

Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse comment on the Federal Government's response to issues of child sexual assault in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities

The AD&FV Clearinghouse welcomes the Federal Government's concern about addressing the significant levels of family violence and child sexual assault devastating some Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The Government's response to the Wild and Anderson (2007) report and the resulting discussions across the nation have shone a spotlight on critical needs in Indigenous communities; needs that for many years, Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers and researchers have insisted require urgent and comprehensive efforts to address them. However, any response must be long term and sustainable. Interventions need to address the underlying issues contributing to these problems; they need to be informed by research, need to work with Indigenous communities and support existing, successful initiatives.

The Wild and Anderson report documents a terrible situation of child abuse that is immediate and severe. However, casting the problem in terms of a disaster requiring military intervention and penalising approaches will foster unnecessary anxiety and alarm amongst Indigenous people, particularly about the removal of their children and loss of land rights. Indigenous people need to be reassured that interventions will be considered and sustainable; that interventions will stop the violence while supporting them to heal their families and communities.

Interventions need to address the underlying contributors to violence and abuse. Problems of family violence and child sexual abuse have their foundation in chronic Indigenous disadvantage, past and present removal of children from families, racism and a lack of basic infrastructure and services. They are also closely linked to drug and alcohol abuse. Without a doubt, Indigenous communities (particularly in the Northern Territory) require more policing services, health services, houses, schools and better access to education and employment opportunities. They also need comprehensive counselling, as well as health and criminal justice responses to family violence, child abuse and child sexual abuse.

Over the past few decades Indigenous communities, local services and governments have developed successful programs addressing violence, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, housing, health, parenting, education and employment issues. Many of these programs have been abandoned due to a lack of sufficient and ongoing funding. This is a time to invest and support those interventions which have demonstrated effective outcomes, rather than seeking to develop new, untried initiatives.

A clear goal for any intervention is to identify perpetrators (both Indigenous and non Indigenous) of family violence and child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities, and to deliver protection and justice for victims. These are issues shrouded in shame and secrecy, as well as collusion and cover-up by

some community members. Those Indigenous people who contributed in consultations for the Wild and Anderson report are to be commended for speaking openly about these issues and identifying solutions.

Notwithstanding the need for urgent responses, we also need to acknowledge the real and significant barriers to addressing such entrenched problems. For example, sexual assault cases (including child sexual assault) generally face an extremely high attrition rate in the criminal justice system; this process has been well documented (e.g. NSW Criminal Justice Sexual Offences Taskforce 2006). More police and arrests alone will not combat the high rates of child sexual assault or deliver justice to victims. We need to see comprehensive and sustained strategies that redress factors which underlie or contribute to ongoing patterns of violence and abuse. We also need to address factors in the criminal justice system that contribute to attrition of these cases.

The Clearinghouse urges the Federal Government to utilise the recommendations of the many inquiry and taskforce reports listed below; recommendations that were founded in consultation with Indigenous people themselves, as well as drawing on considerable research and information about these issues.

Many of the Federal Government's proposals find their origin in comments made by Mr Noel Pearson, Director of Cape York Partnerships, about the Wild and Anderson report. While Mr Pearson is a much respected voice from the Indigenous community, he is just one voice representing one type of community. There are many different communities for whom different approaches are needed. It is vital that the Federal Government works in partnership with local Aboriginal communities (and state and territory governments) to develop and implement initiatives, so as to ensure the best possible outcomes for those communities.

These problems are not confined to Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. As the numerous inquiry and taskforce reports listed below show, they are problems experienced across Australia. Now is the time for a nationwide investment in and response to violence and abuse in Indigenous families and communities. Importantly, these problems are not experienced in every Indigenous community. There are many stable, functioning, healthy communities, supported by strong local leadership. In bringing focus to the serious issue of child sexual assault, it is important not to demonise Indigenous communities and people.

We all need to work towards building Indigenous communities that are strong, self reliant and healthy. Achieving this needs long term, sustainable initiatives that uphold Indigenous rights; that strengthen, support and empower Indigenous people to secure a healthy and safe future for them and their children.

Finally, governments and communities need to acknowledge that family violence and child sexual abuse are prevalent in both Indigenous and non-

Indigenous communities. This national debate provides an opportunity for federal and state governments to develop and support interventions that prevent family violence and child sexual abuse across all Australian communities.

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