

28 August 2018

Megan Mitchell  
National Children's Commissioner  
Dr. Susan Nicolson Director, Children  
Australian Human Rights Commission  
GPO Box 5218  
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Megan and Susan

We provide a Submission to Australia's Report to the United Nations relating to Children's Rights focusing specifically upon our experiences in the Northern Territory delivering child and family programs within the Utopia Homelands.

It has been a special privilege to be invited to work within the Utopia Homelands with the children, families and community members. We appreciate this opportunity to share some key lessons learned from these experiences and in working towards addressing Children's Rights within the Utopia Homelands.

We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have in relation to the supplied documents or provide additional information as required.

Warm regards



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## Profile of Contact

Contact Inc. (Contact) a leading Australian organisation helping to address the impacts of isolation for children, families and communities, was launched over three decade ago in 1979 as the follow-on initiative from the *International Year of the Child*.

Contact serves the community by working across all child, family and children's sectors, providing service delivery in ways that best fit local child and family need.

Working in urban, as well as rural and remote communities throughout Australia, Contact utilises its extensive networks, experience and established strategies to:

- Design and deliver innovative professional and resourcing programs to skill the community and its services;
- Offer specifically developed supports, referrals;
- Develop creative solutions that are responsive to locally identified needs for rural and remote communities.

## Vision

In 2018, Contact's vision remains that isolated children, families and communities, irrespective of their locality and circumstances, have access to education, relevant supports, information and services to best meet their needs.

## Role

Contact has unique expertise in providing information and support pathways to people caring for children in isolated circumstances. Contact serves the community by working with parents, carers and children's services agencies to relieve disadvantage and isolation, irrespective of race, creed or religion.

## Values

Consistent with emerging global consensus, Contact provides holistic programs in the community, which focus on children, are respectful of communities, are inclusive of families and other caregivers and are sustainable to seek to overcome isolation and increase the social cohesion of communities particularly in remote areas characterised by long-term deprivation.

## Working within Indigenous Contexts

Contact acknowledges that within many Indigenous contexts there is a need to fill the balance to truly break the cycle of disadvantage caused by intergenerational welfare dependency, compounded by failure to educate future generations.

We applaud the Australian Government's commitment in defining Indigenous Affairs as a significant national priority and in its implementation of defined key approaches seeking to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Working towards healthy communities and safe homes, improving school attendance, educational attainment and creating lasting employment and social participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians are shared goals that Contact has supported in our work within the community since 1979.

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Contact strongly believes that Indigenous representation is critical to the success of efforts aimed at making serious gains in this area.

From inception when working within the community, Contact has remained committed to working in partnership with Indigenous Controlled Organisations and the communities they serve and to ensuring that our approaches are aligned in best practice in Indigenous service delivery. To this end, Contact has deeply valued Indigenous representation within Contact's Board to further guide the organisation's strategic directions and approaches and throughout, the organisation has continually assessed relevant Indigenous and early childhood, family, health and community development literature to guide the organisation's processes and principles in working within the community.

Influencing change in rural and remote and Indigenous settings is complex and time consuming when done effectively. Our experiences within the community suggest that in some instances, support may be required at the request of some Indigenous run and controlled services in implementing policies and strategies to empower communities and to develop successful future educational attainment, community safety and wellbeing, employment and training pathways.

Research undeniably acknowledges that all children benefit from quality early education experiences in helping children to be better prepared for the transition to formal school settings by laying down a solid foundation for children's learning, and that these experiences are especially beneficial for children and their families from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds and within remote communities.

Contact believes to ensure equal educational opportunities specifically for Aboriginal children there must be opportunities for Aboriginal children to participate in early education, which involves their families and the communities. With this in mind, access to quality early childhood education that engages the children, families and community is critical to children's rights, 'closing the gap' and in achieving the Australian Government's Indigenous Affairs framework in addressing Indigenous disadvantage and increasing future school readiness.

Evidence clearly states that from a fiscal cost-benefit perspective, high quality early childhood education is one of the smartest investments Australia can make. Businesses and philanthropists are now looking at the benefit of investing in early childhood education especially for those children from disadvantaged communities, in particular within an Indigenous and rural and remote contexts.

### **Contact Children's Mobile**

There are still many remote areas in Australia where childhood educational opportunities are not available. In response, between 2010-2014, philanthropic funding from the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation and The Yulgilbar Foundation enabled the development of the Contact Children's Mobile servicing the Ti Tree and Utopia Homelands regions.

In 2014, Contact secured a Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet grant to enable the continuation of this Mobile Children's service post-philanthropy and in 2015, secured an Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) to continue in the delivery of programs within the Utopia Homelands up until December 2017. A Community Led application was presented to Prime Minister and Cabinet seeking funding in partnership with Urapuntja Aboriginal Corporation (UAC) to continue the Contact Children's Mobile. This application was not funded.

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Since 2012, the Contact Children's Mobile operated in various Utopia Homelands remote Aboriginal communities, and these communities are now more child aware and families are engaged with their children's learning and education, in particular in the critical early years period which prepares children to be ready to learn in primary school. Families and community members are demonstrating child development understandings and knowledge related to how the play-based early learning programs are supporting their child's future school readiness; children are successfully transitioning to school and Indigenous community members were employed and volunteering within the Contact Children's Mobile activities.

Reinforcing trachoma elimination and a range of other health, wellbeing, child safety educational and community programs within the trusted environment established by the Contact Children's Mobile team was intrinsic to the service delivery model with great possibilities to further add additional approaches into the future.

Working in a partnership complementary approach with the Indigenous Controlled Organisations and representatives there was strong evidence of support from the Utopia Homelands communities regions and community agencies (Urapuntja Aboriginal Corporation, Urapuntja Health Service Schools, CALYLUS, Arlparra School, etc) for the maintenance and extension of the Contact Children's Mobile.

Indigenous Controlled Organisations and representatives (including Elders, parents and other community members) from the Utopia Homelands region continue to highlight the service's valuable contributions to early childhood education, family support, child health and wellbeing and the role it could further play within any defined ongoing strategy rollout in their region.

A 2013 Menzies Contact Children's Mobile Evaluation Report highlighted the effectiveness of the Contact Children's Mobile and its contributions to the early childhood education and educational landscape in the Utopia Homelands region; providing evidence of the Mobile's innovation in reducing social exclusion and supporting highly vulnerable Aboriginal families and identifies the potential of the Mobile service to bring about fundamental and lasting improvements to the lives and opportunities for the children and families in these regions, including employment opportunities for parents in their community.

Throughout its operations, the Contact Children's Mobile worked collaboratively and in a complementary approach, working closely in a partnership approach with the Utopia Homelands Aboriginal communities, Urapuntja Aboriginal Corporation and Urapuntja Health Service as well as other service agencies and provides ongoing options for participation within the Mobile's program design and delivery. This was to ensure that Contact Children's Mobile resulting approaches were:

- Targeted to meet needs, adequately resourced and sustainable;
- Not duplicating resources and service delivery and is physically and culturally accessible; and
- Strategies/programs were regularly appraised monitored and evaluated.

In 2018, without ongoing funding, the Contact Children's Mobile discontinued service delivery within the Utopia Homelands. In partnership with Urapuntja Aboriginal Corporation, Contact continues to explore options to seek to address identified child and family service delivery gaps within the Homelands communities.

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Contact also continues in 2018 to maintain an Alice Springs base with BushMob, an Indigenous Controlled Organisation and have commenced to develop programs in the Northern Territory for young people referred to BushMob programs to further support their capacity for safe and effective parenting.

### **Demonstrated Measures of Contact Children's Mobile (CCM) Success**

These measures include:

1. Acknowledgment that CCM is an important resource within the Barkly and Central Desert regions - providing a strong sense of community, capacity building, ownership and valuing of the Mobile and its contributions to their community(s).
2. Strong relationships built with CCM providing regular early childhood holistic and community engagement programs across contracted Homelands sites. Continued strong relationships in the communities were evidenced within the Mobile's service delivery with regular early childhood education child, family and community programs provided at various remote Homelands sites; consistent participation of children and caregivers - mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles grandparents and Elders within these activities when they were on community.
3. School readiness and early literacy and numeracy skills supported through play-based educational programs offered side by side with the children and their families. Active and eager participation of children at the nominated CCM venues with each early childhood educational learning session conducted on average for three or more hours.
4. A continuing progressive increase of children engaging in the early childhood educational programs delivered when on community with, for example, 75 children attending the CCM sessions from January to June 2017, compared to 48 children engaged in the early learning educational activities July to 31 December 2016 and 34 children in the period up to January to 30 June 2016.
5. Success for children comes when the early learning service provider and families have positive relationships. CCM achieved ongoing success by communication; consultation and collaborations with families, building and supporting their understandings related to early childhood developmental outcomes and school readiness, engaging them within the programs, complemented by a range of other engagement actions.
6. Close collaborative relationships in the communities resulted in consistent participation on average of 5 to 25 children and caregivers - mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents and Elders within the programs delivered.
7. When on community, there was evidence of an increase in family engagement in the early educational programs within 2017 with 69 Indigenous parents engaging in their child's education delivered through CCM sessions. This result demonstrates a progressive increase of parent numbers in CCM activities with their children as 65 families were engaged up until December 2016 and 62 families in prior period ending 30 June 2016.

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8. Families and community members volunteered willingly and engaged in activities alongside the children and interpreting when CCM are delivering new concepts. Parents were encouraged to have input and make active contributions sharing information related to their child's learning and development priorities. Regular attendees were very familiar with activities, commenting when children are doing a little more each time as they participate within a particular activity and encouraging a little extension each time for their children within activities.
  9. The CCM early childhood practices reflected both the Australian Government's early childhood National Quality Framework (NQF) - Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standards (NQS).
  10. Children's learning is a process of explorations that children engage in from birth as they expand their intellectual, physical, social, emotional and creative capacities. As a result, CCM provided throughout intentional exploratory play-based activities that allowed the children to seek understanding of their world, themselves and their communities. Equally, as reflected in the NQS, each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests provide the foundation for all child related CCM programs delivered.
  11. The majority of children attending the CCM were a young cohort, aged birth to four years and all CCM activities were planned to open up their innate desire to seek more complex understandings of their environments and building positive child developmental across all domains.
  12. CCM activities focused upon developing children's positive strong sense of self, enabling them to try new experiences with confidence and transferring easier concepts into more complex play ideas.
  13. In the life of a child and their families, starting school is a significant event and the strong relationships and information sharing between families that attended the CCM and the Utopia Homelands schools helped to support Utopia Homelands children's successful transition to school.
  14. Respectful reciprocal relationships between CCM, Utopia Homelands families, community members, Indigenous Controlled Organisations and agencies resulted in everyone working collaboratively to achieve positive outcomes for their children's successful transition into school and towards building healthy and safe communities, improve school attainment potentials and employment and social participation.
  15. Evidence suggests that children who have a positive start to school are likely to engage well and to experience ongoing academic and social success. Children entering formal school in 2018 accessed focused school-ready CCM activities, complemented by community members taking roles to ensure school-ready activities are completed throughout the sessions.
  16. CCM designed intentional experiences to help transitional children gain the desired skills. Staff evaluated each learning session to ensure intentional teaching activities were based on the child's abilities and interests to achieve maximum learning outcomes.

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17. Children transitioning to school in 2018 are naturally maturing into their role as leaders of the others and enjoy being chosen to lead play actions. CCM reports provide evidence of school-ready skills being displayed by children moving onto transition next year. More complex elements were accommodated within transition of children's activities with time spent with relevant children's parents explaining how activities were building school readiness skills and ways to build upon these with their children when CCM was not on community.
  18. Families and community identified their skilling requirements and desires to know more about their children and to work with the Mobile. Families and community members sought ideas to continue early learning activities back at camp, as they wanted their child to be successful when formal school time approaches and requested to know more about their child's development and to support their effective transition into school settings.
  19. Families were travelling to other CCM venues so their child can access more programs each week. For example a new mother was a keen participator as this was her children's first experience in an early learning environment and was repeating activities back at her camp emulating CCM actions with her interactions with the child.
  20. At the end of each CCM session, CCM staff would sit with the adults to reflect on the learning that occurred, explaining how through certain activities, skills for later learning are practiced with parents progressively demonstrating that they were becoming more competent/confident expressing what learning has occurred for the children.
  21. CCM progressively developed resources to further support families' understandings of their child's development and the early literacy, numeracy and school readiness skills that their children are demonstrating within the early learning play-based CCM sessions.
  22. Promoting employment opportunities led to community members employed or volunteering within CCM activities and employed community members displayed competencies, contributing to the programs offered, working to routines of the session and assisting in the successful delivery of the sessions. There were increasing numbers of Indigenous people employed (Soapy Bore, Atheley and Rocket Range) when they are on community offering to work within CCM service delivery. Further Indigenous people have completed relevant documentation however to date, had not formally commenced employment duties.
  23. CCM actively collaborated with Arlparra School, CALYSUS and My Pathways to encourage and support the potential of Indigenous community employment opportunities and to encourage individuals within their ongoing employment actions.
  24. All community members that attend the CMM programs volunteer in one way or another.

## **Attachments**

- Attachment 1 CCM – Service Delivery Model
- Attachment 2 CCM – Key Success Factors and Lessons Learned
- Attachment 3 CCM – Case Study with Atheley Community
- Attachment 4 CCM – Clean Up Australia Day in Utopia Homelands
- Attachment 5 CCM – A time to come together on Community
- Attachment 6 CCM – Benefits for transition aged children, families and community members