

Wellspring Community Inc

(An Australian Community inspired by the Iona Community)

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The Honorable Jenny Macklin
Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra

November 3rd 2008

Dear Minister,

Wellspring Community is an ecumenical Christian community with an ongoing interest and concern for Aboriginal Reconciliation. We are well aware of the heavy responsibility you carry as you make decisions about the Intervention in the Northern Territory.

We applaud the extent of consultation that has already taken place, and encourage the government to continue to discern the best way forward.

We also applaud what is happening already in the areas of safety, health, education and housing, and we want to emphasize the need for more to be done in these areas over a long-term.

We acknowledge the complexity of the situation and that circumstances vary from community to community, so that women in one community are happy with the income management system while in other communities they find it demeaning, costly and inconvenient. Because of this we would like to see individual communities treated appropriately for their own circumstances.

We endorse Tom Calma's response, and the need to consider the human rights implications of some aspects of the Intervention.

We do want to express particular concern about the cost of transport experienced in some communities in order to access registered stores, and that the viability of some small businesses is threatened by the endorsement of the mega-stores.

We want to express the hope that changes to the compulsory and universal application of income management may be able to be made before another year is out in communities where this does not jeopardize the health and well-being of families.

We urge you to support the indigenous people to positive change and not leave them open to being constantly racially accused by a structural instrument that is within your control to change without legislation.

We look forward to seeing how the desperate plight of many Aboriginal people can be improved and offer you our prayerful support as you work in this area.

Yours sincerely

Jill Robertson
Co-leader

Mary Gilchrist
Co-leader

OFFICE OF THE HON JENNY MACKLIN MP

MINISTER FOR FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

17 December 2008

MC08-033732

Ms Jill Robertson and Ms Mary Gilchrist
Co-leaders
Wellspring Community Inc
PO Box Q924
QUEEN VICTORIA BUILDING NSW 1230

Dear Ms Robertson and Ms Gilchrist

Thank you for your letter of 8 November 2008 to the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon Jenny Macklin MP, about the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). The Minister has asked me to reply to you on her behalf.

Your support of the Commonwealth Government's work towards improving the lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is greatly appreciated. Since coming to office, the Government has set a national priority to close the disadvantage gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and through the Council of Australian Governments, has secured the agreement of all State and Territory Governments to the same targets.

The matters you have raised are wide-ranging and I would like to take this opportunity to update you on recent developments. As you may be aware, on 23 October 2008 the Commonwealth Government released an interim response to the independent review of the NTER.

The NTER review made three overarching recommendations, that:

- There was an ongoing need to address issues of 'urgent national significance' in remote Aboriginal communities;
- Both the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments reset their relationship with Aboriginal people; and
- Government actions affecting Aboriginal communities respect Australia's human rights obligations and conform with the Racial Discrimination Act.

The Commonwealth Government has accepted these recommendations and is committed to continuing and improving the NTER.

The NTER review found that the imposition of the NTER, without seeking the views of the people affected, left Aboriginal people feeling hurt, betrayed and less worthy than other Australians. The failure to consult and engage undercut the potential effectiveness of many of the NTER measures.

The Commonwealth Government is committed to building genuine, sustained and constructive engagement and partnership with Indigenous people in the Northern Territory and across Australia. The Commonwealth Government has already begun to act on this commitment nationally through:

- The Apology to Indigenous people, and in particular the Stolen Generations – an important and symbolic first step to building trust and good faith;
- A new commitment to be held accountable to closing the gap targets between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; and
- Consultation across the country on the establishment of a national representative body.

In the Northern Territory, the Commonwealth Government will legislate in the first half of 2009 to ensure people subject to income management have access to the full range of appeal rights, including through the Social Security Appeals Tribunal and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

The Commonwealth Government has asked the Northern Territory Valuer-General to determine a reasonable rent for all existing five-year leases that were compulsorily acquired by the previous Government. Payment will then commence automatically.

In particular, the Commonwealth Government will design and implement in consultation with Indigenous people an income management policy framework that conforms with the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*. Legislation reflecting this policy will be introduced in the 2009 Spring sittings of the Parliament. Indigenous women and Elders who are vulnerable to intimidation or abuse have reported that they have greater control over their finances, and are more able to provide for children as a result of this policy. For this reason it is important that there is an orderly transition from the existing arrangements.

Through this process the Government will draw out the many voices in communities in a way that brings people together behind a common goal, fosters respect, and recognises leadership from Elders, men, women and youth. The Government will respond in full to the Review Board's recommendations, including future funding arrangements, over the coming months.

One key concern in your letter is the cost of transport in some communities to access stores that are licensed to receive income managed funds. The Government acknowledges the transportation and accessibility difficulties experienced by many Indigenous Australians and is working to address these issues. The recent introduction of the 'BasicsCard', an EFTPOS-based, pin-protected card, has made it easier for customers to shop with their income managed funds.

Throughout the Northern Territory, over 350 shops are approved to accept the card and include supermarkets, butchers, clothing retailers and major national retailers. To date, Centrelink has issued almost 12,000 cards. The recent launch of the BasicsCard in Katherine was very successful, with the card winning strong support from customers and shop owners.

Thank you again for writing. I would like to assure you that the Commonwealth Government will continue to work closely with Indigenous Australians with a view to making sustainable long term improvements in their lives.

Yours sincerely

Kate Huntington
Advisor