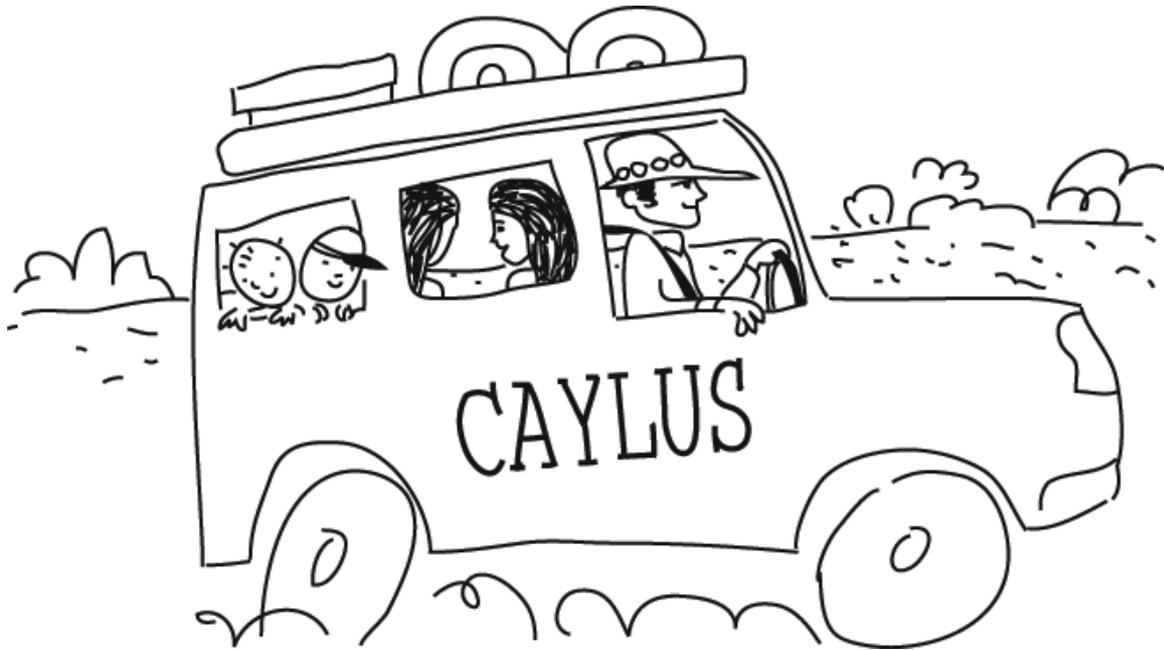# Submission to the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan

Central Australian Youth Link-Up Service – Tangentyere Council
Oct 2021

Background

First established in 2002 as a response to endemic levels of petrol sniffing at that time, CAYLUS works to reduce the impact of substance misuse in remote communities in the southern part of the NT. We do this primarily through supporting measures to reduce the harm caused by substance misuse, the supply and availability of substances and the demand for substances in the first place. Our demand reduction work centres largely around providing young people in the region with better options than substance misuse, through supporting measures that improve quality of life such as diversionary programs, employment initiatives etc. It is through doing this work that CAYLUS has worked to provide access to public computer rooms and internet in remote communities in our service region. This has given us some insight into the situation around internet access and connectivity in remote communities. More information about CAYLUS and our computer room work can be found on our website caylus.org.au.

- CAYLUS recommends that providers such as Telstra and NBN should provide subsidised, inexpensive, generous and robust data packages specifically for community wifi hotspots in remote Aboriginal communities. (Similar to NBN Public Interest Premises (PIP) plans). These should maximise peak data availability, as off-peak data is not useable in the majority of remote Indigenous communities.
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- Likewise we recommend that given the levels of poverty, poor access to community services and geographical isolation in remote communities that the costs of prepaid mobile data should be reduced in remote communities. Currently some of the poorest people in Australia are paying the most for their internet access.

Many people in remote Indigenous communities in the Central Australian region rely on community wifi hotspots to access on-line services and information. These are often content filtered, data limited, and are usually turned off at night, so off-peak data is not useable.

Reliable, affordable and accessible internet and phone services are an essential service for remote Aboriginal communities, with a notable paucity of community and government services available in many communities. Government and businesses are increasingly moving to on-line only access, with no alternatives. People access essential services such as banking, Centrelink, health information, court lists, etc. on the internet as this is most often their only option. This has only been exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic during which people in remote communities have had reduced access to urban centres.

Strategies used by providers such as NBN and Telstra to provide services guaranteed by the USG and USO in regional and remote Australia continue to be not fit for purpose, inadequate and unaffordable for many residents of remote Aboriginal communities. For example, two remote Aboriginal communities in the central Australian region have recently had their wifi hotspots downgraded from unlimited data plans via ADSL services to NBN Skymuster (satellite) services due to the withdrawal of support for ADSL by Telstra. This was a business, not a quality of service or service guarantee decision. The reduction of quality in connectivity and data availability has impacted remote community residents' ability to access fast, reliable broadband, as NBN satellite connections and plans have very limited data available and have contention and latency issues. Mobile broadband is available in both communities – but is not affordable for a population that largely lives in poverty. This reduced internet access makes it very difficult to access post-primary school education and

skills development resources and activities, further deepening the digital divide in opportunity and access for remote Aboriginal communities.

There are a range of assumptions made by policy makers and connectivity providers that are not relevant and do not apply in remote Aboriginal communities.

The majority of remote Aboriginal community households cannot afford or sustain their own internet connections. In remote communities, household residents are highly mobile and move around frequently between households and communities, with unreliable incomes (or no income), and unreliable access to basic services such as power (which operates on a pre-paid system). In the Alice Springs town camps, households are without power supply an average of one day per week. It is likely that this is worse out bush.

The rollout of mobile broadband availability into remote Aboriginal communities is meant to broaden connectivity options. However, the prevalence of use of prepaid mobile data packages means that people are paying top prices for their data – prepaid is the most expensive way to purchase data.

There is an assumption in policy and practice that users will be able to pay for connectivity and telephony services. This does not recognise the level of poverty in many remote Aboriginal communities. According to stats from the 2012/13 census, *(ABS and AIHW analysis of 2012013 AATSIHS)* 50% of people 16-64 y.o. working age) in remote Aboriginal communities receive no income, as they neither have jobs, nor reliable access to Centrelink entitlements. Many are doing unpaid and unrecognised work (such as caring for aged people, people with disabilities, or children – sometimes all three). There may be a higher percentage of people without income now, as the stats quoted above were prior to Robodebt, the escalation of mutual obligation requirements for welfare benefits and the high levels of 'breaching' CDP participants over recent years.

These are all stories from people out bush about mobile phones.

•When you buy your new phone, it has to be activated. You have to have an email address and ID to activate the phone. You don't have an email address, so you have to find someone who does who is willing to help you get the phone activated. The local community store can't help you.
•When someone steals your simcard and you can't ring your parole officer. They can't ring you either. Warrant gets issued. This makes you nervous about contacting Centrelink or any other government service because now you have a warrant.
•If your phone is lost or broken you can't contact family, so you have to look for a phone you can borrow.
•Mobile phone goes flat on hold for Centrelink. Get breached by Centrelink and lose your payments.
•Have to use the power point at the basketball court or wait until the computer room is open to recharge your phone because no-one at home has got any money for power cards. The Council won't let you use their phone or power points.
•All your daily data allowance at the wifi hotspot gets used up by the phone updating itself, so no data left to do internet banking or Centrelink reporting.
•All your daily data at the wifi hotspot gets used up with the 20 apps your kids have open on the phone refreshing.

Specific comments on Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan discussion paper:

- There is a lack of data from remote Indigenous communities about the factors that impinge on connectivity e.g. unreliable power supply, clunky, slow, data-heavy legacy software used by government.

- Assistance with digital tasks (especially for older people) is unreliable and time-consuming – usually performed by people whose primary jobs are other roles – such as nurses, teachers, youth workers etc.

- Mobile broadband services are sometimes not robust enough to service community wifi hotspots. Most mobile services are designed for use on one device at a time.

- Pg 8 of Issues paper "Network coverage" claims that there is expansion of ADSL and mobile broadband services. In some communities in this region, ADSL has been withdrawn (without any community consultation), and has been replaced by Skymuster. This results in an inferior service and consumer experience - less data, slower speeds, more contention and latency issues.

- Fixed voice and payphone services: covered by USO – but "reasonable request" is defined by providers, not by remote communities.