

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

An alliance of the CLC, NLC, CAALAS, NAAJA and AMSANT

MEDIA RELEASE

Aboriginal people will be denied access to the justice system if remote court closes in April

Monday 4th April 2016

Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APO NT) today expressed alarm following an announcement that Court sittings in Mutitjulu, would be discontinued from the 27 April 2016, until further notice.

APO NT understands that the decision was made due to inadequate facilities in the community to host the Court sittings.

“Remote court sittings provide an essential forum for Aboriginal people to engage with the legal system, and are a foundation for access to justice,” said APO NT spokesperson Eileen Van Iersel. “As it stands, Aboriginal people face enormous barriers in terms of access to justice. The withdrawal of these essential services from any remote community will exacerbate this.”

As a result of this decision, cases that would ordinarily be heard in Mutitjulu will now be transferred to Alice Springs. This will mean that both defendants and victims will be required to travel to Alice Springs for court.

“Requiring defendants and victims to travel over 450kms to attend court is extremely onerous, and will lead to an increase in defendants not appearing before the court and having warrants issued for their arrest. This will result in more people being imprisoned, placing greater pressure on a prison system that is already stretched,” said Ms Van Iersel.

Similarly, the closure could lead to victims not appearing before the court to give evidence – including many victims of domestic and family violence. The pressure placed on victims to travel may worsen the trauma and stress of legal proceedings.

“We acknowledge that working remotely can be challenging and that the conditions are not always ideal. However, the importance of this essential service is so great that there must be genuine efforts and a commitment to maintain it. The discontinuation of this remote court sitting will have a negative impact on both defendants and victims, and has the potential to further disengage Aboriginal people from the court process in the Northern Territory.”

For media comment:

APO NT spokesperson, Eileen Van Iersel on (08) 8950 9317 or 0447 746 112.