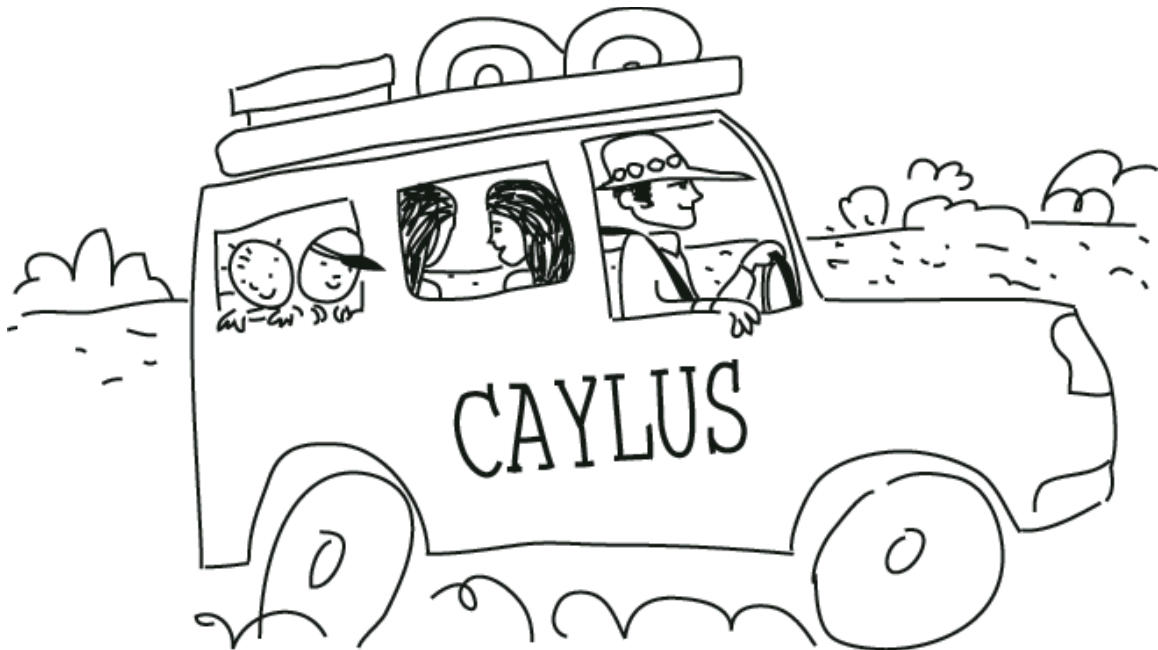


**Submission to the Inquiry into the Harmful Use of Alcohol
in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities**



Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service – Tangentyere Council
April 2014

“Parents drinking, kids sniffing”

Comment by community member asked about causes of inhalant abuse.

The Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service is a Petrol Sniffing prevention program based in Alice Springs. We commenced operations in 2002 and provide services to more than 20 remote communities across the bottom half of the Northern Territory. For detailed information on CAYLUS, our structure and our programs visit <http://caylus.org.au/about/>.

While CAYLUS was established to address inhalant abuse, it has always been clear that young people in our region experience issues resulting from the harmful use of a range of substances. Knowing this we work to support community initiatives, not just around petrol and other inhalants but also around ganja, alcohol and other substances.

Over the years when talking with community stakeholders we have often heard that alcohol abuse by parents is one of the underlying causes of young people sniffing petrol and other inhalants.

Our work to reduce inhalant abuse has been in partnership with remote community people and agencies and all levels of government. Efforts in our region have been successful, with a more than 90% reduction in petrol sniffing¹. As such, we have direct experience in implementing a very successful set of substance misuse prevention measures, which have led to sustained results in our region.

Drawing on lessons learned in this process, in this submission we focus on the critical nature of supply reduction and the need for a commitment to providing young people in remote communities with high quality targeted youth development programs as a way of reducing the demand for alcohol and other substances.

Supply reduction

As outlined there has been a very significant reduction in inhalant abuse in Central Australia in recent years. This was primarily achieved through a supply reduction strategy - Opal Low Aromatic Fuel (LAF). The number of people abusing inhalants dropped when the LAF rolled out in 2007, and has stayed at low levels subsequently. This successful strategy is being replicated in other parts of Australia that suffer inhalant abuse. The Top End of the NT has some LAF available, but a more comprehensive roll out is planned pending the construction of a storage tank in Darwin that will ensure supply is available to retailers in that region.

¹ Peter d’Abbs and Gillian Shaw 2008, Executive Summary of the Evaluation of the Impact of Opal Fuel, Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra

With the roll out of LAF we were fortunate that we had the support of the major fuel companies, the majority of fuel retailers and the general population, whereas any attempt to reduce supply of alcohol faces a much harder task.

It was our experience that until supply reduction was undertaken in the form of LAF, other approaches to dealing with sniffing had limited impact. Until LAF became a possibility, CAYLUS worked with all stakeholders to attempt to implement demand reduction strategies, including education programs, diversionary activities, casework including counselling, and supporting treatment options including mandatory treatment under the NT Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act. It was not until the LAF supply reduction strategy was rolled out that these programs started working. Prior to that, the number of people with inhalant issues far exceeded the capacity of any of these programs. For example, people leaving rehab stood little chance of staying away from sniffing upon return to their homes when all of the young people around them were still sniffing, youth programs struggled to cope when people would turn up sniffing or intoxicated, sniffers would wait outside of schools trying to lure their friends to come sniffing instead of attending classes and community elders were frustrated in their attempts to stop the sniffing because the numbers of people sniffing were simply too large. Subsequent to the roll out of LAF, these strategies have been far more successful in keeping the numbers low, and addressing the smaller number of people whose addiction drives them to locate alternative sources of inhalants.

When talking about this issue, we use the metaphor of the poor living conditions and ready availability of petrol in remote communities being like a factory producing inhalant abusers. These damaged people come out on a conveyor belt that eventually drops them in an early grave. Actions based on taking individuals off the conveyor belt, such as casework or treatment will never be enough when the factory keeps producing more. It was not until action was taken to disassemble the factory that inhalant abuse was reduced to a level where the actions around individual users could be more systematically effective.

It is worth noting the supply reduction in the form of LAF proved most effective when it was applied across the region, the clearest gains came when all of the retailers in Alice Springs converted to using LAF in place of standard unleaded. All motorists in Central Australia, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal now have the same options at the fuel pump meaning that standard unleaded is increasingly hard to come by. In Central Australia we all now share the benefits achieved through use of LAF. Such benefits come in the form of safer communities and reduced costs to the taxpayer. Similarly, alcohol supply reduction measures need to target the general community not just Aboriginal people. All populations currently experience the harms of alcohol and all populations stand to gain from reducing supply.

Alcohol supply reduction can come in a range of forms; priced based measures seem to be the most logical and effective of these. We are a member of the Peoples Alcohol Action Coalition and are supportive of the evidence given to the inquiry by PAAC in relation to the most effective forms of supply reduction.

In 2006 when making the case for the roll out of Opal fuel we established a partnership with NPY Women’s Council and General Properties Trust (GPT) called the Opal Alliance. Together we commissioned Access Economics to conduct a cost benefit analysis of supply reduction using Opal Low Aromatic Fuel. Access Economics weighed up the cost of producing and distributing LAF against the likely benefit and found that our region would save in excess of \$70 million per year including costs to the Justice and Health systems².

While really worthwhile, it seems to us that these savings are really just a drop in the ocean compared to those that could be achieved in our region through price based alcohol supply reduction measures. The excessive use of alcohol amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in our region is much wider and the damage far greater than that which has been caused by sniffing. Unlike LAF, which costs money to produce and distribute, price based Alcohol supply reduction measures could actually generate income to be used for the public benefit.

Demand reduction

It has been our experience, that supply reduction is a necessary part of any substance abuse strategy. However, we do not think it is sufficient in itself. Prior to the advent of LAF a supply reduction strategy using an aviation fuel called Comgas was implemented in the Pitjatantjara lands in the 90s. However, no other strategies were implemented along with this. While there were initial gains, over the next two years, the inhalant abuse rose back to the same levels as prior to the Comgas roll out – see Figure 1 below³.

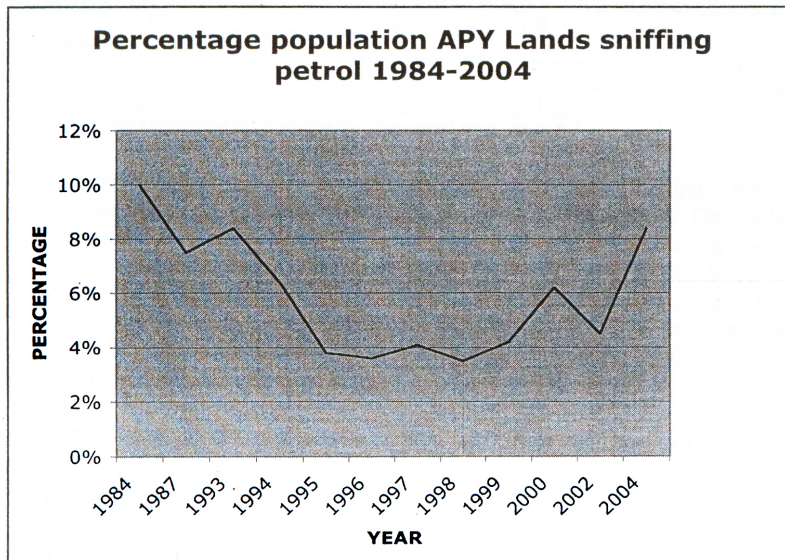


Figure 4 Percentage population sniffing petrol 1984 - 2004

² Access Economics 2006 Opal Cost Benefit Analysis

³ From Survey of the Prevalence of Petrol Sniffing on the Anangu Pitjantjara Yankunytjara Lands October 2004.

We were aware of this precedent and so worked to support the establishment and development of a range of programs to accompany the roll out of LAF.

Some of measures that worked well to accompany LAF included:

- The NT VSAP Act which gives police and health staff clear powers and can be used to force people to attend treatment
- Residential treatment programs
- Targeted casework with individuals and families
- Work with retailers to manage other potentially intoxicating substances so that they were not easily accessible
- Programs to engage young people in alternative recreational and developmental activities and link them to education and work

We are aware that there will be a range of submissions to the inquiry highlighting the need for similar programs to be a part of the mix when attempting to reduce the harms currently being caused by Alcohol. We acknowledge that a range of programs are important but would like to highlight the need for building programs that provide diversionary and recreational activities to youth in remote communities in Central Australia

It is our experience that young people in remote communities readily engage in basic youth activities when they are made available. Further it is our experience that such programs have the effect of reducing prevalence of youth substance misuse and provide a safe environment where young people can gain assistance in dealing with their own substance misuse or misuse happening in their family.

Local youth workers can also play a useful role in coordinating and supporting the myriad of drive in drive out services that are often funded to support young people in various ways but which struggle in the absence of having existing relationships in the community, of knowing local families, dynamics and politics. We would note that drive in drive out service provision has proliferated in recent years, often delivered by large NGO'S that have few connections to the region. It is our view that priority should be given to basing such resources so that they are resident in remote communities and giving local people formal means of input into how these services are delivered. It often seems

that the millions of dollars that are invested in short term visiting programs wash through the region then are gone, with little lasting effect other than perhaps adding some confusion.

We support the development of youth programs as they provide alternative activities in remote communities that fill the gap left by inhalant abuse, provide diversion from other forms of substance abuse that might otherwise arise, and because the youth workers give us a beachhead in the community for engagement with individuals and families when issues do arise. There is still much work to be done in building such programs. Many communities do not have any programs, they are funded in some other communities but are not effectively delivered and at times Commonwealth and Territory policies constrain programs. We recommend that any alcohol strategy also address this need for demand reduction and build the delivery of remote youth development programs in Central Australia. There is a place for treatment, casework and counselling, but youth programs engage large numbers of young people and prevent the substance misuse before it happens.

Conclusion

The inhalant reduction strategy undertaken in Central Australia by CAYLUS and our partners has been a major success. A seemingly entrenched substance abuse problem was overcome through a strong supply reduction strategy along with complementary measures. Youth programs in remote communities need to be a priority and to be supported and built as a part of attempts to reduce the harm caused by Alcohol in our region. Price based alcohol supply reduction is the alcohol equivalent to Opal Low Aromatic Fuel though the potential gains are far greater.