

Intervention policy tearing communities apart, says far-north health chief



Liz Conor and Irene Fisher spoke at last night's forum.

Photo: *Justin Mcmanus*

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CONFUSION and distress in remote Northern Territory communities arising from the Federal Government's emergency intervention is damaging the health of Aboriginal people, a health executive told a meeting in Melbourne last night.

Irene Fisher, chief executive of Sunrise Health, a network of 10 health centres in remote communities east of Katherine, said anxiety was feeding despair in already fragile communities. Two recent youth suicides in the area — the first in several years — had galvanised her involvement in an increasingly vocal campaign against the Government takeover of 70 remote communities.

"I've never known a mortality rate like what is happening at the moment," Ms Fisher told *The Age* before last night's meeting. A Jawoyn woman, she has worked in the area as a nurse and health executive for 17 years.

"I know cynics will say, 'Oh, you can't blame it on the intervention' — and say this is why we need the intervention. People are forgetting the fragile state of the communities and the people living in them. To me it is almost like some are dying of broken hearts."

Along with Aboriginal leaders Olga Havnen and Lowitja O'Donoghue, Ms Fisher was in Melbourne this week as part of an effort to revive a 10-year-old lobby group of black and white women concerned about Aboriginal policy. The Women for Wik movement, which monitors the effects of the intervention, has gained endorsement from about 3000 women, including Tamie Fraser, Lady Deane, Justice Elizabeth Evatt and Gabi Hollows.

The most tangible effect of the intervention so far was "absolute shock and cynicism", said Ms

Havnen, an outspoken critic of the intervention. "The only thing people have seen on the ground has been an increased number of bureaucrats, and new housing and vehicles for bureaucrats, and constant convening of meetings by the public sector," she said.

"The \$1.3 billion is not being spent on child protection — there are no additional child protection workers, there are no services or programs expanded in the areas of children or family services."

Ms Fisher said she was already calling on aid groups to help communities facing a grim Christmas.

Under the intervention, 50 per cent of family welfare payments will be withheld to ensure it is spent on food and other essentials. But many remote townships still did not have functional town stores equipped to cater for those needs, she said.

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