

ATTACHMENT A

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The Secretariat
Northern Territory Government Board of Inquiry
into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse

26 September 2006

Dear Sir/Madam,

**RE: Inquiry into the Protection
of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse**

The Smith Family appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the "Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse". Our submission highlights key areas of disadvantage and proposes some practical ways forward. It is underpinned by our recognition that indigenous cultures and languages are an asset to be built on and not part of the disadvantage to be overcome.

The Smith Family is an independent non-profit national social enterprise. Established for more than 80 years we work in over 70 communities to achieve our mission of promoting educational opportunities for disadvantaged Australian children and their families. Our annual national expenditure is close to \$40 million. We rely on sponsors, donors and corporations for our funding. Only 8% of our funding comes from Governments.

Over the last seven years, The Smith Family has undergone a comprehensive organisational transformation moving its program focus from a welfare-oriented model to one more in line with a leading social enterprise focused on children and education. Every step of this transition has been informed by the latest national and international research, not only in terms of evolving individual programs, but at a higher strategic level with regard to the range of outcomes we aim to achieve. Our core business is now firmly centred around supporting disadvantaged children to benefit optimally from education and through that to better life chances

We began our work in the Territory in January this year and in 2006/07 The Smith Family will bring around \$1million dollars into the Territory. This is but the start of a long term commitment. We have begun our work in nine school communities across the Top End.

Prioritising the education and development of our children and young people is required for Australia to take the giant leaps forward it needs to maintain our standard of living and economic future. This issue is even more pressing in the Territory. With 40% of the NT school population indigenous, and a high proportion of these students failing to reach basic literacy benchmarks, we recognise that indigenous education is of mainstream importance and concern.

Improving indigenous education outcomes is essential for the Territory's future prosperity and stability.

It is widely acknowledged in research and by indigenous leaders that the pathways to being a victim and perpetrator of abuse are largely the same pathways to school failure and welfare dependency. The Chief Minister's recent keynote address on Aboriginal Affairs acknowledges, for instance, the links between adequate housing and abuse.

- The lack of adequate housing impacts seriously on family strength. Without a fridge food cannot be stored and children may find they are scattering through the community on some days searching for food. Without a door to lock parents cannot create a safe zone for their children. With overcrowding children often do not have their own sleeping space. This makes children vulnerable to perpetrators. The same conditions deny children the reliable nutrition and sleep they need to take advantage of the education on offer
- Drug and alcohol abuse significantly reduces the ability to effectively parent. Children consequently lack essential care and guidance making them vulnerable to school failure as well as being victims of abuse
- Intergenerational welfare dependency creates a passivity and lack of hope, a learned helplessness, that robs families and community leaders of a sense of being able to right wrongs and make a difference. The intergenerational burden of grief over family destruction adds to the sense of hopelessness.

Despite the specific focus of the Inquiry it would clearly be unproductive to develop a model for understanding and resourcing the problem of aboriginal child sexual abuse in isolation. Holistic interventions are called for. With so much in this area already well documented and agreed we suggest that the challenge is how to identify, build on and resource effective holistic interventions.

We propose that the following areas provide important opportunities for efficient and effective holistic approaches. We suggest that building interventions and strengthening resources in these areas would provide a significant return on investment and would impact for good on the lives of indigenous children in the Territory.

Making schools the centrepiece of a prevention strategy would acknowledge that schools are increasingly the last community hub of our society. It also acknowledges that the delivery of a strategy into remote aboriginal communities is hampered significantly by the lack of skilled, resident personnel who are engaged with children and families. Schools are staffed with tertiary educated personnel who have made a deliberate career choice to train and work to develop children. Schools are a natural centre for attracting and supporting parents. Enrich this hub so it can better support the children we are focusing on. To some extent schools are already dealing with this problem. However, the elements of a strategic response from Government are scattered. Teachers are left to apply a band aid when the resources for comprehensive care are elsewhere. Build into school communities the parent support and health services necessary for a holistic approach. Resource and develop the leadership teams so that the "welfare side of the school offering" is sufficiently resourced.

The Smith Family's strategy in the NT is to add value to the school efforts. Our plans will have us embedding support through the schools and marshalling support and resources for disadvantaged children from a range of sources through the school. Already we are seeing a response for schools that convinces us that with the right kind of support and resources schools are ideally places to address the welfare needs of children in a way that empowers children to improve their own life chances.

We also suggest that making the jail experience a transformative one is an opportunity too good to ignore. We understand that the NT jail population is close to 80% indigenous. This is a dramatic overrepresentation but at the same time provides an opportunity for effective individual and family interventions. The very high level of illiteracy in indigenous people in jail is well documented. Literacy programs could make a significant impact. The very successful family visiting and strengthening program conducted by Good Beginnings Australia in the past could very usefully be replicated or reinstated. While some sentences only last 3 -6 months this time could be used to establish people in a pathway that could be continued beyond jail with the support of partnerships, for example, through programs such as those offered by the Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

In the longer term we encourage the Northern Territory Government to seriously negotiate a school centric approach to supporting families and children in need in the Territory. The anecdotes about the abuse of the baby bonus are but one example of the problems generated when responses from the federal government are applied without due consideration of, and need for adaptation to, the complex challenges of the NT.

The Smith Family has begun a long term partnership with NT schools. We believe that enriching these key Government supported institutions that impact on the lives of indigenous people is an effective and efficient way to tackle the challenge of preventing abuse.

Yours sincerely

Elaine Henry
Chief Executive Officer
The Smith Family