

COMMONWEALTH GRANTS COMMISSION

INDIGENOUS FUNDING INQUIRY

SUBMISSION

From: Tangentyere Council

Submission No.: IFI/SUB/0047

Date Received: 23/08/2000

TANGENTYERE COUNCIL INCORPORATED

ALICE SPRINGS.

SUBMISSION TO

COMMONWEALTH GRANTS COMMISSION

1. Introduction

Tangentyere Council Incorporated is a Government funded resource organisation, which represents the interests of approximately 1200 Aboriginal people who reside in 18 Special Purpose Leases within the Municipal boundaries of the Town of Alice Springs. Every "Town Camp" is separately incorporated under the Associations Incorporation Act (NT) or the Commonwealth Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act (1976).

Accordingly, each of the Associations has its own elected Executive body and each is a member of Tangentyere Council Incorporated. Executive members of Tangentyere Council are elected from among the members of the eighteen member Associations.

The Council was first incorporated on 6 February 1979 but had been in operation for close to two years before its incorporation. In its early days Tangentyere's main task was to assist the "Town Campers", who had been living on the various parcels of land around Alice Springs for very many years, to obtain some sort of formal ownership of the land. It should be noted that the Northern Territory Government would not provide any form of essential services to people living on land to which they held no title. Therefore, it was essential to negotiate with government to obtain the necessary titles and eventually most of the Town Camps were granted a Special Purpose Lease. These have now been largely replaced with Leases in Perpetuity, thereby giving the residents a greater measure of security in their ownership of the blocks of land.

With the granting of the leases it now became possible to think about building homes and providing the essential services to the leases. In mainstream society the provision of water, electricity, sewerage and telephone connections are taken for granted. It took many years for these to be achieved within the "Town Camps". Tangentyere was able, during the 1980's, to obtain funding to construct homes for the Aboriginal residents of the Town Leases. The Organisation was able establish its own Works Department and, with its own Design Department, design and construct houses. One of the benefits was that Tangentyere was able to train a considerable number of

Aboriginal workers for the construction industry and at one stage, employed more apprentices than any other employer in the Northern Territory.

CURRENT SITUATION

As at the end of August 2000 there are now close to 200 houses in the Town Camps, although some people are still residing in tin sheds. A further seven (7) homes are under construction and the target completion date is the end of September 2000. At times there is overcrowding of the homes due to the large number of visitors who come from the remote communities in the Region to call upon their relations and to attend various activities, such as sporting events, or to visit the hospital for check ups. People from the outlying communities visit Alice Springs for a number of reasons and it is expected of their relations living in the "Town Camps" to provide accommodation.

As the early needs of land tenure and housing have largely been fulfilled Tangentyere has gradually changed its role from being the provider of housing, essential services and other related issues to being the facilitator of programs which improve the lifestyle of the Town Camp residents. Our role in housing continues but to a lesser degree and is now more concerned with maintenance than establishment, though there is still need to provide additional housing.

The improvement of peoples' lifestyles encompasses many aspects. These include the combat against substance abuse (petrol sniffing, underage drinking, excessive use of alcohol), domestic violence, a range of health issues (renal problems, diabetic disorders, infant mortality, and general poor health leading to more serious ailments), lack of meaningful employment, loss of self esteem, educational problems and general disempowerment and marginalisation. There are many aspects of life which lead to the misfortune and helplessness of Aboriginal people and, despite the many thousands of dollars, which appear to be spent on these issues, the problems do not go away.

It is understood that the Commonwealth Grants Commission travels to various parts of Australia to identify areas of need in order that the Federal Government may provide funds for the relief of those problems. Having achieved this the Grants Commission advises Government in Canberra where funds need to be expended to meet the identified needs. Following this the Federal Government makes available to appropriate agencies the funding to meet those needs. The agencies involved will be either its own Commonwealth Departments or the Northern Territory Government.

It is at this point that the process falls into a large hole because the funds intended to meet particular needs become filtered into places where they cannot be used to their best effect. Firstly, grants made to the Northern Territory Government, because of legislation, become "untied" funds and therefore they are not necessarily expended in the way the Federal Government intended.

Secondly, funds made available to Commonwealth often suffer because of the administrative costs attached to them and thus their effectiveness is much reduced.

It would appear that the best solution to these issues is to make funds, which are identified as essential to the meeting of urgent needs within the Aboriginal community, available as direct grants to Aboriginal organisations. This method of funding could meet the needs much more efficiently and much more quickly than by following the existing method. Tangentyere, for example, is already engaged with limited funding, in issues which require urgent funding from the Commonwealth. We are more than capable of being accountable for such funding as we have a very experienced team in our Finance Office. The Office is headed by a Certified Practising Accountant who is assisted by another qualified Accountant and experienced book keeping staff.

In addition we have other staff experienced and qualified in other areas such as health care and we also have a wide network of people we can tap into if the need arises. It is considered that Tangentyere Council would be well equipped to receive, expend in a meaningful way and account for grants made directly from the Commonwealth Government. There are other Aboriginal Organisations in the Northern Territory who are equally well placed to receive funds in this way.

We believe that if the Commonwealth Government is serious about tackling severe problems connected with health, employment, social issues, and the like it is imperative that funds should be directed to where they can achieve the greatest benefit. This is by diverting funds away from government instrumentalities and granting them to organisations which can get to the root of the problems to be addressed.

Northern Territory Grants Commission

We are quite well aware that the Northern Territory Grants Commission has absolutely no relationship to the Commonwealth Grants Commission, however it is considered that you should be made aware of the situation surrounding the funding made available to Tangentyere Council from the NT Department of Local Government.

Tangentyere Council is not a local governing body. It cannot be so because the area in which we are based and in which we work is located within an existing local governing area – the Municipality of Alice Springs. It is not possible to have two governing bodies in the same place.

However, because of our role in relationship to the Special Purpose Leases in which our client group reside we are obliged to offer support in local government-type services. We have historically operated a garbage service, provided street lighting, community facilities and the power/water connections and costs to them, hygiene services, road maintenance, and a parks and gardens service. For many years we have received from the Department of Local Government a grant to provide these services, as the Town Council has not been involved in the Town Camps in any way.

For the last seven years this grant has been reducing by 5% every year thus making it more and more difficult for us to assist us in servicing the Town Camps. Costs are ever increasing and the grant diminishing and it will not be long before we are totally incapable of continuing these services. The explanation we are given is that the population of the Town Camps is reducing when compared with other funded areas. The effect of this is that, instead of solving problems, the Department of Local Government is creating them. What worse health scenario can be imagined than uncollected garbage from over 200 homes? Our Garbage compactor unit is worn out from use and yet we are unable to obtain funds from any source to replace it.

It appears that the NT Grants Commission may be failing in its duty to make sufficient funds available to us to provide much needed services to our clients residing in the Town Leases and we feel powerless to make any change to this situation.

Recommendation

It is recommended that you give serious consideration to the diversion of funding you perceive as a need to address problems in relation to Aboriginal people direct to Aboriginal Organisations. These organisations can then tackle the problems from the bottom up and achieve greater efficiencies than are presently possible from the use of untied grants to State/Territory Government agencies.

William Tilmouth,
Executive Director,

Tangentyere Council Inc.

18 August 2000