buy palliative beds in smaller communities, we are relying on the community to raise money for a cancer appeal or to help a family whose house has burnt down, people are being really stretched, and that affects their own self-esteem and their own capacity to continue. So some people will not go off the farm. I have letters from people right up and down the eastern seaboard saying, 'I no longer participate in anything because I am too ashamed to do so,' and that is really tough.

Ms Dodd—One of the other things is that, for a lot of the—for lack of a better word—charities, the appeals that come through up here, the money does not necessarily come back into the communities here. I do not want to name names but I am referring to some of those Australia-wide organisations that have big appeals. That used to be tolerated by the communities earlier when they felt that they were strong and really well-off communities. They did not mind the money going back to the capital city—Sydney is the centre of the world. But now there is a different attitude towards that and I think some of these larger groups have to look at putting back some of what they take out of these smaller communities because the communities now need that.

Senator MOORE—We have had evidence from across a range of states and one of the issues is the fact that people feel as though it is getting worse and that people are now overcoming their reluctance to ask for help—that there was a perception that people in some areas and in some industries were self-reliant and worked their way through things and felt it was somehow shameful to ask for help. I would like a comment on that.

Also, I would like an opinion from the two of you who work in the field about whether people really understand the system, the different levels of systems that we have—government and support—and whether there is any genuine understanding of what entitlements there are and how you access the help that you can.

Ms Dodd—The people who have never needed that support—until, say, the last five to seven years or so—have had no need to investigate the supports that are available. When I worked in one of the federal departments it used to amuse us greatly that nobody ever applied for their own pension—their accountants did it. That never occurs now because a lot of the accountants have gone and people do not have the wealth or the income to employ them. For people who are in some of these small communities, the educational levels are not high. It ties in with what Brenda-Anne said before about them understanding the requirements of departments to fund schemes. For those of us who have been working in the area for years, it is bread-and-butter stuff. But for people who are coming across it the benefit structure is extraordinarily—

Ms Parfitt—Convolutd.

Ms Dodd—Yes, and multilayered. People from my own practice area do not understand it; they find it very difficult to get through it and make headway in.

Ms Parfitt—It just becomes too hard.

Ms Dodd—People give up. An indication of that is the number of calls that Centrelink have that drop out every year. I cannot give you the exact figure, but it is in the millions. That is because people in these areas have to use the call centres. The information they get from the call centres is not always accurate.

Ms Parfitt—Or they do not know what they are looking for, therefore they do not know what button to push.

Ms Dodd—Speaking to people from the department, they are aware that these things happen. They have said to me that the training given to people in the call centres is not equivalent to that given to the people on the ground. Once again, that can put rural people at a disadvantage. They can make some fairly major decisions based on the information that they are given, which may not be the best information, the information they should be receiving.

Ms Parfitt—Senator Moore, to pick up on your point, I have worked in North Queensland, moved to Melbourne, where I got another picture, and come back again and used that information. One of the things I have noticed is that in the last seven or eight years there have been compounding effects. Families traditionally have got through the drought cycles by fluctuating their purchasing and those sorts of things. They have got through pests and diseases by doing the same kinds of things. In that cane community right up and down the eastern seaboard—and to a certain extent in the drought affected areas of the beef country—there has been drought, then pests, then drought and so on. In those seven or eight years a huge amount of their resources have been used up. People now do not have a cent. The lucky ones have got enough income. If you are in Hughenden you might be lucky enough to work in a local school as a teacher's aid, or as a mechanic helper on the road, or part-time in a chemist shop. People just do not have the resources that they would normally use in order to meet this kind of change. This change on top of normal hazards—pests and whatnot—has really compounded to make it extraordinarily difficult. The people we are seeing are in greater states of poverty—as well as psychological and emotional poverty—and despair and have lessened capacities to lead their families and be parents for their families.

We are actually seeing people who are in greater need than I have perhaps ever seen. I have been in the game for approximately 25 years and I have seen urban poverty right through to rural poverty. It is kind of the end of the line. They are coming forward, but it is only because there is nothing left. It is really awful. For example, I was in touch with a service station owner who was distraught because he had had to knock back a person who was trying to get some petrol on tick. The person who was wanting to get petrol on tick was a woman whose family had a farm. They could not pay their bills and so they could not get the petrol on tick. But if she did not get the petrol on tick she could not come in to work in the chemist's store where she earned \$125 a week, which was what they used to feed themselves and to pay for the next lot of fertiliser for the farm. He was feeling awful; she was feeling awful. It is really very tough. I agree with you—

people are beginning to come forward, but their level of need is far higher than what you would perhaps see in similar circumstances in an urban population and that is combined with a lack of familiarisation with the kind of help that is available, which is another stumbling block.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming in, Ms Dodd and Ms Parfitt. I hope it is not as traumatic for you getting back. Thank you also, Ms Parfitt, for making the effort to fill in.

Proceedings suspended from 11.01 a.m. to 11.13 a.m.

GRAHAM, Mr Kenneth Herbert, North Queensland Branch Delegate and Vice-Chairperson, Queensland Shelter

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Kenneth Graham from the North Queensland branch of Queensland Shelter. The committee has before it your submission. 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.

Mr Graham—Since I wrote my submission things have happened in Townsville, which I will highlight here. I wrote this supplement, which you should have, and this includes recommendations which I hope will be considered. Since my submission to the inquiry in February, I have attended the Third National Homelessness Conference held by the Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations in Brisbane from 6 to 8 April. The link I made in my submission between affordable rental housing—or lack of it—and poverty and financial hardship stood out in stark relief at that conference.

It was opened by Senator Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Family and Community Services, who stated that there were more than 100,000 homeless people in Australia. We knew that anyway. Most of these people are not sleeping rough but moving from place to place and staying at friends' or relatives' places or in emergency shelters. These people are classed as being in the secondary homeless category—that is the cultural definition of homelessness that is generally accepted throughout Australia now. The tertiary homeless are those in insecure accommodation like boarding houses and caravans parks.

The homeless who are sleeping rough are in the primary category. I saw two men in that category on my way back from the homelessness conference one night. Each was in a bus shelter near the city hall. These two unfortunate men were possibly made homeless by the closure of many boarding houses in inner Brisbane. The boarding houses have been sold to developers to build high-rise and high-cost apartment blocks. On a much smaller scale, a similar trend is happening here in Townsville with the impending closure of longstanding boarding houses, whose residents usually have nowhere else to go—and many of whom are disabled in some way.

From the figures available from the ABS we estimate, probably conservatively, that on census night there were 203 homeless people in the secondary category—that is, they were staying in other people's places. Extrapolating for the year, there would be more in this category than those seeking emergency accommodation from agencies—well over 1,000 in a population of 150,000. Many of those would be poor; others not. I met a 17-year-old girl working at my local hotel who had been 'kicked out of home'—her words—by her mother. Since then she had been moving between places belonging to her sister and a friend. She was surprised when I told her that she was really homeless—in the secondary category. As she was working part time, she was probably not poor but certainly not well off. If she had not had the support of her sister and her friend she would have been in a really bad situation, like many others in her position and of her age.

In my submission I mentioned tenancy databases—or 'blacklists' as we call them—and their effects, along with Centrelink breaching, on homelessness. I imagine a scenario of a vicious

circle, which is probably fairly common. An unemployed person renting privately, for whatever reason, is breached by Centrelink. He or she falls behind in the rent as a result and is evicted. The person moves from place to place, perhaps overstaying his or her welcome, while waiting for Centrelink to restore the Newstart allowance to the full amount. Finally the person is able to apply for rental accommodation again but finds that he or she has been blacklisted by the previous real estate agent and cannot rent again. In the process of moving to yet another temporary place a Centrelink letter does not reach the person in time for an interview, and the person is breached for a second time, this time much more severely. This homeless person is plunged into deeper poverty and is trapped in a vicious circle and there seems to be no way out. It just keeps going around.

With the boom in residential property purchase in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne now past its peak, investors are targeting regional cities—and Townsville is one of them. A report in *The Courier-Mail* of 2 August titled 'Investors bet on Townsville as a boom town', confirmed my suspicion about the sudden surge in buying, which has caused the private rental housing vacancy rate to drop to an alarming low of 0.57 per cent. The unit vacancy rate is 1.35 per cent, a higher rate because of all the luxury apartment blocks recently built or being built in prime locations for views. These are of no help to people on low incomes. These rates were published by the *Townsville Bulletin* on 18 July.

Before this report we were aware of rents rising in most suburbs of Townsville—and they are relatively rapid rises as well. The southern absentee landlord investors buying existing houses can gain a higher profit yield by buying properties much cheaper than in the capital cities and charging rents higher than previously normal for Townsville—whatever the market will bear. No doubt there would be local landlords, as in the capital cities but on a much lesser scale, ready to take advantage of the situation and sell to southern investors at a good profit from under their tenants or else the tenants would have pay the higher rents demanded by the new landlords. We have one report of a certain real estate agent evicting 13 tenants in one month. Once the tenancy agreement is broken or ended, a new one can be signed at a higher rent.

We are concerned at the effect this will have on long-term Townsville residents on low incomes who have to rent privately. With their rents rising, they will suffer more housing stress, with many finding themselves in housing poverty through paying more than 40 per cent of their incomes in rent. With the decline in public housing, this is becoming a crisis situation. Personally, I hate to see this kind of thing happening in my home city. In making the link between the growing shortage of affordable rental housing and growing poverty, we can sum it up in an equation: low income plus high rent equals poverty.

I will outline the four recommendations. First, that the Commonwealth greatly increase its funding to the states for public housing through the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement to bring it back to the level it was at before 1996, when it was savagely cut. It has been reduced ever since. Second, that the Commonwealth adopt the proposal of the Affordable Housing National Research Consortium to address the growing need for affordable rental housing in Australia with investment by superannuation funds and other investors. It involves the issue of a bond with seeding funding from the Commonwealth government and a guaranteed minimum after-tax return. Third, that the Commonwealth adopt all the recommendations of the Senate inquiry report on participation requirements and penalties in the social security system. Very few have been implemented. Fourth, that the Commonwealth strengthen its privacy legislation

concerning tenancy databases to stop the injustices that are still being perpetrated. The new Queensland legislation on this matter can be used as a model.

I would like to point out that in Europe there are traditionally much higher levels of public housing. In the UK, 20 per cent of housing is public housing, and the rate goes up in other countries to the highest, which is 42 per cent, in the Netherlands. In Australia it has always been much lower, with the emphasis on home ownership, but there were always those who could not afford a deposit and who had insecure jobs so they were not able to buy their own homes. Of course it is worse now with the casualisation of work. People who can only get casual work cannot afford to buy their own homes. For many years the level of public housing in Australia has been at a national average of six per cent. Queensland's was lower because of previous National Party governments' lack of concern for public housing; it was four per cent. Now with the decline in public housing, thanks to the Commonwealth government's policies, the national average is about five per cent and Queensland is at three per cent. We are losing.

In Europe, because there are much higher levels of public housing, there is a healthy competition between public and private rental housing. It means that there are short waiting lists and short waiting times for public housing, and landlords in private rental would not dare raise their rents too much otherwise they would lose their tenants to public housing. We are going the opposite way in Australia. With an inadequate supply of public housing in any particular area, it means landlords in private rental can increase their rents to whatever the market will bear because they know that there is not much chance of their tenants getting into public housing. It would be the opposite if there were a good supply of public housing. Landlords would not dare raise their rents so much. So that means that the federal government could be seen as being in breach of its own national competition policy.

In my submission I gave you the example of my brother, who lost his parenting allowance when his daughter turned 16. That is fairly common. He lost \$150 a fortnight and he is now paying 50 per cent of his income in rent. It is well established, since way back when the Henderson poverty report was released, that people who pay more than 30 per cent of their income for rent are in housing stress. Those who pay more than 40 per cent of their income for rent are in housing poverty—that is after housing costs.

This housing boom that has been going on in the big cities is something that the Reserve Bank governor has been warning about. People who are afraid of missing out, who are on average or above average incomes, are investing in more than one home. They have got their own home and they are investing in another one, even up to three. They are being talked into it by the white-shoe brigade. In some cases they are not investors, just home owners not wanting to miss out. They are paying high prices and making low deposits, but the repayments will start to kick in—some are already paying 40 per cent of their incomes in repayments of home loans. They are in housing stress, but they made that choice. Tenants, people who rent, have no choice.

CHAIR—That was quite eloquent. Thank you.

Mr Graham—I am sorry if I got a bit carried away. I feel strongly about this.

CHAIR—It has been well said, Mr Graham.

Senator McLUCAS—I just want to go to your recommendation about the tenancy databases needing to be managed. I am aware that Queensland has brought in some legislation and that your group is pleased with that legislation. Do you feel as if it covers issues of confidentiality and protection of tenants?

Mr Graham—The Queensland legislation sets a model that we hope all the other states will follow. The problem is that where these database companies—the biggest one in particular, TICA, the Tenancy Information Centre Australasia in Sydney—are based outside of Queensland the Queensland government have no control over them. It needs national legislation. The national privacy legislation has been extended to include small business, including tenancy databases, but it is inadequate. In particular, it makes no provision for a tenant wrongly listed, and does not prevent a tenant who has paid the rent arrears and fixed up the problems from being de-listed. TICA has every person on its books there for five years, and you cannot get off, no matter what.

Senator McLUCAS—And national legislation would protect Queenslanders in this case.

Mr Graham—It would protect all Australians. That is what is needed.

Senator McLUCAS—We have actually raised the question of tenancy databases in a number of states. It is an issue that is around; certainly we are aware of that.

Mr Graham—It causes a lot of homelessness.

Senator McLUCAS—In your submission you refer to Queensland Shelter's report on homelessness in Townsville, and you say that homelessness was being caused by Centrelink breaching. Do you have the proportions of people who were found to be homeless as a result of breaching?

Mr Graham—Not in Townsville. We could not get any particular figures, but it would be in line with what is going on elsewhere. I have made reference to these reports in my submission, especially the Salvation Army report, *Stepping into the breach: a report on Centrelink breaching and emergency relief*. The ACOSS one has a similar title. They have the nationwide figures there. It is pretty bad, yes. They are draconian penalties, especially the third one, which they still have not fixed up—the allowances are cut completely for half a year.

Senator McLUCAS—That is right. It is a sure-fire way of making someone homeless.

Mr Graham—It is the way the Commonwealth saves money.

Senator McLUCAS—Thank you, Mr Graham.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Graham. Your paper was very clear and, as Senator McLucas and Senator Moore have reminded me, we have had Shelter appear before us in a number of states, and you have emphasised exactly what they see as the problem. Thank you.

Mr Graham—I hope something good comes out of this.

CHAIR—Thank you.

[11.31 a.m.]

COSTANZO, Mr Francesco (Frank), Convenor, Unemployed Workers Group (Townsville/Thuringowa)

CROWTHER, Ms Margaret Ann, Member, Unemployed Workers Group (Townsville/Thuringowa)

OLSEN, Ms Mary Alice, Member, Unemployed Workers Group (Townsville/Thuringowa)

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from the Unemployed Workers Group (Townsville/Thuringowa). The committee has before it your submission. 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. Mr Costanzo, please begin.

Mr Costanzo—I have just been informed that Margaret has work commitments.

CHAIR—Please go first then, Ms Crowther.

Ms Crowther—Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak today, and I thank Frank for inviting me to come along and present my views as a member of his group. I am also an advocate for the less advantaged. I am a full-time literacy teacher at the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE. I have both first-hand and professional experience of the issues and stresses caused by poverty in our local community. Those issues and stresses caused by poverty have challenged me at both the personal and professional level.

I will go into some of the details of how I can have empathy for the less advantaged in our society by talking briefly about my experience with poverty at a personal level. I have been a full-time literacy teacher for 10 years. I went through a period when my husband was unemployed. I had to go back to work when my last son was about three months old. I had to fight and struggle and cope with part-time and casual employment for over 10 years. I am now in the most fortunate position where I have a permanent position with my organisation and a full-time teaching career, but I also have to cope with three children with special needs and that has caused a lot of issues in my life.

My daughter, who is now 23, has made me a grandmother, which means that I have another person in my life that I am helping to support and coping with. I take my daughter in on weekends and I support her. She is on a disability pension, so I support her emotionally, intellectually and also economically.

It has been very difficult. At times I have had to seek the financial support of my retired parents, because I am supporting four or five people in my family. I have a reasonable income, but it is really stretched to the limit. I have a 16-year-old who was kicked out of school at the age of 15. He is no longer doing anything—he is sitting at home. He has been in trouble. I have to go

to court next week to sort out another issue. My daughter has just been the victim of domestic violence, and we have had to support her recently in that situation.

I also have a 22-year-old son who I took out of school at the age of 15 and put into a literacy class for two years so that he could make up the gap that he experienced in education. He is now a fourth-year university student studying engineering. A lot of people look at us and say that we have done a really great job, but it has been really tough. I have to support my 22-year-old son at university, who is full time, I have to support my 16-year-old, who does not get any Centrelink payments, and I have to support my daughter, who is on a part disability pension. It is hard. So life has been a difficult journey. I can remember speaking to Senator Jan McLucas on Labour Day, expressing some of my problems and shedding a few tears. I had actually hit crisis point at that particular time. Life is a road where you do hit crisis points at times. You bounce back and you just keep moving on.

I know what the public housing situation in Townsville is like, because we have been trying to get support and housing for my daughter ever since she was 19 years of age. She is now 23 and she is still on the waiting list for public housing. She is now paying a reasonable rent in a rundown shack up at North Ward. She was kicked out of the last premises, did not get her bond back and so forth. Private rents in Townsville are extremely high for the quality of housing that you get. It is a disgrace.

I think that there are a lot of parents out there like me who are getting a good income but struggling financially because they are actually supporting their children. People are supporting their children for longer and longer periods of time, because the government does not recognise your adult children as independent adults until they are 25 years of age.

I am a churchgoing Catholic. Recently I heard a sermon by a priest saying that the best people who can help those people in need and advocate for those people in need are those who have actually experienced it at a personal level and know what it is like and can understand the feelings and emotions that go with it. I attended a national conference in Brisbane called Bridging the Gap. Frank networked that information to me. They talked about the gap widening in Australian communities. Many kids are struggling and many kids are coming out of school with an elementary level of education—that means that these are kids coming out of year 10 with a year-3- or year-4-level education.

Okay, the advocacy that has been done by parent groups and people like myself is now coming through—there are youth access groups coming into TAFE locally doing trials and so forth—but we really have to address those education issues. The best way that people can get out of the unemployment and poverty trap is through education. We cannot expect things to improve when people are coming out of education with very limited skills. We have to address that and we have to address that now.

We have students at TAFE who are struggling to pay \$16 for 60 hours of literacy tuition. We are now getting more and more governments saying, 'We've got to have a user-pays system.' There are people out there, frankly, who cannot afford to compete in a user-pays system. We need to have governments making commitments to those levels of education where people can get basic levels of literacy. People cannot get employment unless they have at least a certificate III in some vocational area. When you have kids coming out of year 10 who are struggling with

elementary tasks in literacy, they are a long way behind—they are going to be in their 20s and their early 30s before they even get into the competitive race of employment. We have to have early intervention and we have to address these issues—and we have to do it now.

I have taken on the training for voluntary tutors at TAFE. We have lost a lot of resourcing. Our classes are struggling with fewer and fewer resources of trained and teaching personnel.

Mr Costanzo—We need more jobs in that area, I think.

Ms Crowther—Recently I had a student who could not ring his voluntary tutor because he had to keep working. He is a car cleaner, and he had to stay back at work. He could not afford to ring his voluntary tutor because he did not have any credit left on his mobile phone. He was really embarrassed about that. He lives in a dingy boarding house here in Stanley Street, where there are a lot of very down-and-out people living. He cannot afford to live in private rental. He relocated away from his family home in Ingham because they do not have the literacy support they need in their local community. We have students struggling with not only educational issues but also personal and emotional issues. I have managed to keep a band of volunteer tutors in literacy to support their tuition and training.

The business and funding models that are happening at organisations like universities and TAFEs are not in line with the principles of access and equity, as I have just explained, because we are losing resources in areas that are needed vitally—not only for our community but for the individuals requiring our services. As a teacher I put in hours of work. I am at work until 8 p.m. three or four nights a week. I get up at 5 a.m. I put in lots and lots of hours. There are lots of workers and teachers out there putting in heavy workloads, but you wonder how long you can sustain those sorts of workloads to provide quality learning programs and to keep getting those results that we want our students to get. We know how important education is for our students. But what is the price for me at an individual and personal level?

A lot of our learners need intensive support. We are running literacy classrooms where all of the students require intensive support. We cannot take those students that need not only intensive support but one-to-one supervision, because we do not have the resources to cater to that particular need any more. Large classes in adult literacy have a ratio of between 12 and 16 students to one teacher, and all of those students are coming in with elementary levels of literacy. Our goal and our brief is to try and get them up to a year 10 standard so that they can go on to the next level of their education. We have a huge diversity of adults who all have a basic need and motivation to improve their basic reading and writing skills. They are in the poverty-literacy cycle right here, right now, and they are going to be in that cycle for two, three or four years—who knows? They will need a lot of intensive assistance before they are eligible to compete in the employment market.

We have learners who come from a cycle of violence that has left its own scars. Many are mature age women wanting to improve themselves in order to get employment. For many years these women have struggled on their own with their children, escaping the threat of having their children taken into foster care by community services. I do have an example of this. In 1996 I delivered and coordinated a women's access course. One of the common elements for all of those women was the fact that they were struggling on their own on welfare payments, with three or four children ranging from very young through to adolescence. They were in that course

to improve themselves. Five or six years on, I can see where they have come in their journey in the community. Some of them have got employment and have moved along their very difficult road. It is heartening to see that some of them have now made it, but we are looking at a journey that could take six or seven years. We cannot wave magic wands in those classrooms and get a quick fix in six months. It is unrealistic for organisations like Centrelink to expect that in a couple of months we can fix a literacy problem that has been with them right through their primary and secondary school years.

We are currently seeing a lot of youth learners who are coming out of school environments with undiagnosed learning difficulties. A quarter of our client group of youth learners have undiagnosed learning difficulties. They are coming in not only with learning issues but also with very negative attitudes towards learning. They are coming in with a lot of behaviours that we cannot deal with, because our resourcing has declined. Sometimes we cannot provide the level of assistance that some of these youth learners require.

That cohort has got to go a long way before they have adequate skills. We need to go back to the concepts of early intervention. We need to go back to the source of the issues, when parents come into those classrooms in primary school and say, 'My little Johnny'—or my little Margaret—'has a problem.' We need to do something about those kids coming out at the other end of their education with those problems remaining and without any recognition.

Students accessing the course often come from families that have been seriously disadvantaged due to poverty, issues of disability and learning difficulties, issues of violence and other negative social factors. We are now seeing in our communities second- and third-generation unemployed. For those students to get out of that unemployment cycle we need them to obtain enough basic literacy skills. We are talking about critical literacy skills, learning strategies and English and maths skills. Only with those skills will they be able to negotiate entry to vocational training, because you cannot get trade based courses without being able to demonstrate a year-10 level of maths and English. With those skills they can start opening up their options and pathways to employment. We need to be able to stay with these learners for up to two to three years for them to be able to become independent learners and independent adults.

My recommendations and my advocacy today concern those education measures that we need to take for those people to have a chance. My 10 to 15 years of service to adult literacy has given me a bird's-eye view of the enormous range of issues that pertain to low levels of literacy—issues of poverty, issues that affect families, issues of unemployment and all of the results that relate to that. I will finish talking now and answer any questions that you might wish to ask me before I have to fly back to the class.

CHAIR—I think you have been very clear, Ms Crowther. You have eloquently restated the number of messages that we have already received. If you want to take off, you can.

Ms Crowther—Thank you. Thank you very much, Frank—good luck.

CHAIR—We have your submission here, Mr Costanzo. You do not need to read it out.

Mr Costanzo—I think Margaret's introduction was quite good in highlighting the human aspect of poverty. We do not want this to be an academic or an intellectual presentation—nor,

hopefully, will this Senate inquiry end up being mere words on paper. We trust that some recommendations will come out of it and they will be implemented. 'Real people, real lives, real problems requiring real solutions now'. That is the title of our submission, and that crystallises what I have just said. It is about people, and we need to focus on solutions. There are a lot of people in the community who are hurting. If nothing is done about it, we as a community and you as politicians are not doing our jobs or playing a purposeful role in our society.

Let me apologise on behalf of Claire Carey, who could not make it today. She has secured another part-time job and now has two part-time jobs. She has asked me to pass on a couple of comments to reinforce what she said and to offer a supplementary comment about poverty. Since she has acquired her second part-time job, which now puts her well over 40 hours per week—sometimes she works over 50 hours a week—she is still getting hassled by Centrelink. I cannot put it any other way, because it is a hassle. I could use other words, but I want to be civil. There is her job diary, a review, a preparing to work agreement and mutual obligation requirements—and she still has to look for work. Why is it that in a civilised society when people are satisfied that they have enough hours and enough income they have to go through this? I raise this because people who are on a very low income do not need the stress. What they need is job security—stability in their lives. To go to an agency that is supposed to be caring for you and have those things put on you is just not on; it is not Australian, as far as I am concerned.

The government have to look at the processes of Centrelink. I am not in any way blaming Centrelink staff or the management; I am blaming the federal government for this, because they got rid of the Department of Social Security. The modus operandi of Centrelink is that you are guilty until proven innocent, and that is the attitude from the day you walk in. That happens no matter who you meet or what sort of review you have. I have seen it time and time again. Not a day goes by where I do not see an argument. You do not have to ask me about that; talk to the Centrelink staff. They do not give out their telephone numbers, their addresses or any personal details because they get threats. I am not here to justify any threats to any staff member, but that is the situation in this country now, and it is shameful.

Claire works with kids with special needs, and she also works in rape crisis support. They are very stressful jobs. Her comment to me to pass on to this inquiry is that she chose to do social work for service to the people. She chose it as a way of expressing her love for people, her philanthropy. She could have done a business degree or something else, but, no, she wanted to give something back to society. In return, she gets an \$8,000 HECS bill, and she feels that that is unfair and that something will have to be done. Why should a person who gives her life to the community have to pay \$8,000 to get an education in order to get a job—which should be a right, not a privilege? She works hard for her wages. She has to deal with stressful situations in her work. She deals with kids who have been abused in the special needs areas in which she works or women who have been sexually assaulted or raped and the stress that goes with that. Sometimes she has to stay overnight and into the morning with a person. Contrast that work—and her salary, which is a basic wage, at \$10 to \$12 an hour—with the work of a CEO. Companies that are making millions and millions are paying their CEOs fantastic wages. She says that, in contrast to her work, it is unfair.

Her final comment—and this is supplementary to what she has written—is that she has noticed a lot of people with appalling dental health, and she links that up with poverty. I have to say that here, locally, at the public dental clinic there is a two- to three-year waiting list for

dental work. I know that because I go to the public dental clinic, and I support it—they are great staff—but my annual check-up is over eight months overdue. That is something that might have to be looked at in the health area. Her final comment is that, hopefully, this committee will put forward some recommendations and follow through, which is what is really needed, and do something for the people.

Before I go any further, I would like to recognise Indigenous unemployment rates. I know that earlier on Mr Clark eloquently and very succinctly put the case on behalf of Indigenous people. Let us not just leave it that the Indigenous people should look after themselves—there are issues of autonomy et cetera. They are citizens of our country—they are our brothers and sisters—and when their communities are ravaged by unemployment rates four times the national average, we should feel shame. I know there are a lot of historical issues that have to be addressed—which is true—but, at the same time, we have to do something about it. It is not just about the rural communities but what is happening in the urban areas. That situation has to be looked at and given a high priority.

Reiterating what I put in our submission about unemployment in Townsville and Thuringowa, according to the census figures 5,984 people are completely out of work. Extra to that would be over 20,000 casual workers. Going by the national average, about half of those would be looking for either more hours or full-time jobs. Extra to that are about 1,800 people who do not fall into any category—prisoners, homeless people and people who have dropped out of the system. That is a true reflection of unemployment in Townsville. It does not just come from me. I have talked to Job Network agencies. Once at a course I quoted the national ratio of unemployed people to existing vacancies as being about seven people per vacancy. I was shouted down by the employment agency officer there. She said, ‘Where did you get those figures from?’ I said, ‘They’re statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.’ She said, ‘That’s rubbish.’ Forty to 50 people apply for every job they advertise at their agencies.

To supplement what I have written in the submission, I would like to dispel the myth that the unemployed do not want to work. I will give you one clear example. A couple of years ago, just before the last federal election, 110 Centrelink call centre jobs were advertised. Over 4,000 people here in Townsville and Thuringowa applied for those jobs. According to the statistics, that is three-quarters of the unemployed in our area. That negates all the rubbish that has been coming from this federal government about the unemployed not wanting to work. The issue is jobs—the availability of jobs. We need to get the facts before we can progress.

Every six months or so I hear Mr Brough, Mr Abbott and all the rest dumping on the unemployed. This inquiry should look at their performance, including what targets are set for reducing unemployment. I remember—I have a good memory—Amanda Vanstone, as the first employment minister of this government, in what I think was one of her very first interviews saying, ‘We will not set any targets for reducing unemployment.’ That was a shameful comment for somebody who has been elected by the people, for the people, to make. Our parliamentary system does not look at parties; it is about representing people. The House of Representatives and even the Senate are about people. The parties do not even come into it. They are not even recognised in our government setup. To say to unemployed people, ‘We don’t care about you,’ is shameful.

The destruction of jobs continues. The Howard government has stated in black and white that it has created over one million jobs. Its actual words are, 'We have created over one million jobs since we have been in office.' That is a lie. I will tell you why. Firstly, it has not created jobs. Perhaps the economy has produced over one million jobs during its seven or eight years in office, but the government has not produced one job. In fact, if we look at its record in the public sector we see—and I hope there is somebody from the public sector here who might be able to back me up on this—that 150,000 to 200,000 jobs have been shed in the federal public sector alone. Centrelink has shed 5,000 staff, and something like 20,000 jobs have been cut by Telstra. The Australian Taxation Office has shed a lot of staff. Those are the facts, and we need to focus on them.

If we really want to get people out of poverty—and we believe that unemployment is the primary cause of poverty—we have to address employment and have a commitment from not just the federal government but also the other tiers, state governments and local governments, as well as business and industry. As I say in our submission, they must all make a commitment. It is no use saying, 'It's a public sector issue.' It is a public sector issue but there has to be a commitment. The mutual obligation has to extend to all areas of our society, including corporations. I have mentioned the 16,000 jobs at Telstra—and Telstra has just announced that another 3,000 jobs will be cut—and I have mentioned Westpac. But look at the announcement by the Commonwealth Bank the other day that another 600 jobs are to be shed. They are in a very good, very profitable position. Why are they shedding those jobs when we are in a time of high unemployment?

The government must look at the economic policies that it believes in. There is a holy grail of economic rationalism, privatisation and deregulation. Otherwise, they should go back to their businesses. If they are here to serve the people then they must do so, not serve the interests of business or their mates in the corporations because they are not contributing anything to society at the moment. It is all take, take, take. Before I conclude I want to say that over half of the unemployed now are long-term unemployed—that is, people who have been without work for over 12 months. In all the so-called intensive assistance programs of the government et cetera, there is not one iota of definition of priority for the long-term unemployed. That is where we have to focus. Those people who have been waiting the longest should be served first. If it takes the reintroduction of a national public sector employment agency, something like the old CES—it may have another name, I do not care; so long as it is run by the federal government for the people—then that is what we believe should happen. All levels of government must look into that in their recruitment, whether it be the federal government, state government or local government. They should have targets for the long-term unemployed in local communities. Similarly, industry, mining and commerce and the various business sectors have to chip in.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Costanzo. Ms Olsen, bear in mind that we have your document here.

Ms Olsen—I was going to refer to something that Frank said about pressure from Centrelink and the government trying to make out that the unemployed do not want to work. I have been a casual worker for 7½ years and for two of those years I was on a sole parent pension and I was a student. To back up what Ken from Shelter said, as soon as my son turned 16, I lost that and I lost approximately \$103 a fortnight plus my concessions which totalled nearly \$4000 a year. So my circumstances did not change, only my status. We say that education improves your life

chances, but my son dropped out of school after that. He did get an apprenticeship, and 20 months into the apprenticeship, after he had taken out a loan for a car, Tony Ireland Holden sacked him. They hassled him to leave and then he was only on youth allowance, which only covered his loan plus \$20 a week, so on my eight to 16 hours a week of work I had to feed him. Luckily, I have a very good daughter, who is a very good sister to him, who does not live with us. She pays our phone bills and she has always given us money because as you can see we could not live.

The other thing is about saying that people do not want to work. After losing his job my son could not get another job, so he slowly got more and more depressed until I was very frightened to leave him alone. I thought he was going to take his own life, so I took him to the mental health service and he was given an antidepressant. Somehow or other it did not go very well with him—it was Zoloft—and it made him go up and up, so he became manic and had to be hospitalised and brought right down. This is over a year ago. He started saying, 'I have nearly been unemployed for two years.' He was starting to get worried and I thought, 'Here we go again, it is going start again,' so I took him back to the doctor and they have given him some sort of sedative or something. It is not right to say that people do not want to work; to say that my child, who is just basically a boy who wanted a car and all that sort of stuff, does not want to work. He has worked himself up into sickness because he wants a job. It does not help my circumstances that for 7½ years I have been a casual worker.

Also, I have a Bachelor of Arts plus I have completed half of a master's degree in librarianship, so I am not uneducated. It seems to be a case of putting profit before people. I worked for the Townsville City Council for four years. It is a Labor council, and I am still a casual worker employed for between eight and 16 hours. I have applied endlessly for jobs. So I think the abolition of casual work has to start at a grassroots level. I cannot afford to live on a casual wage. They were whinging about the unions wanting to make workers permanent after six months; they were saying, 'Oh, but that's created all the jobs.' But what sort of jobs are they, and what sort of life do the workers have? I am not even classed as unemployed.

Talking about depression, I think that my depression and my circumstances added to Ben's. Can you understand what I mean? I can remember going home one day after not getting a job, and I threw something and broke the window. That is not good. So am I manic, too? It is just not on.

Margaret talked about moving on. It is pretty hard for people to move on when they cannot move on. I cannot move on. It is just so frustrating. I will not tell a lie: I have given up looking for work. During these last few months, I have not bothered, and I lie to Centrelink every time. I do not care what they do about it, because I just cannot stand another knock-back. I just cannot handle it. I work myself up and think, 'Oh well, someone will give me a go.' But they won't. There are people with less education that get the jobs, so it has nothing to do with education.

Talking about education, you have to have the hope and the physical means to get the education. You have to have money. I am not saying you have to be a millionaire, but when I lost the sole parent pension and \$4,000 a year, my son and I were existing for four days straight on bread and butter. That is what we were eating every week. What kid wants to get an education in those circumstances? He just wanted to get a job—and then he lost it. That is all I have to say.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Mr Costanzo—I wish to make a supplementary comment. I wish to expand on what Mary had to say about the Newstart allowance not adequately reflecting the cost of living. I refer to it in my case study, and you have a copy of that. You are probably wondering: if you are in debit at the end of 12 months and you have actually lost money, how do you survive? I have now listed my house, which I have lived in for 12 years, for sale. I cannot live on Newstart without having any employment. I have housing costs; there are major carpentry repairs that are required. My rates are about \$1,800. They have gone up; next year they will be about \$1,900 a year, and I just cannot afford to maintain and live in my house. So my house is now listed for sale. I will most probably be out in four weeks time. There is a four-year wait for public housing. Ken talked about that earlier but I would like to stress that the vacancy rate in the private rental market is 0.57 of one per cent. I have checked with rent assistance, and the costs are comparable to having a home, but in my case I just cannot afford to live in my house, so it is up for sale.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Costanzo. I would like to thank both of you for coming here today.

[12.10 p.m.]

GLEESON, Mr John Fredolin, Conference Member, Society of St Vincent de Paul, Townsville

JOHNSON, Mr Michael Bernard, Vice-President, Townsville Regional Council, and Conference Treasurer, Society of St Vincent de Paul, Townsville

NORTHEY, Mr Clifford Warren, President, Townsville Regional Council, Society of St Vincent de Paul, Townsville

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Gleeson—I am a rank and file member of the Society of St Vincent de Paul but I open our session here today on behalf of Mrs Losa Guise, the Townsville Diocesan President of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Unfortunately, Losa, who was here, had a prior commitment and she was not able to stay on.

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

Mr Gleeson—The Society of St Vincent de Paul in Townsville agrees with the views expressed in the society's national council submission of February 2003 to this inquiry. The poverty issues we see in our work here are not significantly different from those presented in evidence to this inquiry by the St Vincent de Paul representatives in other regional centres. The dimension of the society in the Townsville-Thuringowa area—that is the city areas of Townsville and Thuringowa—is indicated by nine conferences, which are parish based, approximately 88 active members responding to requests for help and approximately 192 active volunteers.

The most striking observation we make is that the inequality of incomes, the level of economic participation and the inequality of opportunities seems self-perpetuating within the families that we see. Typically, the main family characteristics we observe are low aspirational levels, environments that are not supportive of personal development, the reliance on public transport and the scarcity of work that is within the abilities of those that we assist. That is a general observation on behalf of the society here. With your approval, Chair, I will hand over to Mr Mike Johnson, who is the Vice-President of the Townsville Regional Council of the society.

Mr Johnson—As Frank suggested earlier, it is important to put a human face on poverty, so I am going to try and put flesh and bones on the subject and I would just like to share with you some observations of our work in the Upper Ross district of Townsville. This district includes the suburbs of Kelso, Rasmussen, Condon and Kirwan; it is a narrow corridor up by the Ross River. The home visitation program involves a central call centre where people call in, details are forwarded to local conference volunteer members and a couple of them go out each night to visit people in their homes. So we actually see people in their homes.

The assistance we give is usually something like a food voucher. It might be assistance with a household bill or a voucher for furniture or clothing at one of our stores, or it might be a counselling referral. So the information we have got that I will carry on to talk about is not the result of a statistical treatment of our records or of data collected specifically for this inquiry; it is simply a summary of the stories we hear from people. Essentially, almost all the families we have visited are unemployed. Most are female supporting parents. Few are job ready or planning to be job ready or aspire to re-enter the work force. Besides those people, the next most common group would be those on a disability pension.

The next observation we make is the issue of management of resources. Most are unwilling or unable to manage the available income in a way that enables them not to need our help—that is, either unable or unwilling; sometimes unwilling. But, in saying this, we do not suggest that even with excellent management skills they would still not be living in poverty. A regular observation is the low aspirations of the people who we call on, and that is among both the adults and children. It is rare to find a vision or a plan for the future—very rare. Few of the homes that we would go to would have a computer—we hardly ever see one.

Another common thread is relationship breakdown. It is a very common circumstance of the majority of the people who we visit. The combined living expenses of the couple, once they have separated, increase as each party attempts to maintain contact with the children or to travel or provide some place for them to stay in each home. In other cases, the absence or uncertainty of maintenance payments interrupts income flows—more the absence than the uncertainty. Often the custodial parent inherits the full family debt because she stays in the home.

People have difficulty with the rules so they get into this legal and statutory bind. An increasing number of families over the last year report being breached by the department, resulting in either suspension of social security payments or deductions from payments. The rules by which social security payments are interrupted or reduced seemed to be severe and counterproductive, particularly where some find short-term work or where benefits are based on the presumption of non-custodial parent maintenance payments. We have countless examples of those people.

With respect to drug and alcohol dependency, it is observed occasionally but not as frequently as one might suspect. More likely, the female head of the family will be handicapped by the dependency of those around her, either family, friends, children or older people—people who stay and do not contribute to the household expenses. We see, particularly among the Indigenous community, grandmothers looking after seven or eight grandchildren and not receiving all of the parenting payment to go with those children. Sickness is another common observation. When people are living on social security payments, sickness within the family overstresses financial resources. Additional costs arise from doctors' bills and prescriptions getting filled, additional travel expenses and special arrangements such as child care.

One fellow that we have been visiting in recent months has a genetic problem: he weighs about 150 kilos. He has had to travel to Townsville hospital from the Upper Ross region. It is a fairly long taxi ride; there are buses but they will not let him on. He has an abscessed leg and it smells, and he is in constant pain. From time to time he requires a taxi fare. He went down to Brisbane for treatment and needed taxi fares from the airport. His flight down was covered but not transport from the airport to the hospital and back. Subsequently, he had to go down to

Sydney—same thing—so he had to be provided with money to do that. As it turns out, he is going to have that leg off at the hip now and he is going to need some sort of motorised cart which someone is going to have to find for him—probably us.

Another observation is mental illness or physical incapacity. A small but significant number of home visits involve families where mental or physical incapacity or mental illness diminish living conditions. These people are dependent on the kindness of family and friends. They are sometimes taken advantage of. Also noted in recent times is the reclassification of some benefit recipients from disability to Newstart.

I saw one lady on Monday night. Five minutes with her and you would very clearly see that she was not normal. But she had been reclassified to Newstart. She is totally and utterly unemployable yet someone has seen fit to put her on Newstart. She explained that last week she had been sent to an interview with a psychologist who gave her a test. She described the test and it seems likely that she will be going onto a disability pension.

Within the terms of reference we thought we would have a look at the specific features of Upper Ross district and whether there was anything different in our area from areas you have already heard from and had lengthy submissions on. There is not a great deal of difference. I guess the difference is the concentration of poverty in those suburbs, particularly the further west you go—for example, in Kelso. It is a working class region—a long narrow corridor—so there are limited services and amenities within walking distance. Public transport is costly and infrequent. A significant proportion of the population is transient. A lot of the population are involved in seasonal work and a lot are involved in part-time work. We would put a different focus on it than what Frank Costanzo was just putting. There is a shortage of full-time employment that is within the capabilities of those who call on us. There might well be employment opportunities but not within the capability of many of these people: it is a matching issue.

My personal view, after thinking about this over the years—because I also worked with St Vincent de Paul in Sydney some years ago—is that we focus too much on defining poverty in terms of income and expenses. We can do surveys of what income people have and come to some conclusions about the extent of poverty but it would be better to conduct an elementary inventory of accumulated assets of a sample of families to make comparisons. It is the accumulation of effect over time that is more revealing. When we talk about accumulated assets there are financial and property assets but there are also intellectual assets, like the abilities and education of people. And physical and mental health status is an asset that a lot of people do not have to the same extent that you and I have them. Finally, there is access to entertainment, services and other social amenities. These are measures of the quality of existence and they get neglected in that focused look at just income. By this measure the quality of existence of almost all we visit is very, very poor. When you walk into their homes you can see that they have nothing. It is important to remember that poverty accumulates over the lives of some people and over generations within some families.

Mr Northey—I do not have a lot to say—just a couple of things. We have nine conferences in town with 88 members. Our membership is not growing at this stage. For the last few years it seems to have been the older members who are doing it after they have finished their families. This is why we find it very difficult. Our computer statistics for our help line calls, for 2001-02,

show that we had 3,542 calls that year. In 2002-03 it jumped to 6,332 calls. We were getting a number of complaints that people were not getting through to get help so we put a second lady on with a second phone, and that is how far it increased. We get a lot of calls and we find it very difficult to handle because we still have 88 members and where we were receiving 3,500 calls, now we are receiving 6,300. People do this of a night-time when they finish work, or in their afternoons. That is all I have to say.

CHAIR—What were those figures, again?

Mr Northey—In 2001-02 we had 3,542 calls and in 2002-03 we had 6,332 calls. Most of those callers would have received a food parcel that night when we went out with our conference members.

CHAIR—It is a significant increase, isn't it?

Mr Northey—It is unbelievable. We could have more if we put a third lady on but where would we get the funds to keep going? And then we would have to get the members to go out and do the work of a night.

CHAIR—St Vincent de Paul has appeared at every one of our hearings, and that is great. We have certainly had the opportunity of a snapshot of the region—including from sleepy old Raymond Terrace in New South Wales, which you might know, Mr Johnson. Where once they might have dealt with a particular problem, because the freeway is the first step out of Sydney, it is now where women fleeing domestic violence run out of petrol. It is good that you were able to give us those sorts of statistics. Matthew Talbot reported to us that in 1998 they had helped out 23,000 men and in 2002 it was 43,000. So the statistics that you are providing are not going to—we hope, anyway—disappear into the ether.

Mr Northey—Before this period, we had old ladies or volunteers coming in and doing the calls for us. We had people saying that they were having difficulty getting through, so we employed a lady. We found that she could not handle it and we put on a second phone, and you can see how it has jumped up even more.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I would like to thank you gentlemen for coming along here today.

Mr Northey—Thank you very much.

Mr Johnson—Thank you.

CHAIR—I understand that the Australian Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union is another organisation—like yourselves—that has made an appearance at every hearing. They might have missed one or two—that is about it.

Subcommittee adjourned at 12.26 p.m.