

# Opening of the Alice Springs office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman

The opening of a new office in Alice Springs is an important and historic development for the Commonwealth Ombudsman. We are especially pleased to be joined on this occasion by members from Aboriginal communities in the Alice Springs region. I begin by acknowledging the Mbantua people, the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. We pay our respects to their elders and descendants, past and present.

It is a great pleasure also to welcome many others who work in government agencies and community organisations. I note the presence of Government Business Managers and other officers from Australian Government and Northern Territory Government agencies, the community leaders from Aboriginal land councils and support groups, and staff from local media agencies. I extend a special welcome also to Major General Dave Chalmers, the head of the Northern Territory Emergency Response team, who has kindly joined us for this opening.

Another highlight of this opening is the 'welcome to country' by Elaine Peckham, a member of the Mbantua community. Elaine's welcome opens the door to all of us, from many different backgrounds and organisations, to work together as a community as we open a new office in a traditional setting.

The office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman was established in 1977 - just over thirty years ago. A foundation principle that has guided the work of the office is that it must be a national operation. An office that helps people resolve problems they encounter in dealing with government should be in close contact with people and government around the country. To facilitate that contact, the Commonwealth Ombudsman has always maintained offices in each State and Territory capital city. We currently have eight offices, including in Darwin.

The opening of an office in Alice Springs - the ninth office - is an important initiative. This step has been taken so that we can provide a better service to people in the Northern Territory, arising particularly from the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention measures implemented in 2007 by the Australian Government.

The Ombudsman experience, gleaned from 30 years of dealing with problems in government, is that difficult and unanticipated issues arise whenever new government programs are implemented. We live in a complex world. People's individual circumstances can be vastly different and throw up an endless range of challenging issues whenever a new program or common rule is introduced to deal with an existing problem. The constant experience of the Ombudsman's office is that there is no such thing as a problem free solution. Every solution to a problem in fact creates new problems of an unanticipated and unintended kind.

That is why, when the emergency intervention measures were first introduced, Ombudsman staff made initial visits to the Territory to meet with people and organisations, and we approached the Australian Government for additional office funding to play a role in the Intervention. We received support, both from government and the community.

Our early experience has borne out the value of establishing a stronger Ombudsman presence in the Northern Territory. We have, on the one hand, been impressed by the commitment, determination and professionalism of the officers from nine different Australian Government and Northern Territory Government agencies engaged in the response. Equally, we have seen that members of the community, and community leaders, welcome the presence of an independent Ombudsman office to which they can turn with problems that they have encountered.

Many practical issues have been raised with Ombudsman staff concerning emergency response rules and decisions. Not surprisingly, there are many questions about two measures in particular - income management, by which 50% of a person's government benefits can be quarantined to be spent on food and essentials at designated stores; and the transfer of many people onto Centrelink benefits that require completion of job-search and activity test requirements as a condition of continued social support payment.

The problems brought to the Ombudsman's office under those and other emergency response measures are familiar in our work. Factors that have given rise to grievances include difficulties faced by agencies in clarifying people's individual circumstances, misunderstanding between claimants and government officers, computer systems not working as expected, delays in getting issues resolved because of competing demands, and occasional mistakes in decision making.

We have been able to work through those problems, both with people in the communities who have contacted us, and with government officers here and in Canberra.

That is a beneficial process. It is now a foundation principle in Australian government that people have a right to ask questions, a right to complain when they are unsure or unhappy about a government decision. Members of the public must be able to raise a concern, confident in the knowledge that it will be properly investigated and that they will not suffer any adverse consequence for having lodged a complaint.

The right to complain is a valuable and important right in Australia. It also leads to better government. Doubtless the standard of Australian government administration is already very high. That has been illustrated by the early success of some parts of the emergency response measures, that have been implemented quickly and by a large and committed team of officers assembled from around Australia. But doubtless too a large reason for the high standard of government administration is that agencies have become responsive to people and the problems they raise.

Simply stated, complaint handling and investigation makes government better and more accepted by the community. Complaint handling reminds us that our systems do not always work the way we expect. It reminds us that all members of the community are different, and that a rule that applies easily to one person might not apply as easily to another. Above all, complaint handling reminds us that people matter: that our commitment to public service and to better government must translate as a commitment to listen and to talk to each member of the community, especially when they express dissatisfaction with government decision making and service delivery.

That is the philosophy that has guided the Ombudsman's office for over thirty years in Australia. I am delighted that, with the opening of an office in Alice Springs, we are now

better placed to implement that philosophy in a more direct and practical way in the Northern Territory. Our ability to work closely with people and government in this region will be strengthened.

We now have a fully staffed office in Hartley Street, Alice Springs, co-located with the Northern Territory Ombudsman. From that base we have already visited many communities in the Northern Territory, including Mutitjulu, Hermansburg, Wallace Rockhole, Santa Teresa, Areyonga, Titjikala, Imanpa, Finke River, and communities in the Katherine region. We will soon be visiting Papunya, Kintore, Mt Liebig, Docker River and surrounding communities. The program of visits to new areas will accompany the roll-out of the Emergency Intervention measures around the Northern Territory.

The Ombudsman's office in Alice Springs will also deal with other issues concerning Australian Government agencies that are raised with us. Nationally, over 34,000 people contact the Commonwealth Ombudsman annually, and up to 5,000 of those contacts are taken up for individual investigation. The issues we deal with range across the spectrum of Australian Government programs and agencies, such as postal services, child support, immigration, policing and taxation. Those and any issues to deal with the administrative actions of Australian Government agencies can be taken up with our Alice Springs office.

May I introduce the Commonwealth Ombudsman staff who are here today and will be the primary point of contact in Alice Springs.

The first is Maureen Abbott, well known to many of you as an Alice Springs resident, and a member of the Western Aranda and Western Luritja communities. In a moment I will ask Maureen to extend a special welcome in her own dialect. May I first mention that Maureen will be a full time staff member in the Alice Springs office. She has excellent contacts in the community, as well as extensive experience working in Australian Government agencies. We are lucky to have someone with her breadth of experience.

Next may I introduce Maureen Colley, who is a senior officer, based in Canberra, but spending much of her time in the Northern Territory. Maureen is the Director of the Indigenous Unit in the office, and was formerly a member of the Social Support Team in the Commonwealth Ombudsman. Two other officers present today who are jointly working in both the Canberra and the Alice Springs offices are Catherine Gray and Sally Ayers.

Thank you for your support by coming along today to the opening of the Alice Springs office. We look forward to working with you, in a partnership to address special problems that arise in government administration in the Northern Territory. Your presence at this opening signifies our commitment to a common goal.