

**SUPPORT FOR DROUGHT AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN NEW SOUTH  
WALES**

**Organisation:** Western NSW Community Legal Centre

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## Western NSW Community Legal Centre Inc

29 November 2019

The Honourable Mr Justin Clancy MP  
Chair, Committee on Investment, Industry and Regional Development  
Parliament House  
6 Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Clancy

**RE: SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO SUPPORT FOR DROUGHT AFFECTED  
COMMUNITIES IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

### **1. BACKGROUND**

The Western NSW Community Legal Centre (**WNSWCLC**) is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on Investment, Industry and Regional Development (the **Committee**) in relation to its Inquiry into support for drought affected communities in New South Wales (the **Inquiry**).

WNSWCLC is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation based in Dubbo that provides free legal services to people in western NSW who experience social, economic and/or geographic disadvantage. WNSWCLC provides legal advice, ongoing casework, referrals and representation, and offers outreach services to rural and remote towns, servicing an area of approximately 200,000 square kilometres, bordered by Mudgee in the east, Lightning Ridge in the north, and Bourke and Cobar in the west. WNSWCLC also engages in community legal education, law reform and offers media comment on issues of importance.

In recent years, WNSWCLC has seen the effect of the NSW drought on its clients, their families, and communities. WNSWCLC's solicitors have been required to give an increasing number of advices on employment law matters, including redundancies resulting from the drought, credit and debt matters, and social security and Centrelink issues. In addition, WNSWCLC has seen first-hand the financial and psychological strain which the drought has placed on individuals, families and communities in the region. The Inquiry provides an invaluable opportunity for WNSWCLC to support and give a voice to its clients and the concerns of the communities which it services.

WNSWCLC has conducted consultations with stakeholders, small businesses and clients in its service area and has discussed the impact of the drought at interagency meetings. On the basis of these consultations and informed by its experience providing frontline legal

services to vulnerable Australians directly affected by the drought, WNSWCLC has identified three key impacts of the drought on the western region of NSW. These are:

1. loss of employment opportunities, resulting in high rates of welfare-dependence;
2. increased cost of living and growing debt; and
3. cultural and social impacts of the drought.

This submission explores each of these concerns and calls on the NSW Government to take urgent responsive action. The submission specifically comments on the following Terms of Reference:

- (a) population loss;
- (c) direct and indirect impacts of drought on businesses and industries;
- (d) transition and recovery from drought when drought conditions begin to improve;
- (i) particular impacts on Indigenous communities; and
- (j) any other related matter.

WNSWCLC recognises that the drought has also had a devastating impact on farmers, however this submission does not directly address or explore that impact. Rather, this submission is intended to bring attention to the wider impacts of the drought, particularly on vulnerable Australians who utilise WNSWCLC's services and who are facing significant and increasing financial pressure. They include clients who have lost jobs and can no longer support their families, welfare-dependant clients who face mounting debt and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.

## 2. LOSS OF EMPLOYMENT

The current drought has had and continues to have a critical impact on employment opportunities in regional NSW, across both farming and non-farming related industries.

### 2.1. Loss of employment in farming industries

Looking first at farming industries, ordinarily spring time would see a surplus in casual and seasonal jobs for farm workers – harvesters, packers, laborers, shearers, general farmhands, and cleaners to name a few – ordinarily, there are jobs galore. However, with no crops growing (in many areas the last good harvest was between three and six years ago) and farmers forced to sell livestock because they cannot afford feed or water, the jobs have disappeared.<sup>1</sup> Farms are working on skeleton staff and many local people, including clients of WNSWCLC, have found themselves unemployed or underemployed because there is not nearly enough work to go around.

In Bourke, a remote town of approximately 2,500 people, 370 kilometres north-west of Dubbo, employment prospects looked to be improving at the beginning of 2019 when construction of a \$60 million Small Stock Abattoir was finally completed. The project had promised 200 jobs once the abattoir was fully operational and was looking like it would

<sup>1</sup> Community consultations in Coonamble on 6 November 2019 indicated that the last good local harvest was six years ago. Community consultations in Walgett on 21 October 2019 indicated that the last full harvest in the area was in 2016 and that local grain silos have not been working at full capacity since 2012.

revitalise the disadvantaged local community.<sup>2</sup> However, by late May 2019 the abattoir was closed, citing stock supply issues, and with that closure went the jobs.

In Brewarrina, a town about 100 kilometres east of Bourke, the story is distressingly similar. The Merriman Shearing School, established in 2010, aimed to counter local disadvantage, including low education and high unemployment, by encouraging young Indigenous Australians to enter the wool industry.<sup>3</sup> The school generally ran two 16-week live-in courses per year, enrolling 15 students (aged between 15 and 30) per course and was phenomenally successful in assisting at-risk youth.<sup>4</sup> 50 per cent of graduates were immediately placed into full-time employment following completion of the course and 80-90% of students ended up with full-time employment within the following 6-12 months.<sup>5</sup> However, unfortunately, the school was not immune to the drought and was forced to close in mid-2018 because there were not enough sheep (which traditionally were supplied by local farmers) to run the courses.<sup>6</sup>

When farmers sell-up stock, there is no need for local abattoirs; and when there are no sheep, there is no need for shearers. These are just two of countless examples of how the drought has created invisible victims – not the farmers, or even people who work on or service farms, but individuals, families and communities whose jobs, livelihoods and futures are nevertheless dependent on the local farming economy. The drought has dramatically reduced employment and training opportunities in agricultural industries in the western region and local people and communities are under enormous financial pressure as a result.

## 2.2. Loss of employment in non-farming industries

The impact of the loss of employment opportunities in agricultural roles would not be nearly as significant if alternative local employment was available in other industries. But no new jobs are being created in towns in the western region. Furthermore, as a result of the financial strain felt by farming and farming-dependent families, the local economies have fallen flat and alternative employers, including small-businesses, are now feeling the pressure to sell up meaning even more workers will be let go.

Keith Glover is the owner of K&H Glover, a family-owned and operated Honda garage in Coonamble, 160 kilometres north of Dubbo. Keith spoke to WNSWCLC about the strain that he felt small business owners were under as a result of the drought. He explained that 70-80% of his business was dependent on the rural industry, including the sale and service of farm vehicles, and estimated that sales had dropped by 90% in recent years as a direct

<sup>2</sup> For \$60 million value of Small Stock Abattoir project and anticipated workforce statistics see: Bourke Shire Council, *Annual Report 2017/2018* p.6 <<https://bourke.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Annual-Report-2017-2018.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> Community consultations with representatives from Regional Enterprise Development Institute Ltd and Centrelink in Brewarrina on 22 October 2019. See also: Woolmark, *Merriman Shearing School* <<https://www.woolmark.com/about-wool/woolgrowers/nsw-merriman-shearing-school/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Community consultations with representatives from Regional Enterprise Development Institute Ltd and Centrelink in Brewarrina on 22 October 2019.

result of the drought because people do not have money to spend.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the accumulating losses on his balance sheet and increasing uncertainty over the future, Keith is doing everything he can to avoid letting his staff go, including paying himself less than what he would receive if he sold the business and applied for the tax-payer funded aged pension.

Keith employs five staff, including his two sons and two grandsons, and between them his staff have 11 dependents. Keith recognises how dire the local employment market is and knows that if he lets his staff go, there are no good options for them; their only choices – for them and their families to become welfare-dependent or to move away. Keith explained that local small business owners lie at the heart of the community and want to do their bit to support the town but doing so is becoming harder and harder. If Keith was to close-up-shop, it is likely, at least for a period, that his workers, their families, his wife and himself – 18 people in total – would become Centrelink dependent.

Joe Bellgardt, the owner-operator of the Coonamble butchery, Joe's Quality Meats, had similar concerns. From his shop-front on the main street, Joe described what used to be a vibrant and bustling town centre. However, as the drought continues, local people have less and less disposable income to spend and more and more shops are going out of business and being boarded-up. There is now little to no casual employment available in town, no employment opportunities, traineeships or apprenticeships available for young people, business owners are just "hanging out for rain" and Joe estimates that 70% of the town's population is already dependent on social welfare.<sup>8</sup>

Even if it was to rain consistently and the drought end, Joe believes this situation is likely to last for years. Farmers have now sold their stock and townspeople have mounting debt. There is little money left in the economy. Even the local banks have been quoted as saying that they will not lend because Coonamble is not an economically-viable town.

### 2.3. Potential government action

To support drought-affected communities money needs to be urgently invested in job growth for local people in regional towns, specifically in western NSW. Creating jobs will funnel money back into the economy, reinvigorate local small businesses, and ultimately allow small communities such as Bourke, Brewarrina and Coonamble to not only survive but flourish. WNSWCLC therefore calls on the NSW Government to implement strategies to increase local employment opportunities for local people in drought-affected communities in western NSW. This may include:

1. supporting the development of infrastructure in the region and employing local people to build it;
2. establishing non-agricultural, drought-proof industries in the region so that local economies do not solely depend on farming and the availability of rain; and/or
3. offering grants or no-interest loans, such as those available to primary producers through the NSW Government Drought Assistance Fund, to small businesses to support the employment of local people.

<sup>7</sup> Community consultation with Keith Glover at K&H Glover, Coonamble, on 6 November 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Community consultation with Joe Bellgardt from Joe's Quality Meats, Coonamble, on 6 November 2019.

### 3. INCREASING COST OF LIVING AND GROWING DEBT

Compounding the impact of the loss of jobs in the western region of NSW is the increasing cost of living which is placing even more financial strain on local families and communities. WNSWCLC's solicitors have been providing an increasing number of civil law advices to clients being driven into debt trying to meet every-day essential living expenses. Electricity prices are as high as ever, rental prices are rising, the cost of food and groceries is increasing, and families are needing to meet new costs as a direct result of the drought – most notably the cost of fresh drinking water.

#### 3.1. Rising electricity costs

Surging power prices have been an issue and continue to be a concern across Australia. However, people in regional and remote NSW are bearing the brunt, with regional families paying up to 25 percent more for electricity than their city counterparts.<sup>9</sup> St Vincent de Paul's annual electricity report released in July 2018 estimated the cost of annual energy bills in dual energy households (i.e. households powered by both electricity and gas) in different regions, including:<sup>10</sup>

Region	Average annual energy bills for dual-fuel household from July 2018
Western Sydney, Wollongong, Blue Mountains and Lithgow	\$3,505.00
Eastern Sydney, Sydney's North, Swansea and Newcastle	\$3,685.00
Wagga Wagga and Uranquinty	\$3,730.00
Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange and Parkes	\$3,845.00
Goulbourn, Boorowa and Yass	\$3,885.00
Tamworth	\$4,0090.00

In their July 2019 report, reflecting a change in regulation of the energy industry, St Vincent de Paul projected that power costs would drop for dual-fuel households from July 2019 and estimated how much dual-fuel households could expect to save in the following year, including:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> New South Wales Legislative Council, *Electricity supply, demand and prices in New South Wales* (22 November 2018) <<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/inquiries/2457/Electricity%20Supply,%20Demand%20and%20Prices%20in%20New%20South%20Wales%20-%20Final%20report.pdf>>, pp. xi, 88-89.

<sup>10</sup> St Vincent de Paul Society, *NSW Energy Prices July 2018* (July 2018), <[https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms\\_docs/295992\\_NSW\\_Energy\\_Report\\_July\\_2018.pdf](https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms_docs/295992_NSW_Energy_Report_July_2018.pdf)>, p.35.

<sup>11</sup> St Vincent de Paul Society, *NSW Energy Prices July 2019* (July 2019), <[https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms\\_docs/309452\\_NSW\\_Energy\\_Prices\\_July\\_2019.pdf](https://www.vinnies.org.au/icms_docs/309452_NSW_Energy_Prices_July_2019.pdf)> pp.33-34.

Region	Average decrease in energy bills for dual-fuel households from July 2019
Inner Sydney, Northern Sydney, Swansea, Newcastle, Maitland, Cessnock, Singleton and Upper Hunter	Saving of \$145.00
Western Sydney, Wollongong, Blue Mountains and Lithgow	Saving of \$30.00
Wagga Wagga and Uranquinty	Saving of \$40.00
Bathurst, Orange, Dubbo and Parkes	No saving
Goulbourn, Boorowa and Yass	Saving of \$50.00
Tamworth	Sydney of \$50.00

These figures clearly demonstrate that electricity costs are higher in regional areas and government efforts to lower electricity bills are providing a significantly greater benefit to residents in Sydney and Newcastle metropolitan areas than to those in western NSW and other regional areas.

WNSWCLC notes that no specific figures were provided for remote western region towns including Gilgandra, Coonamble, Coonabarabran, Warren, Nyngan, Walgett, Lightning Ridge, Bourke, Brewarrina or Cobar. Many of WNSWCLC's clients, and others in these areas, report paying over \$1,000 per quarter (\$4,000 per annum) for electricity alone and say that energy costs are continuing to rise.<sup>12</sup> WNSWCLC is providing an increasing number of advices to clients who simply do not have the means to pay their power bills. Some clients are now also receiving disconnection warning notices from their power companies advising that if they do not pay their bills their power will be turned off – going into summer, when power is needed to cool houses in 40 to 50-degree heat, this is far from ideal.

### 3.2. Other living costs and growing debt

General living costs for people in western NSW towns have also been increasing, heightening further the financial strain of families and those out of work. Limited rental properties are available, driving prices high.<sup>13</sup> In Dubbo the median rental price is about \$350 per week; in Bourke between \$200 and \$250 per week, and in Coonamble around \$200 per week.<sup>14</sup> Whilst these may seem low compared to state and national averages, when median personal weekly income sits between \$600 and \$650 per week, any increase

<sup>12</sup> Community consultations including those conducted in Walgett, Lightning Ridge, Bourke, Brewarrina and Cobar between 21 and 23 October 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Prices are high relative to the region, with median rent in western NSW regional towns being well below the national average.

<sup>14</sup> Figures are rough estimates based on information provided by realestate.com.au.

in rental price has a significant impact on people's ability to both afford the rental and stay out of debt<sup>15</sup>.

Throughout WNSWCLC's consultations another issue mentioned by almost every person spoken to was the cost of buying bottled water. Many towns in western NSW including Walgett, Lightning Ridge, Brewarrina, Bourke and Cobar (each serviced by WNSWCLC during a monthly 3-day outreach trip), are surviving on bore water which cannot be drunk. In February 2019, the Walgett Shire Council released a statement that the average sodium level for bore water tested was 300 mg per Litre.<sup>16</sup> The Australian drinking water guidelines recommended value is 180 mg per litre.<sup>17</sup> On average, interviewees estimated that they were paying around \$15 per week per person for bottled drinking water. For a family of four that is \$60 per week, and this is likely to increase heading into summer. Locals in these areas acknowledge and are extremely grateful for donations of drinking water through charities and crowd funding initiatives, however these donations are often one-off and responsive to news-media cycles. Some towns have been surviving on bore water for 24 to 36 months and sourcing and affording fresh and drinkable water remains an ongoing concern.

A further significant cost faced by people in western NSW is the cost of transport. In regional and remote communities, personal motor vehicles are largely the only transport option and are essential for people to move around town and to and from employment. However, because of the financial strain felt in the current economic climate, many people are unable to afford insurance or regular services, repairs and maintenance on vehicles. WNSWCLC is assisting with various matters in which clients have been unable to pay debts on motor vehicles, including debts under loan agreements or debts in relation to repairs, and further matters where clients have been uninsured or unregistered in motor vehicle accidents because they are unable to afford insurance premiums or registration fees. Safety is being put at risk because people feel they have no other option – if they lose their car, they may lose their job and if they lose their job they cannot support their families.

### 3.3. Potential government action

The drought is putting families and communities in western NSW under an enormous amount of financial strain. For a single-person with dependent children, relying on Centrelink due to drought-related unemployment, the maximum Newstart allowance is \$604.70 per fortnight or \$15,722.20 per annum.<sup>18</sup> That is very little to live on in any circumstances, and once you factor in a \$4,000-plus power bill, \$30-\$60 a week for water and other heightening living costs in regional NSW, it is very easy to see how debts are accumulating. WNSWCLC therefore calls on the NSW Government to introduce measures to assist regional and remote

<sup>15</sup> Income estimates are based on average 2016 Census data for Dubbo, Bourke and Coonamble available from <https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/2016>.

<sup>16</sup> Walgett Shire Council, *February Water Quality Tests* (4 March 2019), <https://www.walgett.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Media-Release-February-2019-Water-Quality-Test-Results.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Australian Government, National Health and Medical Research Council, *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines* 6 (October 2017) <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/reports/aust-drinking-water-guidelines.pdf>, p.187.

<sup>18</sup> Australian Government, Department of Human Services, *Newstart Allowance – How much can you get* <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/newstart-allowance/how-much-you-can-get>.

families, particularly those in western NSW, to meet essential living expenses. This may include:

1. offering one-off grants to regional families to assist with living costs. (WNSWCLC notes that tax-cuts are unlikely to assist these families because of how low they sit on the tax-income scale); and/or
2. subsidising the cost of essential goods or services, such as electricity, water, transport, car registration and/or insurance.

#### **4. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACTS OF THE DROUGHT**

Finally, although it is not the specific focus of the Inquiry, WNSWCLC believes that it is essential to recognise and understand the social and cultural impacts that the drought has had on communities in the western NSW region.

##### **4.1. Social and cultural impact of the drought**

For many regional towns, water is not only vital for the town's economic viability but is also at the heart of social and cultural life. In Bourke, when the Darling River is in flow, the river and surrounding areas are alive and buzzing as children and adults alike swim, splash and laugh in the cooling waters, a welcome reprieve from the scorching heat of 40-50 degree days. Through the summer holidays the river keeps local school kids cool, safe, entertained and out of trouble. However, when the river runs dry, this social hub is completely disbanded. Families retreat to houses where fans and overworked air-conditioners provide a poor alternative to the comfort and social interaction available at the river. Those that can afford it seek refuge at the local pool. However, for many the pool is not a viable alternative, at least not every day. Although the \$2.00 entry fee may not seem burdensome,<sup>19</sup> for parents looking to entertain multiple children the costs add up. In January 2019, Bourke recorded 21 consecutive days above 40 degrees.<sup>20</sup> For a family of five, the total cost to enter the pool each day over this 21-day period would have been \$210.00 (or, if they had the funds and foresight to buy a season pass, \$165.00).<sup>21</sup>

The local river systems and land now subject to drought are also of vital cultural importance to the Aboriginal communities in western NSW. 24 different Aboriginal tribal groups are living in Bourke which together account for approximately 30 percent of Bourke's

<sup>19</sup> For entry fee details to Bourke War Memorial Olympic Pool Complex see: Bourke Shire Council, *Swimming Pool*, <<https://bourke.nsw.gov.au/info/swimming-pool/>>.

<sup>20</sup> Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology, *Monthly Climate Summary for New South Wales – New South Wales in January 2019: warmest month on record* <<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/month/nsw/archive/201901.summary.shtml>>.

<sup>21</sup> Pool entry costs vary across the region, with some pools being substantially more expensive making them even less accessible to families experiencing financial strain. At Dubbo Aquatic Leisure Centre, the cost of an adult casual ticket is \$5.20, the cost of a child casual ticket is \$3.60, and a family day ticket is \$18.50; at Cobar Memorial Swimming Pool, the cost of an adult ticket is \$5.50 and a child ticket is \$3.00; at Narromine Aquatic Centre, the cost of a single-entry ticket is \$4.00; across the Warrumbungle Shire Council pools, the casual admission fee is \$3.50; and at Gilgandra Swimming Pool, Coonamble Swimming Centre and Nyngan Memorial Swimming Pool the general single-entry admission fee is \$3.00.

population.<sup>22</sup> For each of these groups, the river is at the centre of their cultural identity and history. It is a place for gathering, for traditional activities including hunting, gathering and fishing, and is a sacred place for ceremonies, lying at the heart of dreamtime storytelling.<sup>23</sup> When the river runs dry, the ability of local Aboriginal communities to practice and pass on their culture is severely restricted.

Jamie Moore from the Marangunka Justice Reinvestment Project in Bourke further explained that staying on the land and remaining connected to country is of enormous cultural significance to local Aboriginal people. Many people are moving out of Bourke and looking for greater opportunities in bigger towns. The 2006 census calculated the population of Bourke to be 3,217 people. This was down to 2,634 people in the 2016 census and is currently estimated to be about 2,500. However, Jamie noted that there are a lot of Aboriginal people who will not move away, regardless of the economic climate. Their ancestors have been on the land for 40,000 years before them and they currently have four or five generations of their family groups living in town. For many Aboriginal communities, in Bourke and across the western region, their connection to the land is too important for them to leave.

#### **4.2. Other social flow-on effects of regional economies in crisis**

The social impact of the drought on communities in the western NSW region becomes even more evident when looking at the flow-effects or social consequences of regional economies being under strain. It has been recognised by government and non-government organisations alike that becoming unemployed and/or being under financial pressure can have a hugely detrimental impact on a person's physical and mental health.<sup>24</sup> In modern society, work is a 'core value and mode of integration' because individuals define themselves by their level of social contribution; employment is perceived as socially productive and therefore morally good, whereas unemployment is inefficient, unproductive and non-progressive.<sup>25</sup> A person's employment, or lack thereof, is therefore key to their identity and self-esteem, especially in regional communities where the working identity of many families is cross-generational. When a person loses their job or lacks job security, as is increasingly the case in western NSW, they lose confidence, purpose, self-esteem, a social network and a means of providing for themselves. This can, and often does, lead to a raft of mental health issues, including isolation, anxiety, depression and drug and alcohol dependence. Throughout WNSWCLC's consultations, local people spoke about the devastating impact that the drought has had on mental health, mood and community morale and described how

<sup>22</sup> The number of Aboriginal tribal groups living in Bourke was confirmed by Viviane Prince from Marangunka Justice Reinvest Project in Bourke on 28 November 2019. For statistics on the percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people living in Bourke see: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2016 Census Quickstats*

<<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/reports/aust-drinking-water-guidelines.pdf>>.

<sup>23</sup> Consultation with Jamie Moore and Vivian Prince from the Marangunka Justice Reinvestment Project in Bourke on 22 October 2019.

<sup>24</sup> See for example: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Age Counts – An inquiry into issues specific to mature-age workers*, (June 2000, Canberra), "Chapter 2 – Consequences of Unemployment"

<[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_Committees?url=ewr/owk/report/index.htm](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=ewr/owk/report/index.htm)>, pp55-56; Beyond Blue, *Unemployment* <<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/unemployment/>>.

<sup>25</sup> Beck, Ulrich, (2000) *The Brave New World of Work*, Oxford: Polity Press, pp. 11-12.

quiet and miserable communities have become. When regional towns are flourishing, shops and town centres become social hubs. However, when shops close and people do not have money to spend, communities retreat, a social hibernation of sorts which further contributes to deteriorating mental health.

Unemployment and underemployment can also have a significant impact on family relationships by changing the dynamic within a family unit and increasing financial strain. An inquiry conducted by the Australian Government in 2000 into issues specific to mature-age workers noted that unemployment often caused family disturbance and stress because of the changing of the breadwinner role between partners.<sup>26</sup> Families must adapt to the formerly employed partner, traditionally the male, being at home a larger percentage of the time with no clearly defined role, while other household members, both adults and children, are pressured to seek employment. WNSWCLC cannot point to empirical data to support a causal link between the impact of the drought and family relationship or family violence issues. However, the drought is a significant concern and pressure point for a number of families within WNSWCLC service region, and a substantial proportion of the advices given by WNSWCLC and its specialist domestic violence unit – Western Women’s Legal Support – continue to be on family law, family or domestic violence, AVOs and victim’s support.

#### **4.3. Potential government action**

In western NSW, the impact of the drought goes far beyond the purely economic consequences for local businesses and communities and it is essential that the Inquiry recognises that and considers strategies which can mitigate the social and cultural harm caused by the drought. This may include:

1. subsidising the cost of local pools or other community services;
2. introducing strategies to encourage social activity and integration and improve mental health and community morale; and/or
3. giving special consideration to the impact of the drought on Indigenous communities and taking measures to preserve Indigenous history, culture, land and identity in drought affected areas.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Through this submission, WNSWCLC has sought to give a voice to its clients’ concerns and shed light on some of the economic, social and cultural impacts of the drought on individuals, families and communities across its service area. However, this submission is only a snapshot – the drought has impacted people and communities in different ways and to different degrees. During WNSWCLC’s consultations, individuals and stakeholders all agreed that to properly understand how the drought has impacted western NSW, and to ensure that government support strategies are as effective as possible, the NSW and Commonwealth governments need to visit drought-affected towns and engage directly with

<sup>26</sup> Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Age Counts – An inquiry into issues specific to mature-age workers*, (June 2000, Canberra), “Chapter 2 – Consequences of Unemployment”

<[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_Representatives\\_Committees?url=ewr/owk/report/index.htm](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=ewr/owk/report/index.htm)>, pp59-60.

communities, families, stakeholders and small business owners. WNSWCLC therefore calls on the Committee to visit drought-affected communities in western NSW. Only by doing so, will the Committee be properly equipped to consider and evaluate the most appropriate options to address the holistic effects that the drought has had on regional communities, specifically those in western NSW.

Should you wish to discuss this submission please do not hesitate to contact Hannah Robinson on [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully

**Western NSW Community Legal Centre Inc**

Per:

[REDACTED]

Hannah Robinson  
Solicitor