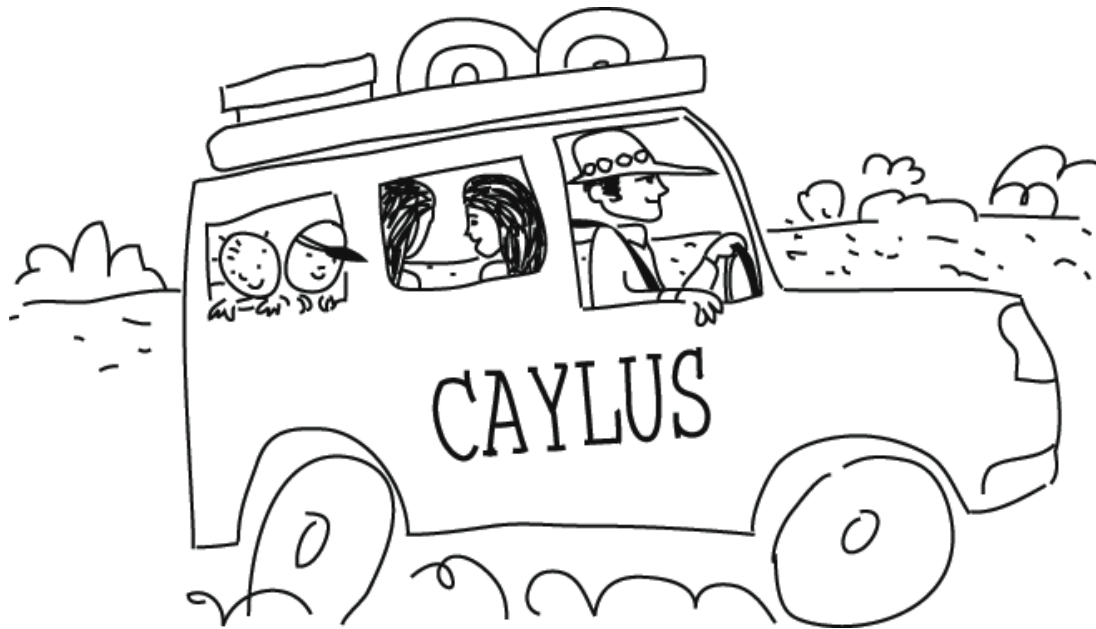


Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service



**Submission to the Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT
November 2011**

Background on CAYLUS

The Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service (CAYLUS) is a petrol sniffing prevention program that started in 2002. We are a division of Tangentyere Council and are based in Alice Springs where we work to support communities across the bottom half of the NT. CAYLUS works to prevent sniffing and other forms of substance misuse that affect young people by supporting community initiatives to that improve quality of life for young people and their families.

As a part of the Opal Alliance CAYLUS won the Australian National Council on Drugs National Excellence in Prevention Award in 2007 for work in supporting and developing the regional rollout of Opal Fuel in Central Australia. This work has led to a 94% reduction in prevalence of sniffing in our service area¹. CAYLUS has also worked to support the development of youth programs across our region working in partnership with the relevant funding agencies, service providers and community groups to improve the availability of funding for such programs, the quality of service delivery and the infrastructure available for use of programs.

CAYLUS staff have worked in the region for many years and jointly have over 80 years experience working to implement programs in remote communities in Central Australia.

Suicide and Substance misuse, and the role of youth programs

It has been our experience that youth suicide and substance misuse are closely linked, prior to the roll out of Opal fuel, we dealt regularly with communities where young people who were sniffing were threatening, attempting and at times completing suicides. In one community there were a series of very public completed suicides by sniffers in the years leading up to Opal rollout.

It is also our experience that the drop in prevalence of petrol sniffing has been complemented by an overall drop in levels of suicide attempts that our service deals with. However prevalence of youth suicide and threats of suicide remain a major issue in our communities and are often closely connected to use of cannabis and alcohol. In the next section of this submission, we outline recommendations that can reduce the levels of substance misuse as a practical way of reducing suicide.

In one our service communities a recent suicide was followed by over a dozen copy attempts many of them involving use of cannabis. During this intense period, CAYLUS was the only external agency that provided practical support to the community to deal with this issue. In partnership with the local Shire, CAYLUS placed an extra youth development worker there to boost the capacity of the youth program for three months. This is because we understand and can strategically support the important role youth development workers play in communities, both as agents working to support local youth

¹ Peter d'Abbs and Gillian Shaw 2008, Executive summary of the Evaluation of the Impact of Opal Fuel, Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing , Canberra

in times of stress and as a point of contact for external agencies that want to operate in the remote community but lack the personal relationships that can make this work effective. Youth programs are often the first line of response to such outbreaks, with youth workers playing an important part in liaising with potential suicides, local families and concerned agencies. The local youth workers are known and trusted agents that live and work in the community, with an understood role of looking after young people. Another recommendation following acknowledges this important role as a way of creating local capacity in remote communities to prevent suicide and suggests improved funding be provided for this important work.

Recommendations

We propose the following measures and actions by the NT Government could effectively reduce prevalence of substance misuse and thereby significantly mitigate a major causal factor in suicide in the NT:

1. The NT Government should maintain a position in favour of Federal Opal Mandating Legislation and should begin to actively advocate to the Commonwealth, WA, QLD and SA Governments encouraging them to maintain a similar stance. Failing clear progress on this issue by June 2012 the NT Government should move to implement such legislation in its own right so that least NT Communities will have the full benefit of the fuel.

2. The NT Government should advocate for a Commonwealth commitment to refunding and expanding the Youth In Communities Measure. Such a commitment is needed before the crucial services YIC funds wind down operations in early 2012.

3. The NT Government should take a stance in favour of a floor price on Alcohol of \$1.20 per Standard drink.

These recommendations by CAYLUS address the following key areas of interest of the committee:

- Proposals to access Commonwealth funding programs;
- Services for high-risk groups;
- The response and policies of agencies such as police and health services;
- The adequacy and appropriateness of youth suicide prevention programs, including in schools;

1. The NT Government should maintain a position in favour of Federal Opal Mandating Legislation and should begin to actively advocate to the Commonwealth, WA, QLD and SA Governments encouraging them to maintain a similar stance. Failing clear progress on this issue by June 2012 the NT Government should move

to implement such legislation in its own right so that least NT Communities will have the full benefit of use of the fuel.

The NT Government currently supports the idea of Federal Opal Mandating Legislation. Such legislation would force recalcitrant retailers in strategically important sites to stock Opal Low Aromatic Fuel. This would allow the Federal Government to cut off supply of standard unleaded fuel to nearby communities where there is evidence of ongoing petrol sniffing.

Despite the clear success of Opal and the many benefits it has brought to communities and regions that use it, efforts to extend its coverage and to cut off availability of standard unleaded fuel for sniffing are being compromised by retailers that refuse to stock the fuel. The reasons that such retailers cite include the belief that they may lose business by stocking the fuel, frustration at being told what to do by government, the belief that sniffing isn't an issue in their region and a belief that supply reduction through Opal will not be effective as a means of deterring petrol sniffing and that families and communities must act alone to address the issue².

These reasons given by retailers for not stocking the fuel do not stand up to scrutiny, particularly given the cost to nearby communities of their decision. A recent coronial inquiry looked into a spate of deaths in Balgo Community in WA. Coroner Hope found that that rate of suicide in the community at that time was 100 times that of the general population³. In relation to the death of one of the young men who ultimately had died from sniffing he stated;

“While Opal fuel was the only fuel available for purchase in Balgo from 2008, a significant development after that time was the fact that the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse, situated across the border in the Northern Territory and one of the main sources of unleaded fuel in Balgo, closed down.

CAYLUS, Balgo Police, Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation and the Federal Government had all made representations to the owner of the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse, asking that he not make unleaded fuel available, without success. It was during that time that the deceased developed a petrol sniffing habit and his behaviour escalated.

The rollout of low-aromatic fuel in Central Australia has been entirely voluntary; the rollout has been near comprehensive since Alice Springs retailers took up use of the fuel in 2006. Over that time it is estimated that 1.7 million tanks of the fuel have been used by motorists⁴. The vast majority of retailers stock low-aromatic fuel as a way of doing their

² South Australian Centre for Economic Studies 2010- Cost Benefit Analysis of Legislation to Mandate the Supply of Opal Fuel In regions of Australia.

³ WA Coroners office, Record into the investigation of the Death of Ashton Michael Sunfly, Mitchell Nanala, Lewis John Kalions, Jason Milner,

⁴ BP Australia press release Oct 11 2011 see-
<http://www.bp.com/genericarticle.do?categoryId=9008681&contentId=7071693>

bit for an important community cause. However, the actions of these responsible retailers are undermined by a small number who refuse to do their share.

In Central Australia everyone gains from the massive reduction in sniffing. Police and medical systems are less tied up and communities and towns across the region are safer, happier places. The NT and Federal Governments are right to be proud of what has been achieved with the Opal roll out under their watch, however without mandating legislation these gains remain in jeopardy for some, and unattainable for others.

2. The NT Government should advocate for a Commonwealth commitment to refunding and expanding the Youth In Communities Measure. Such a commitment is needed before the crucial services YIC funds wind down operations in early 2012.

Good youth programs make life better for young people and their families. They reduce the prevalence of substance misuse and provide young people who are in trouble with professional support. A number of Central Australian Youth Services have played a crucial role in preventing and responding to suicide.

When CAYLUS started in 2002 services for young people in Central Australia were thin on the ground. With the exception of the Mt Theo Program at Yuendumu, youth development services were often run quietly on the side of sport and rec or after-school programs without clear support for this from funders. They suffered from inconsistency due to funding and staffing issues and were often compromised by a lack of regional coordination and quality control.

In the 9 years since, there has been an increasing recognition of the tenuous situation of youth and children in remote communities. Through Commonwealth government initiatives such as the Petrol Sniffing Strategy, The Youth Alcohol Diversion Measure, the NTER and associated programs and finally The Youth In Communities Measure a model of integrated and regionally managed Youth Services has emerged in Central Australia. These programs have been the first occasion in which discreet specific youth programs with a development focus have been funded in the region.

The Youth In Communities Measure has been the most recent of these targeted youth funding measures from the Australian Government. Funding under this measure runs out in June 2012, and there is currently no commitment to continue the programs it has supported. In Central Australia the Youth in Communities Measure has considerably improved services to young people in the West Macdonnell Communities through funding services delivered by the Macdonnell Shire and NPY Women's Council and in Warlpiri Communities through the Mt Theo Program.

Some communities however missed out. The Youth In Communities Measure has been a limited pool of funding, and consequently many Central Australian youth received no support through the program. Notably in the Barkly Shire youth in the larger communities of Ampilatwatja, Lake Nash, Arlparra and Ali Curung received no services

through the measure. In the Central Desert Shire youth in Harts Range, Ti Tree, Mt Allen, Engawala, Nyirripi, Willowra and Laramba also missed out. In the MacDonnell Shire, Santa Teresa, Amoongana and Titjikala are all sites that have not been directly supported through Youth In Communities funding. The situation in these communities continues to be sub-optimal, with insufficient services, delivered in a poorly coordinated way using patchy funding.

The situation of remote Central Australian communities is not great: people suffer from the effects of unemployment and poverty, isolation from services, decaying infrastructure, low levels of English language literacy, and leadership and governance structures that are under great pressure. In this environment the Recreational, Social and Emotional needs of youth often get lost. Youth programs where they exist are often seen as not having clear and quantifiable results. However as young people increasingly become the largest population in many communities (38% under 14 years of age⁵) and take on leadership roles and responsibilities the need to have young people who are valued and capable in both the eyes of their families and the eyes of wider Australia is increasingly apparent. Education in schools while fundamental to this is only part of the answer. Programs that support the recreational, cultural as well as social and emotional needs of school age children and their young parents and older siblings, uncles and aunts are also necessary.

Youth services in Central Australia provide the following positive outcomes,

- increased school attendance
- improved child and maternal health
- better child nutrition
- reduced prevalence of youth substance misuse
- reduced levels of crime
- better uptake of employment opportunities by young people
- local support and coordination for visiting child and family services
- faster and coordinated response to emerging local child welfare issues
- better family and community involvement in child and youth services
- emergency and crisis support for young people and families
- practical support for emerging young community leaders

When the Youth In Communities Measure expires in June 2012 there is a danger that the activities it funds in Central Australia will either cease or have to dramatically downscale, losing staff and along with them the working relationships that have been developed.

As such CAYLUS asks that the NT Government use its influence with the Commonwealth to advocate the following :

⁵ Population characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander Australians, 2006, Catalogue no. 4713.0, ABS, Canberra, 2008.

“That the Australian Government commits to refunding the Youth in Communities Measure for a further 3 years. That the measure is refunded at least the same level with allowance for indexation.

That priority is given to maintaining continuity of services in Central Australia in order to minimise disruption in Communities as funding arrangements transition.

That the Australian Government recognise the importance of maintaining services through the high-risk June/July school holiday period and funding arrangements are settled well in advance of this period in 2012.

Further that it is recognised that all youth in Central Australia should have access to at least basic youth services and as such additional funding is made available through the continued Youth In Communities Measure to support the development of new services in Central Australia.”

3. The NT Government should take a stance in favour of a floor price on Alcohol of \$1.20 per Standard drink.

Heavy drinking is a major causal factor in the difficult situation of many Central Australian Youth, not only due to their personal heavy drinking, but also due the cumulative effects of intergenerational substance misuse in their families and community. A floor price on Alcohol is the elephant in the room of NT Alcohol Policy discussions. It is an evidence based practical and pragmatic measure that would lead to benefits to the whole NT Community.

The actions of the responsible retailers of Alice Springs lead by Coles and Woolworths should be noted and applauded. This group, which includes all Alice Springs retailers except The Todd Tavern and Gap View Motel, have implemented a voluntary floor price of \$1.20. The two retailers mentioned still sell 2 litre casks with a cost per standard drink of 76 – 85 cents per standard drink. Thus, voluntary measures such as the \$1.20 floor price and NT Government measures to implement banning notices and alcohol courts are significantly compromised in an environment where some irresponsible retailers are allowed and even encouraged to profit from the misery that cheap alcohol brings to our community.

Should you have any questions on the above, we would be happy to give evidence in person or by phone link up if required.