

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES  
SUBMISSION TO THE

**THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT  
ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

INQUIRY

*LANGUAGE LEARNING IN INDIGENOUS  
COMMUNITIES*



**Australian Government**

**Department of Human Services**



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## 1 Introduction

The Department of Human Services (the department) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in its *Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities*.

### 1.1 Overview of the Department's submission

After a review of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, the department's response addresses the following:

- the benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages
- the contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture
- measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services.

In its submission, the department notes that '*giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages*' not only demonstrates respect for Indigenous culture but also allows government to provide information and deliver services to customers in a culturally appropriate manner and assist those customers with poor English skills in a language that they may more readily understand.

Additionally the department has provided information on how it provides access to interpreter services and how it encourages and facilitates access to language, literacy and numeracy programs as part of participation requirements.

For the Committee's information we provide some general information about the department.

## 2 Department of Human Services Overview

The department was established in October 2004 to improve the development and delivery of Commonwealth social and health-related services, including financial assistance.

The department delivers programs and services on behalf of a range of Government departments, including:

- the Department of Health and Ageing
- the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
- the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
- Department of Veterans' Affairs

These departments are responsible for the development of policies and programs to support people. The department, as the service delivery arm of the Australian Government, is responsible for the implementation and administration of payments and programs administered by these policy departments.

The department delivers the following master programs:

- Child Support Program
- CRS Australia
- Centrelink
- Medicare

The department delivers services through various customer access channels, including face-to-face services, call centre networks and online services. The department provides social support through social workers and other specialist officers, and provides linkages with other assistance available in the states and territories and the wider community.

The department is comprised of more than 39,000 employees, representing nearly a quarter of the Australian Public Service. Of these, approximately three-quarters work in front-line services. The department has significant systems capability to deliver payments and services to Australian citizens and organisations.

## 2.1 Department Structure

With the passage of the *Human Services Legislation Amendment Act 2011*, the Department of Human Services, Medicare Australia and Centrelink became a single department from 1 July 2011. The department administers a number of master programs as follows:

- **Centrelink** programs deliver a range of government payments and services to Australians - including retirees, families, carers, parents, people with disabilities, Indigenous people and people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Centrelink programs also provide assistance at times of major change and emergency.
- The **Child Support Program** provides support to separated parents to provide the financial and emotional support necessary for their children's wellbeing.
- **CRS Australia** helps people with a disability, injury or health condition to find and keep a job, by providing individualised vocational rehabilitation and helping employers to keep their workplaces safe.
- **Medicare** programs support the health of Australians through efficient services and payments, such as Medicare benefits, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register and the Australian Organ Donor Register.

### 3 The importance of Indigenous languages in maintaining Indigenous identity and culture

#### 3.1 Language is important

The department notes the important role that language plays in the maintenance and continuing revitalisation of Indigenous culture. Language connects Indigenous Australians not only to each other, providing a sense of identity, but also to their history, thus providing a sense of continuity.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not have a written history, rather history was told through dance, song, stories or art, which have been passed down from generation to generation.

Storytelling is an integral part of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. From an early age, storytelling has played a vital role in educating children. Elders or Aunts and Uncles use the stories as the first part of a child's education. As children grow into young adults, more of the history and culture is revealed. Adults then take responsibility for passing on the stories to the following generations.

The department is firmly of the view that increasing the understanding of cultures, customs and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will enable our staff to gain a deeper appreciation of the richness of Indigenous culture and the challenges faced today by our Nation's First Peoples.

#### 3.2 Our approach to working with our Indigenous customers

We build our approach towards assisting our Indigenous customers on the following key elements<sup>1</sup>

- **Relationships:** We believe that building strong, mutually respectful relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples is essential for effective policy development and service delivery.
- **Respect:** We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first Australians and see building knowledge, understanding and appreciation of their cultures, histories and relationships as crucial to improving service delivery and the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.
- **Opportunities:** We will ensure recruitment and retention policies support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and assist us to establish a workforce that reflects the communities in which we live, work and operate.

Our access and equity commitment is demonstrated by the provision of a range of specialist services offered to our Indigenous customers.

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<sup>1</sup> DHS Reconciliation Action Plan 2011 -2013

### 3.3 Indigenous Service Units

Indigenous Service Units strategically influence the development of improvements to service delivery that lessen the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous customers and communities. The units assist the department, policy departments and other agencies to work with Indigenous people and their communities to achieve integrated services that contribute to social inclusion outcomes.

Unit managers focus on policy effectiveness and sustainable delivery of services that affect Indigenous customers and communities. They provide strategic direction, guidance and advice on Indigenous issues across the department's network.

### 3.4 Indigenous Service Officers

A network of Indigenous Service Officers operates at key department sites across Australia. As contact points between Indigenous communities and the department, these specialist officers facilitate better communication between Indigenous customers and the department, and provide advice and support to the department that helps improve service delivery.

Examples of activities include:

- establishing effective relationships with local Indigenous communities, government and non-government agencies, and other relevant stakeholders
- conducting outreach activities to local Indigenous communities to ensure customers understand the services offered by the department
- identifying opportunities for enhanced service delivery
- working with DHS Service Centres to develop strategies to achieve equitable access to and participation in DHS services and programs by Indigenous customers
- identifying possible candidates to become interpreters.

### 3.5 Indigenous Customer Service Advisers

Indigenous Customer Service Advisers operate at various locations across Australia, providing culturally appropriate and individually tailored customer service to Indigenous customers.

Examples of activities include:

- referring customers to appropriate service providers, linking them with community support
- establishing and maintaining operational partnerships with local community service providers
- providing out-services to their local community
- providing advice on customer rights and obligations.

## 4 Language and Participation

Providing interpreting services and facilitating access to language, literacy and numeracy programs allows the department to assist those Indigenous Australians, who would otherwise be disadvantaged by poor English Language skills, to first access services and payments and then, to better participate in the economic opportunities available to them.

### 4.1 Indigenous Language and Interpreter Services

The department has a policy of providing free interpreting (and translation) services to customers who have limited English language skills. This is fundamental to ensuring customers both understand their rights and obligations and are able to conduct their ongoing business with the department.

Interpreter services are provided on-site (face-to-face), on a regular rostered basis in areas of high language concentrations and over the telephone. This includes international, sign language (Auslan) and Indigenous languages.

The department's international language service was identified as best practice in the Ombudsman's 2009 Use of Interpreters report. It is the intention of the department to use this expertise in developing viable interpreter services for Indigenous languages to meet its business needs.

Establishing a viable supply of interpreters in Indigenous languages will not only assist the department in providing responsive customer service but will also contribute to the maintenance of Indigenous languages and culture.

The department is the largest government agency user of Indigenous language interpreters in the Northern Territory through the Aboriginal Interpreter Service. Together with the Kimberley Interpreter Service in upper Western Australia, the department is able to meet the majority of the demand for interpreter services. Outside of these regions, the department uses its own panel of interpreters and bilingual staff to meet demand.

Staff undertake a one day cross cultural awareness training with a particular focus on communication barriers, cultural diversity and use of interpreters when dealing with Indigenous people.

### 4.2 Challenges

The department's experience in developing and delivering Indigenous interpreter services has highlighted the following:

- a national shortage of trained and accredited professional Indigenous language interpreters in Australia, particularly in terms of language and geographical coverage

- a lack of qualified Indigenous language assessors for the purpose of accreditation and competency
- the skill levels required to deal with the full range of complexities inherent to customers further complicates this shortage
- the Indigenous language interpreter profession remains at a fledgling state
- in the last decade there have been significant improvements in the access to, and skill of the interpreters
- a great deal more needs to be done to raise the size and standard of the profession to make it comparable with the network of international language interpreters.

### 4.3 Bilingual staff

The department pays Community Language Allowance to employees who use a language other than English in the course of their work (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and Auslan, a sign language for deaf people). Currently Centrelink has 30 staff registered as receiving Community Language Allowance for an indigenous language.

Currently eligibility for Community Language Allowance for an Indigenous language requires verification by an elder that the candidate is fluent in the language.

While this allows the department to provide a limited bilingual service, we would prefer to develop more controlled testing arrangements to meet our duty of care obligations to customers. The department has approached its testing agency, the University of New South Wales to source interpreters who can act as examiners for the Community Language Allowance test. Despite approaches to the Aboriginal Interpreter Service, various Language Centres and other university campuses, the University of New South Wales has been unable to source examiners with sufficient English literacy to conduct the examinations. This highlights another serious deficiency in the Indigenous language field.

### 4.4 Current initiatives to improve the capability of the department's Indigenous interpreter services

The department is working with key stakeholders to improve the capability of its Indigenous interpreter services.

- It has worked closely with the Aboriginal Interpreter Service on streamlining booking processes and developing management and reporting information.
- It currently has an open tender under development (due to market July-August 2011) to create a panel of suppliers for Indigenous Interpreting services nationally, with options for suppliers to be part of a panel broadly based around language and/or geographical areas.



- A feasibility study was conducted by the Department on behalf of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs on a National Indigenous Interpreter Framework (delivered Jan 2011).
- The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, in conjunction with the department, is proposing an interpreting trial in Aurukun, North Queensland.
- The department will be operating a pilot aimed at directly recruiting interpreters for its existing panel in Far North Queensland concurrently with the Aurukun trial. Lessons learnt from a similar trial in the delivery of Pitjantjatjara language services in South Australia (2010–11) will be applied to this (Pitjantjatjara services are continuing to be supplied). This direct recruitment exercise is to supplement expected deficiencies in local supply in various locations nationally (mainly outside of the Northern Territory) of interpreters from the open tender.
- All the department's Indigenous Interpreting Services have been consolidated in the Multicultural Services Branch to take advantage of their expertise in delivering language services.
- The department and other agencies are reporting to the Commonwealth Ombudsman following the Ombudsman's own motion report, 'Talking in Language: Indigenous language interpreters and government communication', which was tabled in April 2011. All agencies last reported in June 2011 on their policies and plans for improving access to interpreting services.
- The department is working with the University of New South Wales to expand its Community Language Allowance testing regime to include examination in Indigenous languages rather than endorsement by a community elder.

#### 4.5 Suggestion – Working with Indigenous Language Centres

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet manages the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records program which funds various maintenance and recording of language activities across Australia, including a number of language centres.

These Language Centres could provide the basis for a viable structure with growth potential for an interpreter capability. A focus on developing bilingual speakers (and eventually interpreters) would help actively maintain and promote the languages while enhancing interpreter capability and capacity.

A possible approach could be to combine the Language Centres under one overarching network, with proper training and technology, to link a series of Centres to form the basis of a national Indigenous interpreting service. DHS with the addition of the health, education and the justice systems creates an enormous potential to provide work and create resources for Indigenous interpreters and bilingual speakers.

## **4.6 Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program**

The Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program provides language, literacy and numeracy training for eligible job seekers whose skills are below the level considered necessary to secure sustainable employment or pursue further education and training. It is designed to help remove a major barrier to employment and improve participants' daily lives.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations is responsible for this program that seeks to improve a person's literacy and/or numeracy with the expectation that such improvements will enable them to participate more effectively in training or in the labour force and lead to greater gains for society in the longer term.

The role of the department in relation to the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program is to identify eligible and suitable job seekers and to refer them to the program. The target group is job seekers aged between 15 and 64 years inclusive.

The Language, Literacy and Numeracy Supplement provides an incentive and financial assistance to customers, in receipt of eligible income support payments, participating in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program. The supplement assists with the additional costs associated with attendance in the program.

## **4.7 Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program in Remote Indigenous Communities**

In remote Australia the principle and preferred language spoken by Indigenous Australians is often one or more of the Indigenous languages common to the area they reside in with English, as, more often than not, the fourth or fifth language an individual may speak.

## **4.8 What works well for Indigenous Australians**

Indigenous job seekers are more likely to participate in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program when the program is delivered in a culturally sensitive manner. Anecdotal feedback from Indigenous job seekers indicates that their preference is to be taught by an Indigenous trainer in a culturally appropriate training venue. They are more likely to complete the program where there is ongoing community and/or mentor support offering reinforcement, encouragement and motivation to stay in the program.

## **4.9 Challenges in Remote Communities**

While there have been some successes in the delivery of the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program in urban environments, significant challenges exist in remote areas.

A major challenge is provider capacity to maintain a presence in remote communities due to access issues and a lack of resources and infrastructure within the community. Thus, training is often cancelled due to the unavailability of qualified trainers in this environment. .

While there is an option to learn English via distance education rather than face-to-face training in these locations, the distance education mode of the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program provides additional challenges for Indigenous participants due to the unsupported nature of this type of learning activity.

#### **4.10 Opportunities in Remote Communities**

Most remote Aboriginal communities have some planning mechanism in place which outlines the community's aspirations. Many communities have developed Local Implementation Plans that include the type of development and employment opportunity available or expected to become available in the future. This environment offers significant opportunity for the delivery of literacy training in conjunction with other vocational education training programs that are relevant to the current or planned industry within the Local Implementation Plans.

#### **4.11 Outcomes in Urban Areas**

Recent Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program pilot programs in Darwin and Sydney achieved education and employment outcomes for Indigenous participants, where the previously mentioned cultural factors were embraced by the provider.