

Background

SOCIAL SECURITY NEEDS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Background: Aboriginal people make up about 70% of DSS clients in the Northern Territory. It has been estimated that Aboriginal people in Central Australia have an unemployment rate of about 75%. Of those who live on special leases on the fringes of Alice Springs, 58% live in households where there are no working members. These figures are probably worse on those former government and mission settlements to the north and west of Alice Springs, where there are far fewer job opportunities. Thus Aboriginal people as a group are especially dependent upon the income support provided by the DSS.

Problems in applying the social security system to Aboriginal people: Particular difficulties are confronted when applying the social security system to the needs of Aboriginal people.

There is a high degree of mobility amongst the Aboriginal population. Forwarding addresses are not generally left with post offices. This leads to problems in the distribution of cheques and the return of forms.

A large number of people live in communities remote from Alice Springs, the nearest DSS office. Most of these communities are several hours drive from Alice Springs over rough roads and telephone communications via radio telephone can be very difficult.

Illiteracy is an almost universal characteristic amongst unemployed and old Aborigines. The overwhelming majority of Aboriginal people in Central Australia have a language other than English as their first language.

Many Aboriginal people dependent on social security are intimidated by any authority they see as 'welfare'. Many have had their children literally ripped from their arms by welfare officers on horse back. This practice continued into the 1950s. It is not an overstatement to say that many would rather starve than walk inside the DSS office in Alice Springs.

A special difficulty is presented by the fact that our system of benefit entitlements is based on the Western family model - a model which does not fit the complex Aboriginal family structure. This is well illustrated by the family allowance. Amongst most of the DSS clients in Central Australia, Aboriginal traditional family structure is very strong. Every child will have a number of mothers and fathers, each having special responsibilities for the child's development at different ages.

A claimant for family allowance might be asked: 'Are you looking after X?'; to which the response would be: 'Yes'. Another question might be asked: 'But Y says that she is looking after X - who is looking after X, you or Y?' This question would never receive an answer which the DSS could cope with.

Steps being taken by the DSS to meet these special needs: The DSS sends millions of dollars in benefit cheques to Aboriginal communities each year. The cheques and forms for return to the DSS arrive on the communities in a mail bag. No-one is employed by the DSS in Central Australia to be responsible for the distribution of these cheques and the return of the appropriate forms to the Department. It therefore falls on the limited resources of these communities to meet this need. Thus their level of funding from the Northern Territory Department of Community Development determines the extent to which they can cope with this responsibility, which is arguably that of the DSS.

The result of this *ad hoc* approach to the distribution of benefit cheques is that some recipients do not understand when their eligibility ceases and their benefits are terminated. On the other side of the equation, there are probably many overpayments which are going to people who have no idea that they are being overpaid. The employment of a person to assist in the distribution of cheques would probably pay for itself by avoiding these overpayments.

The DSS employs some 8 Aboriginal people in its Alice Springs office, in line with its policy that Aborigines should make up at least 10% of its Territory staff. They often have to interpret for non-English speaking Aborigines as the DSS does not employ Aboriginal interpreters.

As in the bush communities, the DSS accepts no responsibility for the distribution of cheques and the return of forms in the Alice Springs region. This need has to be met by the resources of the Aboriginal communities through their organizations in Alice Springs.

Those who live outside organised Aboriginal communities (for example, around the cattle stations which are mainly to the south and east of Alice Springs) depend on the white employees of the cattle station to advise them of their social security rights. The two Aboriginal liaison officers employed by the DSS in Alice Springs are required to cover an area from Indulkana in South Australia to Tennant

Creek in the Northern Territory - a hopelessly inadequate situation.

A benefit for Aboriginal people? It has been argued at various times that a special social security entitlement should be available to Aboriginal people. I would argue strongly against that notion. Although special difficulties arise in meeting the needs of Aboriginal people under the present system, these problems can be overcome by involving Aboriginal people in the administration of the system.

Proposals: The DSS should provide funds to Aboriginal communities and organizations so that they may employ people to administer the distribution of cheques and assist people completing forms for return to the Department. These people should be employed by the community organizations, so as to avoid any conflict of interest. Unless the communities choose the people to be given this responsibility, the person may not be strong enough to act in the interest of the whole community rather than be subject to family pressures within the community.

The DSS should also employ at least one interpreter in each of the major languages of Central Australia in its Alice Springs office.

It has been suggested that an officer of the DSS should travel with the plane to the bush communities to supervise the distribution of cheques and return forms. This should be instituted together with the employment of people from the local community. The need for assistance from someone with sound local knowledge and language when the cheques are being distributed would be apparent for anyone who has witnessed the total chaos which often occurs at the time of distribution. In addition, there is a need for people on the communities to have access to someone to assist them with their social security problems on a daily basis.

Despite the disadvantage which Aboriginal people suffer compared to other Australians in dealing with the DSS, there has not been one appeal by Aboriginal people in Central Australia against decisions made by the DSS in the last year. This indicates that there is a serious communication gap between the DSS and the majority of its clients in the Central Australian region.

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(Chris Loorham is the chairperson of the Alice Springs Social Security Appeals Tribunal. This article is an edited text of a paper presented to the National Conference of Social Security Appeals Tribunals, Melbourne, 9-10 November 1985.)