

## Reductions in services to Indigenous women experiencing violence

Various threatened and actual reductions in services to Indigenous women experiencing violence in **central Australia** have been brought to WESNET's attention.

In general terms, we understand some 19 'bush women's centres' have been or will be closed since the cut to the ATSIC budget made in the 1996 Federal Budget. They received approximately \$900,000 annually from ATSIC, usually in operational funding. These centres also often have a variety of other bits and pieces of funding to run particular programs such as meals for the elderly, bathing facilities, laundry facilities, nutrition programs, children's activities. **They are also widely used as safe places for women to spend time away from violence in their communities during the day.**

We list here the experience of six separate Centres.

### 1.

One Centre has been closed already and the coordinator it used to have has gone. She was at the Centre every day and it was a hive of activity. Men would not go there and women from the local community used it during the day to have time out from violence they were experiencing at home and to receive support from other women. They had been thinking about starting a night patrol and had received a \$5000 grant towards it from the Drugs and Alcohol Services Authority. This has not been able to proceed.

The wages and running costs of the Centre cost only \$46,000 yearly, and it had been built for \$75,000. Since the closure, the unity amongst the local women has gone and the Centre has been vandalized.

### 2.

In another community Centre (known as a multi purpose one) expects to survive cuts that will occur over the next 6 months but it will reduce its services. A night patrol operates from the Centre to assist petrol sniffers and women experiencing violence. There is very little locally for women experiencing violence and as it is very shameful to admit to being beaten, support and prompt action are needed if women are not to be discouraged from dealing with the problem. Information, and better informed and resourced police are needed as delay in dealing with complaints of violence, (and 2 very recent examples of this were provided), often means women will not continue with them as they are made to feel their complaints are unimportant. Yet two or three women in the community have obtained restraining orders and are willing to say this publicly and that they had the effect of stopping the violence. The domestic violence unit in the police station at Alice Springs is very supportive but it is one hour's drive away.

This Centre also provides time away from violent homes during the day for women experiencing violence, and the coordinator and the local women are trying to establish it as a night refuge too, because the night patrol room has a shower, toilet and kitchen. They are therefore seeking money for swags and towels. Already they use the rest of the Centre as a refuge of sorts at night when necessary.

3.

This Center considers it may avoid closure because it will not lose all its funds, but it is not sure its current levels of activity will continue as it will lose some funding.

The Centre is used by women experiencing violence at home as time out during the day. Men do not come there. A large group of women come every day, and some are always there using the place as a refuge. The violence is not much talked about.

Night patrols are run in this community. Sometimes the women escape the violence by going on bush trips collecting tucker and hunting for a time, when alcohol problems are particularly bad in the community.

4.

The Co-ordinator was lost at the end of the last financial year. There is still a building and some women are paid under the Community Development Employment Program to prepare meals for the elderly and do their laundry.

The local women have used the Centre for daytime refuge from violence whilst the coordinator was there but this is all less organized now. Night patrols are run too from the Council office down the road, comprising equal men and women in them.

5.

This had operational funding from ATSIC with other funding for children's services and the homemakers' program. There is no local school so running children's activities was particularly important.

It is feared that if operational funding is not continued, then the Women's Centre will lose funding for other programs, but the infrastructure may still be able to be used by the Centre particularly as a refuge from assailants.

6.

This Centre used to receive approximately \$42,000 from ATSIC. It had other funding sources as well for various programs it ran. The Centre has been closed since April 1997.

One of its functions had been as a Shelter when families needed a safe place to stay because of alcohol related violence, including the elderly. It was important that they

had a safe place to go. If this service was needed, they had women holding keys to the Centre in each sector of the community.

**The Good Protection For All Women Project: The cross-border domestic violence project.**

First funded in March 1994 as a two year domestic violence pilot project funded under the Commonwealth's SAAP program, it was successfully reviewed in April 1996 and is funded until June 1998.

Widely regarded as an innovative and successful project, it works to develop appropriate strategies and services to assist Aboriginal women from remote communities in the cross-order region of the NT, SA and WA who experience domestic violence. It works closely with individual Aboriginal women experiencing violence, Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal services including women's centres where these continue to exist, and with police from all three jurisdictions.

The project is directed by an Aboriginal Women's Council that bases its authority on traditional knowledge and practices.

It is hoped that ongoing funding will be found for this project.

*Prepared by WESNET, 02 6247 1616(ph)*

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