

We can't cope, admits senior indigenous official

Alana Buckley-Carr

THE head of Western Australia's Department of Indigenous Affairs yesterday admitted her agency was underfunded, lacked credibility and was operating in a vacuum as Aboriginal living conditions in the Kimberley worsened.

Jackie Tang, acting director-general of the department for the past year, gave evidence on the last day of the coronial inquest into five alcohol-related deaths at the remote Kimberley town of Oombulgurri in 2005 and 2006.

Under cross-examination by lawyer John Hammond, representing the families of the dead, Ms Tang admitted the department had little money to fix the growing problems in the Kimberley, with salaries and allowances for the 145 staff leaving little left over from her \$24 million budget.

The department "has been in a vacuum", Ms Tang said. "It has not been leading. In order to lead

you need credibility. We don't have credibility."

Ms Tang said she was aware of the substandard housing conditions, high suicide rate and domestic violence, sexual abuse and alcohol problems in Oombulgurri, but the department's role was not to provide direct services.

"There's an issue in that the role of the Department of Indigenous Affairs is misunderstood," she said. "It's not a direct service-delivery agency. We don't provide alcohol rehabilitation programs, we don't build houses."

She said the department was leading the state Government's implementation of 27 recommendations handed down by Coroner Alastair Hope in February as part of his report into the deaths of 22 people across the Kimberley, the majority of which occurred in Fitzroy Crossing.

Among his recommendations,

Mr Hope recommended liquor restrictions be put in place, as well as improved public housing.

Wes Morris of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, also giving evidence yesterday, said there was no "silver bullet" or quick fix for the problems of the town.

He said the Government had been warned seven years ago that the suicide rate of indigenous people would "increase markedly unless the government acted" but had failed to act.

Mr Morris said that in 2001, then indigenous affairs minister Alan Carpenter, who is now Premier, was given the Working Together briefing paper prepared by the Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Steering Committee, but none of its recommendations were implemented. "The response from government has been underwhelming," he said.