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PERCEPTIONS OF THE
COMMUNITY AGENTS PROGRAM
Comments from Aboriginal Communities and
Department of Social Security Regional Offices

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COMMUNITY AGENTS PROGRAM
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Department of Social Security Regional Offices

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SUMMARY

This paper records opinions and perceptions about the Community Agents Program. The information was gathered from Aboriginal people living in remote communities which have Department of Social Security Community Agents and from Department of Social Security regional office staff who deal with Community Agents.

Comments were collected in response to a series of open questions organised under ten headings. These same headings are used in this paper. As explained in the Findings section (p.10) the headings consist of the four identified objectives of the Community Agents Program and six aspects important to the successful implementation of the Program.

A brief summary of the findings follows.

Awareness

The overall indication is that individual recipients of Social Security pensions and benefits living in Aboriginal communities still may not have a detailed personal awareness of their entitlements and responsibilities. It is, however, believed by both Community Agents and Department of Social Security regional office staff that general awareness of Social Security benefits and programs is growing.

Access

It was said frequently that there is a heavy reliance on Community Agents to act as intermediaries for Aboriginal people living in remote communities because residents were more comfortable talking to the local Community Agent than contacting staff at a regional office. Thus, the indication was that Aboriginal people's access to Department of Social Security programs and services has improved although not on a direct basis.

Timeliness

Overall improvement in relation to this objective of the Community Agents Program was indicated, although several problem areas were identified. Some respondents specifically linked a decrease in the number and length of delays in the receipt and processing of claims and other forms from Aboriginal people, to the presence of Community Agents at particular communities.

Correctness

The correctness of claim and continuation forms received from residents of Aboriginal communities was said to have improved generally following the introduction of Community Agents. It was also indicated that regional office follow up action on incomplete forms was easier through a Community Agent. This indicated again considerable reliance on Community Agents to act as intermediaries for Aboriginal people living in remote communities.

Training

Included under this heading are training for Community Agents, training for regional office staff in relation to Community Agents and regional office staff expectations of Community Agents. While the former of these training needs has been met (to varying degrees as specified in the Findings section) by each regional office visited, the latter training had not been considered. Although the lack of staff training resulted in widely varying expectations of Community Agents, it was possible to identify three broad expectations. Regional office staff said that they expected Community Agents to:

- (1) liaise between community residents and regional office staff;
- (2) assist community residents with claim and continuation forms; and
- (3) provide information on clients to regional office staff.

Resources/Facilities

As stated in the Findings, most Community Agents experienced problems with the receipt of at least some of the equipment they needed and/or requested.

Publicity and Information

Publicity about Community Agents for Aboriginal community residents was generally said to have been handled in an informal manner. Information dissemination, both from regional offices to Community Agents and from Community Agents to community residents, was also found to be informal. The provision of relevant Departmental information and publicity material to Community Agents was one aspect of the Community Agents Program which appeared to require standardising.

Liaison/Support

In the regional offices surveyed, there appeared to be minimum commitment to the Community Agents Program resulting in very little support from staff for Community Agents. In most of the offices, staff other than AILOs rarely visit communities. Telephone contact between regional office staff and Community Agents was said to be client generated and thus client or benefit specific.

Selection/Contracts/Administration

In general, the process of selecting a Community Agent was regarded as satisfactory by the people interviewed. Respondents indicated that they understand the conditions of the contract and regard them as quite relevant to individual communities. The only aspects considered to be in need of examination were the allocation of hours, funding (including the supposed impact of CDEP on the workload of Community Agents) and the possibility of including some provision for Community Agents to travel to outlying communities/outstations within their area.

Duties of Community Agents

The duties of Community Agents, as identified by the Agents themselves, can be summed up as follows:

- basic information gathering;
- forms completion; and
- helping people talk to Social Security.

As mentioned under Selection/Contracts/Administration, one aspect of their duties which Community Agents said deserves serious consideration is the need for them to be more mobile within their areas of operation.

Community Agents did not mention teaching community residents to complete their own Department of Social Security forms, or teaching residents to deal directly with Department of Social Security regional office staff as part of their duties. This educative role needs to be emphasised in all training for Community Agents.

Included in the general duties of Community Agents was maintenance of records of client contact. The nature of the records kept by the Community Agents visited varied, but they were generally found to include date of visit, name and type of enquiry/problem. Although most Community Agents said they forward these records to the relevant regional office, staff at these offices did not appear to make any constructive use of the records.

Conclusion

This report indicates that the Community Agents Program is a valuable means of delivering Department of Social Security services to remote Aboriginal communities. Although the comments collected indicated some areas of the Program which need to be improved, there was strong endorsement both from communities and from Department of Social Security regional offices.

The recommendations included in the paper indicate the areas needing improvement. Implementation of these recommendations would make the Community Agents Program a very effective service delivery strategy. The recommendations are included throughout the Findings section. They have also been collated and are listed in the final section, Conclusion and Consolidated List of Recommendations (p.29).

INTRODUCTION

The Community Agents Program is one of several initiatives introduced by the Department of Social Security to improve the service offered to residents of Aboriginal communities and towns with predominantly Aboriginal populations. Others include:

- mobile review teams;
- remote visiting teams;
- an increase in the number of Aboriginal/Islander Liaison Officers;
- the Information Campaign in central Australia; and
- SNAP officers.

Under the Community Agents Program the Department of Social Security pays Aboriginal community organisations (often Community Councils) so that those organisations can employ a resident of the community to assist with Social Security related matters. The main duties of Community Agents, as stated in the Aboriginal Community Agent Agreement (Attachment), include:

- answering simple enquiries about Social Security pensions, benefits and allowances;
- giving out Social Security forms and pamphlets;
- assisting people to fill in forms;
- accepting, dating and forwarding to the regional office claim and review forms; and
- sighting, and if possible, photocopying proof of identity and other papers supporting claims.

At the time this research was started, there were approximately forty Community Agents throughout Australia.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNITY AGENTS PROGRAM

The goal of the Community Agents Program can be stated as follows:

that Aboriginal people residing in Aboriginal communities or predominantly Aboriginal towns have improved access to the programs and services provided by the Department of Social Security.

From this general goal four specific objectives have been identified. These are:

OBJECTIVE A: AWARENESS

Increase the level of Department of Social Security related knowledge of Aboriginal people residing in Aboriginal communities and towns with predominantly Aboriginal populations so that they have a better understanding of:

- the different types of Social Security benefits and payments;
- eligibility conditions for the above;
- the rights of Social Security clients;
- the responsibilities of Social Security clients; and
- the Social Security office structure - including key personnel in different sections and their responsibilities.

OBJECTIVE B: ACCESS

Increase the level of access of Aboriginal people residing in Aboriginal communities and towns with predominantly Aboriginal populations to:

- Social Security offices and staff;
- Social Security benefits and other payments; and
- Social Security information.

OBJECTIVE C: TIMELINESS

Decrease the number and length of delays in processing claims and continuations from Aboriginal people residing in Aboriginal communities and towns with predominantly Aboriginal populations.

OBJECTIVE D: CORRECTNESS

- (a) Increase the number of correct payments to Aboriginal people residing in Aboriginal communities and towns with predominantly Aboriginal populations (including continuations and increasing take-up amongst those currently not receiving payment but who are eligible).
- (b) Increase the number of correctly completed claims and other forms received from Aboriginal people residing in Aboriginal communities and towns with predominantly Aboriginal populations.

CONCLUSION AND CONSOLIDATED LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has shown that the Community Agents Program is a valuable means of delivering Department of Social Security services to remote Aboriginal communities. Although the comments collected indicated some areas of the Program which need to be improved, there was strong endorsement both from a community perspective and from a Department of Social Security regional office perspective.

The recommendations included in this paper indicate the areas needing improvement. Implementation of these recommendations would make the Community Agents Program a very effective service delivery strategy. To make implementation easier, the recommendations have been collated and listed in this section.

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY AGENT AGREEMENT

It is recommended that the Aboriginal Community Agent Agreement be reviewed as follows:

- the formula for the calculation of the number of hours for which funding is provided should be reassessed;*
- for communities with a requirement for less than ten hours Department of Social Security related work consideration should be given to paying Councils at the agreed rate for those hours without an actual Agent being selected;*
- the decision to reduce the number of hours for communities which convert to CDEP should be reviewed;*
- the possibility that Community Agents may need transport to outlying communities or outstations should be included;*
- the need to complete standard client contact records should be included.*

It is recommended that discussion on the communities' role (support, supervision, etc.) be included in the initial contract negotiations.

FACILITIES

It is recommended that the system of allocating funds for the facilities packages for Community Agents be reviewed as follows:

area offices should be held accountable for all expenditure on facilities for Community Agents and should be required to report to Central Office on a regular basis;

the purchasing and supplying of facilities for Community Agents should be the responsibility of regional offices;

all requests for facilities from Community Agents should be dealt with promptly.

It is recommended that an instruction be issued to Regional Managers and Area Managers explaining appropriate expenditure of funds allocated to Community Agents.

TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY AGENTS

It is recommended that initial training for Community Agents be held in regional offices with regular, planned follow up training by regional office staff at the communities on an individual basis.

It is recommended that initial training for Community Agents includes:

- staff familiarisation;*
- a detailed study of the Community Agents Agreement;*
- a clear breakdown of the role and duties of Community Agents;*
- maintenance of standard client contact records;*
- a detailed study of all relevant claim and continuation forms;*
- basic Department of Social Security program information; and*
- a workshop on methods of information dissemination to community residents.*
- methods of educating community residents to complete their own Department of Social Security forms; and*
- methods of educating community residents to deal directly with staff at Department of Social Security regional offices.*

It is recommended that the above training be reinforced by periodic refresher courses.

It is recommended that more than one person from each community attends the initial training course run by regional office staff for Community Agents.

It is recommended that more frequent training be considered to help with the problem of high turn over among Community Agents.

It is recommended that the possibility of funding all Community Agent training courses through the Department of Employment Education and Training be investigated.

It is recommended that higher level training for established Community Agents be considered.

INFORMATION DISSEMINATION TO COMMUNITY AGENTS

It is recommended that the dissemination of relevant information to Community Agents be standardised. One method would be for area or state office information/publicity sections to include Community Agents on their mailing lists.

It is recommended that the Community Agents Handbook be revised to incorporate local information where applicable.

It is recommended that the Community Agents Handbook be updated on a regular basis.

TRAINING FOR REGIONAL OFFICE STAFF

It is recommended that all regional office staff likely to deal with residents of Aboriginal communities be informed of the benefits of the Community Agents Program to Aboriginal people and to themselves. The need for total commitment, support and regular contact should be emphasised. Regional office staff should have a thorough understanding of the Community Agents Agreement and the role and duties of Community Agents.

REGIONAL OFFICE SUPPORT AND MONITORING OF COMMUNITY AGENTS

It is recommended that regional office management teams be expected to perform the role of supporting, training and monitoring Community Agents.

It is recommended that Community Agent client contact records be forwarded to Regional Managers regularly (perhaps monthly) and used by the regional office management teams to check the progress of the Agents.

It is recommended that regional office staff, other than AILOs, travel to communities, especially to those with Community Agents.

It is recommended that Community Agents travel around the communities with the AILOs and other regional office staff during their visits.

It is recommended that each regional office prepares a handout for Community Agents providing contact names and numbers for the different regional office sections. This should be updated frequently.

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COMMUNITY AGENT PROGRAM (CAP)

CAP HANDBOOK



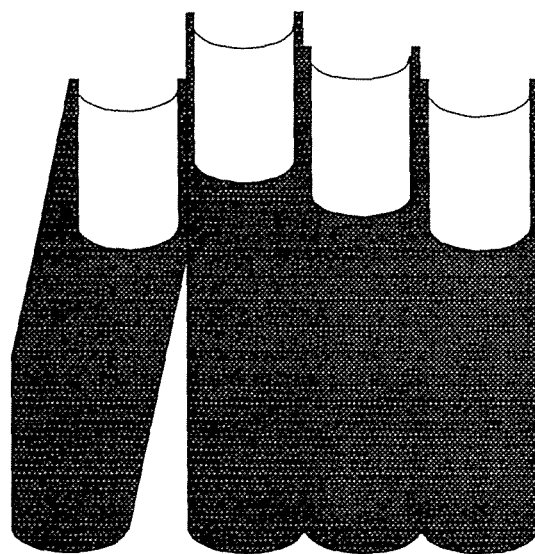
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HANDBOOK FOR THE GUIDANCE OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITY AGENTS



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BACKGROUND TO THE COMMUNITY AGENT PROGRAM

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY AGENT?

Agents are employed by community organisations using funds provided by the Department of Social Security.

ROLE OF THE AGENT

WHAT DOES A COMMUNITY AGENT DO?

The agreement or contract between Social Security and the organisation provides for an agent to be employed by the organisation for an agreed number of hours per week to handle a variety of tasks:

- answering simple enquires about Department of Social Security (DSS) programs and seeking answers from DSS on more difficult cases;
- giving out DSS forms and pamphlets to people asking them and keeping enough stocks on hand;
- accepting and date stamping any claim and review forms and other correspondence lodged; assist people to fill in forms where necessary (**The Agent is not required to and should not make any decisions about whether a person can get a payment**);
- sighting and photocopying paper supporting claims;
- sending to DSS the forms and papers lodged;
- referring people to other Departments and welfare agencies where necessary; and
- telling DSS of community reaction to our programs/services.

TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY AGENTS

WHAT DO AGENTS NEED TO KNOW?

- Most of the information you will need to have to do your job is in this handbook. If there is something that is not clear to you after you read this book, you can ask for help from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Liaison Officer (AILO) at the nearest DSS Office. If the AILO is not in the office, the Regional Manager can help.
- When you take on the job of community agent you will be offered a visit to the nearest DSS office. DSS will arrange a place for you to stay while you are being trained at the office. If after your first week of training you feel you might need more training then you can talk to the AILO to arrange it.
- If necessary, the AILO or a person from DSS will visit you in your community to help with anything you are unclear about.
- It is better to ask about anything you do not understand rather than give out information to people which you are not sure about. If the AILO is not available other people in the DSS office will help you.

