



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
11th Assembly
Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT

Public Forum Transcript
11.00 am, Friday, 3 February 2012
Mirambeena Lodge, Darwin

Members: Ms Marion Scrymgour, MLA, Chair, Member for Arafura
Ms Kezia Purick, MLA, Member for Goyder
Mr Peter Styles, MLA, Member for Sanderson

Witnesses: TIWI ISLANDS SHIRE COUNCIL

Ms Lynette De Santis (Mayor Tiwi Islands Shire Council): welcomed Committee members and advised Councillors that the Committee was attending their meeting to discuss the issue of youth suicide on the Tiwi Islands.

Ms Marion Scrymgour (Chair Select Committee Youth Suicide in the NT): thanked the Mayor and Councillors for allowing Committee members to come and meet with them and apologised for having to cancel the previous meeting and public forum due to the weather. Ms Scrymgour also noted that the Committee was keen to meet with Councillors today as it might not be possible to get over to the Tiwi Islands given that the Committee is on a very tight timeframe to get the report drafted and ready to be presented to Parliament in the March Sitings.

Ms Scrymgour introduced other Committees members in attendance: Ms Kezia Purick, Member for Goyder, and Mr Peter Styles, Member for Sanderson. Ms Scrymgour advised that the other two members of the Committee who were unable to attend were Ms Lynne Walker, Member for Nhulunbuy and Mr Michael Gunner, Member for Fannie Bay.

Ms Scrymgour provided a brief overview of the purpose of the inquiry and the work of the Committee to date.

Ms Scrymgour and Ms Purick discussed what the Committee had heard during the course of the inquiry about the alarming rate of suicide in Indigenous communities, the work that has been carried out by the Children's Commissioner, Dr Howard Bath, and the research that still needs to be done in order to gain a better understanding of why suicide rates in Indigenous communities had increased so much since over recent years.

Ms Lynette De Santis: noted that bullying was a concern in the school, especially inter-clan bullying.

Ms Marion Scrymgour: mentioned the kids matters and mind matters programs that the Committee had heard about which aim to develop emotional health and well being and build resilience so that children were more able to deal with things like bullying.

Roseanna ?: asked whether the rates of suicide mentioned by Ms Scrymgour included suicide attempts or just completed suicides.

Ms Marion Scrymgour: advised that she was only referring to completed suicides. Ms Scrymgour noted that the data provided to the Committee from the Police Commissioner indicated that the number of attempted suicides was considerably higher. The work being done in WA regarding the review of deaths by misadventure to try and get a better idea of how many of these might also be considered to be suicide was also mentioned. It was noted that more research needs to be done in this area.

Roseanna ?: mentioned that the DARE program used to be offered in Tiwi Island schools and noted that it was particularly good. Apart from providing education about drugs and alcohol, it also looked at emotional well being and the development of peer support. It was unclear why this program had stopped being offered. It was assumed that the funding had run out.

Ms Lynette De Santis: noted that kids matters and mind matters should be in all schools across the NT. It was noted that too many programs were offered on an ad-hoc basis.

Mr Alan Hudson (Chief Executive Officer Tiwi Islands Shire Council): noted that the greatest problem currently facing communities on the Tiwi Islands was the epidemic of marijuana. Police estimate that 80% of the population are addicted to marijuana. It was noted that it undermines everything - people don't want to work, kids threaten parents to get money to buy cannabis. It was noted that a child recently stabbed one of their parents because they could not get any money to buy drugs.

It was also noted that the Council is having difficulties getting PAWA to put caps on the remaining power poles and also on any new ones that they put in as they are still experiencing lots of attempted suicides from power poles.

It was noted that cannabis comes into the Tiwi Island communities both by plane and boats. It is not unusual for anywhere up to 100 or 150 young kids to be roaming around the streets at 3 or 4am.

Ms Lynette De Santis and others: noted that they have a lot of break and enters with kids either looking for cannabis or stealing food because they have the 'munchies' from smoking cannabis.

Mr Alan Hudson: noted that when the Council put in their submission for sport and recreation funding they asked for money for additional workers as the current level of funding meant that the ratio of kids to supervisors was in the order of 50:1 which was totally unrealistic and the department did not acknowledge the high proportion of young people in the population. Initially the department refused their application and cut their funding completely as their bid was not considered to be competitive enough. Whilst the department has since refunded the Council it was noted that it is still not enough to employ the staff required. It was acknowledged that sport and recreation programs were a good way of building self esteem.

Gambling was also raised as another serious issue on the Island which impacts on people's willingness to work. After Christmas the Council held a public meeting about the gambling and the number of break ins by people looking for money. Although the Council advised the community that gambling in public was banned nobody listens and the police do not enforce it.

Cannabis use and gambling were noted as being the main drawbacks on the Islands as people don't want to work or participate in society. It was also seen to be responsible for kids not going to school as they are up all night smoking.

Cr Henry Dunn: noted that there are only 2 police officers in Nguuu and they are just overwhelmed by the amount of break ins and other anti social behaviour.

Mr Alan Hudson: stated police have been known to work 48 hrs straight trying to maintain some sense of order in the community.

Cr Henry Dunn: noted that there were no police at Milikapiti even though it had a population of 600. There are 2 police officers at Garden Point. It was noted that the police don't last long and leave due to the workload and the conditions they have to work in – dilapidated buildings full of asbestos and ridden with white ants.

Ms Lynette De Santis: noted that the Council was expected to upgrade these buildings but was not provided any funding to do so.

Cr Henry Dunn: pointed out that in the absence of a designated space, the juvenile diversion program has to be run out of the childcare centre. He noted that in spite of all the good work the program officer, Kevin Doolan, had done there was no support in terms of assisting the Council to construct a dedicated space for young people to use where they run programs, and have a space where they could discuss issues of concern in confidence.

Mr Peter Styles: noted that the supply of marijuana was a problem that could be stopped as there must be people in the community that know how it gets onto the islands.

Cr David Boyd: pointed out that whilst marijuana was a problem, when it ran out the problems actually got worse – people will often get violent and threats of suicide increase.

Cr Henry Dunn?: the police seem to pick and choose what they will or won't police.

Mr Peter Styles: or is just that they are overwhelmed? So what's the answer? If you stop the gunga it causes other issues?

Cr Henry Dunn: probably, there was a big fight here last year and the 2 police officers just could not control the number of people that got involved.

Mr Peter Styles: maybe we need to rotate the police, keep the same OIC and rotate the constables. Perhaps that is a recommendation the Committee needs to put forward – rotation of police to inhibit burnout.

Councillor?: there is no one solution and we need to work together. Marion you talked about the lack of funding for mental health. The Federal government people need to spend more time in communities – they keep consulting but they don't listen. It is mindboggling the amount of money going into Indigenous communities but nothing is happening. There needs to be a grass roots approach, facilitated by government. We need parenting programs to assist with attitudinal change. Funding bodies need to get serious about listening to people.

Ms Marion Scrymgour: yes it is amazing just how much money has been spent and for very little gain.

Mr Peter Styles: there is the potential to use places like the Tiwi Islands and Groote Eylandt as the communities have clear boundaries to trial holistic, community based programs.

Cr David Boyd?: the kids are bored and there is a lack of youth programs.

Ms Marion Scrymgour: we also need to be honest about the politics on the ground that divides people. We need to look at why all the funding allocated hasn't worked – where does it go? We need to aim funding at community well being initiatives.

Councillor?: there are so many services it confuses people and they all compete for the same money and stop the Shire getting funding. We keep getting new agencies coming in and they all want to utilise the Shire's facilities.

Mr Alan Hudson: we hear about a lot of services that have funding to provide services on the Tiwi Islands but we never see them.

Councillor?: we need services that can develop relationships with the kids – not this fly in/fly out.

Mr Peter Styles: maybe the Committee should put forward a recommendation for rotational police officers and more of them so that they have more time to develop relationships with young people.

Councillor?: Its not just about building relationships but communication in a culturally appropriate manner from an Indigenous perspective. Western views will not work – white workers need to be able to change their perspective and there is a need for greater mutual respect.

Mr Peter Styles: yes I agree, there is a need for more cross cultural training of workers. I know that the police get cross cultural training but it needs to be improved.

Councillor Richard Tungutalum: Another problem is that parents are being taken advantage of by their children. They threaten them and use violence against them.

Mr Peter Styles: but is this because of the family violence, physical and sexual abuse that they are experiencing? Would extra police help? Police can't stop the gambling if they are out investing assaults etc. Would it help if there were designated areas away from the community for gambling, do they take their children with them?

Ms Lynette de Santis and others: yes they do especially the little kids and often the kids have their own gambling rings.

Cr Henry Dunn: the community has tried to set up specific gambling areas and tried to get help from the police and gaming commission to take it away from the kids, but we were told it is illegal. Also the restrictions with alcohol have created a black market or means people leave the community to come into Darwin.

Mr Peter Styles: so marijuana has replaced alcohol? If you are going to have gambling why not have gaming machines in the clubs so that the profits can go back into youth activities?

Unknown person: yes like the first nation people in America did and set up their own casinos.

Ms Marion Scrymgour: but this is not such a simple solution – there are lots of problems with gaming machines and encouraging people to gamble.

Mr Peter Styles: would gaming machines help, as a means of raising revenue for other activities?

Cr Barry Puruntatameri: six cans of mid strength beer is not enough so they use cannabis as well.

Cr Henry Dunn: since the alcohol restrictions it has really reduced the club's capacity to operate and provide a decent wage for the workers. The sessions just encourage binge drinking – they should be made to also provide food. Controlled gaming within the club could work. They also need access to take away beers to stop them just drinking as much as they can while the club is open. Since we had to stop selling mixed drinks a lot of the

ladies don't come anymore as they don't like beer. Having just the men in there causes more arguments and issues amongst the men.

Ms Marion Scrymgour: I think we have got off the track a bit with our discussion and the Committee should get over to the Tiwi Islands to talk more with community members.

Ms Lynette de Santis: if you are going to visit the Tiwi's it needs to be to all 3 communities and you do need to get the views of the community.

Cr Mani Rioli: regarding the DARE program, I remember another program ASPA – Aboriginal Students and Parents Association – it was good too so why was it stopped?

Ms Marion Scrymgour: it was a Federally funded program and the funding ran out.

Cr Mani Rioli: I have sat here and heard people blaming the kids, the marijuana, the alcohol, the gambling, the Council and the Government. What about parental responsibility? What are the parents doing letting their kids, and real little kids, roam around the streets at all hours of the night to 3 or 4 in the morning? We blame the police, the government, the kids, but surely it is the parents that need to be made more responsible. I find it appalling that they let their kids be out till that time. The fault lies with parenting. We need programs to help parents learn about their responsibilities.

Ms Marion Scrymgour: one of the problems is that parents are getting younger and younger and they just do not have the skills and no longer have older people to assist them and give them guidance.

Cr Mani Rioli: but parents ad parenting needs to be targeted.

Mr Peter Styles: but where parents are addicted to drugs it is a problem for them to bring up children and it is a problem for the kids. Young people need a role model that can influence them, build their capacity and confidence so that they can discuss their issues. We need to start off with the very young kids.

Councillor: we have to acknowledge the changes, influences and different policies and laws that have come into place and the impact they have had. Kids these days know their rights and use that to abuse their parents. We need to look at the social determinants.

Cr David Boyd: kids need stable home environments.

Unknown: they need proper housing first.

Ms Marion Scrymgour: we will have to wind up this session now as the Council has other business to go on with. It would be great if the Committee could visit Tiwi Islands and talk more about the issue with community members.