



ABN 28 000 030 179

Indigenous Telecommunications Section
Regional Communications Policy Branch
Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2601

18 May 2006

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Smith Family appreciates the opportunity to submit our views and comment on the Discussion Paper *Backing Indigenous Ability Delivering a Comprehensive Telecommunications Package in Indigenous Communities*, one of the four programs of the *Connect Australia* package.

The Smith Family is a national, independent, social enterprise established in 1922. Our mission is *that, together with caring Australians, The Smith Family will unlock opportunities for disadvantaged families to participate more fully in society* and in the contemporary context we have a particular focus on children and education. The Smith Family is working to achieve its mission of unlocking opportunities in two ways – by increasing the participation in society of those who have previously been marginalised on the one hand, and through the engagement of those who have the capacity to give of time, talent and dollars, on the other. Pursuing our vision of *a more caring and cohesive Australian community*, The Smith Family researches different forms of disadvantage to propose preventive responses to them, and to promote social change.

We draw attention to the importance and potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for disadvantaged Indigenous communities and families in Australia. Indigenous families continue to face multiple, diverse and compounding disadvantage in many areas, including education, health and social inclusion, at rates much higher than those experienced by non-Indigenous Australians.¹ Our focus accords with The Smith Family's dual generational approach to education and community support, whereby we consider children and youth within the context of their families and communities in order to strengthen educational achievement, social cohesion and positive interaction between the generations.

¹ G. Banks, 'Indigenous disadvantage: assessing policy impacts', Speech to the conference *Pursuing Opportunity and Prosperity*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research/The Australian, Melbourne, 13 November 2003, viewed 9 May 2005, available <http://www.pc.gov.au/speeches/cs20031113/cs20031113.pdf>

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Analysis by Radoll, drawing on the work of Fink and Kenny (2003), demonstrates the need for improved ICT access and use by Indigenous Australians.² It also suggests that digital inclusion is not indicated by use rates of ICT alone, but also by impact of the usage.

A base level of infrastructure should be accessible to all Australians, and should be the focus of *Backing Indigenous Ability* so that all Indigenous communities, including remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders receive a level of access to infrastructure enjoyed by the majority of the Australian population. Further, The Smith Family considers it inappropriate to force communities at various levels of capacity to make submissions competitively for infrastructure which is required for adequate access to ICT, the development of basic ICT skills and connectivity, both socially and economically, in a 21st Century knowledge economy.

The Smith Family commends DCITA for the successes of the TAPRIC program in providing services to remote Indigenous communities and supports the Discussion Paper's acknowledgement that basic telephony services critical to the safety and wellbeing of Australian families must be a priority of the *Connect Australia* package. This need is most keenly experienced in remote outstations and homelands. The need for public telephone access on remote roads (outside of CDMA coverage zones) should also be recognized as a priority to support remote travel by residents and tourists and hence economic development. Communities that were excluded from eligibility under TAPRIC funding should be considered as a priority under the *Connect Australia* package. A good basis for delivery of services could begin where TAPRIC left off.

While we recognise that basic telephony services such as the provision of community telephones is a fundamental right of a community, the higher order needs of communities with respect to the connection between education, income and use of ICT technology is well documented. Understanding the telecommunication needs of Indigenous communities also demands developing an appreciation of the wider community development needs and infrastructure challenges that communities face. Accordingly, integration of infrastructure and service provision within existing and planned service delivery is a practical way to address the higher costs that are unavoidably related to geographic isolation and infrastructure deficits.

The Smith Family's research indicates that contextualising ICT literacy development within either an individual's or a community's broader plans and aspirations, results in higher levels of success in developing ICT literacy.³ The Smith Family supports an asset based community approach whereby funding programs are designed to capitalise on and utilise a community's existing resources thereby creating a multiplier effect.

The Smith Family supports the Discussion Paper's recognition of the need for a coordinated approach with supported training underpinning the rollout of infrastructure to assist communities to use, maintain and achieve optimum value from services. This

² P. Radoll, 'Information Communication Technology – Evidence from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey' in *Indigenous Socioeconomic Outcomes: Assessing Recent Evidence*, Canberra 2005, viewed 9 May 2005, available http://www.radoll.net/peter/papers.htm_docs/IT%20Chapter%20NATSISS%20Mono.pdf; C. Fink and C. J. Kenny 'W(h)ither the Digital Divide?' The World Bank, viewed 9 May 2005, available http://old.developmentgateway.org/download/181562/W_hither_DD_Jan_.pdf.

³ K. Muir, *Connecting Communities with CTLCS From the digital divide to social inclusion*, The Smith Family, Sydney 2004, viewed 9 May 2006, available http://www.smithfamily.com.au/documents/TSF_CC_CTLCS_2004_web_55C4D.pdf

more holistic approach to ICT provision is reflected in The Smith Family's role as facilitating partner with Microsoft Australia for the *Unlimited Potential* program, which provides informal skills training and ICT facilities to a range of disadvantaged communities across Australia.⁴ Phase One of The Smith Family evaluation of this program showed that 60 per cent of those individuals who attended the centre were unemployed but actively seeking work with 84 per cent expressing a desire to undertake further community education courses as a result of their experience.

Greater and more extensive use of ICTs is required nationally to further digital inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and to combat Indigenous disadvantage. However, specific policy formulated in conjunction with Indigenous communities and other stakeholders is likely to be required. It is hoped this Discussion Paper and the responses will make an effective contribution. However, as Radoll has argued, the complexities of ICT use inhibitors, including low income levels and lower educational attainments and greater levels of interaction with the justice system implicitly suggest that a multifaceted, sustained and committed approach to combating Indigenous disadvantage in many areas is required.⁵ Improved digital inclusion is one area where gains are essential and it is hoped that the outcomes of the Discussion Paper and the *Connect Australia* package acknowledge this responsibility.⁶

The Smith Family also notes our support for the Work Ventures response to the Discussion Paper.

Yours sincerely



Elaine Henry
Chief Executive Officer

⁴ K. Muir and R. Boot, *It takes a Community to Bridge a Divide: Working towards social inclusion with Community Technology Learning Centres*, The Smith Family, 2005, viewed 9 May 2006, available http://www.smithfamily.com.au/documents/TSF_CC_CTLCS_2004_web_55C4D.pdf

⁵ Radoll, op. cit.

⁶ For further information about this submission please contact Damian Kelly, National Manager Indigenous Projects, at damian.kelly@smithfamily.com.au