MEDIA RELEASE

15 March 2018

‘THERE MUST BE AN INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF WA COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTRES’

LINKWEST, PEAK BODY FOR CRCS IN WA, FEARS 40% FUNDING CUT DISASTER FOR REMOTE/RURAL WA

‘CRC Network should be strengthened and we want to work with Government’

LINKWEST – the peak body for Community Resource Centres in WA – is gravely concerned that the ‘options paper’ to be presented to the Minister of Regional Development, Hon. Alannah MacTiernan, will not be independent. With regards to the options paper, the organisation says there are currently no terms of reference, no criteria for how to determine community need and no consultation with community or the multiple service providers that rely on CRCS to help deliver services into rural communities.

Linkwest has received notification the WA Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development – which currently funds more than 100 remote and rural CRCS in WA about $100,000 each – will only conduct an internal departmental evaluation on how to apply the 40% funding cut across the program and it will present an options paper to the Minister by June 30, 2018.

“The options could include a mixture of defunding some CRCS and reduced funding of up to 40% for others and the news has been devastating for our members, hard-working CRC coordinators and staff, and the local remote communities they serve,’ said Linkwest CEO Jane Chilcott.

“The CRC network is an extremely efficient, cost effective service that provides access to government services at a very low cost. There is no fat to be trimmed. Staff are paid low wages and most buildings are modest.

“Linkwest is confident that, should an independent review be undertaken, it will reveal all the essential services the centres provide. In fact a previous review reported the program was both economically productive for the state and assisted with the roll out of essential services, and provided State Government with significant potential for cost savings in delivery of services into rural WA.

“The whole network has become destabilised due to current uncertainty, and many of the staff are fearful they will lose their jobs and are very concerned for the wellbeing of the most vulnerable members of their communities.

“CRCs provide vital services to many of the state’s most disadvantaged. Often CRCS are the only access points for wifi for many in remote areas including Aboriginal communities such as the Kalumburu Community Resource Centre in the far North West. For some in WA including the Wheatbelt, CRCS – once known as Telecentres – are also a lifeline that enables them to fill in online forms for Centrelink, Department of Transport and Australian Tax Office information, and other Federal and State requirements.

“Many CRCS also operate as community hubs. In Pingelly, for example, the CRC coordinates important emergency services such as bookkeeping for St John’s Ambulance. Some CRCS also coordinate food parcels for families who have fallen on hard times and are hungry and many work on the front line in suicide prevention, as warm and friendly faces of CRC staff often assist mentally ill or those in desperate need of a listening ear out in the bush.
“Often in small towns, there is no public transport, and CRCs organise bus trips for the elderly and other wonderful services such as children’s activities which city folk take for granted, but there are also CRC beacons of real economic and regional development stories within the network.”

The Tom Price CRC/Nintirri Centre, run by coordinator James Jarvis, coordinates the amazing global tourist attraction, The Karijini Experience in which opera singers perform in the Karijini gorges and Aboriginal people share knowledge and traditional culture; the Ravensthorpe CRC assists in hosting an amazing wildflower festival; and Boyup Brook CRC coordinates the popular art prize a feature of the Boyup Brook Country Music Festival which is attended by thousands each year.

CRCs are run by volunteer committees that organise initiatives/education/services that local communities want and need. They are grassroots organisations fulfilling vital community needs.

Ms Chilcott said: “We have been advocating for an independent review. However, worryingly, no terms of reference have been agreed and no other parties have been consulted for an input into this internal recommendation document. This is despite the fact that multiple other NFP agencies, State government agencies and some Federal Government agencies deliver services through the CRC network. Nor have the local communities been consulted and there has been no assessment of individual local community need that Linkwest is aware. Linkwest would welcome a review that will build on the excellent work and recommendations of the Curtin University review of the CRC Network Diversity in Place, Unity in Service 2016. This extensive review highlighted ongoing need for the network and the potential for it to be better utilised by the State Government and other services to deliver cost-effective services such as Health and Education into remote WA.”

Costings Explained

Ms Chilcott said: “Last week the Minister stated that CRCs had a massive increase in CRC expenditure over five years. In 2011, the CRC program costs increased from $6m to $12m. It is now $13m. There was a one-off doubling of the cost of the program which was to address the historic underfunding of the program. Many of the, mostly female, staff at the time were being paid below the minimum wage. CRCs are now funded approximately $100,000 per annum and can now pay their staff the minimum of the award wage.

“Linkwest and the CRC network want to work with government to help it meet its reform agenda. A move to return to underfunding a program that is evidence based and used widely by multiple government agencies and community partners will be a loss of opportunity for the ongoing development and invigoration of regional Western Australia. In short, slashing CRC funding will be a disaster both economically and socially for remote and rural WA.”

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BACKGROUND: Community Resource Centres

Located in 105 regional and remote communities throughout Western Australia, Community Resource Centres (CRCs) are friendly, locally owned and operated service and information centres. The centres are not-for-profit organisations that are independently managed and governed by their local community.

Established in 1991 under the Labor government of Dr Carmen Lawrence, and for many years the Hon Mal Bryce was the Chairperson of the WA Telecentre Advisory Council until he stepped down in 2006. The Hon. Mal Bryce was a champion for the network and on 25th October 2005 spoke of the vital role the WA Telecentres had in driving a learning community. [http://slwa.wa.gov.au/pdf/MalBryce25Oct05.pdf](http://slwa.wa.gov.au/pdf/MalBryce25Oct05.pdf)

CRCs undertake community, business and economic development activities, and are a central point for locals, visitors and businesses, providing access to government and community services and information. As more and more government services go online, this access point is an increasingly critical function of the CRCs, particularly for those without access to computers and / or reliable Internet services, or poor digital literacy.

Sample of services which are accessed online:

- School Bus services
- Department of Transport services
- Crimestoppers
- Accessing a Firearm
- Applying for driving tests
- Medicare
- MyGov
- MyAgedCare
- MyHealthRecords

The CRCs also provide high quality video-conferencing services, enabling communities to directly access services that are otherwise unavailable in the regions. These include parenting programs, women’s health services, interviews and support for job seekers, and even court appearances. A pilot program to provide outreach legal services via the CRCs is currently underway.

BACKGROUND: Linkwest

Nedlands-based Linkwest is a small not-for-profit organisation that is largely funded by the State Government’s Department of Communities and the Department for Primary Industry and Regional Development. Linkwest is the peak body for Community Resource Centres and Neighbourhood Centres in Western Australia. It offers targeted and relevant training, resources, advocacy and support to those working in small community-managed not-for-profit organisations. Linkwest, with a staff of seven, offers crucial support to more than 150 member organisations, including over 100 regional and remote Centres. More than 27,000 Western Australians currently use these centres each week. The centres provide a friendly, welcoming place where local people can meet to learn, gain new skills, make friends and feel part of their community. They also provide a safe, affordable space for playgroups, community and support
groups to gather. Former Premier of Western Australia, Professor Carmen Lawrence, is Linkwest’s official patron. She has been a patron for the past eight years. The history behind the organisation goes back to 1978 – for many years it was known as Learning Centre Link, until it was renamed Linkwest in 2011.

BACKGROUND:

Service Priority Review
CRCs are grass roots and place based organisations with connections into local communities that can ensure community engagement is genuine and not just a tick box.

Service Priority Review - Priority One Recommendations that CRCs can assist the government’s reform agenda

• #1.2 Improve the quality of engagement with the community to enable sharper focus on their needs.
  CRCs are ideally placed to assist in this at a regional, grass roots level.
• #1.4 Increase online service delivery to provide multiple channels for delivering transactional services. CRCs can do this through their existing video conferencing platform. The VC system is currently very underused by the State government. Other NFP service providers and Federal government agencies are increasingly using this technology through the CRCs to deliver cost-effective services into the community.
• #1.5 Improve the coordination of service delivery in the regions. CRCs currently deliver on multiple government agency outcomes, including but not limited to, regional development, agriculture, volunteering, seniors, youth, communities, disabilities, health, mental health, jobs, environment, innovation and technology, and corrective services. One of the Labor government’s commitments under their Supporting Communities Policy was to break down barriers to maximise every opportunity to deliver quality services to the community. Through CRCs the government is already doing this but the review offers the opportunity to do it better and for more departments.

Sustainable Health Review

The interim recommendations from the SHR is an increased spend on prevention and telehealth services. The Community Resource Centre network is already a significant factor in the prevention of social isolation and loneliness in rural communities. Social isolation is now recognised as being more deadly than obesity. CRCs also have embedded encrypted video conferencing that can provide Telehealth opportunities in rural and remote areas.
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