

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT)

Senators Gallagher and Paterson
Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson
Select Committee on Covid-19
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Sent via email to: covid.sen@aph.gov.au

Thursday 4 June 2020

To Senators Gallagher and Paterson,

RE: Submission to the Select Committee on COVID-19 Inquiry into the Government's response to COVID-19

I write on behalf of the Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (**APO NT**) to provide comment on the Australian Government's response to COVID-19 pandemic and related matters and to put forward recommendations on building remote community preparedness and resilience in the face of future pandemics or emergencies. APO NT supports the recommendations provided in the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the Northern Territory (**AMSANT**) submission and endorses the *OPCAT, places of detention and COVID-19* submission. I also thank the Select Committee in granting an extension on this submission.

Since 2010, the APO NT alliance has been working to develop policies on critical issues facing Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (**NT**) and to influence the work of the Australian and NT Governments. As peak organisations in the NT, we share the aim of protecting and advancing the wellbeing and rights of Aboriginal people and communities. Aboriginal empowerment, local ownership and community control are critical factors underpinning our work. We advocate for coordinated action to address the social determinants of health across a broad range of policy areas: in early childhood development, housing, employment, education and health; but equally important is ensuring that the right conditions are in place for creating strong, resilient communities.

Not surprisingly APO NT has been unable to consult extensively with our members' remote constituencies in developing this submission. We have however received important feedback through the governance of our member organisations including AMSANT and the Executive of the Central Land

Council who have maintained monthly zoom meetings throughout the pandemic. We have also heard from the membership of the NT Aboriginal peak housing body, Aboriginal Housing NT (**AHNT**).

The striking feature of the pandemic has been the rapid and organised response from Aboriginal organisations at a national level and in the NT. As early as March 15, Aboriginal health organisations, representing 140 different groups, met nationally and called for the establishment of ‘special isolation zones’ to protect vulnerable Aboriginal populations. APO NT members including AMSANT, Aboriginal Housing NT and the Northern and Central Land Councils and the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of Central Australia followed swiftly by applying pressure for NT border closures. The NT Government was responsive to the call and agreed to shut down the NT borders on March 26 ahead of all states and territories except Tasmania. There is little doubt that without the leadership and agility of NT Aboriginal organisations and the willingness of the NT Government to respond quickly, the situation in the NT could have been very serious with catastrophic outcomes for its vulnerable Aboriginal population. This prompt and collaborative response has meant that the NT has the lowest number of positive cases Australia-wide and no deaths to date. Of the 30 cases reported in the NT all were acquired overseas and none have been Aboriginal. The APO NT members have been integral to the low incidence of COVID-19 and their response has been multi-faceted.

In addition, Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal community residents have seized the opportunity to develop their own social media COVID-19 messages in a culturally appropriate manner and in local Aboriginal language. In particular, APO NT notes the Northern Land Council’s short films about COVID-19 in language on their [YouTube Channel](#), the Central Land Council’s [messages](#) from Executive members and Chair Sammy Wilson on COVID-19 testing. Other Aboriginal organisations have published culturally sensitive content on COVID-19 messaging. For example, AMSANT have demonstrated social distancing using [illustrations](#) of wildlife and tools, such as boomerangs and the posters published by Children’s Ground have featured a number of positive health messages, including ‘Wash your hands’, ‘Practise social distancing’ and messages for the elderly, that include ‘Our elders are at risk’, requesting that family and friends refrain from visiting at this time. The Central Land Council and Central Australian Aboriginal Congress also developed a [poster](#) that highlighted the COVID-19 restrictions on the number of people attending funerals. These publications, like so many others that have been developed by Aboriginal organisations, have been shared to social media, so that they can be accessed and promoted within the community.

Many Aboriginal community residents have also taken matters into their own hands producing signs for the outskirts of their communities asking visitors to go away if uninvited, respect residents, behave in a safe way and have evidence of authorisation to travel as well as short videos about handwashing and other hygiene practices. Northern and Central Land Councils also played a critical role in supporting and implementing measures to ensure the integrity of the biosecurity areas. This has included taking on the role of ‘decision makers’ under the Biosecurity determination, assessing and approving or denying requests from remote Aboriginal community residents for a ‘permission’ to travel outside biosecurity regions under certain circumstances.

Despite the success of halting the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic has deeply affected the day to day lives Aboriginal residents of the NT who comprise over 30 per cent of the NT population.¹ Those living in the NT's 73 remote communities were most affected given the requirement for them to stay in or near their home communities (except where 'permissions' are granted) following the declaration of the Biosecurity regions on March 26. Travel restrictions throughout the pandemic shone a harsh light on a range of systemic issues facing remote Aboriginal communities including overcrowded housing and issues relating to the supply and pricing of food and other goods. Many lessons have been learned during this pandemic and we believe there is a great opportunity to initiate reform in coming months that will build the resilience and capacity of remote communities to withstand future pandemics and other emergencies.

Systemic Issues Highlighted by COVID-19

Food Supply and Food Security

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the ongoing disparity in prices between food and other essential goods sold in remote stores and regional centres. People who could not leave their community due to Biosecurity travel restrictions were forced to rely on local stores that are not normally expected to provide for all the needs of a community.

Prior to the pandemic many remote residents would obtain supplies of affordable food and other goods at major regional supermarkets and department stores but this was not possible under the Biosecurity measures. Quite suddenly local community stores needed to boost and diversify supplies including warm clothing and bedding as the winter months approached. This spike in demand collided with panic buying and subsequent product purchasing limits in eastern states² and a monopoly on manufactured and fresh goods by major supermarkets trying to keep up with demand. The flow on effect was significant shortages in a range of products especially for smaller community owned stores. So, despite the NT Government assurances that people would not be without any necessary supplies when the Return to Country policy was established, APO NT understands that many community stores have struggled to provide for the needs of constituents in this time. Much of this data has been collected by the Central Land Council, who surveyed a number of remote stores, and the NT Critical Goods Team.

APO NT wrote to the Prime Minister and Minister Wyatt expressing our concerns on remote food security and pricing on April 1 2020. Our letter explained that remote community store food and essential goods prices are, on average, 60 per cent more expensive than town stores.³ As increased Centrelink payments were not expected to come into full effect until the end of April we raised concerns that high food prices and issues with remote supply meant people living in remote communities were at risk of not being able to afford to feed their families.

¹ Northern Territory Department of Treasury and Finance, Northern Territory Economy. Retrieved from <https://nteconomy.nt.gov.au/population>

² ABC News, 21 March 2020, Coronavirus panic-buying threatens food security in remote NT community, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-21/coronavirus-panic-buying-threatens-food-shortage-in-nt-community/12071414>

³ Northern Territory Government Market Basket Survey 2017.

In the letter APO NT called on the Prime Minister to:

- introduce a freight subsidy for essential food and hygiene products at remote community stores. This should be undertaken to ensure prices match those in major supermarkets in regional towns. Aboriginal people should not be penalised with exorbitant prices when the Biosecurity Determination compels them to stay in their home communities. People will need every cent of the recent stimulus to get through the pandemic.
- Mobilise NIAA staff to coordinate the response to food security issues throughout the Northern Territory.
- Work with Coles and Woolworths to reinstate full access to bulk ordering by remote essential services and workers.
- Additional funding provided to critical food security services to ensure the health of our elderly, vulnerable immune cohort and children (such as School Nutrition Project) in all remote communities is not affected adversely by limited access to critical meals.

No formal response to this letter has been received. On April 8, Minister Wyatt convened a roundtable meeting on food security with the NT Chief Minister, Michael Gunner and NT Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Selena Uibo as well as retailers and suppliers to discuss remote food security. The call for subsidies to address high prices were not heeded and subsequently rejected by Minister Wyatt in the media. The Minister noted that subsidies are not required as the additional Newstart payments provided adequate support. The additional Newstart economic support payment of \$750 and the fortnightly doubling of what is now Jobseeker payments did assist greatly in lifting people from bare subsistence to having some capacity to afford essential goods if they were available. Notwithstanding that fact, the additional funds represented significantly less purchasing power out bush compared to the additional funds received by Jobseeker recipients in towns and cities with access to cheaper goods. The round table discussions with Minister Wyatt did result in a one-off supply of donated goods by Woolworths and Coles to a number of communities, which was welcomed but had little lasting impact.

APO NT is pleased about the recently announced Federal Inquiry into Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous communities and hopes it will provide a platform for a constructive analysis of some of the systemic issues and put forward interventions to address the long-term inequity of the remote food supply and pricing system. Through that Inquiry, APO NT will also raise the need for an evaluation of the impact of the federal remote store licensing system that was part of the NT Intervention. The current store licenses are valid until late 2022 and an independent external evaluation of the outcomes of the regime prior to that date will be critical and can also build on the findings of the upcoming Federal Food Pricing and Security Inquiry.

Aboriginal people returning back to Country

On March 26, NT remote communities were closed to all non-essential travel under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* in response to concerns about the spread of COVID-19. There are nine Local Government Areas that are classified as designated areas, comprising all remote parts of the NT, excluding the urban and regional centres, and pastoral properties. The Biosecurity borders will now open two weeks early on June 5 rather than the planned June 18, following advice from the NT Land Councils. This

decision was made due to the low numbers of COVID related cases in the NT. Recently the NT recorded zero infected cases which is exemplary considering the high numbers in other jurisdictions and internationally.

An early priority for a range of agencies and organisations following the declaration of designated areas was to respond to the volume of people in the urban areas and regional towns who have no home in which to seek safety from a pandemic.⁴⁴ Strong advocacy from key Aboriginal organisations who work with these vulnerable populations resulted in the NT Government acting swiftly to subsidise 'Return to Country' services to circumvent the high cost of domestic travel to remote areas in the NT, which is often prohibitive for the NT Aboriginal population. In total over 2,000 people were returned to remote areas through Tangentyere Council, Kalano Community Association, Julalikari Council and the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation's return to country services that are otherwise significantly underfunded. It is worth noting that in many other jurisdictions people on low incomes, benefits and pensions have access to a highly subsidised, state-wide public transport network that makes long-distance travel affordable and accessible – where pensioners can travel 1000 kilometres on rail for three dollars. No such provisions exist in the Northern Territory where fuel costs in remote Aboriginal communities are also double that of the major cities.

Key issues emerging from the 'Returning to Country' response included:

- how to provide safety for homeless Aboriginal people who could not return to their home communities for health or other complex reasons;
- how to protect people living in severely overcrowding housing in remote communities;
- how to support the movement of people onto homelands and outstations that are under-resourced and ill-equipped for large populations.
- How to ensure access to adequate safe housing in remote communities
- How to keep remote Aboriginal people safe during a pandemic in the context of severe overcrowding, inadequate repairs and maintenance and sub-standard health hardware.

Severe Overcrowding – and keeping people safe in a pandemic

The impossibility of keeping people safe in severely overcrowded housing especially in remote Aboriginal communities if an outbreak did occur was highlighted by this pandemic. The rate of overcrowding in remote communities in the NT was described by the United Nations expert on housing in 2006 as a 'humanitarian tragedy'. In 2007, the Little Children are Sacred report described the lack of proper housing for Aboriginal people as 'nothing short of disastrous and desperate.' In 2017 the Commonwealth Remote Housing Review of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH) and the Remote Housing Strategy (2008-2018) found that 2,750 new 3 bedroom houses would be needed to adequately house the NT's remote Aboriginal population, with at least a further 75 new dwellings needed annually until 2027, to keep up with population growth.

⁴⁴ This included those people who were homeless, sleeping rough or could not return to their home communities, homelands or outstations for various other reasons.

Despite the current NT Government substantial commitment in 2016⁵ of \$1.1 billion over 10 years and a \$550 million commitment from the Commonwealth over five years (2019-2023) to reduce overcrowding in remote communities, the NT will retain high levels of overcrowding against population projections, particularly in large communities in the north. While it is critical that both Governments continue to commit ongoing significant funds to expand the remote housing program to reduce current overcrowding and meet ⁶anticipated population growth, APO NT urge that the COVID Recovery stimulus include Aboriginal housing organisations with construction programs to deliver this using the local Aboriginal workforce.

As the urgency of the pandemic hit, and the lack of preparedness to protect Aboriginal people was laid bare, Aboriginal Housing NT wrote to NT Department of Housing (**DLGHCD**) urging a speedy response to COVID-19 with suggestions and solutions that included the following:

- Prepare all vacant DLGHCD dwellings in remote, regional, urban NT and Town Camps to disperse crowded houses and reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection spread due to overcrowding;
- Provide infrastructure funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations managing Town Camps and Homelands /Outstations to undertake upgrades to all vacant dwellings to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread;
- Prepare existing stock, or transport Transitional Accommodation for the purpose of self-quarantine and self-isolation when required; and
- DLGHCD to release data on the numbers of vacant houses per location and commence scoping and quoting as a priority;

AHNT provided the department CEO details of the following: government-owned dwellings that were currently unoccupied on remote communities; the impact on crowding of increased numbers of people returning to Country; the consequences of the mass movements of people onto Homelands, where we saw houses on Homelands with normally four people swell to 23 people⁷ which had become an exercise in shifting the problem of overcrowding; and the significant impact this was having on the Homelands/Outstations service providers left to respond without clear government direction or direct support. This descriptor of Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation (**BAC**) provides an example of the impact that COVID-19 had on remote communities and service providers.

BAC is located at Maningrida in Arnhem Land and is the largest organisation in Maningrida. It maintains 32 Homelands and Outstations surrounding Maningrida across vast distances. This means it provides and maintains power, water, housing, schools, and septic services to the 32 Homelands, with assistance from the NT Government. BAC manages the housing and construction program, a mudbrick factory, the Land and Sea Rangers Program, the Arts Centre, the Women's Centre, the Museum, and a Civil Works program that includes maintaining roads and the air strip, a heavy vehicles workshop, and small cars repair shop. BAC also provides the

⁵ \$1.1 billion remote housing investment package - *Our Community. Our Future. Our Homes*. NT Department of Housing. Retrieved from [https://dlghcd.nt.gov.au/programs/\\$1.1-remote-housing-program-over-10-years](https://dlghcd.nt.gov.au/programs/$1.1-remote-housing-program-over-10-years)

⁶ NT Population Projections 2019 Release; <https://treasury.nt.gov.au/dtf/economic-group/population-projections>

⁷ Mabunji Aboriginal Corporation provided this as just one of many examples across the NT that highlighted how the response shifted the issue of severe crowding to less visible and isolated locations.

'Tucker Run' to Homelands and Outstations, which was a critical service during COVID-19. Maningrida had an influx of people in response to COVID-19, which hit toward the end of the Wet Season, and the BAC Rangers and Housing Team had to speed up their efforts on the Homelands by cutting down wet season growth, spraying weeds and general maintenance work. The numbers of people on the Homelands expanded as people moved from town to Community to Homelands for safety. The Tucker Run provided essential food deliveries, as well as medication supplies, plus spotlights, torches, batteries, knives strong enough to break through buffalo bone, tents, mattresses, fish lures, hand reels and more. The 'Run' traverses a roller coaster of dusty bush roads across rocky outcrops, flood plains, rivers, creeks, along red, yellow and black tracks.

As the largest organisation and employer in Maningrida, BAC is the organisation the community looked to for leadership, direction, guidance and support in response to COVID-19. Despite this, BAC was not included in the preparation of the local pandemic plan. Further it was not allocated extra resources to support the population it serviced, drawing on its own reserves after the funding had run out in the crisis.

Thamarrurr Development Corporation (**TDC**) in the Top End is another AHNT member where the community look to for information, guidance and support in the crisis. TDC convened regular community meetings to provide updates on the latest public health advice, the restrictions of the Biosecurity Act and changes implemented to the Act. TDC erected fencing around public facilities, installed public wash-stations and had Rangers continually sanitising surfaces, hand rails and door handles in all public areas. AHNT members Tangentyere Council and Central Australian Affordable Housing rapidly responded by developing a COVID- 19 protection and management tool for the 25 Alice Springs Town Camps in partnership with Health Habitat and the Fulcrum Agency. This important resource can be used by households themselves, reducing the rate of staff contact, and educating the residents on the Key Healthy Living principles. This resource was promoted by the Department of Health as a tool for Tenancy Managers, Housing Officers, Housing Maintenance Officers, Tenancy Support Workers and Tenants.

By shining a spotlight on the work of just a few AHNT members in response to COVID- 19, it demonstrates the varied responsibilities assumed and the pivotal role Aboriginal housing organisations played in responding to the crisis in the NT.

It is important that the responsiveness and responsibility borne by AHNT members in the pandemic is matched with a rapidly expanded housing program managed by them. Prioritising these resources in the COVID Recovery for the NT is needed as a matter of urgency to reduce the very high risk that remote communities will follow the path of Navajo communities who have the highest per capita COVID- 19 infection rates in the United States.

NT Aboriginal Boarding School Students

There were approximately 1100 students from remote communities that were sent back to their home communities from interstate and NT boarding schools, many of whom were not required to undertake 14-days quarantine before returning. Concerns were raised by some communities and community

organisations about the lack of quarantining and some service providers, for example, health clinics, expressed concern that they were not informed of the impending arrival of students so they could provide appropriate checks and support for the students.

It is difficult to understand the impact for their families and communities of moving a large numbers of students from all across Australia back to their remote locations in a short timeframe. Although the students remained enrolled at their boarding schools, they had to undertake their studies at home or possibly in the local school. This posed difficulties for many students who did not have access to appropriate devices and internet connections in their homes. We acknowledge the work done by local schools to support students to undertake their distance education.

Given the high rates of overcrowding in the homes and other living arrangement pressures, APO NT urges the NT Department of Education and the local community schools to arrange for a conducive study space, i.e. computer room/classroom to be made available for the senior students to study and explore opportunities for students to receive tutorial assistance from local teaching staff, Charles Darwin University (CDU) or Batchelor Institute educators, should a similar event happen again. Considering the appalling educational outcomes of Aboriginal students in NT over many decades, we encourage both the Federal and NT governments to work with Aboriginal communities and organisations across the NT to develop some flexible and practical solutions for emergency education delivery that will work whether a student lives in the urban or regional setting, remote community, homeland or outstation.

JobSeeker payment & Community Development Program

Given the high rate of casual employment in remote regions we believe that Aboriginal people in the NT have been deeply affected by COVID-19. This is particularly so with respect to the lack of jobs, depressed business activity and scarce labour market opportunities.⁸

The Newstart Allowance ceased on March 20 and the JobSeeker payment is now the key income support payment for those individuals aged between 22 and at age of pension, keeping individuals connected to work. On March 23 the Government doubled the JobSeeker payment, and a further \$550 unconditional 'Coronavirus Supplement' has been added per fortnight. There has been an indication that the Australian Government intends to end the JobKeeper payment and the coronavirus supplement by September 2020.⁹ Reserve Bank Governor Dr. Philip Lowe provided evidence to the COVID-19 Senate Committee last week, where he predicted further economic hardships across Australia, due to the impact of COVID-19. This is also due to the related interest rates at 0.25 per cent. APO NT is concerned that the JobSeeker payment will be reduced back to \$40 per day, as it was before COVID-19, plunging recipients back into severe poverty at a time of high uncertainty and economic stress during the current pandemic. The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) submission reports that up to 10 per cent of Aboriginal people in casual employment will be ineligible

⁸ Markham, F., Smith, D. & Morphy, F. (2020). Indigenous Australians and the COVID-19 crisis: perspectives on public policy, Topical Issue no. 1/2020, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra. <https://doi.org/10.25911/5e8702ec1fba2>

⁹ Wright, S. (2020, May 28). JobKeeper may need to be extended: RBA governor. *The Age*. Retrieved from <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/rba-governor-warns-of-post-coronavirus-shadow-over-economy-20200528-p54x8l.html>

to receive JobKeeper payments, because individuals needed to be employed continuously for the last 12 months.¹⁰ Dr. Lowe noted that extending JobKeeper, JobSeeker and additional supplements will alleviate pressures on the Australian economy and that “It’s very important that we do not withdraw fiscal stimulus too early.”¹¹ APO NT wants the Australian Government to heed the concerns of Dr. Lowe and urges the government to extend and broaden the requirements of the JobSeeker payment of \$560 per week until a social security system is put in place that keeps everyone out of poverty.¹²

APO NT has long advocated that the Newstart, Youth Allowance and related payments have been inadequate and should be improved. We believe that the low payments have contributed to a widening income gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, particularly those living in remote communities. APO NT is also concerned at the prospect that mutual obligation requirements will come back into effect. Mutual obligation should not be re-introduced for the duration of the pandemic and APO NT’s view is that the policy should be reviewed as part of a fundamental reform of the CDP. There is an opportunity now to make positive investments that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to enjoy the rights to employment, education, health and cultural participation that all Australians expect.

In APO NT’s 2019 submission on the adequacy of Newstart and related payments¹³ and alternative mechanisms, we pointed out that the NT has been subject to more than a decade of costly, paternalistic interventions, including income management and Work for the Dole. Over this period poverty and unemployment have worsened.¹⁴ APO NT made 11 key recommendations that should be considered as part of the Australian Government’s solutions to welfare and employment post COVID-19. In particular, APO NT recommends that the Government establishes a Social Security Commission that would independently assess the appropriate rate of income support payments, allowances and other aspects of payment structures; consider the appropriateness and proportionality of conditions attached to payments and review any obstacles to people accessing the income support safety net.

Job Creation proposal for Remote Northern Territory Communities

APO NT encouraged and supported the Commonwealth decision to suspend face to face CDP activities, appointments and services and to agree not to apply compliance actions including penalties while COVID-19 restrictions have been in place. Rather than returning to business as usual with CDP once restrictions are lifted, APO NT urges the Commonwealth to consider the following Job Creation proposal to boost local economies, build local workforces and strengthen resilience in times of crisis and emergency. The NT-specific Job Creation proposal for NT remote communities is consistent with

¹⁰ Markham, F., Smith, D. & Morphy, F. (2020). Indigenous Australians and the COVID-19 crisis: perspectives on public policy, Topical Issue no. 1/2020, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra. <https://doi.org/10.25911/5e8702ec1fba2>

¹¹ Ibid and Gittins, R. (2020, May 31). The RBA has just one message for Scott Morrison and Josh Frydenberg. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/the-rba-has-just-one-message-for-scott-morrison-and-josh-frydenberg-20200531-p54y11.html>

¹² Australian Council of Social Services, [Extend JobKeeper & JobSeeker to ensure nobody is left behind](#)

¹³ APO NT [Submission](#) on the adequacy of Newstart and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia.

¹⁴ Markham, F. & Biddle, N., 2018. Income, Poverty and Inequality: 2016 Census Paper 2, ANU & Venn, D. & Biddle, N., 2017. Employment Outcomes. 2016 Census Papers. Paper No 5., CAEPR, ANU.

the principles of the Fair Work Strong Communities proposal released by Aboriginal organisations across Australia in 2017.

The proposal is for the establishment of an NT Remote Jobs Fund to which NT Aboriginal community controlled organisations can apply to establish new jobs which can only be offered to local Aboriginal residents currently in receipt of income support. Each job package which is granted through the fund will be set at a rate equivalent to the minimum wage for 20 hours per week, plus 30% to cover employment costs. Employers would have the option to 'top up' to make jobs full-time, or pay higher wages. It is proposed that funding be available to establish 5,000 jobs, each of which can last up to five years, with the possibility of extension.

Employment in jobs created through the scheme will be ordinary employment, with employees entitled to the same pay and conditions as other employees. Employment in jobs created under scheme will not affect eligibility for social security benefits (for example part payment of Job Seeker Allowance), subject to the usual income tests. Modelling commissioned by APO NT in relation to the similar, Fair Work Strong Communities national scheme, showed that its implementation would lead to an immediate, and substantial reduction in the gap in employment rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in remote areas.¹⁵ It would also lead to an immediate, and significant reduction in poverty. While it is unclear what impact COVID-19 might have on these figures it is clear that, in the absence of significant efforts to create new jobs in remote communities, existing trends to worsening employment and poverty rates will deepen.

We have the opportunity now to consider a 'new normal' post COVID-19 where the Australian Government takes a new approach which provides a real prospect of people in remote communities securing employment and, where this is not possible, providing a safety net that allows people to live a decent life. This requires an immediate review of income support payments and investment in new jobs across remote areas that allow people to aspire to and find work in a post-COVID environment.

Thank you for considering our submission. Please do not hesitate to contact Brionee Noonan on (08) 8944 6672 or via email researchofficer.apont@amsant.org.au to discuss this submission further.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Paterson', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

John Paterson

On behalf of the APO NT Governing Group

¹⁵ See more on the Fair Work and Strong Communities Model [here](#).