



Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia

Contribution from CCYP to the Department of Indigenous Affairs submission to the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities' inquiry

As Western Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People since December 2007, I have responsibility for advocating for the half a million Western Australian citizens under the age of 18 and for promoting children and young people's entitlement to live in a caring and nurturing environment and to be protected from harm and exploitation. I must also give priority, and have special regard, to the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

In this role, I have travelled extensively throughout Western Australia, and consulted widely with government and non government agencies, as well as with children and young people and their families and communities. I have had the opportunity to see accomplishments borne out of collaborative relationships between government agencies, and successful initiatives through using a partnership approach with Indigenous people and other stakeholders.

I have also seen barriers to successful implementation of Indigenous initiatives in regional and remote areas.

This contribution to the Department of Indigenous Affairs submission concentrates on four central themes:

- That there is a significant need for more activities and programs for children and young people in regional and remote WA;
- That there is insufficient coordination of the existing activities and programs for children and young people in WA;
- That the health and wellbeing of children and young people in the State's regional and remote communities, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, can be improved providing them and their families with appropriate services; and
- That children and young people should be given the opportunity to participate fully in decision making and policy development that affects them and that their contributions should be given serious consideration and taken into account.

I will elaborate on each of these points below, under specific issues for consideration which have come to my attention as Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Issues for Consideration

Investment in Early Childhood Services

There is a growing recognition that the first years of life are the key to children's growth and development toward a harmonious and productive adult life. The nature of our society will be greatly shaped by the value which is placed on young children and the resources and support offered to them and their parents. As well as the benefits to children, there are sound economic arguments that an investment in early childhood leads to benefits for the community and government in that children are more likely to be physically healthy, succeed academically, have greater employment options, commit less crime and are less likely to be engaged in child protection systems or dependant on Centrelink payments in the long-term. These outcomes are even more strongly indicated for children who live in disadvantaged families or areas.

It is my view that a lead agency such as an Office of Early Childhood would be the best vehicle for administering a State-wide Early Childhood Plan. Such an Office would bring together parenting programs, maternal health services, playgroups, child care, and early childhood programs, including those incorporating Aboriginal parenting, to give the best start to young children and their families.

With these developments in place, service delivery to and by the early childhood sector would be streamlined across the State, bringing much needed cohesion and coordination and vastly improving economic efficiencies. Importantly, WA would then be best placed to maximise the opportunities arising from the COAG Early Childhood Agenda directions and resources, and potential investment by the private sector.

Children and Young People's Views

In consultations with children and young people, they repeatedly tell us that having things to do and keeping active are extremely important. "Boredom" and "lack of things to do" were identified as the things that aren't so good about living in Australia. "Having more activities, facilities and sport" was rated as a high priority in things that could be made better about Australia. The nature of the activities children and young people were interested in varied primarily according to age, although there were some differences according to geographical location.

Youth Services

In almost every regional and remote community I have visited through the Pilbara, Kimberley and Goldfields regions, there was a call for more activities and programs for young people of all ages, including Aboriginal children and young people.

While most communities have some sporting activities, particularly for young boys, there are limited alternative organised activities or programs in their local communities. The benefits of such programs are enormous both in the short-term and the long-term — with positive outcomes for health, emotional and social development, and as diversions from anti-social behaviour. In December 2008, I called on the State Government to use its Royalties for Regions program to fund a Regional Children and Youth Plan. This Regional Children and Youth Plan would fund, in a coordinated way, programs that provide kids with activities outside of school, including sport and cultural activities, which are proven to provide a range of benefits to children and the community.

Health and Wellbeing

Drugs and Alcohol

The need for cohesive service, support and rehabilitation was raised in many regional and remote areas I visited. This includes increasing access to drug and alcohol treatments and support programs for parents or carers.

In Fitzroy Crossing, community members informed me that alcohol restrictions had given them the breathing space to assess need and plan services to improve their children's quality of life and future opportunities. Locals also told me about the positive impact the alcohol restrictions were having on children and young people - that their children and young people are living in a safer, less violent community and are less stressed. The need for appropriate alcohol restrictions is further supported by the views of children and young people; in particular the recent series of community consultations in Halls Creek where all 76 children involved voted their top wish as an alcohol ban for the town.

Community members from Halls Creek have also advised me about the alcohol problems in their town and the need for a rehabilitation centre rather than people being sent away for treatment. Members highlighted support services for children and young people and appropriate responses to the ongoing health impacts of alcohol abuse on mothers and child protection issues for children as urgent requirements. They continue to raise with services the need for a 'safe house' in particular, and a healing centre with provision of a counselling service as currently none is available.

A good example of one support program initiative is a 'group home' in Halls Creek which I visited for at-risk children run by the Department of Child Protection. This home, like any other dwelling in appearance, provides short stays for children whose parents are struggling to come to terms with their responsibilities. Staff at the 'group home' provide positive support to parents in equipping them with the necessary tools and skills to care for their child during home visits. The 'group home' continues to keep a strong indigenous culture, taking the kids out to collect goanna, bush fruit and berries, and English is a second language for most of the children.

In many regional and remote centres I have visited, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) has consistently been reported as another major health concern. In addition to the alcohol restrictions and other initiatives to reduce alcohol consumption there is a critical need for preventative health education that highlights the importance of this issue as well as immediate implementation of a model of care so that children with FASD, and their families, can receive appropriate diagnosis, treatment and support. This support should also extend to meeting the learning needs of children affected through to care into adulthood.

I support the imposing of alcohol restrictions for those communities that request it, acknowledging the importance of concurrently offering a range of interventions and support, considering at all times the safety and welfare of children and young people in those communities.

Health and Mental Health

In some Australian communities the lack of access to basic infrastructure such as safe drinking water and adequate housing leads to infections and disease. This problem is exacerbated in some regional and remote communities through the

inequity of access to basic health care which can then lead to long-term health problems.

An example of this is the failure of basic services to young children and their parents to keep pace with WA's significantly increased birth rate which has risen almost 16% between 2002 and 2006. Right now, WA is short 94 community child health nurses, 135 school health nurses and over 100 child development staff, meaning the basic health needs of babies, toddlers and children are not being met particularly in regional and remote areas.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Report Card on the Wellbeing of Young Australians ranks Australia 20th of 27 nations for infant mortality.

This is a major concern but of even greater significance is that the infant mortality rate for indigenous Australians is more than double that of non-indigenous Australians. Investment in building an Aboriginal health workforce is also essential - currently there are only 5 Aboriginal Child Health Nurses throughout the State and the existing shortfall in Aboriginal Health Workers is estimated by the Department of Health at approximately 500. Services provided by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people are most often the most effective strategy. Again the South Australian Family Home Visiting Program is a proven strategy in this regard. Under this program, Aboriginal consultants work closely with maternal health nurses and their Aboriginal clients.

My aspiration is for an increase, particularly in regional and remote WA, in maternal health services and school health nurses to meet the demands of current needs and the needs of an increasing population. This will offer a range of appropriate, locally designed services with the capacity to target all new mothers and provide the necessary health assessments on new-borns and children as required.

A need to increase health and mental health services, support and rehabilitation facilities was reported consistently as well as the problems in some areas of transport to and from services, provision of adequate housing and physical infrastructure in regional and remote WA.

Learning and Development

Education

The poor education outcomes for Western Australian Aboriginal children and young people are of great concern to me. The 2008 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results showed, once again, that in WA, in every year and every area tested, Aboriginal student achievement is significantly lower than non-Aboriginal student achievement. Despite wide recognition of this disparity, there has been little to no improvement over the years.

Some individual programs and schools are, however, achieving marked results and provide promising practice of ways to support and enhance the educational experience and outcomes of their Aboriginal students.

The programs offered by the schools vary in their strategies and target groups but share a number of critical success factors including: a child-centred view to improve

the educational wellbeing of the students; a commitment to encourage student participation; and support from the local community. An access program at Swan View Senior High School, for example, is achieving outstanding results with Aboriginal students completing year 12 and then securing a place in further education, training or employment with the support of local businesses and the community.

Employment

Many young people reported to me that they have limited opportunities for training in their local communities, particularly for Aboriginal children living in regional and remote WA. Geographical location can lead to a lack of choice for some school leavers for training and being able to participate in local employment programs. For example, a number of remote communities are looking to their students to take on key roles in their towns such as rangers and lifesavers.

In these areas, sustainability is paramount; in one community I visited, the new local swimming pool was closed due to a lack of suitably qualified staff, and another, a new all-purpose recreation centre was empty and unused due to the absence of youth workers.

In these circumstances, offering local training would be a means to ensure sustainability of activities, employment and services, and improved outcomes for children and young people.

Safety and Protection

Safety

The safety and protection of children and young people from violence and abuse is paramount and must be our first priority. Initiatives such as the multifunction police stations and the increased police presence in some communities are reportedly having positive outcomes in improving the safety of communities creating the opportunity for the other essential services and strategies to be implemented.

Housing

The lack of accommodation for a wide range of people is a commonly reported issue, for families seeking employment as well as those living in remote communities. Inadequate and overcrowded housing, particularly in Aboriginal communities, can contribute to poor health and poor educational outcomes, and places children at an increased risk of suffering child abuse.

The lack of appropriate accommodation also exacerbates youth justice issues, with some young people being denied bail on the sole grounds that no accommodation is available. This is unacceptable, particularly in light of the overarching legislative principle that detention must be a last resort.

The recent Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability has identified significant housing stress and increased risks of poverty due to rising housing costs relative to income. The particular disadvantage of indigenous families is highlighted as requiring significant and immediate action to overcome low levels of home ownership, low access to private rental and high levels of housing stress, overcrowding and homelessness.

Youth Justice

The continuing overrepresentation of young Aboriginal people in WA's justice system is of great concern to me. There are a vast number of areas in the youth justice system where improvements are required (many most recently highlighted by the Auditor General's Performance Report - *The Juvenile Justice System: Dealing with Young People Under the Young Offenders Act*) but one of the most significant for regional and remote areas is the transportation of young offenders, particularly Aboriginal children and young people, from remote areas to Perth. I have been informed that in some cases young people are held in custody for days at a time until arrangements can be made to transport them to a detention centre.

Lack of accommodation (as mentioned previously) and the shortage of Police Officers and Corrections Officers available to participate in Juvenile Justice Team meetings in regional and remote areas are also contributing factors that are undermining the principles of the *Young Offenders Act 1994* - particularly that detention must be a last resort and that young people should be dealt with in a manner that is fair and culturally appropriate.

There is also a dearth of programs available both for young offenders and for young victims of crime in regional and remote areas. The recent disclosures of sexual abuse in the Kimberley, for example, revealed the need for programs for young sexual offenders, healing centres for victims, and significantly increased educational and preventative behaviours programs.

Staffing in Regional and Remote Communities

Service providers in Halls Creek informed me of the difficulty in recruiting people. That finding them housing was almost impossible and that the alternative was to have fly in - fly out workers which meant that residents were unable to create meaningful relationships with service providers.

Housing and lack of social infrastructure were cited as some of the main reasons for the difficulty in recruiting as well as:

- Lack of childcare;
- Lack of access to good quality education for children;
- The increased costs of living in regional and remote i.e. food produce;
- That professionals were seeking alternative employment in the mining industry as pay was considerably higher; and
- Lack of feeling safe due to large influx of mine workers living in temporary accommodation.

Effective collaboration

I acknowledge the initiatives being developed through COAG and the Federal Government in relation to Indigenous children and their families. Many of these have the potential to improve the wellbeing of children and young people. It is critical, however, that those reforms be based on evidence and research, effective engagement with local communities and be well coordinated and integrated with State government, local government, private industry and the not for profit sector.

Summary

In summary, children and young people wherever they reside are entitled to the same levels of basic services such as health and education. They should also have access to basic amenities such as clean water and affordable fresh foods, having the same opportunities as those living in metropolitan areas.

I hope this information is of use for your submission.

Yours sincerely
MICHELLE SCOTT
Commissioner for Children and Young People WA
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