

**Statement to Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Affairs - Inquiry into Remote Community Stores Public hearing
and community meeting**

**Jilkminggan 21 July 2009 - Irene Fisher, CEO, Sunrise Health Service
Aboriginal Corporation**

Good afternoon.

Before I begin today I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and elders for the land on which we meet, the Mangarrayi people. I thank the Standing Committee for the Parliamentary Inquiry they are holding into the important issues of food supply, costs and the role of remote community stores.

In particular I would thank you for coming to Jilkminggan.

For many of us living in regional and remote Australia, it sometimes seems to us that Canberra is “a remote community”, so I would like for that reason to welcome you here to Jilkminggan which is some 144 kilometres from the capital of our region—Katherine.

Sunrise has forwarded a Submission to the Standing Committee, but I would like to say a few brief words—after which I am happy to assist your committee where I can, and answer questions where I am able.

There are a number of overarching issues and some issues specific to the Jilkminggan Community Store that I would like to draw your attention to this afternoon.

In raising these issues I would emphasise that good health is dependent on good nutrition, and that the poor health experienced by many Aboriginal people today is compounded by the inadequate access to an affordable and healthy food supply.

In the years leading up to the establishment of Sunrise Health Service, the Jawoyn Association—which initially sponsored Sunrise—formed a partnership with the Fred Hollows Foundation.

Hollows’ first priority, in response to the needs of this region, was in establishing nutrition programs.

I think all members of the inquiry here today would acknowledge the absolute commitment to Aboriginal health championed by the Hollows Foundation, and would applaud their commitment in this case to improve nutrition among our people.

Firstly the overarching issues:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that '*everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food.*'

Given this, it is of concern to Sunrise that Indigenous Australians living in remote and very remote areas have among the lowest earnings in the nation, yet pay substantially higher food prices than the rest of the nation.

There must be appropriate supports and the necessary steps taken to drastically improve infrastructure arrangements as this will help to ensure more reasonably priced access to food supplies.

An example of a key future area for investment is the need to subsidise freight and provide greater storage and freezing facilities.

Further examination of the whole food supply chain should be undertaken—this will help to ensure that there are accountabilities for items such as charges for equipment maintenance.

Sunrise understands that these can be very high.

For stores where there is not the opportunity for group purchasing and where there are no working quality standards in place, store licensing needs to make provisions for suppliers to remote communities.

It is not uncommon for prices to increase once a contract is decided, or for there to be a decrease in the quality of food being delivered to remote stores.

Within the provisions of S.7 of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act of 2007 a community store must be licensed.

While the community store-licensing regime is governed by this legislation, there is no legislative contemplation of the long-term future for such stores beyond the five-year operation of the *Emergency Response*.

This is a major shortcoming, and should be addressed by this Inquiry.

Another overarching issue is that community-controlled stores are often the only commercial operation on communities, especially smaller ones, and hence effectively the only private sector source of employment for Aboriginal people on those communities.

While this is less true of some larger communities in which other private sector employment is available, the role of community stores in establishing or building other economic activities on communities is vital.

We suggest that the long term goal in working towards improving cost, quality and culturally appropriate food to remote communities needs to have a focus

on the control of community stores being placed with the right senior people and traditional landowners as appropriate to each community location.

The Commitment from Outback Stores to increase the skills of Aboriginal people to operate a community store has to extend to providing training in marketing, health promotion and management of staff working in store and not be limited to increasing skills in working behind a cash register only.

Further consideration about the links that community stores form with others and other agencies must be examined.

Community stores through their store committee previously often supported other important local events, such as ceremony, providing assistance with funeral expenses, and creating innovative links with Women's Centres, Sewing Centres and offering bush tucker for sale.

Since the commencement of Outback Stores this important community link that supports inclusion policies appears to be missing¹.

Sunrise is pleased that Outback Stores have a Nutrition Policy in place as this suggests there is a commitment to improve the health of people living remote through better access to food—but we still have a long way to go.

It is important for the standing committee to note that in remote and very remote communities, the store is the predominant option for food and is the key source of nutrition.

In Jilkminggan, Outback Stores commenced management of the community's store in July 2008. It is the view of Sunrise that while the Outback network of stores has had some benefits in management and group purchasing, the health benefit outcomes have yet to be realised.

Many people living in Jilkminggan—if they have vehicles—will travel into town to purchase groceries or even to Mataranka.

Our nutritionists report that many people have suggested that the store is too small and does not have the variety they would like; other comments reported to me are that it is cheaper for people to go into town this is despite the fact that a round trip in the taxi will cost approximately \$400 dollars. There is no system of public transport for people living in the area.

¹ *The Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill 2007* can be cited as a special measures bill - this bill adopts a blanket approach. A one size fits all framework is not recommended as an effective measure to close the gap for some of the poorest Australians. The bill rolls up a number of key elements of individual pieces of legislation into a special approach. Power under this legislation includes, but is not limited to, power to the Commonwealth to seize assets, appoint government observers, control community stores licenses and control the permit system. Sunrise asserts that the special measures contained in the bill are or at the very least appear to be discriminatory and disempowering to Aboriginal Traditional Owners.

The results of the Market Basket Survey conducted in May 2008 indicate that the cost of a Market Basket is \$721 for Jilkminggan and that the availability was at 57% this represents \$180 more than the costs of the same Market basket in Katherine town where the availability is 100%.

Other areas suggested for improvement to increase community support and the number of community people that purchase food in the store is investment into increased shelving and storage of food so that more products can be available for the community.

The store would benefit from being redesigned with potential for two tills as opposed to one to manage high numbers of shoppers.

Shade and chairs out the front encouraging the community to utilize the store and provide a community area for health promotion activities and community announcements and meetings would also be of benefit.

In summing up today it is important to emphasise that the cost of food is the major issue in remote communities. This has not been addressed. Even with group purchasing and good management structures in place.

Nevertheless, we welcome the contributions made by Outback Stores, in general as well as to this Inquiry.

Sunrise Health Service has spoken to representatives of Outback with view to establishing a Memorandum of Understanding with Outback to establish a common approach to nutrition, health and the role of community stores.

We understand this would be the first such regional partnership between a primary health care provider and a store network.

We don't have all the answers but could suggest the following:

A trial is undertaken with limited mark up on essential foods such as fruit and vegetables, meats, milk, bread to determine impacts.

Freight subsidies with a sliding scale be developed, this could be benchmarked against how remote a community is, along the lines of existing Remote Area Indexes used to determine primary health care funding.

Investigation into food packaging for the benefit of decreasing cost to the consumer and to the environment is conducted.

Competitive prices with regional centres continue to pull people away from the Store. Increased culturally appropriate marketing to encourage local shopping is essential.

The introduction of Outback Stores is a positive interim step however in the long term, health, wellbeing and economic advancement of Aboriginal communities will be dependent on the store coming under community control.

The Outback Stores model is a mainstream, one size fits all approach that is improving a current dire situation and has potential to develop and meet community needs.

It is a concern however that a ceiling point will be reached under this model that limits advancement and opportunity for the community store to be part of broader economic development.

In concluding, I would make specific reference to this issue of economic development—and the potentially shortsighted nature of current discussions on this issue.

First, the Northern Territory Government—with apparent support from the Commonwealth—has proposed a process of intense resourcing of what they describe as “growth towns”.

That’s well and good, but misses the point about the relationship between economic enterprise—for example—and primary health care.

Two of the growth towns in the Katherine region—Ngukurr in Sunrise, and Lajamanu in Katherine West—are very remote. They also figure as among the most expensive places in the greater Katherine region to buy food.

The promised “growth” of these towns will be illusory—in health terms—if access to proper nutrition at reasonable costs remains denied to these growing populations.

Entrenched chronic disease burdens—so often mirrored in lifetimes of poor nutrition—will be cruelly contradicted by the rhetoric of “growth towns”.

Put simply, safe, secure, affordable food supplies to these “growth towns” must be ensured—and this should be taken into account by this current Inquiry.

Second—what of the towns and communities potentially out of the loop of the “growth towns” scenario?

As a primary health care provider, Sunrise is obliged to extend primary health care services to the whole region we cover.

The ten major towns and communities—along with outstations—that are not contemplated as being “growth towns”, cannot—and must not—be overlooked by us.

Nor, we would argue, can this Committee of Inquiry ignore them. The non-“growth towns”—too—have community stores.

Jilkminggan—where we are meeting today—is one such non-“growth town”. In the last 25 years, Jilkminggan has trebled in population, so it is certainly a growing town, if not an official “growth town”.

The people of this community—and so many others like it—deserve good nutrition, and good community stores.

A little over 11 years ago, Katherine—and many Aboriginal communities in the region, including Jilkminggan where we meet today—were under water with the Australia Day floods. You can see how these places have been re-built after that week of devastation.

Our job is to re-build the lives of Aboriginal people, after generations of devastation—and the work of this Inquiry can assist in this regard.

Thank you.