

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 have a quick question: how many charges have so far been laid to do with child abuse as part of the Northern Territory intervention?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I do not have visibility of those figures, Senator. Those figures are very much something that the Northern Territory Police and the ACC work in. I think the Northern Territory police commissioner is on the public record as having said that of the order of 30 investigations are either in progress or have commenced, but he put a heavy caveat on that figure. I could not give that figure and I am not sure whether the department is able to.

Dr Harmer—We do not have that figure, Senator. It is information that the Northern Territory Police alone would have at this stage.

Senator ALLISON—So the Northern Territory Police are just doing what they have always done. There is no link between their activities in charging people and the intervention program—is that correct?

Dr Harmer—As Major General Chalmers said earlier, they are not doing what they have always done because they are now present in many more communities and a great deal more activity is going on. The Northern Territory Police are linked with other activities that are going on in the Northern Territory. We have a substance abuse desk in Alice Springs, which is linking with the Northern Territory Police. A lot more activity is arising out of initiatives taken over the last couple of years by the Northern Territory Police. In relation to referrals or charges that have been laid, we do not have those figures, I am sorry.

Senator ALLISON—As a result of health checks how many referrals were made to the Northern Territory Police in this respect?

Major Gen. Chalmers—Again, that is not information to which I am privy, Senator. Clearly, there are privacy issues surrounding it and, frankly, I do not need to know in order to roll out the intervention, so I do not share that information.

Senator ALLISON—How many police officers came from each of the states? Is there a table or some figures available?

Dr Harmer—Senator, we have answered that question.

Ms Moody—A question was asked earlier about funding for night patrols under the Northern Territory emergency response intervention. The Attorney-General's

portfolio received \$3.9 million as part of the intervention for night patrols. That includes the \$1 million that has been transferred from FaHCSIA.

Senator SIEWERT—Are we moving on from law and order?

CHAIR—I am just checking to see whether there is nothing else under law and order, and then we will move on to child safety.

Senator SIEWERT—I have another question. Reports are coming in from communities about the extra policing. I am not saying that we should not have extra police in communities, but the extra policing is leading to a significant increase in minor infringements. I thought the idea of the police was to provide for safer communities and better engagement with them. I do not necessarily think that an increase in minor infringements is the way to go. Are you getting reports back on that?

Major Gen. Chalmers—I would couch my answer by stating, firstly, that every community without exception that I have been to that does not have a permanent police presence seeks a permanent police presence. They seek police.

Senator SIEWERT—I am not disputing that at all; the point I am making is that maybe there should be more focus on effort.

Major Gen. Chalmers—You are now asking a question about community policing and operational police matters—in other words, how do the police go about their business? That is a question for the Northern Territory police commissioner. Clearly, police have to enforce various laws, and so they do. How they go about that though is sometimes a matter for judgment and for policy, and that policy and judgment derive from the police commissioner and flow down through to the stations. I would suggest that, where we have an additional police presence, there is a demonstrable change in those communities. People have said things to me like, 'I have finally had a good night's sleep. It's the first time that I've been able to sleep soundly at night' because of the diminution of noise, people on the streets and drunken violence in communities at night. So there has been a significant change. Whether or not that is also accompanied by police doing those other annoying things that police have to do, I could not say.

Senator SIEWERT—I take your point and I understand that police have to do the work. However, it does intersect with the task force trying to achieve their overall objectives, which is why I asked the question. We have certainly had feedback from communities that there has been a significant increase in minor infringements. The feedback has been that they do not necessarily think it is achieving the aims of the intervention.

Major Gen. Chalmers—I meet regularly with the police commissioner to make sure that where the work of the police intersects with the intervention we are of the same mind and we are working together. Because I visit communities regularly, I am able to raise issues with him that may have come up in policing where people have said similar sorts of things to me, and he takes those on board. He reminds me that I am not an expert in operational policing, and so therefore my views relate only to the feedback that I get from communities. So we provide information to him and feedback that we get from communities. But, at the end of the day, how they go about their business is very much a matter for the commissioner.

Senator SIEWERT—I take your point.