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Touring senators skirt reality of petrol sniffing
By Ashleigh Wilson

THEY come from hundreds of kilometres away to this remote part of the country where the fumes don't reach. Mt Theo outstation, 450km northwest of Alice Springs, is a place where young petrol sniffers are given the strength to combat the debilitating habit.

And for a group of senators trying to find answers to the crisis of petrol sniffing, Mt Theo was the place where they could "feel the love".

This week, as part of a Senate inquiry into petrol sniffing in remote communities, five senators travelled to Mt Theo and the nearby Aboriginal community of Yuendumu. But when they left a few hours later, the people who work with sniffers every day wondered why they had bothered to come.

Labor senator Claire Moore, chairwoman of the Senate committee, said Mt Theo wanted to tell its story of success.

In fact, The Weekend Australian understands the program's organisers asked the senators not to come, saying they should instead visit communities where sniffing was rampant.

"Everyone knows our story," Mt Theo co-ordinator Susie Lowe said. "If these senators went to a place like Papunya (a couple of hours drive away), they would never be the same again."

The committee heard evidence in Perth, Darwin and Alice Springs this week. The senators will travel to Cairns and Mornington Island next month. But stung by criticism that communities suffering with high rates of petrol sniffing were off their radar screen, the inquiry is now considering travelling to South Australia and northern Western Australia. So far, the senators have heard evidence about the need to roll out non-sniffable Opal fuel across the central Australian region, and about the devastating health and social effects of petrol sniffing.

And they saw how the inspiring success of Mt Theo combined with a zero-tolerance approach has all but eliminated sniffing at nearby Yuendumu. Senator Moore defended the decision to avoid communities struggling to cope -- where people wander the streets sniffing petrol -- saying the inquiry was interested in diversion programs and success stories in fighting the menace.

"The focus of this whole exercise was not to look at the evils of petrol sniffing," she said. "We know it's there." Describing Mt Theo, Senator Moore said: "You need to care about people, and here you can just feel the love."