

TO:

**BOARD OF INQUIRY INTO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY'S
CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM**

Personal submission

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My submission is based on personal experience in having worked as a case worker for NT Families and Children at the East Arnhem office in Nhulunbuy, 2009/2010, Department of Community Services in NSW and Department of Child Safety in QLD.

Due to my experience I have little faith that my concerns will have any impact on strengthening the Child Protection System within East Arnhem as I perceive the NT Government to have their own agenda which appears to me to have little understanding of achievable work loads, the difference in cultural views of the Yolngu people and the reality of working in remote communities.

Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers (RAFCW)

The biggest shock I encountered whilst working with NT Families and Children (NTFC) in East Arnhem was, despite the majority of clients being Indigenous, there was only one Indigenous Yolngu worker allocated to the whole of East Arnhem and one Aboriginal Community Worker (ACW) in the Nhulunbuy office. The Indigenous Yolngu worker allocated to the East Arnhem office and stationed at Elcho Island is employed through a pilot program known as Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers (RAFCW) which is an excellent initiative however NTFC East Arnhem was allocated only one RAFCW.

NTFC East Arnhem are based in Nhulunbuy and service the areas of Elcho Island, Milingimbi, Ramingining, Gapuwiyak, Groote Island (Umbakumba, Angurugu, Alyangula), Bickerton Island, Numbulwar, Yirrkala, Gunyangara (Ski Beach), Wallaby Beach, Nhulunbuy and all the Homelands associated with these areas. There are well over 150 Indigenous clients associated with the East Arnhem office.

Eight years ago there were Indigenous Yolngu child protection support workers in most of the communities serviced by NTFC and these workers supported non Indigenous case workers when they visited remote communities. Today case workers continually find themselves out in communities without any Indigenous support for:

1. Locating families
2. Interpreting

3. Supporting interaction on a culturally appropriate level
4. Providing workers with general community information
5. Alerting workers to impending danger. At times situations can become tense whereby families become frightened or aggressive towards NTFC staff. Yolngu workers have a clear understanding of these dynamics and other potentially escalating situations.
6. Providing Indigenous community members with a contact point
7. Providing Case Workers with a contact point for follow up once the Case Worker has returned to Nhulunbuy

Support Needed

Child protection case workers contact remote Health Clinics prior to visiting a community in an effort to access an Indigenous worker from the communities Health Clinic (ie Strong Woman Health Workers and Aboriginal Community Workers). In addition, visiting child protection workers rely on the Health Clinics for a vehicle as few communities provide hire vehicles. There have been many incidents whereby a child protection worker will arrive at a community only to find that an Indigenous worker and/or vehicle are no longer available. At times child protection workers will access Indigenous Yolngu staff and vehicles from remote schools in an attempt to get the job done. It is an extremely unprofessional practice.

If the NT Government are serious about making a difference regarding child abuse the absolute first thing they need to do is support those workers who are 'on the ground' and out there doing the investigations. Child protection workers in the East Arnhem office need Remote Aboriginal Family and Community Workers or Indigenous Yolngu Child Protection Workers in every community within East Arnhem Land. In addition, child protection staff must have access to a vehicle when in remote communities.

Work Load

The Child Protection system will not improve until the crippling work load is acknowledged and acted upon. Many staff burn out, break down and leave. Others choose to transfer to positions that do not include case work, 'on the ground investigation or court work.

Unrealistic work loads have been the climate of child protection for many decades throughout Australia yet case workers are continually burdened with a case load that is humanly impossible to manage effectively resulting in poor outcomes.

Staff members leave their job on a regular basis not because they don't like the work but because the work load is too demanding, the mind is over stimulated and workers realise very quickly that what is expected is impossible to achieve.

Consultation and communication

Indigenous child protection workers and Indigenous community members must be more involved in how child protection best operates in their own communities and much more consultation and communication is needed with the Yolngu people of East Arnhem Land in relation to child protection practices. The majority of Indigenous families I have visited following a notification believe that the role of NTFC is to remove their children.

There are many 'strong' Indigenous men and woman in East Arnhem who need to be consulted and involved when it comes to Child Protection Policy and Legislation.

Thank You and Good Luck