

Submission  
No 10

## INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

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# WIRRINGA BAIYA

## ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S LEGAL CENTRE INC

Providing free legal advice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women,  
children and youth who are or have been victims of violence

29 November 2007

Standing Committee on Social Issues  
Parliament of New South Wales  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

By Post

Dear Committee,

### **RE: INQUIRY INTO CLOSING THE GAP- OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE**

We refer to the above inquiry.

Wurringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre is a community legal centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, children and youth. Our service is state-wide, and the main focus of the service is to assist victims of violence.

It is well known that police and court statistics show that Indigenous people, in particular women and children, are over-represented as victims of violence, particularly in the crimes of domestic violence and sexual assault. We submit that the high levels of violence experienced by the Indigenous community have a huge impact on the health and wellbeing of the Indigenous population.

Through our work we see the detrimental impact of domestic violence, sexual assault and child sexual assault in terms of both physical health and mental health, which thus reduces the lifetime expectancy rates of its' victims. These health issues are as follows:

#### **Physical Health**

- Severe physical injuries ranging from broken bones, brain damage, scarring, bruising to loss of teeth
- Sexually transmitted disease and unwanted pregnancies
- Poor nutrition, due to poverty partly resulting from lack of financial support by an abusive partner
- Health conditions or diseases linked to or caused by stress, such as high blood pressure

## Mental Health

- Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder
- Suicidal ideation
- Drug and alcohol dependency (with consequential serious impact on physical health)

## Impact on Parenting

- Consequential impact on ability of adult victims to parent properly, resulting in the poor health and emotional wellbeing of children.

The above health issues in turn greatly affect the individual victim's ability to gain a proper education at all levels, and therefore employment. This in turn leads to poverty with all of its associated effects on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Research conducted by the New South Wales Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council in its' report *Speak Out, Speak Strong (2002)*, has shown that an overwhelming majority of Aboriginal women in custody were the victims of sexual and domestic violence. Many of the women in the report cited a connection between the violence they experienced and their drug use. The Report stated that: "One of the most significant and important findings of this study is the clear link between child sexual assault, drug addiction and the patterns of offending behaviour that led the women who participated in this study to be imprisoned" (page 5).

The report by the Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce, *Breaking the Silence: Creating the Future. Addressing Child Sexual Assault in Aboriginal Communities in NSW (2006)*, has identified a number of recommendations to address the issue of child sexual assault within Indigenous communities in New South Wales. It is our understanding that **no** additional funding has been provided by the government to fund any of these initiatives. Rather, funding is to be found from existing budgets to implement these recommendations.

We submit that if the government is truly serious about tackling this urgent issue, it needs to provide additional funding to the relevant government departments to ensure that these recommendations are given adequate funding to be fully implemented without having to take funding from other critical services that the Indigenous community also utilizes.

We also submit that more money needs to be invested in culturally appropriate counseling for Indigenous adult victims of sexual assault as well as domestic violence victims. Furthermore, we submit that more funding is needed to establish more culturally appropriate refuges to enable more Indigenous women and children to escape domestic violence.

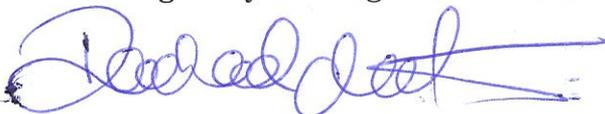
We do not support the Federal Government intervention in the Northern Territory. We submit that the New South Wales Government has to work closely and collaboratively with Indigenous communities in New South Wales to reduce the levels of violence within those communities. It has a sound 'Interagency Plan' to tackle child sexual assault in Indigenous communities but these initiatives must be funded properly, and not at the expense of other existing and critical services. The government must also be transparent about what actions in its' Interagency Plan are being implemented. To date there has been little public information about what the government is actually doing.

It is our view that if additional and adequate funding is invested now to tackle child sexual assault, adult sexual assault and domestic violence, the government will reduce the lifetime expectancy gap. It will also save the government money down the track, especially with respect to the cost of the criminal justice system, the correctional system, community services and the health system.

If you have any questions about this submission please contact Christine Robinson, Coordinator, or Rachael Martin, Principal Solicitor, at this office on (02) 9569 3847.

Yours faithfully,

**Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre**



**Per: Rachael Martin**  
**Principal Solicitor**