

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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13 August 2008

Standing Committee on Social Issues
Inquiry into overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Interim Report
socialissues@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir or Madam

The Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide a supplementary submission to the Inquiry into overcoming Indigenous disadvantage Interim Report.

While there are many additional issues for consideration NCOSS will only be addressing the following issues in this submission

- The appropriateness of driver training programs aimed at assisting members of the Aboriginal community to obtain drivers' licenses (Issue 10)
- Need for a coordinated approach to identifying communities' transport requirements and tailor additional services to meet those needs (Issue 11)
- Mechanisms for improving the reporting and accountability processes for community organisations (Issue 12)

NCOSS is an independent non-government organisation (NGO) and is the peak body for the non-government human services sector in NSW. NCOSS works with its members on behalf of disadvantaged people and communities towards achieving social justice in New South Wales. It was established in 1935 and is part of a national network of Councils of Social Service, which operate in each State and Territory and at Commonwealth level.

NCOSS provides an independent voice on welfare policy issues and social and economic reforms and is the major coordinator for non-government social and community services in NSW.

Issue for consideration 10 – Environment and infrastructure: drivers licenses

The Committee will consider the appropriateness of driver training programs aimed at assisting members of the Aboriginal community to obtain drivers' licenses.

There is a shortage of licensed drivers in Aboriginal communities in NSW. This can be a serious issue for young people who wish to learn to drive, but do not have access to a car and don't have access to older licensed drivers (driving school is expensive, and is not an option for low income families). Fines are also a significant (and related) issue. Currently the NSW Government uses licence suspension as a sanction for unpaid fines. This has

had dramatic effects for many Aboriginal people – particularly in communities where not only are there few motor vehicles, but a small number of people with a valid licence.

The use of license suspension leads to an ongoing problem for Aboriginal communities. A person has their license suspended, however in order to get to work or school or to access services they need to drive. This is the result of limited or no access to public or community transport options. As a result the person drives their car. If they get caught, they get fined again. They cannot pay their fine ... and so the circle continues.

NCOSS has also been informed of another related issue during regional consultations with Aboriginal communities. NCOSS was informed that some young Aboriginal people cycled to get around, however often they were unable to afford a helmet. The young person would then get a fine for not wearing a helmet. They were unable to pay the fine and then cannot get a license as they have an outstanding fine.

Therefore while many of the driver license programs noted in the interim report are to be applauded and should be supported on an ongoing basis, they do not address the issue of the impact of fines on Aboriginal people.

Previously NCOSS has called for a re-structuring of the fine system in recognition that a fixed fine amount has a greater detrimental impact on socio-economically disadvantaged people and isolated communities, who do not have easy access to public transport. A fixed fine imposed regardless of the financial position of its recipient means that people who can least afford to pay a fine are hit hardest, while the system does not impose the same hardship on those with higher incomes.

In other countries such as Sweden, Germany and Finland, there is some recognition of capacity to pay when a fine is levied. The Finnish system varies the fine amount based on the income of its recipient - this means that people receive a fine which is relative to their financial position.

Therefore NCOSS encourages the Committee to call on the NSW Government to explore options for a fine system that is based on capacity to pay. A range of administrative changes across all fine types could also be made such as new guidelines to waive fines in special circumstances, and time payment arrangements, to reduce the unnecessary hardship caused by the current fines regime.

Issue for consideration 11 – Environment and infrastructure: transport

The Committee will consider the need for a coordinated approach to identify communities' transport requirements and tailor additional services to meet those needs.

Frequently there is poor coordination between local, public and community transport providers, which can make existing services difficult to use, or fail to take opportunities to share resources in order to solve community problems. Better coordination of services can help to improve links to vital services, especially for Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal people are frequently excluded from transport consultation and planning processes. This exacerbates existing disadvantage, since Aboriginal people are continually excluded from developing solutions to the current problems. Planning

processes must expressly involve Aboriginal communities in order to redress the poor prioritisation of Aboriginal transport issues.

Solving transport disadvantage in Aboriginal communities will require a concerted approach from Government, transport operators and local communities. An important starting point is to create processes for Aboriginal people to be involved in planning for future transport needs.

As well, existing services are frequently unable to respond flexibly to the particular needs of Aboriginal communities. For example many Aboriginal communities are unable to organise transport to funerals, often because there are a lack of public or community transport options, and no prioritisation for these journeys. Because of the history of mainstream service provision, there is frequently a case for Aboriginal communities to provide their own culturally appropriate services.

NCOSS encourages the Committee to consider innovative transport programs that link transport to services. These must be developed in conjunction and close involvement of the Aboriginal communities affected. These services must be flexible and respond to the particular needs of Aboriginal communities. In the longer term, improvements to transport connectivity can be achieved by better cooperation between government, transport operators and communities in transport and land use planning.

Issue for consideration 12 – Environment and infrastructure: reporting and accountability

The Committee will examine mechanisms for improving the reporting and accountability processes for community organisations.

NCOSS strongly supports the need for consistent and appropriate reporting and accountability processes for all NGOs. This should not be taken, however, to imply that existing governance standards and practices within NGOs generally is in any way lacking or not providing sufficiently high levels of probity, accountability and ethical behaviour.

NCOSS has strongly advocated for continuous improvement to such standards and for appropriate resources and support to be made available to the community sector so that it can collectively develop capacity to meet such requirements. NCROSS is keen to ensure that in meeting the highest possible standards that such processes are consistent across Government, do not lead to unnecessary duplication and minimise transaction and compliance costs.

This is particularly important for smaller NGOs and those that are in regional and remote locations who are less able to access training, resources and support. Many Aboriginal community organisations are small and in regional and remote locations and so this is a particularly relevant consideration for them.

Funding policy- Like other funded community organisations in NSW, an improved and generic funding policy, across all human service funding agencies, would improve the reporting and accountability processes for Indigenous community organisations. At present the range of reporting requirements, which vary according to Departments, combined with a trend toward short-term funding contracts, results in very high transaction and compliance costs for the funded service. It should be noted that the vast majority of

Indigenous and non Indigenous NGOs in NSW receive funding from more than one agency, and often receive small amounts of funding from multiple sources.

As recommended in the NSW Aboriginal Community Care Gathering Committee policy report¹, Government funding agencies need to 'develop a standard consistent approach to accounting and reporting procedures to avoid multiple and duplicate reporting systems'.


Capacity to comply- There are now a broad range of legislative, funding and quality assurance reporting requirements placed on NGOs, including Indigenous NGOs, and this work is in addition to the core function of delivering much needed services. Many Indigenous NGO's lack the resources (funded corporate service positions to enable them to meet these accountability requirements) and the specific expertise/training or the capacity to access such expertise and training due to distance, time and cost.

The NSW Aboriginal Community Care Gathering Committee policy report also recommended recurrent funding to provide accredited training in the financial, human resources and operational management of services.

NCOSS appreciates the opportunity to provide this additional submission.

Should you require any further information, please contact Samantha Edmonds, Deputy Director Policy and Communications, on (02) 9211 2599 ext 111 or samantha@ncoss.org.au

Yours faithfully



Alison Peters
Director

¹ NSW Aboriginal Community Care Gathering Committee (2007) Leading Our Way in Community Care, New South Wales Council of Social Service.

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The Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide a supplementary submission to the Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Interim Report.

Our submission is attached in Adobe .pdf format. If you need more information, please contact Samantha Edmonds, NCOSS Deputy Director Policy and Communications, on 9211 2599, ext 111 or email Samantha@ncoss.org.au

Yours faithfully

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