

ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES 2008

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY AFFAIRS:

FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO

21 February 2008

Extract:

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Senator ALLISON—I wish to ask one question in this area. I refer to the Northern Territory intervention experience and petrol sniffing. Has anything been done, by way of Commonwealth services, to protect children from the availability of petrol? What is the current arrangement?

Dr Harmer—Quite a lot has been done. We probably have some information about what we have been doing.

Ms Moody—The Commonwealth has an eight-point Central Australian petrol sniffing strategy which has been in place for a couple of years. It was launched in September 2005. A number of Commonwealth agencies are involved in that, including the Department of Health and Ageing. FaHCSIA has some roles, particularly in youth activities. It deals with the rollout of non-sniffable fuels, for instance, which has been very successful in the Central Desert and Central Australian region. That has significantly reduced the number of sniffers in those regions. The Department of Health and Ageing also looks at treatment and respite facilities.

Senator ALLISON—Is that just in the Central Desert?

Ms Moody—The rollout of Opal at the moment, yes.

Senator ALLISON—How many communities do not have Opal?

Ms Moody—I do not have that information with me; I would have to take that question on notice.

Senator ALLISON—Was it the experience of the teams going out there that children were still affected by petrol sniffing?

Mr Barson—There are still children who are affected by petrol sniffing, yes. It continues to be a problem in the Territory generally and it continues to be a problem in Central Australia, even where we have Opal fuel. Unfortunately, children are still engaged in the sniffing of petrol or other substances. It is a continuing and serious area of concern. Certainly Opal fuel is one of the solutions to that but, again, the broad range of endeavours will give those young people something different to do from petrol sniffing. Some children who are addicted or habituated to that will continue sniffing, no matter what we do.

Senator ALLISON—Is there a service for those kids who have become addicted or habituated?

Mr Barson—Yes. The Department of Health and Ageing and the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services are the authorities that intervene with children who are designated ‘deemed to be habitual sniffers’. It is not our area. I do not know enough about it.

Senator ALLISON—I know you will say that it is up to the health department, but what typically happens in a health check if petrol sniffing is identified?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I could not answer that question, except to say that the doctor would refer, using the normal referral processes.

Mr Barson—There are processes for declaring a person—and I will not have the right terminology—who is a habitual sniffer. That is where those authorities step in with compulsory treatment.

Senator ALLISON—Compulsory treatment?

Mr Barson—As I said, a health treatment regime cuts in when a person is deemed to require that level of intervention. I can get the details for you, if you wish.

Senator ALLISON—It is Northern Territory legislation?

Mr Barson—It is Northern Territory legislation, yes. It is an existing arrangement and it is not our service provision.

Senator ALLISON—And it is not a service provided within communities?

Mr Barson—It is not a service provided by us within communities.

Dr Harmer—Not by FaHCSIA.

Mr Barson—Not by FaHCSIA, no. It is a Northern Territory government and health service. At that stage the issues are not ones of diversion away from petrol sniffing; they are actual treatment of the addiction.

Senator ALLISON—Has there been any assessment of the extent to which petrol sniffing is a factor in the broader problem of child abuse?

Mr Barson—Not that I am aware of, no, Senator.

Senator ALLISON—Does it make children more vulnerable to child abuse if they are dependent on these substances?

Mr Barson—Certainly some of the cases that have come up, or most of the cases that have come up, have involved either alcohol or drugs or some form of addictive substance, yes. But I would not say it is exclusively associated with petrol sniffing at all.

Senator ALLISON—That is not what I suggested.

Mr Barson—I know.

Senator ALLISON—I asked you whether it was a factor and you said—

Mr Barson—It is a factor along with alcohol and other drug use.

Dr Harmer—Senator, I suspect that the answers to some of your questions about petrol sniffing, what is going on, how effective it is, et cetera, will be answered. We have commissioned an evaluation of our petrol sniffing strategy, and that is due to be provided to us I think in April. We are looking forward to that evaluation to make an assessment of how the program has gone so far and what we need to do to adjust it to make it more effective.

CHAIR—FaHCSIA has commissioned an evaluation?

Dr Harmer—Yes. Other departments are involved in it, but we have commissioned the evaluation.

CHAIR—Are you the lead agency in that program?

Dr Harmer—Yes.

CHAIR—So you have commissioned that. Is it an external consultant?

Dr Harmer—Yes.

CHAIR—Is the name public?

Mr Yates—Senator, it is two-staged. The first stage is being conducted by Urbis, and they are providing an assessment of the implementation of the strategy over the last couple of years. Obviously, because we want to look at some of the longer term impacts, we have a more comprehensive evaluation strategy commissioned from Courage Partners and they will be submitting to us their proposed evaluation plan in April. So an initial report will be available on the implementation of the strategy over the last couple of years, which may go to some of the questions that have been raised. But we realise that you need to do a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of the program, its coverage and issues of effectiveness that evaluations normally address.

CHAIR—Senator **Allison**, have you finished with the petrol sniffing issue?

Senator ALLISON—Yes.

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