Submission on the *Stronger Futures in the NT (Consequentional and Transitional Provisions) Bill 2011* and the *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011* and the *Social Security Legislation Amendment Bill 2011*

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation (Waltja) works generally with community women to address the major issues affecting Aboriginal families in their communities. In particular, Waltja's work focuses on addressing the many significant gaps in service delivery for families, women, children, young people, old people, people with disabilities and men, in remote communities in central Australia.

Waltja is an advocate for community-based services, and a mediating organisation linking Aboriginal people in remote communities to service providers and funding bodies. Waltja is also a service provider, providing training, health, nutrition, disability and youth services under Commonwealth and NT-funded programs (see Waltja's website www.waltja.org.au for more information about our projects).

Waltja is a Registered Training Organisation, and offers a range of accredited and non-accredited training programs. Waltja offers training on communities and in Alice Springs, including accredited training in community services, administration and governance.

Waltja's Publications Unit produces high quality books, reports, posters, and the Waltja magazine Family News (see website for more information).

Constitution:

Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation was established:

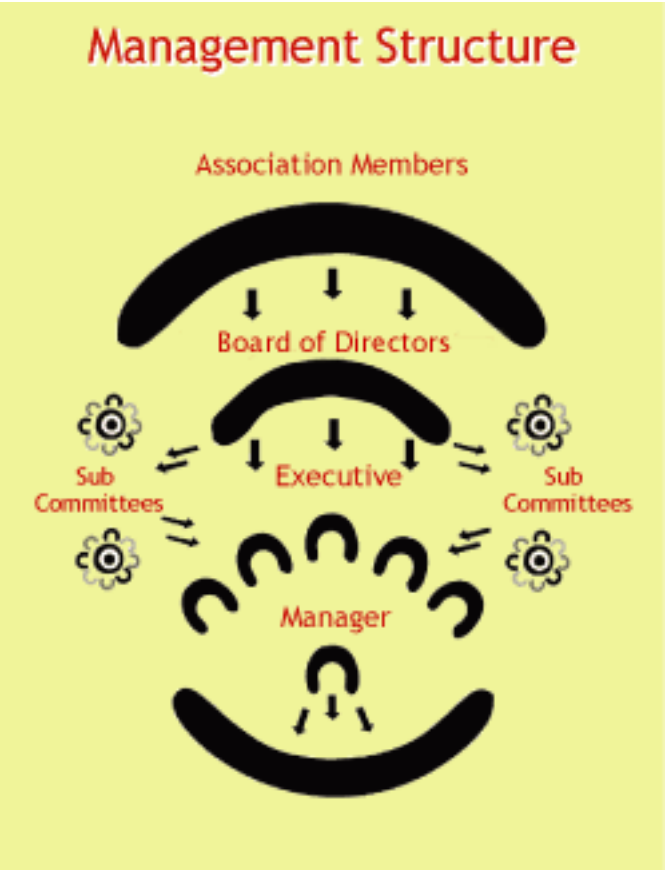
In recognition of the severe sickness, poverty, helplessness and distress experienced by Central Australian Aboriginal people as a result of dispossession of traditional lands, cultural disintegration and social and economic marginalisation. The following are the objects of Waltja's Constitution:

- To provide appropriate transportation, sporting, communications, health and disability, education and homemaker services to relieve the severe economic disadvantage and social, emotional and spiritual well being issues

experienced by Central Australian people. This includes substance misuse, child protection issues, and all forms of violence including suicide and clinical mental illnesses.

- To provide administrative and related resources and programs to develop members of the Central Australian community's capacity for self-management and self-determination.
- Facilitate community participation in the planning, management provision and evaluation of community based services in the Central Australian Region.
- To secure the provision of training, employment and related programs to alleviate chronic unemployment experienced by Central Australian people.
- To represent the views of Central Australia families, from children to the elderly, to arrest cultural disintegration within the Central Australian community.
- To provide and promote opportunities for members' cultural expression to arrest disintegration within the Central Australian community.
- To undertake measures necessary to improve race relations and counter racial vilification, alleviate the social distress experiences by Central Australian people.
- To provide resources, administrative and related support to members in the establishment of initiatives and organisations, the objectives of which will reduce the levels of sickness, poverty, helplessness and distress experienced by Central Australian people.
- Identify opportunities and needs for the enhancement or extension of community based services to relieve the reliance on Alice Springs services.

Waltja's management is a partnership between the Board of Directors including the Executive Directors and the Manager with the support of all other Waltja personnel. Each year Waltja holds its Annual General Meeting, at which a Board of Directors (maximum of 12 women) are elected from its membership. Members also elect office bearers. These office bearers make up the Executive Directors.



WALTJA - Organisational Structure

All Board of Directors members must be appointed from remote communities.

The Board of Directors meets at least 3 times a year. They are responsible for setting the overall goals and objectives of Waltja and making decisions about policies and priorities.

The Executive Directors meet 4 times a year. They are responsible for setting direction and making decisions about projects and programs. They work more closely with the full range of Waltja's services and activities with agencies and remote communities.

Sub and Steering committees are formed by members to address specific issues as the need arises. Sub – committees can include members from outside Waltja's Board of Management. They provide specialist information to the Members.

The Directors employ Aboriginal workers and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal support workers to run a range of programs, forums, workshops, training and cultural activities.

Waltja's feedback on proposed legislative changes

Since the introduction of the Northern Territory Emergency Response in 2007 Waltja has received extensive feedback from people from remote Central Australian communities (see website for Waltja's service area) about the impact of the 'intervention' on their communities and lives. Waltja has continued to seek and receive feedback from people from these same remote communities about the proposed extension of the intervention (as proposed by the *Stronger Futures* and *Social Security Amendment* Bills) and this feedback forms the basis of this submission. Feedback demonstrates unequivocal opposition to the proposed legislation and a strident call for the proposals to be withdrawn.

The proposed legislation infringes on Aboriginal people's fundamental human and legal rights and would do much damage to people's capacity for self-determination. Indeed, feedback to Waltja field workers from remote communities across the region states that the current intervention has already resulted in an increased sense of despair, disempowerment, loss of hope, sadness and deep shame. Feedback also shows that people have not seen the promised, positive outcomes in their communities – such as extra and better housing, better and more responsive store management, better education outcomes and less alcohol and marijuana abuse in communities. One senior woman from Yuendumu community said that 'the intervention took away everything. It made a big crack in communities and it will never be fixed'.

The abolition of community councils and the permit system (and, in doing so, disregarding local leadership), income management and punitive measures around school non-attendance have all deepened the sense of helplessness. Furthermore, it implies that view that Aboriginal people are not able to manage their finances, care for their children nor manage their own communities.

The alcohol reforms proposed by the *Stronger Futures* Bill are punitive and discriminatory and destined to fail. Alcohol is still being smuggled into communities

and alcohol-fuelled violence within, or on the boundaries of some communities remains high. Where people are discouraged from smuggling alcohol into dry communities for fear of jail penalties, anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a drift of people into major service centres such as Alice Springs, where they can legally access alcohol. The implications for this are far reaching, including an marked increase in racial tension and negative stereotyping by 'mainstream' groups. People who are most impacted by alcohol abuse are Aboriginal families in Alice Springs, who have no choice but to live with and near drinkers.

Alcoholism and binge drinking is a nationwide issue and yet these reforms have been targeted at one group. This has and will further deepen the sense of segregation and shame. Government efforts would be much better placed by supporting local initiatives to place restrictions upon alcohol, help educate people about the dangers of binge drinking and help to implement programs that recognise that alcoholism is an illness, not a criminal behaviour.

Despite the huge amount of resources devoted to income management and SEAM, Waltja Members see no evidence that these initiatives have been effective. Actual costs (which, according to Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), average over $4000 per person in the NT), do not take into consideration the huge cost of supporting people (by services such as the Tangentyere Council, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Salvation Army, CatholicCare, Anglicare, Waltja, etc) who are affected by these measures. In regards to SEAM, this has been at the expense of devoting resources to strengthening the ties between communities and their schools, improving school environments, implementing incentive-based initiatives (e.g. tying school attendance to community pool use) to help encourage children into education, training and employing more Aboriginal teachers and teacher's assistants and engaging Aboriginal children through bilingual education and culture.

In addition to factors identified by ACOSS associated with non-attendance at school among Aboriginal children, Waltja has found that many children do not attend school due to inter-family conflict within their communities and the fear that they

will face hostility, bullying and violence within school. Other issues such as inadequate sleep, an inability to identify with mainstream educational values, fear of failure, low self-esteem and language barriers cannot be improved by threatening parents with punitive measures. The suspension of income support for people who are already living below the poverty line, will only put greater pressure on their families to support them (usually grandparents) and effectively force multiple people to exist on a single Centrelink payment. It will also place greater pressure on organisations such as Waltja and already limited Emergency Relief projects and other case management/counselling/financial support services.

Feedback regarding income management has been mixed; people have said that they would prefer the program to be optional and many people have said that they would have chosen to 'opt in' (but would have liked the choice). Other feedback (largely received through Waltja's Money Management program) demonstrates that people, particularly elderly people, do not understand where their money is going; a feeling of shame when using basic cards at shops and their lack of confidence and numeracy and financial literacy skills makes it extremely difficult to effectively budget or save money. In short, regardless of whether people would choose to be income managed or not, the process has been disempowering and has greatly decreased their opportunity for self-determination.

Since the introduction of the intervention in 2007, Waltja Members and staff have noted an increased number of attempted and completed suicides. This is indicative of the widespread despair and pain for individuals, families and communities and the disintegration of community life. When the intervention was rolled out, Waltja Directors and Members were 'really worried about families'. They said that 'it's been hard and might get harder again', but they hoped that the attention the intervention brought to some of the difficult issues faced by Aboriginal people would result in better educational outcomes, more teachers, more housing (and improvements to existing housing), improvements to community stores and child protection – in short a 'better future for our people'. The past 5 years have not improved things for Aboriginal people and the gap has not been closed and the new legislation will fail as

the Emergency Response has.

Written on behalf of Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Directors

Sarah Holder
Management
Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi

PO Box 8274
Alice Springs
NT 0871