

ENGAGEMENT WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

BACKGROUND

I have regularly stated my concerns in the Commission's Annual Reports about the availability and accessibility of the Commission's services to Aboriginal people. In my first report (1998/99) I stated that I was "*particularly concerned that Aboriginal people within the Northern Territory are significantly under represented in the complaints process and disproportionately over represented in health service utilisation*". I went on to state that "*the approach I intend to take is to employ and train an Aboriginal Complaints Officer and provide opportunities for Indigenous people to input into the development of a culturally and less discriminatory complaint mechanism*".

\$20,000 was spent in 1998 on employing a consultant to develop a detailed position analysis and training program for the position of Aboriginal Complaints Officer. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth Government, despite their previous agreement, did not provide the on-going funding to employ the Officer. Because of this, in 1998/99 and again in 1999/00 I sought funding as part of the NT Government's budget process to employ such an Officer and commence the training program. Despite a compelling case having been made out that this was a priority area and the amount of time and effort put into this proposal, no funds to employ an Aboriginal Health Complaints Officer were forthcoming.

In my 2000/01 Report I stated that I had been severely criticised by the Aboriginal Justice Advocacy Committee (AJAC) for not taking action to make the Commission's services more readily available and appropriate for Aboriginal people. They suggested that this would be achieved by my:

- obtaining additional shop front accommodation in Darwin that could be directly accessed from the street; and
- employing an Aboriginal Complaints Officer.

I agreed at the time that implementation of both these suggestions would go some way to making the Commission's services more readily available but that neither would be implemented unless additional funding was provided to the Commissioner for these purposes. Additional funding through the Budget Cabinet process for the employment of an Aboriginal Complaints Officer was not forthcoming and I could only conclude at the time that provision of equitable services to Aboriginal people was not a Government priority.

Frustrated with the lack of support from Government, I determined that, on becoming vacant, I would reprioritise the duties of an Investigation Officer's position in Alice Springs to become an Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer. This was done, the position advertised and in September 2003, Mr Wayne Sanderson was employed as the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer.

THE POSITION

The position is based in my Alice Springs Office and its key responsibilities are to:

- Develop mechanisms to enhance indigenous users accessibility to the services provided by the Ombudsman and the Commission.
- Provide an educational resource to the indigenous communities throughout the Northern Territory by developing and distributing educational and promotional material.
- Receive, inquire into, investigate and resolve complaints

The position commenced a project to develop mechanisms to improve accessibility for Indigenous people in November 2003.

THE PROJECT

The objective of this project is to pilot an access and awareness mechanism for the Ombudsman and the Commission that will enhance indigenous users accessibility to the services provided by the Ombudsman and the Commission.

It is envisaged that as a result:

- opportunities for Indigenous people to make complaints and participate in improvements to, and the development of, government services, health services and community services, will be improved;
- Indigenous people will receive culturally relevant service delivery;
- targeted organisations/communities will be aware of the role and function of the Office of the Ombudsman and the Commission; and
- identified personnel will be effective in delivering the role and function of the Office of the Ombudsman and the Commission, which will result in their clients enjoying the same level of awareness.

Two organisations have been specifically targeted to assist with the implementation of this project. The organisations and the reasoning for their selection are:

Tangentyere Council Inc. (Tangentyere)

Tangentyere provides assistance and services to all Special Purpose Leases (Town Camps) in Alice Springs and has a number of services including Day/Night Patrol (including administrative support for all Central Australian Remote Night Patrols), Job Shop, Community Development Employment Program, Land Care, housing, education, Mens' Health, Meals on Wheels, complaint advocacy and financial counselling. These services include contact with people from/in town camps, a number of whom have English as a second language. Town camps also have a significant number of people staying in them that are visiting from remote areas. The objectives of Tangentyere are to relieve the poverty, sickness, destitution, distress and misfortune of Aboriginal people in Central Australia, with a focus on people living in Town Camps in and around Alice Springs.

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Association (Waltja)

Waltja is a community based organisation, working with Aboriginal families in remote Central Australia. Services provided by Waltja include, Petrol Sniffing Brokerage and Support, Licensed Childcare, Family News publications, Disability Support, Child Rearing Practices Support, Aged Care Consultancies – Advocacy and Support and On the Job Training. Services are provided by Waltja to communities grouped under the ATSIC Papunya and Alice Springs Wards. The estimated population of Aboriginal people in this area is 13,000, spread over an area of 700,000 square kilometres. Waltja works with approximately 32 communities. There are approximately 9 main language groups in the area covered by Waltja.

Key positions within these organisations are being utilised to assist with raising the awareness, and therefore the accessibility, of the Office of the Ombudsman and the Commission. The logic behind this approach is that these positions have daily contact with Aboriginal people and are therefore best placed to become aware of potential complaints to the Office of the Ombudsman and the Commission. By providing these people with the support of the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer and training in the role and function of the Office of the Ombudsman and the Commission, it is envisaged that they will become effective in promoting approaches to these Offices.

This project does not replace existing Ombudsman and Commission access and awareness visits to Aboriginal communities and/or organisations. Those visits continue in addition to this project.

PROJECT ACHIEVEMENTS DURING 2003/04

1. Specific presentations on the project itself and for identified positions/people were developed.
2. Formal approaches were made to Chief Executive Officers of Tangentyere and Waltja. These approaches included:
 - An introduction of Wayne Sanderson, Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer.
 - A project overview.
 - Obtaining approval from the organisation for their staff to be involved.
 - Invitations being sent to allow staff from the organisations to meet and discuss the project in more detail with the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer. As a result of these invitations a presentation was made to the Tangentyere Executive in December 2003 and to the Aged Care and Disability Group at Waltja in February 2004.
 - Seeking a “contact person” to liaise with the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer to assist in the day to day delivery of the project. To this effect two contact people were identified within Tangentyere and they organised an all staff meeting which the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer attended. Ombudsman and

HCSCC pamphlets have also been distributed to Waltja and Tangentyere.

3. In addition to the Project above, the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer met with the Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT) and subsequently presented the Ombudsman and Commission information at one of their staff meetings.
4. The Town Clerk from Pt Keates was approached to be part of the project and agreed that the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer could visit the Community. It was envisaged that this visit would take place prior to the end of 2004.
5. Apart from the specific organisations identified, contact was also made with the following:
 - Health Services Coordinator, Central Australian Remote Health Development Services.
 - A Mens' Health Meeting between Tangentyere Council and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress), at the invitation of Tangentyere CEO. The meeting was attended by a number of Town Camp Presidents and a large number of Town Camp men. This opportunity gave the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer a chance to speak informally with a very large number of men from Town Camps regarding the services available to them at the Commission and the Ombudsman's office.
 - Director of Medical and Clinical Services, Alice Springs Hospital to discuss how the position could assist the Aboriginal Liaison Unit at the Hospital. The Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer was then put in touch with the Coordinator of the Aboriginal Hospital Liaison Team and provided brochures and posters.
 - Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service to arrange a meeting to ensure that both our offices have a better understanding of the services provided by each other.
 - Hermannsburg to advise of and explain the role of the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer. Council Members and staff at the Cultural Centre were very interested in the position and asked a number of questions regarding contacting the Office and where the office was located in Alice Springs.
 - The Hospital Liaison workers at Nganampa Health were visited and the roles and functions of the Ombudsman and the Commission were discussed.

CONCLUSIONS

It would appear that the informal approaches have generated a far better outcome than the project's methods. Organisations such as Tangentyere and Waltja are extremely important organisations and have face to face contact with a large Aboriginal population; as a result I believe the project's approach may be asking too much from these organisations.

Simply ringing key people in organisations and visiting them to identify opportunities to speak with staff, be that one person or a group seems to be far better received and more effective. This approach does not require significant effort on the part of organisations and still allows for the Ombudsman and Commission information to be distributed. Staff of these organisations also seem to appreciate meeting with the Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer.

I am however concerned that despite utilising my own resources and my best efforts I am still only playing lip service to enhancing Aboriginal access to the services provided by the Ombudsman and Commission. At the same time, the resources I have diverted away from my core responsibilities for this purpose have led to a reduction in the resources available to resolve complaints. Recognising this problem, I again approached Budget Cabinet for additional funding of \$60,000 for 2004/05 to undertake a detailed and justifiable community engagement program specifically targeting Aboriginal people. This funding proposal was prepared with the assistance of DEET and I would take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the assistance provided by the department. I was again told that it was not a priority.

I can only conclude from this that Government does not support the notion of the Ombudsman and Commission engaging with communities outside of major centres in order for them to be aware of and have access to the services of the Commission and the Ombudsman. As a result the most vulnerable members of the community have no understanding of and no access to these services and Government is prepared to let this remain the status quo.

Without additional funding and the support of Government I cannot continue to provide these additional liaison services to Aboriginal people. As such, the position of Aboriginal Liaison/Investigation Officer will revert to its original duties of Investigation Officer and activities associated with providing access and awareness to remote Aboriginal people and communities will be severely restricted. The Commission, as is clearly the message from Government, will restrict its activities to only resolving complaints and continue to provide an inequitable service to 28% of the Territory's population, that is Aboriginal people.