

NATIONAL CLOSE THE GAP DAY – THURSDAY 19 MARCH

Will the gap of inequality and disadvantage be closed by cutting funding for frontline and municipal and essential services and closing down Aboriginal communities and homelands?

The Closing the Gap Report

The Federal Government's *Closing the Gap* Report was recently released. It highlighted the widening gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal inequality and disadvantage. While there's been some progress in halving the infant mortality rate and the gap for Year 12 attainment, there's been little progress with closing the life-expectancy gap; no overall improvement in halving the gap in children's reading, writing and numeracy; and no progress in halving the gap in employment outcomes.

Closing the Gap Day

Closing the Gap Day reminds us of the importance of working towards closing the inequality gap by ensuring that the things that can make a positive difference to people's lives are available to them. This includes things like access to clean water, power, diesel, decent sanitation, regular rubbish collection, good infrastructure in communities, appropriate health services, education, legal support services etc. We take these services for granted in cities and towns but all these basic services are currently under threat in regional and remote Aboriginal communities and homelands.

Municipal and Essential Services

Since 1973, the Federal Government has been responsible for funding municipal and essential services (MES) in remote Aboriginal communities and homelands. In September 2014, the Federal Government struck deals with four states (Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia), which meant that responsibility for funding municipal and essential services was transferred to them. In Western Australia, the Premier has indicated that 150 remote communities could be closed.

South Australia did not enter into a deal with the Federal Government, stating that the funding for the provision of MES services is the Federal Government's responsibility. SA rejected the Federal Government's one-off offer of \$10 million as it would not be enough to provide for basic services. The Federal funding cuts are supposed to start from 1 July 2015 – in just over three months' time.

If Federal MES funding or alternative funding is not made available, any gains made in closing the gap will be wiped out and the very existence of many communities and homelands will be threatened.

People's health and wellbeing will be affected. In the absence of rubbish being collected, infection is more likely to spread; in the absence of a safe supply of water, dehydration and an increase in

water-borne disease is likely; in the absence of properly maintained aerodromes, the planes for the flying doctor or emergency evacuations won't be able to land and take-off; in the absence of a reliable power supply for lighting and community streetlights, household activities and community safety will be compromised.

In the absence of these basic services we cannot hope to improve health and wellbeing, life-expectancy or the birth-weight of babies – in the absence of municipal and essential services, the gap will not be closed.

With just over three months to go until the funding cut-off date, neither the Federal nor State Governments have provided communities with a clear statement of their intentions, and there does not appear to be a coherent strategy in place to ensure that communities will continue to access basic services, an entitlement which is enjoyed by all non-Aboriginal communities across Australia.

In November 2014, the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Minister Nigel Scullion, said that 'any decision about the closure of Indigenous communities in South Australia will be a matter for the State Government. I remain committed to working with the South Australian Government to ensure it takes responsibility for servicing its Aboriginal residents just as it provides services for non-Indigenous residents'.

The former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation, Minister Ian Hunter, said that the 'cuts to Commonwealth funding will place vital services to Aboriginal communities and homelands at risk'. During his interview with Paper Tracker radio in 2014, he said that he viewed the Federal funding cuts as 'coercive', potentially forcing Anangu to move out of smaller communities and homelands in the event that services are no longer provided. The new South Australia Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation, Minister Kyam Maher, has not yet released a media statement regarding his intentions on municipal and essential services funding.

Uniting Communities calls on both the Federal and State Governments to communicate with remote communities and homelands, and to indicate how basic services will be provided as from 1 July 2015.

Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) funding

Coupled with the cuts to municipal and essential services, the Federal Government announced the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) during last year's Budget. This has resulted in merging over 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs into five competitive funding streams:

- Jobs, land the economy
- Children and schooling
- Safety and wellbeing
- Culture and capability
- Remote Australia strategies.

The outcomes of the first round of IAS funding allocations were announced in March. These are having a significant impact on frontline services, more especially legal aid support services. These cuts to basic services and programs only serve to widen the gap in disadvantage and inequality.

Communities should not become casualties of the Governments' blame-game and lack of strategy!

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