



We build strong **PEOPLE**
strong **FAMILIES** strong **COMMUNITIES**

YMCA Australia Submission to the Independent Sport Panel

November 2008

Introduction

YMCA Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide our input to the Independent Sport Panel and to the review of sporting development in Australia at both the elite and community-based levels.

We believe these issues are of critical importance particularly in relation to the development of a National Preventative Health Strategy and in our collective efforts to tackle growing concerns regarding obesity and related health issues in the Australian community.

With the predominant nature of our work centred on strengthening communities, for the purpose of this submission YMCA Australia will focus on the Terms of Reference most relevant to our work and those areas in which we have the greatest level of expertise (2, 3 & 5).

YMCA Australia and Community-based Sport

YMCA Australia is a national community-based not-for-profit organisation that delivers programs and services to help build strong people, strong families and strong communities across Australia.

We operate in over 500 locations across Australia and during 2007 an estimated 2.2 million Australians accessed a YMCA facility or service.

The YMCA has worked over a long period as a foundation of community-based sport in Australia.

The YMCA delivers a broad range of community-based sporting and recreation activities including:

Basketball	Aquatics	Squash
Handball	Gymnastics	Tennis
Netball	Skate Parks	Badminton
Indoor Soccer	Athletics competitions	Funs runs
	Sports carnivals	Triathlons

The YMCA also delivers Indigenous sports programs, sporting programs in schools and provides opportunities for children and adults living with disabilities to participate in sports and sporting activities. The YMCA also delivers targeted sporting and recreation programs for young migrant and refugee people and health and recreation activities for women and new mothers. In delivering these programs, YMCA Australia works in partnership with local communities and community organisations with support from all three tiers of government.

YMCA Australia: Response to the Terms of Reference

1. Ensure Australia's continued elite sporting success.

YMCA Australia is supportive of elite sporting programs and acknowledges the crucial role that sporting achievement at the elite level plays in encouraging greater levels of participation in the broader community, particularly among children and young people through the provision of positive and inspirational role models.

1.1 Elite Sport and Community-based Sport

While acknowledging the positive role that elite sport can play, YMCA Australia considers the link between success at the elite level and increased participation in grassroots sport to be overstated. We believe it is far more important for children and young people in our communities to have access to opportunities and well-supported programs.

Investment in elite sport should be proportional to our economy and population and should not come at the expense of community-based sport or compromise our capacity to provide an appropriate level of resources into community-based sport and recreation activities.

We also hold the view that to date there has been a critical imbalance between the resources and support from the Federal Government for elite sporting achievement and that which has been directed towards the sustainable development of community-based sport. YMCA Australia is deeply concerned about this imbalance, not only from a sporting pathways perspective, but also in relation to current concerns about tackling issues such as childhood obesity and physical inactivity among young people. We will discuss these issues further in the submission and also in relation to the development of a national preventative health strategy.

YMCA Australia believes it is far more important to become a healthy, active and engaged nation than to be a nation of gold medal-winning spectators.

1.2 Talent Identification

With regards to talent identification programs, the YMCA is an organisation that provides the base from which future talent is drawn. We are concerned about the exclusionary implications of early talent identification that does not have the capacity to encourage and support young people as they transition across age groups. The YMCA can and does play a crucial role in talent identification through our programs and facilities, particularly in aquatics, gymnastics and basketball. In 2007 there were over 25,000 children enrolled in gymnastics at any one time and over 30,000 in swimming at a YMCA. This support for young people on an elite pathway often occurs when high performance clubs are sharing the same built environment with community-based groups and the YMCA can play a supportive role where sometimes the elite talent-identification programs of National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) are unable to. The Federal Government should consider the often critical role that community organisations such as the YMCA can play

in partnership with NSOs in talent identification at the grassroots level to ensure that NSOs can continue to have an ongoing relationship with local clubs.

The YMCA believes that the primary purpose of encouraging grassroots participation in community-based sports should be to promote a healthy lifestyle and wellbeing and not to provide a base from which to produce elite sportspeople. This is where the YMCA believes there is a 'disconnect' or mismatch between the primary mandate of the NSOs state-based bodies and local sporting organisations.

2. Better place sport and physical activity as a key component of the Government's preventative health approach.

2.1 Preventative Health

Despite worrying trends regarding increasing levels of obesity, diabetes and physical inactivity, YMCA Australia believes that obesity and associated health issues can be successfully addressed within a framework of preventative health and social inclusion and the YMCA is encouraged by the Federal Government's proactive approach in this regard. YMCA Australia also believes that enhancing opportunities for all Australians to participate in community-based sport and recreation activities is critical in the development of a national preventative health framework. While this will be a multi-faceted approach from the Federal Government, the YMCA strongly urges the Federal Government to re-focus policy and resources on community-based sport as building the foundation blocks of a healthy lifestyle for *all* Australians, including children and families. Investment in preventative health measures that include community-based sport will always present a positive cost benefit for the Federal Government and will also produce a more resilient and socially inclusive Australian community.

As part of the Federal Government's commitment to preventative health, all children should have access to community-based sport and recreation, regardless of where they live or their capacity to pay.

The YMCA also believes that tackling obesity and related health and wellness issues is not just about programs and activities, but about community development, individual and community capacity-building and providing opportunities for all people to be proactively engaged.

2.2 Volunteers

As a national organisation that works with over 3,000 volunteers across the country, the YMCA is all too aware of the barriers facing volunteers in terms of their time, personal transport costs and other costs associated with their volunteering activities. To ensure that the community-based sporting sector retains the participation of a well-supported and well-resourced volunteer base, the Federal Government needs to consider putting some forms of assistance in place to reduce some of the costs associated with volunteering for community-based sporting organisations such as police checks and working with children checks, the costs of which are often borne by the volunteers themselves. There are also inconsistencies across states in relation to these requirements and other compliance issues.

The YMCA has considerable experience in the training of young people to become coaches which may not only provide a vocational pathway, but also ensures a longer-term commitment by experienced, trained and supported volunteers leading to sustained outcomes and higher retention rates within community-based sport. In its ongoing commitment to volunteers, the Federal Government must consider more substantial funding for the training and support of volunteers.

2.3 Local Government and Community Infrastructure

The YMCA recognises that local government is struggling with support for infrastructure at the community level and bears a disproportionate level of the cost in terms of providing resourcing for community-based sport and recreation. As a result, many local Councils and Shires are placed in a position whereby they are required to charge fees for sporting and recreation services, even the use of local parks by small groups. This has inevitably resulted in decreased accessibility and decreased participation at the local level.

With diminishing levels of infrastructure support for local sporting club facilities, many are falling into disrepair, which acts as another significant barrier to participation. This is an additional area in which enhanced Federal Funding through to local government could provide improved support to re-establishing and maintaining local sporting facilities and clubs. YMCA Australia believes there is a strong need to reinvigorate levels and models of funding between the Federal Government and local government bodies and to ensure that funding is delivering real and tangible results to grassroots community sporting organisations. The Federal Government needs to ensure that appropriate funding linked to a social inclusion requirement is provided to local government guaranteeing access for all in the community. Local government must be able to demonstrate that health and wellness activities, programs and services are accessible to all in the community at a grassroots level. Local authorities in the UK, for example, are now providing free access to swimming pools for certain groups in the community to encourage greater participation in sport. By 2012, the aim of this initiative is to provide free access to all people.

Local government is at the forefront of community infrastructure and community strengthening. Support for the role of local government in community health and wellbeing should be seen as a central component of preventative health strategies.

2.4 Organisational Capacity-Building

Tasks for community sporting clubs are often onerous and are predominantly the responsibility of volunteers. There is a clear role for organisations such as the YMCA in providing mentoring and capacity-building assistance for smaller community-based sporting organisations, particularly with regard to facilities management and financial administration. The Federal Government could enhance this role by providing greater resources to facilitate such collaborative and sustainable partnerships. This is particularly important in rural and regional areas where there is a critical lack of sustainable support for local sporting organisations that are often the central social and cultural thread of the community. There is often a duplication in management and administration that creates a burdensome workload for committed community volunteers.

The YMCA is often viewed as a 'community hub' and we currently play a non-profit management role, bringing both professionalism and accountability as a central 'sporting hub' in local communities working towards the sustained capacity-building of local sporting clubs and community-based sporting organisations.

The Federal Government could consider supporting a more efficient model of community-based management in which 'back office' operations such as administration, payroll and insurance are done in a collaborative manner, while ensuring that local sporting clubs continue to be run by the local community.

2.5 Enhanced funding for disadvantaged groups

With regard to enhancing the opportunity, access and participation in community-based sport for people with living with disabilities and community-based sporting programs targeting greater participation within Indigenous communities, the Federal Government must ensure appropriate levels of funding are available to community organisations to enable 'reach out' to these and other marginalised or isolated groups in the community. Some projects for 'high need' groups are generally funded on an annual basis where in reality there is a critical need for recurrent three to four year funding to build the capacity, success and sustainability of some of these specialised, high intensity programs that also require the recruitment and retention of staff with specialised training. In this respect, it will be essential for the Federal Government to implement the development of funding models that go beyond annual funding and move towards recurrent funding in order for community organisations to build capacity and plan strategically for the implementation of intermediate and long-term programs. This may be a critical area of re-examination and re-focus of the mandate, functions and priorities of the Australian Sports Foundation.

The YMCA also recommends the Government consider the introduction of a tax offset based on eligible health and wellness expenses paid by parents to register a child in a prescribed program of physical activity.

We also urge the Australian Government to consider reviewing the applicability of the GST on health and wellness programs to allow for the provision of prescribed programs to be GST-free.

2.6 Active After-schools Communities Program

YMCA Australia is concerned that there are limitations on the way that the Active After-schools Communities program operates and recommends the Australian Government commit to an evaluation and re-invigoration of the Active After-schools Communities program to ensure a model is developed which encourages life-long participation in physical activity. Our key concerns are focused on what we believe is a structure that is over-administered, inefficient and fails to draw on existing infrastructure. The experience of the YMCA is that many local communities find the programs too difficult and cumbersome to engage effectively with.

2.7 Promotion of positive messages to the community

As a national organisation with significant reach into local communities across a broad range of program and service delivery areas, the YMCA can play a significant role, working in partnership with Government to deliver positive messages about healthy living and

physical activity, including greater participation in community-based sport. This utilisation of community-connected organisations to deliver positive health and physical activity messages can work well in conjunction with federally funded national campaigns. YMCA Australia is concerned about the level of duplication in campaigns and advertising across different states and territories and is supportive of federally-funded national campaigns such as the recent *'How Do You Measure Up?'* campaign to raise awareness about the risk factors of diabetes, obesity and other health related issues.

3. Strengthen pathways from junior sport to grassroots community sport right through to elite and professional sport.

3.1 Enhanced support for coaches and officials

The Federal Government needs to take measures to reduce the significant barriers facing individuals who are often volunteers and committed parents that are acting as coaches, officials, umpires and administrators of local community-based sporting clubs. In *section 2.3* of this submission, YMCA Australia outlines its response in relation to the provision of support to volunteers. With regard to training and accreditation of coaches and officials, the YMCA believes that a re-examination of funding models through State Sporting Organisations and local sporting groups needs to occur in order to provide enhanced support for coaches and officials, building the capacity of local sporting clubs and community-based groups to recruit and retain appropriately trained and supported personnel.

3.2 Re-examination of Federal Funding to National Sporting Organisations

Internal YMCA research has shown that of the top 15 National Sporting Organisations funded by the Australian Sports Commission, on average, **only seven per cent** of total revenue 'trickles down' to community-based, non-elite sporting development. The YMCA is concerned that recreational participants are helping to fund elite sporting programs through excessive registration fees.

YMCA Australia recommends a critical re-examination of the ways in which funding from the Federal Government to NSOs and their respective State Organisations is structured. This will ensure that an appropriate level of sustainable funding is directed to local community-based sporting organisations that will achieve the aims of enhanced participation and sporting development. YMCA Australia is also aware that as major funding contributors to state and territory sporting organisations that State Government funding will also need to be part of this review.

YMCA Australia also recommends the Federal Government provide enhanced support to providers of active recreation, not just competitive sporting bodies to promote the message that it is just as healthy to exercise for fun, enjoyment and community participation as it is to compete.

5. Identify opportunities to increase and diversify the funding base for sport through corporate sponsorship, media and any recommended reforms, such as enhancing the effectiveness of the Australian Sports Foundation.

5.1 Concerns regarding sponsorship of community-based sport

YMCA Australia is greatly concerned about the level of sponsorship of community-based sporting organisations by large fast-food corporations. If the Federal Government is serious about tackling issues such as childhood obesity, then these 'negative partnerships' need a radical review. A lack of appropriate, sustained core funding for community-based sporting organisations by government frequently forces these organisations into sponsorship agreements that are sending negative messages to participants and to the broader community. As a result, the Australian Government must critically review and address growing community concerns about the high level of reliance on the part of community-based sporting organisations on funding and sponsorship from large fast-food companies.

Access to community-based sport and recreation is a community health issue and is the responsibility of Government. The provision of community-based sport and recreation should not be dependent on private enterprise, particularly those that do not have the enhancement of community health as their primary objective.

5.2 Sustainable and recurrent funding needed for disadvantaged groups

The Australian Sports Foundation could raise their level of support for disadvantaged groups in providing targeted funding to enhance opportunity, access and participation in community-based sport for people living with disability, indigenous people, women, people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As mentioned previously in this submission the funding models should be structured such that three to four year recurrent funding is provided to ensure that intermediate to long-term strategic planning can take place.

The YMCA recommends that government funding to tackle obesity and enhance participation in community-based sport and recreation should be targeted at those groups in the community that are most in need such as people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, people living with intellectual disability, Indigenous communities and people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

5.3 'Whole of Government' initiatives to funding community-based health and wellbeing

With Sport portfolio now residing within the Department of Health and Ageing, there may be greater opportunities for community-based sporting organisations to access Federal funding through alternative funding programs. Successful application of this broader perspective on the role of community-based sport and recreation within a health and

wellbeing and preventative health framework will rely on a whole of government approach that interfaces with the:

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations;
- Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government;
- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; and
- Department of Immigration and Citizenship

YMCA Australia also believes that with a national preventative health framework that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) also has a critical and strategic role to play in elevating the status of community-based sport, recreation, health and wellbeing at the state and local level.

Conclusion

With growing concern on the part of parents, health professionals and the broader community, the issue of increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity is one which is rising in the public consciousness and is high on the political agenda. As such, the issue of obesity can no longer be seen as purely a health concern, but must be addressed as a social and economic issue. **It will be critical to view any measures regarding community-based sport in this framework of preventative health and social inclusion.**

There also needs to be a critical shift in public policy thinking and in the funding and development of services and programs towards preventative health, including sport – this will be crucial not only from a disease prevention perspective, but also from an economic standpoint.

There is a particular need to re-focus preventative efforts for sections of the community that are at greatest risk of exclusion of participation in sport. Measures to address this will need to be particularly focused on those experiencing the greatest levels of social exclusion and those whose voices are silent – Indigenous Australians, people living with disability, people living with mental illness, older isolated people in our community and people living in social and economic disadvantage.

YMCA Australia is ideally situated as a partner with community and Government in developing local solutions that are grounded in expertise, best practice and sustainable community development and we look forward to further opportunities for engagement in this regard.