



Australian Government

Australian Communications Authority

# Data collection and monitoring of telecommunications needs and services in remote Indigenous communities

December 2004

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***The Australian Communications Authority is  
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## ***Executive summary***

In response to recommendation 5.3 of the report of the Regional Telecommunications Inquiry (RTI), the ACA commenced a program for the data collection and monitoring of telecommunications needs and services in remote Indigenous communities. The ACA developed a two-pronged approach to the development of this program:

- developing a strategy for the data collection and monitoring of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities. This framework has been developed in conjunction with the broader telecommunications industry monitoring and reporting arrangements in response to RTI recommendation 7.2; and
- conducting a telecommunications needs identification and assessment program in remote Indigenous communities (Needs Assessment). A significant part of this program involved site visits and engaging in direct consultation with remote Indigenous communities in eight regions of Australia.

The overarching finding of the ACA's Needs Assessment is that current implementation of the Universal Service Obligation (USO), as a legislated safeguard of reasonable access to telephone services—both standard telephone services (STS) and payphones—is not meeting the particular telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities.

In all of the remote Indigenous communities visited by the ACA, there is significant unmet demand for STS. A large proportion of smaller communities (that is, with a population fewer than 50 people) are without access to telecommunications of any kind. Access to basic telecommunications services remains the highest priority telecommunications need in remote Indigenous communities.

There are a number of reasons for the low take-up rates of STS but most relate to credit management issues which would be alleviated by the ability to pre-pay telephone calls. One of the ACA's key recommendations, therefore, is that the Universal Service Provider (currently Telstra) should offer pre-paid telecommunications products as an STS to remote Indigenous communities within the scope of meeting its USO responsibilities.

There have been a number of reviews in recent years that have investigated the adequacy of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities. All have found that access to basic telecommunications services is inadequate and most mention the need for more culturally appropriate telecommunications products. Despite the findings of these reviews and despite continued discussions between industry and government, there has been no significant change in the availability of basic telecommunications in remote Indigenous communities.

The ACA has concluded that without intervention, the telecommunications service needs of remote Indigenous communities will not be met through the existing implementation of the USO regime and remote Indigenous communities will remain the most disadvantaged telecommunications users in Australia.

The ACA proposes that a revised USO framework that is inclusive of culturally appropriate telecommunications products, coupled with a structured, dedicated and monitored program of service delivery, would improve the take-up of basic telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities.

As part of its monitoring of regional telecommunications service availability and performance under the ACA's response to RTI recommendation 7.2, the ACA will be assessing whether the availability and take-up of telecommunications services in remote

Indigenous communities changes over time in response to changes in service delivery arrangements under the USO and other programs.

Further, the ACA will be assessing the performance of available services as part of its ongoing monitoring of industry compliance with the USO and the Customer Service Guarantee, with data collection and monitoring continuing to apply to all telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities. These measures combined are intended to provide a full picture of the telecommunications services available in remote Indigenous communities and the performance of those services.

## ***Summary of findings***

1. The current implementation of the USO, as a legislated safeguard of access to telephone services (both public and private), is not meeting the particular telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities as there are some remote Indigenous communities without reasonable access to telecommunications of any kind.
2. Many remote Indigenous communities meet the requirements of the current Universal Service Provider's (USP) standard marketing plan (SMP) and have reasonable access to at least one payphone. However, there are some notable exceptions including larger communities (population greater than 50 people) without 24 hour payphone access. Some smaller communities which do not meet the population requirements of the USP's SMP are without reasonable access to any shared community telecommunications service. These findings are consistent with those of the ACA's Payphone Policy Review, released in 2004.
3. There are significant levels of unmet demand for STS in remote Indigenous communities for various reasons, which include (but are not limited to):
  - difficulty managing post-paid bills; and
  - prohibitive costs of trenching and connection fees.
4. There is a need for pre-paid, equitably priced, fixed line telecommunications services to ameliorate credit management issues and increase the take-up of telephones (for the community and in individual homes) in remote Indigenous communities.
5. The existing limited pre-paid telecommunications service options are not recognised in the USP's current SMP and are not captured by the USO or existing compliance monitoring regimes.
6. The STS packages that are offered as an interim service do not include any pre-paid option. This acts as a disincentive for consumers who have difficulty managing a post-paid bill to register for Priority Assistance where an interim service is provided in fulfilment of Priority Assistance obligations.
7. There are a number of projects/programs which are ensuring that enhanced telecommunications services are available in larger remote Indigenous communities. While this is an important step, those enhanced services provided are often not fully utilised due to:
  - inadequate training;
  - limited access to facilities;
  - slow data rates;
  - lack of Indigenous content on the Internet; and
  - lack of ongoing affordability of services.
8. Telecommunications infrastructure planning processes for remote Indigenous communities appear to have been based on continuing low levels of telecommunications service take-up which results in lack of capacity issues arising where increases in demand have occurred.
9. The take-up and availability of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities is dependent on a number of factors including:

- tourism;
  - community size;
  - governance structure of community and region; and
  - proximity to telecommunications infrastructure.
10. Where a community representative has undertaken the responsibility for managing telecommunications issues in the community/region, and become a central contact point for all stakeholders, there has been significantly increased take-up and ongoing use of telecommunications in that community/region.
  11. There are benefits for remote Indigenous communities and Telstra when an agreement regarding coin collection and maintenance of payphones is reached. However, such an agreement must be a transparent, contractual agreement with clear terms, conditions and expectations that is signed and understood by all parties.
  12. In remote Indigenous communities it is an uncommon practice to report telecommunication service faults. Consequently, many faults are not captured by existing compliance monitoring regimes.
  13. There is a need for increased awareness about telecommunications services, rights and safeguards in remote Indigenous communities. Any future information and awareness campaigns should recognise the importance of local radio and television networks in disseminating information to remote Indigenous communities.
  14. While the establishment of Telstra's Indigenous Call Centre is an important initiative, there are low levels of awareness of the Call Centre among remote Indigenous communities.
  15. Many remote Indigenous communities continue to hold traditional cultural festivals and rituals—some of which involve moving around traditional country for some months at a time. In some cases, this has negatively affected the delivery of telecommunications services to these communities.
  16. The ACA has developed good working relationships with various Indigenous organisations, councils, representative agencies, and government bodies to:
    - ensure telecommunications compliance issues are raised with the ACA and satisfactorily resolved;
    - assist the ACA to monitor changes in telecommunications service availability and quality over time; and
    - advise the ACA on the efficacy of culturally appropriate telecommunications services being trialled.

## ***Summary of recommendations***

1. That the Australian Communications Authority (ACA), Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) and the Universal Service Provider (USP) implement a structured program approach of delivery of telecommunications services to address:
  - instances where remote Indigenous communities do not have reasonable access (24 hour) to a payphone; and
  - the significant gap in access to a standard telephone service (STS), or an alternative, at an individual or household level.
2. That the USP be required to offer culturally appropriate, equitably priced, pre-paid telecommunications products to remote Indigenous communities under the USO.
3. That the ACA monitor and report on the availability and take-up of pre-paid telecommunications products in remote Indigenous communities.
4. That the pre-paid telecommunications products be available across a range of services and access technologies, including interim services, under the USO.
5. That the ACA and DCITA continue to work with the USP to identify and develop culturally appropriate telecommunications access and payment solutions for remote Indigenous communities.
6. That capacity planning processes should take into account increases in telecommunications service demand in remote Indigenous communities that are likely to result from the availability of more culturally appropriate products.
7. That a number of 'Community Communication Coordinator' positions be established to manage all telecommunications issues in remote Indigenous communities in a particular region, and have responsibility for:
  - identifying community telecommunications needs;
  - liaising with industry, government and remote Indigenous communities; and
  - working with the USP to coordinate technician deployment for telecommunication service fault rectification/trenching/installation to prevent unnecessary repeat visits.
8. That any agreement regarding payphone coin collection and maintenance between the USP and a community must be a transparent, contractual agreement with clear terms, conditions and expectations, that is signed and understood by all parties.
9. That the ACA work with an appropriate and experienced Indigenous organisation (with local/regional knowledge) to develop targeted consumer information on telecommunications rights and safeguards for remote Indigenous communities, using a variety of media.
10. That Telstra should take steps to increase awareness of its Indigenous Call Centre among remote Indigenous communities.
11. That future telecommunications service delivery policies for remote Indigenous communities (by the USP and/or the government) reflect an awareness of—and make allowance for—the cultural festivals and rituals of Indigenous communities.

12. That the ACA should continue to work with Indigenous organisations, councils, representative agencies and government bodies to ensure telecommunications compliance issues are identified and to receive advice on telecommunications service needs in remote Indigenous communities.



## ***Background – Telecommunications services and needs***

The RTI noted that there is a lack of accessible and reliable statistical information on telecommunications needs and services in remote Indigenous communities and recommended that:

There should be more effective data collection and monitoring of telecommunications needs and services in remote Indigenous communities. The Australian Communications Authority should take a leading role in this area [recommendation 5.3].

In developing a response to this recommendation, the ACA separated RTI recommendation 5.3 into two components, described below.

### **Data collection and monitoring of telecommunications services**

In May 2004, the ACA released a discussion paper detailing the ACA's objectives for, and preferred approach to, data collection and monitoring of services in remote Indigenous communities. Specific issues discussed in this paper included:

- defining 'remote Indigenous communities' for the purpose of data collection, monitoring and reporting;
- data collection, recording and monitoring to support provision of reliable quantitative and qualitative information about telecommunications service quality and availability in remote Indigenous communities; and
- quality of service measures for alternative telecommunications services that may be delivered to meet the unique telecommunications needs of Indigenous communities.

This component of RTI recommendation 5.3 is linked to a broader RTI recommendation relating to the ACA's role in industry performance monitoring and reporting, specifically:

Data on telecommunications compliance and performance should be collected at an appropriate level of disaggregation to allow ready assessment of relative performance levels. The Australian Communications Authority should put in place a data collection framework, to ensure comprehensive, disaggregated, standardised and meaningful collection of data on regional, rural and remote telecommunications service and performance [recommendation 7.2].

Submissions received from stakeholders commenting on the data collection and monitoring framework in remote Indigenous communities (that is, the 5.3 discussion paper) were considered and incorporated into the ACA's broader paper addressing RTI recommendation 7.2, which was released in August 2004. This paper described the ACA's overall approach to data collection, recording and reporting. Specifically, the implementation of:

- general industry performance indicators applicable to fixed voice, mobile and data service networks, and monitoring of the availability of services on a geographic basis; and
- regulatory compliance and quality of service monitoring and reporting with a specific focus on providers of the STS and the USO.

Data collection and monitoring of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities is described further in Part D.

## Monitoring of telecommunications needs

This second component of RTI recommendation 5.3—monitoring the telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities—required a unique and targeted approach that would build on existing knowledge and research, and satisfy the following objectives:

- build a picture of existing telecommunications service patterns in remote Indigenous communities;
- assess telecommunications service gaps and needs at various geographic levels across Australia;
- provide information to inform policy advice and future government reviews about telecommunications service adequacy;
- establish benchmarks against which the performance of industry in meeting identified telecommunications needs can be assessed;
- inform culturally specific and appropriate consumer awareness campaigns; and
- provide meaningful information to remote Indigenous communities about telecommunications services available in their region.

## Methodology

This section presents the methodology of the ACA's approach to identifying and assessing the telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities—the second component of the ACA's overall strategy developed in response to RTI recommendation 5.3<sup>1</sup>.

A methodology combining both quantitative and qualitative research—including direct community involvement—was developed for the identification, assessment and monitoring of the telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities (the Needs Assessment).

The methodology comprised three main stages, where information collected in the initial quantitative stage provided the basis for research and assessment of relevant measurement methods in subsequent qualitative stages. The three stages are outlined below

- **Stage one** (quantitative) - examine existing datasets to provide a picture of existing telecommunications services and form a baseline for future assessment of changes over time.
- **Stage two** (qualitative) – develop a 'needs identification network' comprising national state/territory governments and regional/local organisations to gain oversight into current and future programs to improve telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities.
- **Stage three** (qualitative) – needs identification through community site visits and direct consultation with community members and representative agencies.

### Stage One: Examine existing datasets

ACA staff examined a number of existing datasets (described below) to enable an assessment of the current range and availability of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities. Identification of 'gaps' in existing services were useful in informing later stages of the methodology and assisted in identifying priorities for improvement. The existing datasets also enabled the formation of baseline data to allow for assessment of changes in the range and availability of telecommunications services over time.

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<sup>1</sup> The ACA's approach to the first component of RTI recommendation 5.3—data collection and monitoring of telecommunications services—was detailed in its discussion paper *Monitoring and reporting on telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities*, released in May 2004.

#### *TAPRIC database*

In 2001, the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) established a taskforce to investigate telecommunications service levels and needs in Indigenous communities and to develop a strategy and action plan for improving service levels over the longer term. The study focused on the approximately 1,300 community managed Indigenous communities in Australia, as identified by the Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs (CHIN) Survey<sup>2</sup>. As a result of this study, the government announced its *Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities* (TAPRIC program) in mid 2002.

One key body of work arising out of the TAPRIC program was the development of a database on Indigenous communities and telecommunications services, using input from DCITA, ATSIIS, Telstra and the ACA. The 'TAPRIC database' contains the precise geographical coordinates of discrete Indigenous communities across Australia and records information on the range and number of telecommunications services provided to communities. Information on Indigenous communities is sourced primarily from CHIN survey data<sup>3</sup>. The range of services in the database includes the STS, payphones, CDMA and GSM coverage, broadband links and two-way satellite Internet (2WSI) services. Information contained in the TAPRIC database will form an important component of developing a capability in response to RTI recommendation 5.3.

#### *The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS)*

Information contained in the TAPRIC database was complemented by the use of other data sources such as the NATSISS, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The NATSISS provides information about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations of Australia on a wide range of areas of social concern, one of which covers telecommunications services.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Regional organisations, state/territory governments and telecommunications service providers*

Stage one also incorporated the collection of data from other telecommunications service providers and regional organisations servicing Indigenous communities (for example, Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Media (PY Media) and Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation).

#### Stage Two: Develop a 'needs identification network'

In late 2003, the ACA conducted a review of payphone policy (Payphone Review) which commented on the adequacy of payphone services in Australia, with a significant component of the report dedicated to payphone services in remote Indigenous communities. To inform this section of the report, the ACA undertook extensive research, visiting remote Indigenous communities in several regions of Australia.

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<sup>2</sup> Conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on behalf of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIIS).

<sup>3</sup> This survey collects selected information on Indigenous organisations that provide housing to Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

<sup>4</sup> The NATSISS is conducted at an individual level and results aggregated to a national level. Questions relating to telecommunications services include whether there is a telephone in the home and whether there is use of the Internet.

Prior to conducting the Payphone Review, the ACA had had few dealings with remote Indigenous communities, and limited involvement in implementing policy specifically targeting remote Indigenous communities. This highlighted the need for the ACA to identify, and work closely with, other government bodies and organisations that have a first-hand understanding of the telecommunications issues and needs of remote Indigenous communities and the current programs operating to address such needs.

An advantage of developing such a network was that it enabled direct and informal consultation on issues of significance (for example, testing of recommendations arising from the Payphone Review) and obtaining insights to inform the ACA's approach on key issues.

### Stage Three: Community site visits

The ACA recognised that community involvement was integral in providing accurate and representative advice on the actual telecommunications service experience and needs of remote Indigenous communities.

Stage three, therefore, incorporated direct contact with communities and representative organisations (such as land councils and resource agencies) which provided the opportunity to determine first-hand:

- the existing range and availability of telecommunications services in the communities;
- communities' ideas of their own telecommunications needs and services;
- the similarities and differences between communities/regions;
- lifestyle and cultural patterns relative to existing telecommunications services;
- telecommunications service gaps relative to other communities, regions or population segments; and
- the extent to which industry is complying with its regulatory obligations.

A further advantage of this approach was that there were a range of consultation methods to choose from depending on the nature of the issue (for example, interviews, attending council meetings, visits to telecommunications equipment sites).

### *Selection of regions for visitation program*

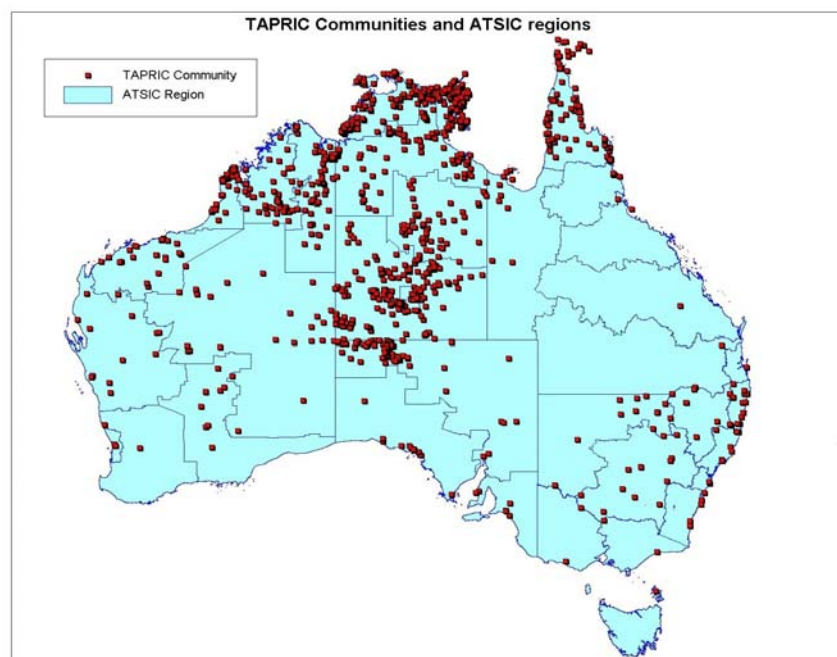
According to the TAPRIC database, there are 1339 identified, discrete communities<sup>5</sup> in Australia. Australia wide, there are 36 administrative areas that were used by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) for the election of Regional Councils (ATSIC Regions)<sup>6</sup>, which represent the local Indigenous population. All communities identified in the TAPRIC database were mapped against these ATSIC regions (Figure 1). This map was used to develop a strategy to select communities for visitation based on the percentage of communities represented in each region.

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<sup>5</sup> Discrete Indigenous communities are generally defined as "communities in geographical locations with distinct physical or cadastral (legal) boundaries and inhabited or intended to be inhabited by Indigenous people, with housing or infrastructure that is either owned or managed on a community basis" (AusStats Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey, 2001).

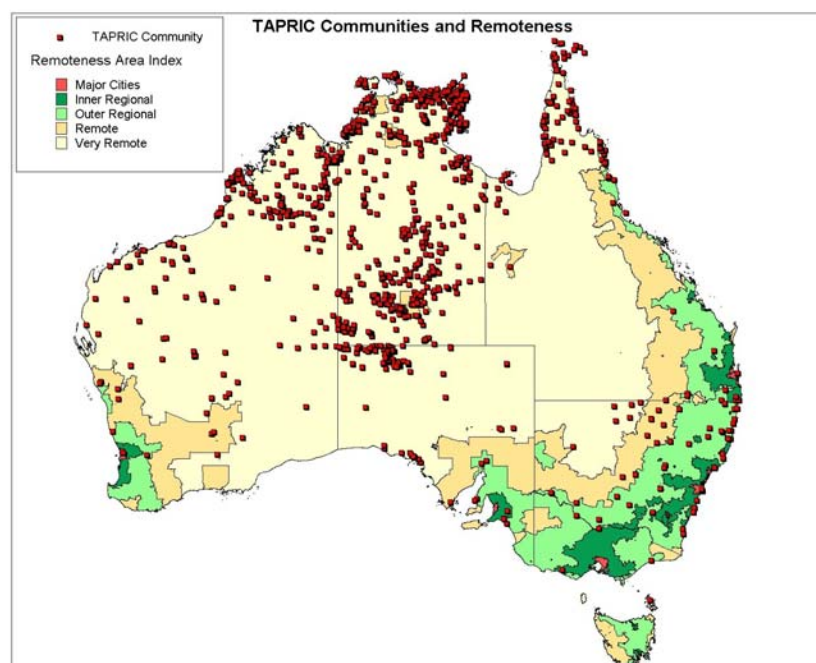
<sup>6</sup> ATSIC was dissolved midway through the ACA's telecommunications needs identification and assessment program. However, ATSIC regions continue to be recognised boundaries.

Figure 1: Map showing location of communities listed in the TAPRIC database and ATSIC regions.



Selection of communities was also informed by the categorisation of communities in the TAPRIC database according to the ABS Remoteness Index, with a focus on communities categorised as ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’<sup>7</sup>. Communities in the TAPRIC database were mapped against this Remoteness Index (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Map showing location of communities listed in the TAPRIC database against the ABS Remoteness Index.



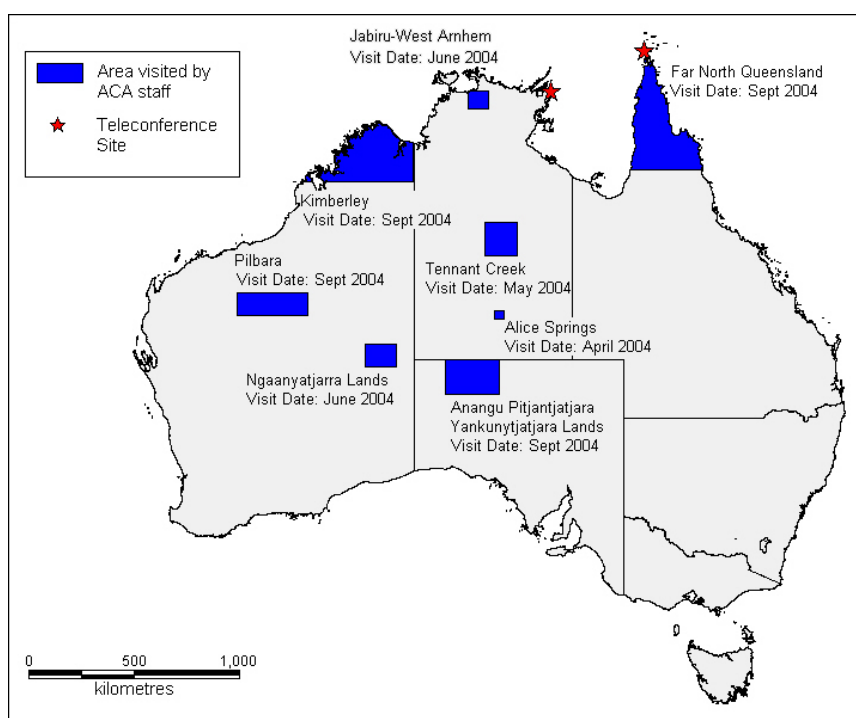
<sup>7</sup> The ABS ARIA Index is a widely accepted measure of remoteness and has five classifications: very remote, remote, outer regional, inner regional, major city.

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the highest proportion of remote Indigenous communities is located in Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Consequently, these areas are where the ACA focused its site visitation program.

Between April and September 2004, the ACA conducted site visits to more than 45 remote Indigenous communities located in the following regions<sup>8</sup>:

- Alice Springs (April 2004)
- Tennant Creek (May 2004)
- Jabiru/West Arnhem (June 2004)
- Ngaanyatjarra Lands (June 2004)
- Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (September 2004)
- Pilbara (September 2004)
- Kimberley (September 2004)
- Far North Queensland (September 2004)

*Figure 3: Regions visited by ACA staff during the telecommunications needs identification and assessment in remote Indigenous communities program.*



### *Data verification*

Although the site visits to communities were intended to provide the ACA with a clear insight into the telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities, they also provided an invaluable opportunity to ‘sanity check’ existing data sources. Wherever possible, ACA staff compared the data from the TAPRIC database with ‘actual’ services on the ground, for the purposes of data verification. This was a valuable process and allowed ACA staff to identify errors in the dataset and fill in any gaps.

<sup>8</sup> For privacy reasons, the ACA will not be publishing the list of actual communities visited.

## **Previous Reviews**

The ACA's assessment of remote Indigenous communities' telecommunications needs was also informed by other recent reviews on the availability of telecommunications services.

### *Telecommunications Service Inquiry (2000)*

The Telecommunications Service Inquiry (TSI) found that it is questionable whether the USO meets the particular communications needs of remote Indigenous communities.

### *Telecommunications Action Plan for Remote Indigenous Communities (2002)*

The government's TAPRIC report was a comprehensive review undertaken in response to recommendations of the TSI and which proposed a combination of strategies to address the unique difficulties faced by remote Indigenous communities in accessing adequate telecommunications services.

### *Regional Telecommunications Inquiry (2002)*

The Regional Telecommunications Inquiry (RTI) found that remote Indigenous communities remain the most disadvantaged telecommunications users in Australia and made a number of recommendations specific to improving telecommunications availability in these areas.

### *Payphone Policy Review (2004)*

The ACA's Payphone Policy Review recommended a series of improvements to payphone availability in remote Indigenous communities, noting that payphones are relied on as a 'lifeline' service in these communities.

### *Review of the operation of the Universal Service Obligation and the Customer Service Guarantee (2004)*

DCITA's review on the USO and CSG recommended that the USO be modified to better meet the telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities.

## **Part A – Summary of telecommunications legislation and regulation**

The ACA's assessment of the telecommunications needs and services of remote Indigenous communities and the development of an ongoing monitoring program was also informed by the minimum telecommunications service requirements outlined in the regulatory framework.

The following outlines the existing telecommunications legislation and regulation as it relates to telecommunications service provision.

### *The Universal Service Obligation*

Part 2 of the *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* (TCPSS Act) defines the USO as comprising three obligations, but in particular to ensure that STSs and payphones are reasonably accessible to all people in Australia on an equitable basis, wherever they reside or carry on business.

The STS is currently defined as a telephone service fit for the purpose of voice telephony, or, if voice telephony is impractical for a person with a disability, a form of communication that is equivalent to voice telephony.

### *The Universal Service Provider*

Telstra is currently the primary USP and, as such, is required under the TCPSS Act to fulfil the USO:

- (i) effectively, efficiently and economically;
- (ii) in ways that are consistent with Australian open and competitive telecommunications regime; and
- (iii) in ways that are, as far as practicable, responsive to the needs of consumers.

The TCPSS Act also requires the USP to develop a Policy Statement that sets out its policy in regard to delivery of the STS and payphones in fulfilment of the USO, and a Standard Marketing Plan (SMP) that sets out the equipment, goods or services that it will supply in fulfilment of the USO throughout Australia.

The ACA monitors Telstra's compliance with the USO.

### *The Customer Service Guarantee*

The *Telecommunications (Customer Service Guarantee) Standard 1997* (CSG) was established under Part 9 of the *Telecommunications Act 1997*. The CSG requires the telecommunications industry to meet minimum performance requirements and to provide customers with financial compensation when these are not met. The CSG covers the supply of standard fixed line telephone services, including voice grade services and services used to access the Internet or for facsimile machines. If a telephone company offers these services in an area, then that company must meet maximum timeframes applying to that area for standard telephone services in:

- connecting a service;
- repairing a fault or service difficulty; and
- attending appointments with customers.

CSG timeframes are described in Telstra's SMP. The ACA monitors industry compliance with the CSG.

## ***Part B – Telecommunications service access and delivery***

### **1. Basic telecommunications services**

Although the USO exists to ensure that all Australians have 'reasonable access' to a telecommunications service—both payphones and STS—the ACA visited a number of remote Indigenous communities that had limited, or no, access to a telecommunications service. The ACA found a number of factors contributing to the limited availability and take-up of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities.

#### *STS provision*

The ACA's visits revealed that few Indigenous residents in remote Indigenous communities have an STS in their homes. The reasons for this tend to relate to:

- the difficulties in obtaining a telephone service in remote areas that are far from existing network infrastructure;
- limited understanding of rights to a telecommunications service and the application process;
- the prohibitive costs of connection and trenching; and



- the difficulties in managing a post-paid bill in a culture of ‘demand sharing’ (these issues are discussed further in following sections).

In the vast majority of remote Indigenous communities that the ACA visited, one or more of these issues had prevented the take-up of STS in Indigenous households. In the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and larger communities in the Kimberley, for example, ACA staff observed that all non-Indigenous residents had an STS in their homes, and most businesses had at least one telephone line. However, extremely few Indigenous residents had an STS, instead relying heavily on the community payphones for basic communications.

#### *Payphone provision*

Telstra’s SMP outlines the criteria that Telstra will consider in assessing a community’s application for a payphone. The SMP states that a payphone will be provided to “small remote communities as a general rule of more than 20 adult permanent residents (eg. Aboriginal outstations)”. In practice, this is taken to mean a permanent population of at least 50 people, including adults and children. According to the TAPRIC database, there are 984 discrete remote Indigenous communities with a population of fewer than 50 people. Therefore, using the population criteria specified in the SMP, more than 70 per cent of remote Indigenous communities are ineligible to receive a USO payphone.

These factors lead many remote Indigenous communities into something of a vicious circle in terms of telecommunications service delivery. That is, an inability to access an STS results in a heavy reliance on payphones as a ‘lifeline’ service for the entire community. However, smaller communities with a population of fewer than 50 people are not eligible for a payphone under the existing implementation of the USO and many must therefore remain without telecommunications access of any kind.

In relation to the USO, the Explanatory Memorandum to the TCPSS Act states that:

...universal service is a ‘needs-based’ concept, the designation of a service as a USO service would depend on the need for it in the community...in relation to the concepts of ‘reasonable access’ and ‘equitable basis’, it should be noted that these concepts are intended to relate primarily to access in geographical terms and equity in terms of equality of opportunity, rather than concepts of affordability.

The ACA considers that the current implementation of the USO, as a ‘needs-based’ concept, and as a legislated safeguard of access to telephone services, is not meeting the particular needs of remote Indigenous communities, as most are without STS and some remain without telecommunications services of any kind.

#### **FINDING 1**

The current implementation of the USO, as a legislated safeguard of access to telephone services (both public and private), is not meeting the particular telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities as there are some remote Indigenous communities without reasonable access to telecommunications of any kind.

The ACA is cognisant of the difficulties and costs incurred by the USP in providing telecommunications services to remote areas of Australia and the resource implications of servicing the technologies that are currently in these locations.

To give explicit recognition of the servicing costs and difficulties faced by the USP, whilst concurrently improving access and availability of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities, the ACA proposes that a coordinated program of telecommunications service delivery, with established milestones, deployment schedules and timeframes be implemented.

The ACA proposes working with DCITA and the USP to develop such a program and envisages that, similar to the Extended Zones Agreement, the ACA would closely monitor the progress of the USP in meeting established milestones within a set schedule. It is proposed that this program would be a stepped and ‘greatest needs’ approach—first addressing instances where remote Indigenous communities do not have access (24 hours) to a payphone, and next addressing the significant gap in access to an STS, or alternative, at an individual level. A proposed model for this program is outlined below.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 1**

That the Australian Communications Authority (ACA), Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) and the USP implement a program approach to address:

- instances where remote Indigenous communities do not have reasonable access (24 hour) to a payphone; and
- the significant gap in access to a STS, or alternative, at an individual level.

#### *Proposed program approach: Model*

Due to the varying characteristics of regions in Australia, and individual communities, there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to telecommunications service delivery in remote Indigenous communities. In order to implement a program of service delivery that will improve availability of telecommunications services while acknowledging the challenges of servicing remote locations, the ACA proposes implementing a program that takes into account the following four criteria.

#### **1. Telecommunications infrastructure**

The availability of telecommunications infrastructure is a critical factor in how quickly and easily telecommunications services can be installed. If no telecommunications infrastructure is available it will take the USP a longer time, and will be considerably more expensive, to install a requested telephone service.

#### **2. Telecommunications capacity**

In some cases, although there may be telecommunications infrastructure nearby, there may not be any available capacity at the community exchange for additional telephone lines. This will also incur additional expense and take the USP a longer time to install a requested telephone service.

#### **3. Permanent dwellings**

The ACA considers that the existence of at least one permanent dwelling in a remote Indigenous community is an important prerequisite for the provision of an STS. The ACA considers this to be an indication that the community ‘resides’ there for the purposes of USO service delivery (this is discussed further in a later section).

#### 4. Population

Recognising that the TAPRIC database is not inclusive of all remote Indigenous communities in Australia, the ACA proposes that, for the purpose of telecommunications service delivery, remote Indigenous communities should be considered to be all communities within the TAPRIC database (except those located in a major city according to the ABS Remoteness Index). The ACA considers that a process of including and excluding remote Indigenous communities from the TAPRIC database should be developed.

The ACA considers that the following four quadrants will assist in identifying the different service solutions for the differing criteria outlined above.

Quadrant	Characteristics of remote Indigenous community
1	With telecommunications infrastructure and capacity, with 1 or more permanent dwellings.
2	Without telecommunications infrastructure or capacity, with 1 or more permanent dwellings.
3	With telecommunications infrastructure and capacity, with no permanent dwellings.
4	Without telecommunications infrastructure or capacity, with no permanent dwellings.

It is technically easier and more cost effective to provide basic telecommunications services to the remote Indigenous communities that fall into quadrant 1, than to those that fall into the remaining 3 quadrants. A coordinated schedule of telecommunications service delivery, conducted over a 3 year period, would allow varying timeframes and service solutions depending on which quadrant was being addressed.

More detail on the ACA's proposed model is at Attachment A.

#### Payphones

The ACA's Payphone Review found that payphones in remote Indigenous communities fulfil a more extensive role than payphones elsewhere in Australia, often being a 'lifeline' service. This finding was reconfirmed by the ACA's Needs Assessment, where all remote Indigenous communities visited by ACA staff were heavily reliant on the payphone(s) in their community—particularly due to the very low take-up rate of STS.

As discussed above, the ACA's Needs Assessment concurred with the Payphone Review's finding that Telstra has largely met its existing obligations to install payphones under its current implementation of the USO. However, there were some notable exceptions—one example being a community of 500 people without 24 hour payphone access. The ACA has raised these matters with Telstra as potential USO compliance issues.

Both the Payphone Review and the Needs Assessment found that many town camps and very small communities (with a population of fewer than 50 people) do not have payphones and are not eligible to receive a payphone under the existing population criteria as set out in Telstra's SMP. This is not to say that *all* communities with a population fewer than 50 people do not have a payphone; the ACA visited a number of small

communities that did have access to a community payphone and the TAPRIC database shows that almost 30 per cent of remote Indigenous communities with a population of fewer than 50 people have a payphone<sup>9</sup>. The ACA is concerned, however, that this has led to a general confusion about community entitlements under the USO (and SMP) and, while it may not be accurate, in some regions it has created a general sense that Telstra's payphone installation process is discretionary.

In some remote Indigenous communities that the ACA visited in the Tennant Creek and Pilbara regions, the communities have expanded since the payphone was installed and the original payphone site is no longer appropriate to service the entire community. The payphone is the only telecommunications service available in these communities, and it is relied upon for incoming calls as much as outgoing calls. As such, appropriate siting is very important (so that ring tone can be heard) and is a significant issue for several communities. Many of the communities that the ACA visited were unaware of Telstra's payphone resiting criteria or processes. ACA staff observed that there is a need for Telstra's siting consultation processes to be more transparent, and where delays occur, explanations need to be communicated to the community or representative.

Several remote Indigenous communities that the ACA visited had public payphones with a quiet ring tone, which made it difficult for community members to hear incoming calls. In communities around Jabiru, the ACA observed several payphones with loud ringers. This is a simple but effective way to help community members hear incoming calls. Consideration should be given to including it as a feature for payphones in other regions.

The Payphone Review made a number of recommendations to improve payphone access, suitability and quality of service in remote Indigenous communities. The series of visitations made by the ACA to remote Indigenous communities across Australia has reinforced the relevance and importance of the recommendations made in the Payphone Review.

#### **FINDING 2**

Many remote Indigenous communities meet the requirements of the current USP's SMP and have reasonable access to at least one payphone. However, there were some notable exceptions including larger communities (population of more than 50 people) without 24 hour payphone access. Some smaller communities which did not meet the population requirements of the USP's SMP were without reasonable access to any shared community telecommunications service. These findings are consistent with those of the ACA's Payphone Policy Review, released in 2004.

### **Standard Telephone Service**

Remote Indigenous communities have unique and diverse cultural needs that may not be addressed by telephone services or technologies provided to the wider community. Improving access to, and take-up of, basic telephone services remains the highest priority telecommunications need for many remote Indigenous communities. This need was also noted in the TAPRIC report:

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<sup>9</sup> If a remote Indigenous community does not meet the population criteria for a USO payphone as set out in the current SMP, they may apply to lease a 'customer operated payphone' (COP) and cover ongoing operational costs.

Current service take-up is extremely low, and there is an urgent need to support improved access to a range of different services, with basic phone access the main priority. (p. 8)

A significant barrier to the take-up of the STS is the post-paid billing system. Telecommunications credit management issues are significant in remote Indigenous communities due to ‘humbugging’<sup>10</sup>, which can result in a large phone bill that the account holder cannot pay. The ACA met with an Elder of one community who said he would like an STS but was aware that whenever his family came to visit, he would be left with an expensive phone bill he could not pay. Instead of applying for a private telephone service, he had decided to ‘make do’ with the community payphone where all community members and visitors could pay for their own calls. This was a common story across all regions the ACA visited.

In many cases, the up-front costs of connecting a service are also prohibitive. As noted in the TAPRIC report:

On average Indigenous people have lower income levels than non-Indigenous people...The income disparity is amplified for people in remote Indigenous communities. Very low levels of disposable income severely limit the potential for take up of telecommunications services in these communities. (p. 19)

The connection fee for an STS is \$209 (\$135.30 for an eligible pensioner). Due to their location, the majority of remote Indigenous communities would need to pay the costs of trenching and a network extension fee in addition to the connection fee—the total cost is often too high to be affordable. These issues of affordability are a significant barrier to the take-up of home telephones in remote Indigenous communities.

#### FINDING 3

There are significant levels of unmet demand for STS in remote Indigenous communities for various reasons, which include (but are not limited to):

- difficulty managing post-paid bills; and
- prohibitive costs of trenching and connection fees.

In all regions that were visited by the ACA, communities expressed a strong interest in affordable, pre-paid home telephone products. The appropriateness and demand for these products are evidenced by the various models of pre-paid products that have been rolled-out in some communities.

#### *InContact*<sup>TM</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Within Aboriginal groups, kinship and other social relations are typically legitimated, tested and reinforced through, and assessed against, flows of services and goods (particularly cash and consumer items), between the relevant individuals and groups. A primary mechanism through which these flows are realised within Aboriginal groups, and between them and the wider society, is what anthropologists have termed ‘demand sharing’. In the contemporary situation, this involves requests or claims for cash, consumer goods, food, use of vehicles or other consumer goods, labour and other services, and so on. In many areas of Australia, Aboriginal people call this ‘humbugging’. ‘Humbugging’ does not represent the incapacity of Aboriginal people to manage their own money, nor does it reflect an uninhibited desire for material goods or cash as such. Rather, it illustrates particular widespread and distinctively Aboriginal values. For example, it demonstrates a process through which access to valued resources is established through cultivating direct personal relationships, rather than through impersonal market-based transactions. (Martin, D., Paper presented at ‘Indigenous consumer issues in remote and regional Australia: A National Workshop’, 22-23 April 2002, Rydges Plaza Resort, p.31)

InContact™ is a Telstra pre-paid telecommunications service that has been offered to a number of communities in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands by PY Media and Telstra. The InContact™ service does not have a monthly line rental charge and requires that all outgoing calls are made with a pre-paid card<sup>11</sup>. InContact™ allows incoming calls, calls to emergency services and to selected 1800 numbers. This service has been extremely popular in the areas it has been offered as it eliminates the problem of managing post-paid bills and the expense of line rental.

#### *Community Phones*

In some communities, to alleviate the pressure on the few existing payphones, ‘community phones’ have been established. These are standard telephones—usually housed in, and paid for by, the community office or community store—that are barred for all outgoing calls except those made using pre-paid cards. These services are heavily used by community members.

#### *‘Local call only’ home telephones*

In the Jabiru region, some Indigenous community members had a modified version of the STS in their home. In these cases, the local telecommunications advisor had arranged for the installation of STSs, but, importantly, had also organised for long distance and fixed to mobile calls to be barred on these services. ACA staff were informed that this is a suitable solution in this area as ‘humbugging’ is not a common occurrence. Although these services are still not particularly common, it is another example of an innovative approach to STS provision that makes the post-paid billing environment manageable.

These examples highlight that where pre-paid services (and services which help manage a post-paid bill) have been offered, both in a community and home environment, they have proved immensely successful.

#### **FINDING 4**

There is a need for pre-paid, equitably priced, fixed line telecommunications services to ameliorate credit management issues and increase the take-up of telephones (for the community and in individual homes) in remote Indigenous communities.

The existing (and limited) number of pre-paid telecommunications service options are not recognised by the USP’s SMP and are therefore not offered as USO services, nor are they captured by the existing CSG monitoring regime.

DCITA’s *Review of the Operation of the Universal Service Obligation and Customer Service Guarantee* found that:

There is a general need in remote Indigenous communities for a telephone service that is community based, and affordable, preferably with pre-paid billing arrangements of some sort. It is apparent that such a service could be provided through either a modified payphone facility or a modified USO offering.” (p 171)

The ACA supports this recommendation noting that the ability to pre-pay calls (with equitable calling rates) is integral to the successful and sustainable increased take-up of basic telephone services in remote Indigenous communities. The ACA considers that the

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<sup>11</sup> Telstra’s PhoneAway® pre-paid calling card is the preferred option in most communities. Calling rates for local and STD telephone calls using a PhoneAway® card are higher than equivalent calls from most home telephones.

offering of a pre-paid product to remote Indigenous communities is an important requirement that should be recognised under the USO.

#### **FINDING 5**

The existing limited pre-paid telecommunications service options are not recognised in the USP's current SMP and are not captured by the USO or existing compliance monitoring regimes.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 2**

That the USP be required to offer culturally appropriate, equitably priced, pre-paid telecommunications products to remote Indigenous communities under the USO.

The availability and take-up of the pre-paid product in remote Indigenous communities should be monitored by the ACA in its role in assessing compliance with the USO. This will be an important safeguard to ensure that industry is complying with the revised regulatory obligations. The information collected will also be useful in providing information to inform policy advice and future government reviews about telecommunications service adequacy in remote Indigenous communities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 3**

That the ACA monitor and report on the availability and take-up of pre-paid telecommunications products in remote Indigenous communities.

## **Interim Services and Priority Assistance**

### *Interim Services*

As remote Indigenous communities are located in such remote parts of Australia and are often some distance from telecommunications infrastructure, they may experience lengthy delays in the installation or repair of an STS. As described in its SMP, Telstra is required to offer its customers access to an interim or alternative service when there is an extended delay in connecting or repairing their STS. However, the STS packages that are offered as an interim service do not include any pre-paid option. For the reasons described above, this is not a feasible option for most Indigenous communities.

### *Priority Assistance*

People with diagnosed life-threatening medical conditions who depend on a reliable, home telephone service to be able to call for assistance when needed, can apply to Telstra to receive 'Priority Assistance'. Priority Assistance customers are entitled to faster connection and fault repair of their telephone service and a greater level of reliability. In remote Australia where there can be limited available telecommunications infrastructure, there is a greater likelihood that Telstra will offer an interim service in fulfilment of its Priority Assistance obligations. Often customers are disinclined to apply for Priority Assistance knowing that they may be offered an interim service with a post-paid bill.

It is concerning that, although Indigenous people are more likely to be hospitalised or suffer from a chronic illness than other Australians<sup>12</sup>, they remain unable to partake in the Priority Assistance program because of an inflexible billing arrangement.

**FINDING 6**

The STS packages that are offered as an interim service do not include any pre-paid option. This acts as a disincentive for consumers who have difficulty managing a post-paid bill to register for Priority Assistance where an interim service is provided in fulfilment of Priority Assistance obligations.

**RECOMMENDATION 4**

That the pre-paid telecommunications products be available across a range of services and access technologies, including interim services, under the USO.

## **Ongoing product development**

The ACA, DCITA and Telstra are currently in the process of developing an appropriate, equitably priced, pre-paid telecommunications product that is aimed at increasing home telephone take-up in remote Indigenous communities. It is expected that a trial of the new product will be launched in early 2005.

While this is one product aimed at meeting one identified element of the telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities, given the number of reviews that have identified a significant unmet demand for telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities, the ACA strongly recommends that work on developing and refining appropriate telecommunications access solutions continue in parallel with the proposed pre-paid product trial.

**RECOMMENDATION 5**

That the ACA and DCITA continue to work with the USP to identify and develop culturally appropriate telecommunications access and payment solutions for remote Indigenous communities.

## **2. Enhanced telecommunications services**

Payphones and the STS are basic telecommunications services that are fundamental requirements under the USO. While these services are essential for communication, it is 'enhanced telecommunications services' such as Internet and higher bandwidth services (such as videoconferencing) that provide the more significant opportunity for community economic and social development. Apart from the Digital Data Service Obligation (DDSO) which requires that all people in Australia have access, on request, to a data service with a 64 kilobit per second (kbit/s) digital data capability, there are no legislative requirements underpinning the delivery of these services.

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<sup>12</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs; *Health is Life: Report on the Inquiry into Indigenous Health*; Commonwealth of Australia, May 2000, p 185.



## Public Online Access Centres

A number of different state and federal government programs have been funding the implementation of public online access centres in many remote Indigenous communities. Online access centres offer a range of online services and, as noted by the RTI and the TAPRIC report, they offer great potential benefits for communities, providing the opportunity for improvements in community economic development and social well-being.

The key challenge in establishing these centres is ensuring that such they are sustainable in the long-term. Although the general level of interest in Internet and such technology based services is high, training and retaining community people to be the local facility manager has proved problematic in some communities. For example, the ACA visited several communities in Far North Queensland where online access centres, videoconferencing facilities and public Internet points were available but not being fully utilised due to:

- inadequate training of community members; and
- limited access—facilities only open at limited times.

Other online access centres in a number of communities that the ACA visited were not being fully utilised due to:

- slow data rates, rendering the Internet experience frustrating;
- lack of Indigenous content on the Internet; and
- lack of ongoing affordability of services.

This issue of sustainability of these services has been raised by a number of stakeholders in recent reviews.

### FINDING 7

There are a number of projects/programs which are ensuring that enhanced telecommunications services are available in larger remote Indigenous communities. Whilst this is an important step, those enhanced services provided are often not fully utilised due to:

- inadequate training;
- limited access to facilities;
- slow data rates;
- lack of Indigenous content on the Internet; and
- lack of ongoing affordability of services.

Notwithstanding issues of sustainability, in some communities, online access centres have been extremely popular, and are heavily used by community members. The ACA fully supports the continued roll-out of online access centres provided they are accompanied by appropriate training programs and ongoing financial and staffing support.

It is imperative, however, that industry and government maintain an emphasis on filling the gap in basic telecommunications service availability and to regard enhanced telecommunications services as a beneficial addition to these basic services, rather than as a substitute for them.

The Central Land Council, in its submission to the ACA's Payphone Review, recommended that a 'greatest needs' approach be taken to the delivery of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities.

The adoption of a greatest needs approach means that while the first step in the provision of telecommunications infrastructure must be the provision of payphones, other steps, in terms of access to digital technology, must follow. (p. 5)

The ACA endorses this 'greatest needs' strategy and has recommended that the ACA, DCITA and the USP implement a program approach to achieve this (recommendation 1).

## **Mobile Telephones**

The ACA visited a number of remote Indigenous communities where many residents owned mobile telephones. In the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia, for example, although very few of the remote Indigenous communities visited had any mobile network coverage, many community members owned mobile telephones for use when visiting their nearest major centre.

The high-take up of mobile telephones in these regions is attributed to the ability to pre-pay calls—further evidence of the appropriateness of the pre-paid model.

## **3. Telecommunications infrastructure**

### **Infrastructure planning**

On 1 June 2001, the government finalised an agreement with Telstra for the provision of untimed calls at the local call rate and upgraded services in the extended zones of Australia. The agreement provided \$150 million for the telecommunications infrastructure upgrade necessary to provide these services and was being funded from the proceeds of the second sale of shares in Telstra.

The extended zones are located in the most sparsely populated areas of Australia and cover about 80 per cent of Australia's landmass. The majority of remote Indigenous communities are located in the extended zones and, therefore, should benefit from the recent infrastructure upgrade.

In the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, (both in extended zones) the popularity of the InContact™ service led to a significant increase of telephone installation requests to Telstra (through PY Media). Despite the recent infrastructure upgrade, a number of remote Indigenous communities in these regions now have 'no spare capacity' due to this significant increase in requests for services. Consequently, there is no accommodation for new telecommunications services into the future in these communities. The ACA understands that Telstra has commenced a technology upgrade in several communities in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands to overcome this problem.

However, it appears from these examples that Telstra's infrastructure planning processes for remote Indigenous communities may be based on an assumption of continuing low levels of telecommunications service take-up. This results in lack of capacity issues arising where increases in demand occur.

A learning from the InContact™ experience is that appropriate, pre-paid telecommunications phone product offerings in remote Indigenous communities are likely to significantly increase the number of telephone installation and connection requests in

remote Indigenous communities across Australia. For these product offerings to be successful, Telstra's capacity planning processes will need to take this increased demand into account.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5**

That capacity planning processes should take into account increases in telecommunications service demand in remote Indigenous communities that are likely to result from the availability of more culturally appropriate pre-paid telecommunications products.

### ***Part C – Role of communities***

Visiting various regions of Australia gave the ACA an overview of the many environmental, social and political factors that affect the take-up and availability of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities.

For example, communities near Kakadu in the Northern Territory tended to be better serviced in terms of telecommunications due to the high level of tourism in the area. Obviously, proximity to telecommunications infrastructure also affects the timeframes within which communities can be connected to telecommunications services—communities which are located in very remote and isolated locations are often far from existing telecommunications networks.

Community governance structures and the emphasis that a community's local council places on lobbying for telecommunications services can also influence telecommunications service delivery. As discussed above, a community's population is a significant determinant of the telecommunications services it is eligible to receive under the current implementation of the USO.

#### **FINDING 9**

The take-up and availability of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities is dependent on a number of factors including:

- tourism;
- community size;
- governance structure of community and region; and
- proximity to telecommunications infrastructure.

### **Community Communications Coordinators**

The ACA's community visits highlighted that, where a community representative has undertaken the responsibility of managing telecommunications issues in the region, and become a central contact point for all stakeholders, there has been significantly increased take-up and ongoing use of telecommunications services in that region.

This model has been extremely effective in the Jabiru/West Arnhem region, where the representative:

- has local knowledge of communities and their telecommunications needs;
- has a thorough understanding of the telecommunications industry and application/installation processes;

- is cognisant of consumer safeguards;
- can explain all aspects of telecommunications service delivery to community members (from assisting in completing application forms to explaining technology);
- acts as a facilitator between Telstra and communities and provides Telstra with useful local and geographical knowledge; and
- liaises effectively with industry and government and keeps abreast of industry and policy developments.

Another role of the representative can be to work with Telstra to assist in coordinating technician deployment for telecommunications service repair/installation to help prevent unnecessary repeat visits. This was an advantage voiced to the ACA by various remote Indigenous communities.

The efficacy of this model is demonstrated by the higher take-up rate of home telephones in the Jabiru/West Arnhem region, relative to other regions visited. In all other regions, the ACA found that there was an obvious need for similar coordinators.

This need has also been identified by previous reviews and, more recently, by DCITA in advertising several 'Regional Agent' positions to liaise with remote Indigenous communities, service providers and DCITA throughout the implementation of its Community Phones Program (CPP). The ACA sees value in these positions being extended beyond the CPP.

#### **FINDING 10**

Where a community representative has undertaken the responsibility for managing telecommunications issues in the community/region, and become a central contact point for all stakeholders, there has been significantly increased take-up and ongoing use of telecommunications in that community/region.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 7**

That a number of 'Community Communications Coordinator' positions be established to manage all telecommunications issues in remote Indigenous communities in a particular region, and have responsibility for:

- establishing community telecommunications needs;
- liaising with industry, government and communities; and
- working with the USP to coordinate technician deployment for telecommunication service fault repair/trenching/installation to prevent unnecessary repeat visits.

### **Payphone coin collection and maintenance**

In most remote Indigenous communities, community representatives collect coins from payphones, clean payphones and conduct routine maintenance on behalf of Telstra. This arrangement takes place under the auspices of a contract which provides details of the obligations. The contract details two payment options for conducting this work:

1. that the community will receive 10 percent of the payphone takings; or
2. that a cash amount will be negotiated between the parties.

Most remote Indigenous communities that the ACA spoke with were relatively comfortable with this arrangement. However, the ACA also visited a number of remote Indigenous communities where community representatives were unsure about their responsibilities and the details of the contract, and felt that the arrangement was an imposition on their resources. In these cases, the representatives said that they had not entered into a formal arrangement with Telstra, instead receiving the payphone coin collection and maintenance responsibilities by default.

#### **FINDING 11**

There are benefits for remote Indigenous communities and Telstra when an agreement regarding coin collection and maintenance of payphones is reached. However, such an agreement must be a transparent, contractual agreement with clear terms, conditions and expectations that is signed and understood by all parties.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 8**

That any agreement regarding payphone coin collection and maintenance between the USP and a community must be a transparent, contractual agreement with clear terms, conditions and expectations, that is signed and understood by all parties.

### **Telecommunications fault reporting**

The ACA monitors telecommunications quality of service under two main regimes: the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) and the Network Reliability Framework (NRF). The CSG is targeted at repairing faults within specified timeframes and the NRF aims to improve the reliability of Telstra telephone services. Under the NRF, if an individual service is suffering repeated faults (within a set timeframe), Telstra, as the USP, is required to report to the ACA and take remedial action. Remedial work is action over and above Telstra's normal fault repair processes, and is action that should ensure that a service is reliable on a long term basis.

Telstra is also required to report to the ACA each month on any exchange service areas where a specified number of services each had at least one fault per month in two consecutive months.

In some remote Indigenous communities the ACA visited, residents were experiencing poor quality of service on their telephones—frequent drop outs and occasional extended periods of no service—despite their infrastructure being recently upgraded under the extended zones agreement. Investigation into these issues revealed that none of these communities had been identified by the ACA's monitoring regimes as problem areas.

The likely reason for this is that the telecommunications service faults do not get reported—both the NRF and the CSG are informed by customer reported faults. There appeared to be a general acceptance of 'bad service' in the area and residents are generally too busy, or it no longer occurs to them, to report telecommunications service faults. Similarly, one person may report a major fault on behalf of the entire community. This means that the significance and extent of the problem is not captured by the ACA's monitoring regime.

#### **FINDING 12**

In remote Indigenous communities it is an uncommon practice to report telecommunication service faults. Consequently, many faults are not captured by existing compliance monitoring regimes.

In remote Indigenous communities where the community payphone does not self-report, community members are often unable to call Telstra to report a fault on the community payphone because the faulty payphone is their only means of communication. In these instances it is not uncommon for payphones to be out of service for lengthy periods. This is another problem that could be addressed by the appointment of a Community Communications Coordinator (as per recommendation 7) as this position could report telecommunications faults on behalf of communities.

#### **Awareness of consumer rights and safeguards**

There is a lack of appropriate and relevant information about telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities. This is a well-documented problem that has resulted in widespread confusion about telecommunications service availability and provision. The ACA also found that there is also little to no awareness of legislated consumer rights or safeguards under the USO or the CSG.

Fundamental to this issue, however, is that the current telecommunications service options available (with a post-paid bill) are not appropriate for remote Indigenous communities, so there is little advantage in promoting awareness of these existing options.

The roll-out of the proposed pre-paid telecommunications products will be a positive step in increasing telecommunications take-up and should be accompanied by an information campaign advising remote Indigenous communities of these new, more culturally appropriate telecommunications service options.

Any future information and awareness campaigns initiated by industry or government should recognise the importance of local radio and television networks in remote Indigenous communities. Radio and television are significantly more popular than print media in remote Indigenous communities and campaigns that have relied solely on print media have had limited success—particularly because English is often a second or third language in these communities. The ACA has had contact with a number of media associations that work with remote Indigenous communities and recommends utilising these local organisations and their knowledge of appropriate communication and production strategies in the development of any information campaign targeted to remote Indigenous communities.

#### **FINDING 13**

There is a need for increased awareness about telecommunications services, rights and safeguards in remote Indigenous communities. Any future information and awareness campaigns should recognise the importance of local radio and television networks in disseminating information to remote Indigenous communities.

#### RECOMMENDATION 9

That the ACA work with an appropriate and experienced Indigenous organisation (with local/regional knowledge) to develop targeted consumer information on telecommunications rights and safeguards for remote Indigenous communities, using a variety of media.

### **Telstra's Indigenous Call Centre**

The ACA's visits confirmed the RTI's finding that many members of remote Indigenous communities face significant difficulties when dealing with Telstra's call centres and interactive voice systems, particularly if English is not their first language.

In response to RTI recommendation 5.2, Telstra established a specialised Indigenous Call Centre that could be contacted using a freecall 1800 number. At the launch of this call centre, Telstra's media release stated that:

The establishment of this specialist team of Indigenous liaison officers, will exclusively handle call traffic from Aboriginal and Islander customers, allowing callers to speak to someone with a familiar cultural background when making enquiries about their telephone service. The Indigenous liaison officers have been specially trained to be aware of needs and cultural sensitivities of Aboriginal and Islander people and communities.

The ACA recognises the establishment of this Indigenous Call Centre as an important initiative, and a needed service. Unfortunately, the ACA's visits to remote Indigenous communities revealed that awareness of this service is extremely low and the call centre is under utilised as a consequence.

The ACA recommends that Telstra take the necessary steps to increase awareness of its Indigenous Call Centre in order to maximise its value to remote Indigenous communities.

#### FINDING 14

While the establishment of Telstra's Indigenous Call Centre is an important initiative, there are low levels of awareness of the Call Centre among remote Indigenous communities.

#### RECOMMENDATION 10

That Telstra should take steps to increase awareness of its Indigenous Call Centre among remote Indigenous communities.

### **Culturally appropriate telecommunications policies**

The ACA's visits revealed that the concepts of 'permanence of residence' may differ in remote Indigenous communities as compared to the wider community where Indigenous community members move locations and residence for a range of reasons (and timeframes) such as:

- cultural or social (such as 'sorry business');
- seasonality – wet and dry season;
- return to homeland; and
- lack of telecommunications and other infrastructure.

Remote Indigenous communities have strong connections to country and these population shifts tend to be limited to within a particular region.

In some cases these periods of mobility have negatively affected telecommunications service delivery. For example, one remote Indigenous community the ACA visited had vacated for a period of time following the death of a community Elder (as is culturally required). Despite their intention to return, Telstra removed the community payphone. This is an example of the need for clearer communication and consultation between industry and the communities (and is another example of where a Community Communications Coordinator would have been a useful intermediary).

Telstra's Policy Statement describes the criteria it will use in making an assessment of whether it will supply a requested STS and states that it will consider the following (among others):

- Has the standard telephone service been requested at a place of residence that is self-contained? In other words, does it contain the facilities to support independent living, for example, a separate kitchen and bathroom as opposed to shared facilities?
- Has the standard telephone service been requested for a permanent site or a temporary site, for example, a mining exploration site in a remote location where the service is only required for three months? Where a customer's site is temporary, Telstra will consider the supply of an interim service for the duration of the customer's stay to ensure the universal service obligation is fulfilled in an efficient and economic manner.<sup>13</sup>

The ACA is concerned that Telstra's interpretation of the concepts of 'reside' and 'permanency' described in its Policy Statement do not make any allowance for the particular cultural and social arrangements in remote Indigenous communities.

In future revisions of the USO Policy Statement, the ACA sees value in incorporating an awareness of, and making allowance for, the cultural festivals and rituals of Indigenous Australians.

#### **FINDING 15**

Many remote Indigenous communities continue to hold traditional cultural festivals and rituals—some of which involve moving around traditional country for some months at a time. In some cases, this has negatively affected the delivery of telecommunications services to these communities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 11**

That, in developing future telecommunications service delivery policies for remote Indigenous communities (by the USP and/or the government), there is a need for awareness of—and allowance for—the cultural festivals and rituals of Indigenous Australians.

## **Maintaining community contacts**

Since the commencement of the ACA's Needs Assessment in remote Indigenous communities, the ACA has developed strong relationships with a variety of Indigenous organisations, community councils, representative agencies and government bodies—all with an interest in the provision and take-up of telecommunications services. These

<sup>13</sup> Telstra's Policy Statement, 2001, pp5-6.



contacts have provided the ACA with useful information on telecommunications issues in their communities/regions.

Into the future, these contacts will be valuable in providing ‘on the ground’ advice to the ACA on the efficacy of trials and telecommunications products, assisting the ACA to better work with industry in refining and developing these products. The ACA recognises the value of these contacts and will endeavour to develop and strengthen these relationships.

#### **FINDING 16**

The ACA has developed good working relationships with various Indigenous organisations, councils, representative agencies, and government bodies to:

- ensure telecommunications compliance issues are raised with the ACA and satisfactorily resolved;
- assist the ACA to monitor changes in telecommunications service availability and quality over time; and
- advise the ACA on the efficacy of culturally appropriate telecommunications services being trialled.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 12**

That the ACA should continue to work with Indigenous organisations, councils, representative agencies and government bodies to ensure telecommunications compliance issues are identified and to receive advice on telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities.

## ***Part D – Future monitoring and reporting of telecommunications services***

Two of the RTI recommendations (5.3 and 7.2) concerned the collection of telecommunications service information to allow an assessment of the relative performance levels and the availability of telecommunications services across Australia. The following section is a summary of the data collection and monitoring proposed under new regional telecommunications service monitoring arrangements that provide a picture of telecommunications service availability and performance in remote Indigenous communities.

### **Monitoring the availability of telecommunications services**

The ACA considers that whether the telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities are being met is best measured by monitoring the take-up of telecommunications services. Therefore, using the new data collection and monitoring framework (described above), the ACA will monitor data on the availability of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities to assess whether incremental improvements in the take-up of telecommunications services occur over time.

#### *Voice service availability*

- the number of fixed voice services in operation in remote Indigenous communities. The ACA proposes that all fixed voice services be captured under this measure, rather than just STSs. This information should be recorded in the TAPRIC database and updated annually by Telstra.

#### *Mobile service availability*

- the number of mobile services in operation in remote Indigenous communities.

#### *Payphone availability*

- the total number of payphones in remote Indigenous communities (geographic information system (GIS) file detailing payphones sites also to be provided).

### **Monitoring the performance of telecommunications services**

The ACA will continue to monitor industry compliance against the USO and the CSG and data collection and monitoring at this level will continue to apply to all telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities. As part of the ACA's ongoing monitoring of compliance with the provision of STSs under the USO and the CSG, the ACA has proposed the use of case studies as a means of monitoring and reporting on the quality of service STSs in remote Indigenous communities. The case study approach is intended to provide a focus on the quality of service of STS within remote Indigenous communities without necessitating the 'tagging' of services as Indigenous or non-Indigenous. The case studies will comprise three main stages, where the ACA will:

1. identify an Exchange Service Area (ESA) where there is a high density of remote Indigenous communities;
2. examine the installation and fault repair timeframes for the STSs within the identified ESA; and
3. compare these results with the required CSG performance for that CSG category, state and nationally.

In addition, data which is currently received under the NRF will also be analysed in relation to the identified ESA.

ESAs will be identified by considering a number of factors including: the number of remote Indigenous communities located within the ESA; the population of those communities; whether the ESA has been previously identified as having poor performance; and the number of STSs within the ESA. Telstra will be advised of the proposed ESA that the ACA is monitoring and will be provided with the opportunity to comment on the suitability of the proposed ESA and any reasons for poor performance.

The ACA has proposed that case studies be conducted annually and that Telstra be approached for data from the chosen ESAs during the request for information to support the annual telecommunications performance report.

#### *Payphone quality of service*

The ACA has proposed that payphone quality of service continue to be measured against the existing performance measures as detailed in the SMP. However, these figures should be disaggregated to provide a figure for performance against each measure in remote Indigenous communities at a national level.

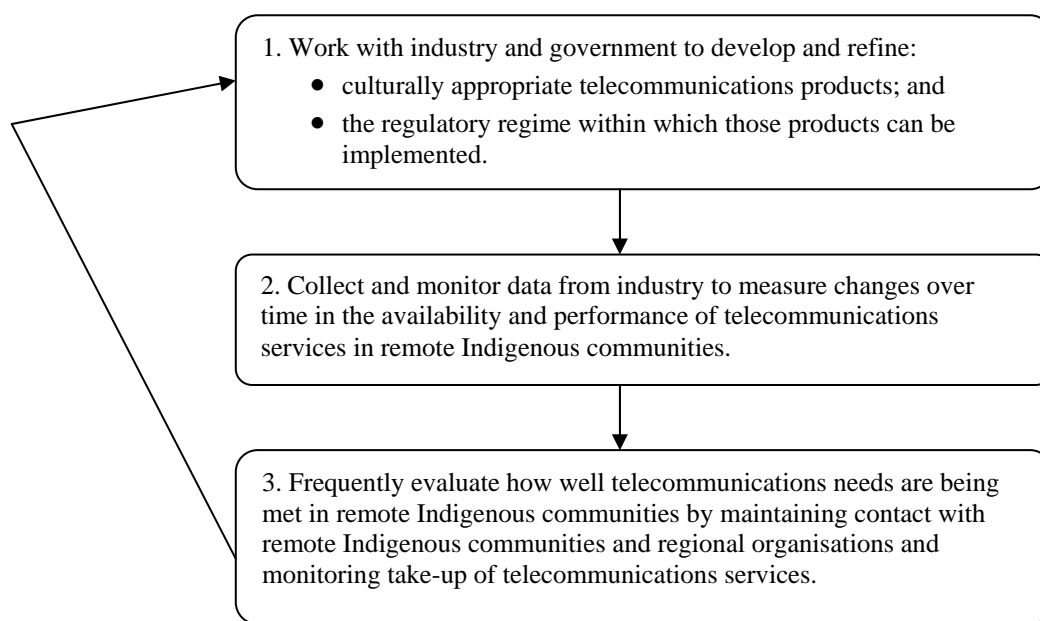
In addition to the ACA's data collection from industry, the ACA will continue to utilise the local knowledge of community and regional contacts to enable frequent evaluation of progress in increasing the take-up of telecommunications service and the efficacy of new culturally appropriate telecommunications products.

In this way, the ACA's quantitative assessment of service delivery (that is, how many services are in the community) will underpin a continuing qualitative assessment of

telecommunications needs in remote Indigenous communities (that is, whether the service is being used).

The process for the ACA's ongoing identification and monitoring of telecommunications services and needs is outlined in Figure 4.

*Figure 4: The ACA's process for the ongoing data collection and monitoring of telecommunications needs and services in remote Indigenous communities.*



## **Conclusion**

Direct consultation with members of remote Indigenous communities, as well as visiting such remote parts of Australia, provided the ACA with invaluable insights to the particular difficulties that remote Indigenous communities face in accessing adequate telecommunications services.

As the government authority responsible for monitoring a number of telecommunications consumer safeguards, the ACA considers that the current implementation of the USO is not meeting the specific telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities. In light of recent reviews and the ACA's visitation program, the ACA strongly recommends that a dedicated, structured and monitored program approach to the delivery of telecommunications services to remote Indigenous communities be implemented.

## Attachment A

### ***Proposed program approach to improving access to telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities***

This document provides a specific framework for the improvement of telecommunications service delivery to remote Indigenous communities through the development, trial and implementation of appropriate telecommunications service delivery models in remote Indigenous communities.

All remote Indigenous communities have been categorised within four quadrants (see Figure 4) depending on key characteristics:

1. availability of telecommunications infrastructure;
2. availability of telecommunications capacity; and
3. permanent dwellings.

*Figure 4: Quadrant model for telecommunications service delivery program in remote Indigenous communities.*

Quadrant	Description
1	With telecommunications infrastructure and capacity, with 1 or more permanent dwellings.
2	Without telecommunications infrastructure or capacity, with 1 or more permanent dwellings.
3	With telecommunications infrastructure and capacity, with no permanent dwellings.
4	Without telecommunications infrastructure or capacity, with no permanent dwellings.

#### **Phased approach to telecommunications service delivery**

Using these quadrants as a basis, the ACA proposes a phased program approach to telecommunications service delivery that will first increase the accessibility of telecommunications services (that is, available telecommunications infrastructure and capacity) and then increase the availability of telecommunications services (that is increased take-up of telephone services) in remote Indigenous communities. A population criteria has also been incorporated into the ACA's phased program approach (described below) to focus telecommunications service delivery to larger communities in the first instance and progressively address the telecommunications needs of smaller communities over time.

#### **Service solutions**

Current programs run by the government are predominantly focused on improving availability and take-up of telecommunications services in remote Indigenous communities in quadrant 1. However, many remote Indigenous communities with the greatest telecommunications needs (that is, without any telecommunications services) fall into the remaining quadrants. The ACA's proposed telecommunications service delivery

program extends the focus to remote Indigenous communities within all quadrants<sup>14</sup> (see Figure 5).

*Figure 5: Service delivery solutions for remote Indigenous communities in different quadrants.*

	<b>Permanent dwellings</b>	<b>No permanent dwellings<sup>15</sup></b>
<b>With infrastructure</b>	<u>Quadrant 1<sup>16</sup></u> Community Phones Program CAT phones <sup>17</sup> USO payphones (population 50+) <sup>18</sup> Pre-paid home phone	<u>Quadrant 3</u> Solution to be developed
<b>Without infrastructure</b>	<u>Quadrant 2</u> Community Phones Program CAT phones USO payphones (population 50+) Pre-paid home phone	<u>Quadrant 4</u> Solution to be developed

### **Proposed phases of telecommunications service delivery**

The ACA's proposed phased approach to telecommunications service delivery allows for the trialling of tailored service solutions to address the telecommunications needs of remote Indigenous communities in different quadrants, and the evaluation of these trials in a regulatory context. In addition, this approach provides regulatory certainty about the approach to meeting USO obligations in remote Indigenous communities.

Figure 6 outlines the service delivery phases and the key achievements that would be expected outcomes from each phase.

<sup>14</sup> This approach does not negate the requirements under the USO to provide USO payphones upon request to communities with a population of 50 people or more, nor to provide an STS under the USO if requested.

<sup>15</sup> The ACA acknowledges that communities without at least one permanent dwelling are beyond the scope of the current implementation of the USO. However, the development of a strategy for providing reasonable access to telecommunications services to these communities forms part of the ACA's proposed approach.

<sup>16</sup> A remote Indigenous community within quadrant 1 is not necessarily adequately serviced. The characteristics of a community in this quadrant indicate that timeframes to provide existing/basic service delivery options are shorter.

<sup>17</sup> The 'Community Access Telephone' (CAT) is a robust, card-only payphone developed by Telstra and the Centre for Appropriate Technology in Alice Springs. The CAT is being trialled in 20 communities in Central Australia.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that the ACA's Payphone Policy Review recommended that USO payphones should be provided in all remote Indigenous communities with two or more family groups.

Figure 6: Framework for proposed phased approach to telecommunications service delivery in remote Indigenous communities.

PHASE 1
<p><b><u>Key Focus:</u></b> Increase the availability of telephone services in areas with available infrastructure and capacity (to communities with a population of 10 people or more).</p> <p><b><u>Key Achievements:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of telephone services<sup>19</sup> in communities in quadrant 1 should have increased by x%.<sup>20</sup></li> <li>• Establishing need for regulatory change.</li> </ul>
PHASE 2
<p><b><u>Key Focus:</u></b> Increase the availability of telephone services in areas without available infrastructure or capacity (to communities with a population of 10 people or more).</p> <p><b><u>Key Achievements:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of communities without telecommunications infrastructure or capacity in quadrant 2 should have decreased by x%.</li> <li>• Number of telephone services in communities in quadrant 2 should have increased by x%.</li> <li>• Number of telephone services in communities in quadrant 1 should have increased by a further x%</li> </ul>
PHASE 3
<p><b><u>Key Focus:</u></b> Increase the availability of telecommunications services to areas with available infrastructure and capacity (to communities with a population of fewer than 10 people).</p> <p><b><u>Key Achievements:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of telephone services in communities in quadrants 1 and 2, with a population of fewer than 10 people, should have increased by x%.</li> </ul>
PHASE 4
<p><b><u>Key Focus:</u></b> Increase the accessibility and availability of telecommunications services to remaining remote Indigenous communities.</p> <p><b><u>Key Achievements:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a strategy for providing reasonable access to communities in quadrants 3 and 4.</li> </ul>

<sup>19</sup> The ACA is currently finalising its data collection and monitoring regime in remote Indigenous communities which will enable this calculation.

<sup>20</sup> Figures to be agreed by ACA, DCITA and the USP.

### **Identifying remote Indigenous communities**

The ACA proposes using the TAPRIC database to populate the quadrants with remote Indigenous communities. Anecdotally, however, there remain an estimated 700-1000 remote Indigenous communities which are not currently identified within the TAPRIC database. It is expected that these communities will be added to the TAPRIC database as they are identified, subject to an agreed approval process. A similar process of removal should be established where it is not appropriate for communities to remain in the TAPRIC database (for example, communities that are located in a 'major city' as categorised by the ABS ARIA index).

### **Regulatory issues**

The ACA recognises that the standard offerings currently part of the USO do not meet the particular needs of remote Indigenous communities in terms of initial installation costs, ongoing costs and post-paid billing.

Following the completion of Phase 1, a comprehensive evaluation of the success of the CAT trials and the CPP should be undertaken to determine if these are appropriate services to be added as a complement to the existing USO services.

However, should these trials not proceed, this should not preclude amending the regulatory arrangements to mandate the provision of appropriate pre-paid services under the USO. It is not anticipated that any additional service offerings would dilute the requirement to provide an STS or payphone on request where an individual or community meets the criteria to receive such a service.