

Productivity Commission —Inquiry into the Disability Discrimination Act 1992

Alice Springs visits, 24–26 June 2003 (*Cate McKenzie, Patrick Laplagne, Jo Lawson*)

This note was prepared by Productivity Commission staff who participated in the visit detailed below, and checked by Waltja for accuracy. This note summarises the tenor of the discussions held at the time and does not represent the views of the Productivity Commission.

**Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation — 25 June, 4.00pm–
5.00pm** (*Kate Lawrence & Keryn Maloney*)

Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation is a community-based organisation, working with Aboriginal families in remote Central Australia. Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi is Luritja for “doing good work for families” and the name encapsulates the Waltja story. (For details about Waltja’s activities, please visit www.waltja.org.au).

Waltja grew out of the Central Australian Family Resource Centre (FRC), which began operating in 1993. The National Family Resource Centre Program — a Commonwealth initiative — provided funding to organisations assisting families in the areas of advocacy, development of family services, information provision, education and training and needs identification. Following the withdrawal of Commonwealth funding, in 1997, FRC members decided to incorporate as an Aboriginal Association in 1997.

Waltja is an advocate for community-based services, and a go-between or 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 Northern Territory-funded programs. Waltja is also a registered training organisation.

Note: the following comments apply only to the Aboriginal communities that Waltja has direct experience of.

It is difficult to identify the extent and severity of disabilities in remote Aboriginal communities. In part, this is because of the lack of support services on remote communities and the ensuing lack of knowledge about what services people with disabilities are entitled to. It is also because Aboriginal people on remote communities experience multiple disadvantage including poverty and high levels of chronic disease.

Disability can be 'hidden' and therefore people with disabilities and their carers do not receive the support they need.

Remote Aboriginal communities generally accept and support their members equally. They do not treat people with disabilities differently or stigmatise them. However, there can be neglect of the special needs of people with disabilities, and an inability to negotiate support for them.

Foetal alcohol cases and sniffers returning to the community can be a problem. However, in one instance, a person with acquired brain damage-related disability has been supported to live in the community, with the help of a disability coordinator funded by the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services. This initiative worked well in encouraging community awareness and support for dealing with brain damage-related disabilities.

Many Indigenous people living in remote communities require the support of intermediaries to access what they need. Often, the services available to remote communities are not interlinked or coordinated. They also need phones, computers, and self-confidence.

Signing is an integral part of all Central Australian language and communication. Auslan and Central Australian signing can be combined to support Aboriginal people with a hearing disability. While some town people use Auslan, Indigenous signing is understood throughout the region.

Many people do not even realise that they are entitled to disability support, except for those who get the Disability Support Pension. But a lot who do not get the pension have a disability. People do not tend to like self-identifying as having a disability.

There are no hospitals on remote communities. Family support and clinic support helps people remain on communities when they are ill. Hospitalisation means family members often need to relocate into town to support hospitalised people.

Waltja runs disability and aged care workshops. Teaching and learning takes place through paintings, discussions and other activities (e.g. camping). Bush food and bush medicine are central to these workshops. Waltja collects disability data profiles and can provide funds to support care for people with disabilities.