

30 June 2017

Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review
c/o Department of Health
PO Box 40596
CASUARINA NT 0811
Alcohol.Review@nt.gov.au

Dear Review Manager

SUBMISSION TO THE ALCOHOL POLICIES AND LEGISLATION REVIEW

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Northern Territory (NT) Government's *Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review*.

We are making a private submission to the review. I was a nurse in remote communities in Central Australia and the Kimberley Region of Western Australia over a 30 year period, commencing in 1964 at Amata in South Australia. My husband worked in remote communities in building construction, essential services and store management. He still does casual maintenance for a group of dialysis clinics in Central Australia.

It is of real concern that there is currently such a high percentage of Northern Territory residents consuming alcohol at an alarming rate. For our first 20 years out bush, alcohol was not an issue with Aboriginal people. There was little illness amongst adults, obesity, hypertension and diabetes were unheard-of and everyone in the community was very active. Sadly unemployment benefits - "the no-work pension" - and later generous Centrelink payments together with easy access to alcohol in the towns created an environment where it could be bought and consumed throughout the day.

There was always strong opposition to alcohol sales in the communities from women and church leaders. At Docker River in 1972 a staff member proposed a wet canteen 'to teach the Aborigines how to drink'. A group of women and the Indigenous Lutheran pastor travelled to Alice Springs, a major exercise in those days as it was a 2 day trek and they successfully lobbied the Welfare Branch head not to allow the wet canteen. It is interesting that 25 years later, we do not believe the feeling about supply of alcohol in communities has changed.

Alcohol is too readily available in the Territory. It is responsible for more than 9,000 emergency department presentations, many of these relating to domestic violence. Men whose fathers or grandfathers we knew as fine traditional members of their tribal group, are in prison in Alice Springs for domestic violence offenses, usually involving alcohol. 50 years ago women were the main breadwinners and their presence was essential for the wellbeing of the family. The men could not afford to have them injured or unable to work.

The progression from happy family man to alcoholic and prison is so evident in many people whom we know. A man whose father was a reliable member of the workforce at Amata and a role model for young people, often wandered the Todd Mall, under the influence and asking for money. The last time David saw him was in the prison. Three ladies who were making a valuable contribution to their community in WA, were also in prison recently for alcohol related incidents while visiting Alice Springs.

I have found it distressing to witness the increase in Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder where it was unknown when I started nursing in the Outback. 25 years ago in our time at Fitzroy Crossing in WA teachers were seeing learning difficulties and unpredictable behaviour in an increasing number of children. FASD was not diagnosed till many years later and in the meantime we have a whole generation come through the schools and experience problems in adult life. We believe that many of the alcohol issues are related to FASD and the difficulty of these people to make wise decisions.

With the relaxation of the POSIs at bottle shops in recent weeks we have seen an increase in drinking in the Todd River. David observed over 220 wine bottles, that had accumulated over about a 10 day period, in a 1km section of the Todd River. We wonder whether the children who are causing many issues with vandalism in the CBD have parents who have been in one of the major drinking camps in the Todd, night after night.

Education programs to persuade Aboriginal people to reduce their alcohol use or abstain altogether have largely failed in Central Australia. The only approach with a possibility of success we believe is to reduce the availability of alcohol.

Together with the re-introduced Banned Drinkers Register, the Government needs to look at the following options:

Buyback of liquor licenses. 10 takeaway licenses in a town of 26,000 people is too many. 30 years ago action was being proposed on the alcohol problems in town. In March 1987 the Centralian Advocate had the headlines "Bid to ban takeaway liquor". The member for the electorate of Flynn had called for licenses for supermarkets and corner stores to be no longer available and he was supported by the Tangentyere Liquor committee. (Thanks to local historian Alex Nelson for the newspaper report).

Reduction in opening hours. In January 1999 the Advocate reported "Grog's deadly effect on Alice Springs", responsible for 90% of road deaths and 80% of homicides. An ATSIC funded report had recommended the later opening time of 4.00pm on some days. There is no need for the two drive-through outlets to open on a Sunday. The town should be able to enjoy one alcohol-free day a week.

Introduce a minimum price for alcohol. The current price for bottled wine in Alice Springs is around \$1.15 a standard drink and for 2 litre cask wine, 90 cents, thankfully higher than

Darwin where the cost is as low as 60cents. This should be increased to at least \$1.30 a standard drink throughout the Territory.

Removal of incentives to buy more alcohol. The two big supermarket outlets in Alice Springs have promotions such as 'buy six bottles for a discount of \$1.00 each. In Darwin one of the supermarket chains offers \$2.00 off already cheap wine, if you buy two bottles. These incentives should be banned.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these very important issues. We wish the review well in its deliberations.

Margaret Hewitt OAM

PO Box 4212

Alice Springs 0871

Phone 8952 6717