

Dear Sir / Madam

I appreciate this late opportunity to place the following comments on record for your considerations.

On the afternoon of 22nd March the Board met with some community stakeholders at Yirrkala on the Gove Peninsular. During this meeting a number of thoughts occurred to me, that I did not wish to enlarge upon in the group setting, because it was important that the time be reserved for the input of the local Yolngu participants.

Because I am in frightful hurry, I'm afraid that I'm providing this input in "dot point" form – but this does not diminish the importance of the issue or the content!

I'm providing this feedback in 2 parts – (a) as an ex-child protection worker, and (b) as the manager of the Wellbeing program area at Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation, an Aboriginal controlled organization in Nhulunbuy.

- a) As a previous Child Protection Worker (Non-Indigenous):
 - i. The influence of professional fears about being accused of "racism", combined with senior management insistence on application of the "child placement principle", even when it is clear that a particular placement might provide cultural security, but not ensure safety from risk for the child – this results in a systemic failure / lack of capacity to articulate safety needs in addition to security of child's cultural needs;
 - ii. Need for far greater levels of cross-cultural understandings – one-off "cultural awareness" training is not sufficient. Cultural competency and culturally appropriate responsiveness to the child's safety and wellbeing needs should be the focus of specific and ongoing training / skills events for non-Indigenous Child Protection workers and management. The latter have the responsibility to ensure that the systemic response is both culturally adequate and appropriate.
 - iii. Child protection workers need to be valued in real ways – much lip-service is given to this, but workers continue to leave the system disillusioned with "the system's" capacity, willingness and commitment to value the front-line workers. I will not write more on this, but wish to support the comments provided to the Board by others in relation to this issue. My own Masters research (1999) also concluded that systemic issues were the "weak link" in the child protection system, as identified by the young people who had participated in the research, and support by the literature, (particularly a British researcher by the name of Morrison).
- b) Miwatj Wellbeing programs – provide a range of services including Alcohol and Other Drugs interventions, and the **Raypirri Rom program** which has been providing services to Yolngu individuals and families since June 2007. The focus of the Raypirri work is broadly social wellbeing, and specifically culturally secure family and individual support focusing on children within their family, community and culture.

Some salient points as follows:

 - i. "Raypirri" means "self discipline" of head, heart, and hands - and "Rom" means "the way / lore";

- ii. The Raypirri Rom program was initially funded through a bipartisan arrangement between the Australian Government and the Northern Territory Government to address issues of family violence and wellbeing issues – the first attachment above is a copy of the current Service Agreement.
- iii. Much work that has been done at the community level has focused on the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, and on the enhancement of protective factors in a culturally secure way – please note that these matters have never made their way to the formal child protection system, precisely because they have been addressed in the community, by Yolngu workers employed under the Raypirri Rom program, in a way that is both appropriate and oversights by community stakeholders;
- iv. Additionally, Raypirri work has often supported mainstream agencies in their work with Yolngu communities, including FACS, the Women’s Crisis Service and other agencies – please see attached letters of support from some of these agencies;
- v. The work of the Raypirri team has been fully evaluated by Charles Darwin University, and one resulting document *“Towards an investment framework to reduce family violence in the Northern Territory”* is currently *“In Confidence”* and before Government, however is attached for the Board of Inquiry’s information in relation to the work of Raypirri on the Gove Peninsular. It provides further information regarding the high standards of outcomes and processes achieved – see document attached – please peruse this document (particularly pps. 15, 16, 18, 20, 24, 26, 28);
- vi. In January 2010, NT Health and Families advised Miwatj that “government can no longer find funding for the program”;

With enormous respect to the Board of Inquiry and your task, it is indeed perplexing that a program such as this, faces closure due to lack of funding while at the same time an inquiry is being conducted to determine the best ways of ensuring that children are safe within their families and communities.

In summary, with ongoing funding the Raypirri Rom program:

- is ideally placed to continue service delivery which provides family and individual safety and wellbeing outcomes, including services to children who are vulnerable to risk of harm and neglect, and associated direct service provision to family and community;
- will continue to build on the strengths of processes and outcomes identified in both the CDU evaluation of the program and the aforementioned (and attached) document *“Towards an investment framework ...”*;
- will continue to ensure training, skills development, mentoring and workforce development, and building of community capacity in relation to child and family safety and wellbeing;

- will continue to ensure service delivery is underpinned by principles of shared responsibility, as different to a “purchasing of cultural input”;
- will continue to work in a child-centered case management approach that is inclusive of cultural needs;
- is ideally placed to provide ongoing child wellbeing service delivery underpinned and supported by community credibility, cultural ways and practice knowledge.

The final document attached above is a covering letter which was included in the Information Packages that Miwatj has been distributing to various Government stakeholders, including Minister Vastkalis, in our advocacy for ongoing funding.

The Minister’s office is currently working with Miwatj to source potential funding, however it seems ludicrous that a program such as the Raypirri Program is perfectly positioned to continue the important work that has a demonstrated, documented evidence base, meeting many of the requirements for children to be safe and happy and healthy in their families and communities, and yet *there is no funding!*

I am happy to provide further information to the Board if requested to do so, and would do so in the company of senior Yolngu from the Raypirri Committee who provide cultural oversighting, support and guidance to the Raypirri Rom Program.