



**Standing Committee on Estimates
and Financial Operations**

Legislative Council
Parliament House
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WEST PERTH WA 6005

By email: icefoc@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear members of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations

RE: Inquiry into the financial administration of homelessness services in Western Australia

Southern Aboriginal Corporation welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations on the inquiry into the financial administration of homelessness services in Western Australia.

The demand for homelessness and related social and community housing programs is particularly pertinent for Aboriginal people in Western Australia, with research showing that despite Aboriginal people comprising only 3.7% of Western Australia's total population, 29.1% of the homeless population identifies as Aboriginal.ⁱ

The provision of homelessness and affordable social and community housing services is therefore critical to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people in Western Australia, and to closing the gap between the outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. However, the current nature of the financial administration of the homelessness and housing sector in Western Australia, specifically the absence of predictable, sustainable and long-term funding from State and Federal Governments for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations which provide uniquely effective housing solutions for Aboriginal people, not only leaves those providers isolated with limited internal capacity to grow and diversify their service provision, but also contributes to increased risk for Aboriginal people seeking access to Aboriginal controlled, culturally appropriate social and community housing services. This ultimately represents a disingenuous commitment from the State Government to improve housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and to trusting Aboriginal organisations to deliver services for Aboriginal people.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on this critical issue and look forward to the outcome of the inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Asha Bhat
Chief Executive Officer
Southern Aboriginal Corporation

ⁱ Government of Western Australia, Department of Communities, *Homelessness in Western Australia: A review of the research and statistical evidence*, 2018, <https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2021-06/homelessness-in-wa-report.pdf>



Response to Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations

*Inquiry into the financial administration of
homelessness services in Western Australia*

Southern Aboriginal Corporation

February 2022

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1 Executive Summary

This submission has been prepared by Southern Aboriginal Corporation in response to the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations inquiry into the financial administration of homelessness services in Western Australia.

Southern Aboriginal Corporation is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation registered with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, which provides community housing services for Aboriginal people in the Great Southern, South West and Wheatbelt regions of Western Australia. As an Aboriginal Community Housing Organisation, Southern Aboriginal Corporation provides Noongar tenants with quality accommodation at affordable rent. The Southern Aboriginal Corporation housing program, which involves the management of 75 properties including 64 properties owned by the Corporation, extends from Bunbury to Ravensthorpe, Brookton, Kondinin, Albany and all towns in between.

Under the housing program, Southern Aboriginal Corporation facilitates complete overhauls and refurbishments of accommodation and uses internal funds to cover long term repairs and maintenance, so that quality, comfortable accommodation can be offered to clients at affordable price points. With a total property portfolio value estimated at \$18,000,000.00, Southern Aboriginal Corporation is registered as a Preferred Provider with the Department of Communities (Housing).

The Southern Aboriginal Corporation Housing Mission Statement represents our commitments as providers of housing to Aboriginal people to:

- Buy and build good quality dwellings in every centre of Aboriginal population in our regions and base each purchase on the availability of suitable properties for purchase and an impartial assessment of local housing needs.
- Allocate dwellings fairly and impartially among prospective tenants who are willing to abide by the terms of our tenancy agreements.
- Promote home ownership in the Aboriginal community by encouraging qualifying tenants to buy their homes.
- Run our housing program as a business enterprise, bearing in mind always that every dwelling we own is an asset of our Corporation and has been acquired for the ultimate economic benefit of all Aboriginal people in our service delivery regions.

Southern Aboriginal Corporation's experience of being a community housing provider for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regional Western Australia over the last decade puts us in a particularly unique and strong position to steer policy responses and drive change in responding to the provision of homelessness and other related housing services for Aboriginal communities in Western Australia.

This submission seeks to highlight key issues of importance in the financial administration of homelessness services in Western Australia and the provision of homelessness services and safe and affordable housing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Western Australian's.

We make key recommendations which canvas a range of issues of broader relevance to the homelessness and housing sector, including:

- Ensuring adequate and long-term funding investments into Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations to continue the provision of homelessness and other related social and community housing programs, to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people who have experienced or at the risk of experiencing homelessness in Western Australia.
- Increasing investment into existing homelessness and related social and community housing programs in regional areas.
- Building the capacity of the Aboriginal Community Housing sector.

2 Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia have historically been overrepresented among people who are homeless, who are users of Specialist Homelessness Services, and who are seeking assistance with housing.ⁱ

Data from the 2016 Census indicated that Aboriginal people represented over one-fifth (22%) of the homeless population nationally,ⁱⁱ and in 2019-20 Specialist Homelessness Service dataⁱⁱⁱ showed that:

- Around 71,600 Indigenous Australians received SHS support.
- Indigenous Australians made up 27% of all SHS clients, but only 3.3% of the Australian population.
- More than half (53%, or almost 38,000) of Indigenous SHS clients were aged under 25 compared with 41% (79,800) of non-Indigenous clients.
- More Indigenous clients (65%) than non-Indigenous clients (57%) were returning clients (that is, they had received SHS services at some point since the collection began in 2011–12).

The demand for homelessness services and quality affordable social and community housing is particularly relevant for Aboriginal people in Western Australia, where research from Noongar Mia Mia,^{iv} an Aboriginal owned housing provider, shows that:

- The state has the second-highest rate of Aboriginal homelessness in Australia, compared to the lowest rate of non-Aboriginal homelessness.
- Despite Aboriginal people comprising only 3.7% of Western Australia's total population, 29.1% of the homeless population identified as Aboriginal.
- 42% of people supported by specialist homelessness services in Western Australia identified as Aboriginal.
- Of the at least 56 people who died homeless on the streets of Perth in 2020, 28% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- Aboriginal people are more likely to be evicted than non-Aboriginal tenants from social housing.
- Despite almost half of Specialist Homelessness Services clients in Western Australia being Aboriginal, the community housing sector has very little Aboriginal-led housing presence.
- Mainstream tenancy support services often fall flat because of a lack of cultural awareness or competence.

In Western Australia, the demand for a dedicated response to homelessness for Aboriginal people has been recognised by the State Government, with commitments in the All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10 Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030 including 'Improving Aboriginal Wellbeing'. The Strategy specifically includes actions to make sure Aboriginal people have safe, secure and stable housing that is culturally appropriate, to ensuring Aboriginal communities and organisations design and deliver services primarily affecting Aboriginal people, and to ensuring social housing policies and practices are flexible and culturally responsive.^v

Yet, there remain discrepancies between the commitments of the State Government to improving Aboriginal wellbeing and related housing outcomes, and its practical actions. Specifically, administration of funding for homelessness and related social and community housing services in Western Australia excludes Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations from dedicated funding to provide housing services to Aboriginal people.

In this submission, we call on the Government of Western Australia to ensure predictable, sustainable and long-term funding investments into Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and to provide culturally appropriate housing solutions for Aboriginal people and families. To have an effect on closing the gap, housing policy frameworks and investment in housing solutions for

Aboriginal people additionally must support capacity building in the Aboriginal Community Housing sector, to promote sustainability and leverage growth.

3 The current funding and delivery of services

Aboriginal people's unique experiences of housing are well documented; they have different cultural norms and customs that impact their lives, with evidence showing^{vi} that their housing needs may be affected by:

- Changing household numbers in relation to extended family transitions between houses and communities resulting in overcrowding.
- Close proximity of houses or the lack of traditional separation leading to aggravations between family, language, age and/or gender groups.
- Avoidance behaviours related to kinship rules.
- Different values and attitudes about the possession and sharing of objects.
- Cultural responses to the death of a householder.

The provision of appropriate social housing for Aboriginal people, including as a response to homelessness, therefore requires an understanding of the cultural norms and practices of those households. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute^{vii} found that "at times, cultural customs can come into conflict with rules and requirements set by state and territory housing authorities." According to the Institute:

Standardised planning and housing is not necessarily suitable or appropriate for the diverse cultural, gender, age and extend family structures evident in Aboriginal communities... State and territory housing authorities see providing standardised housing as a way to give all tenants equality in housing while maximising the number of houses built for a limited budget; however, a 'one size fits all' approach is one the principle factor in the ongoing failure of governments and agencies in the provision of appropriate housing for Indigenous Australians.^{viii}

In Western Australia, a review of the 50 Lives 50 Homes collective impact project designed to house and support the most vulnerable rough sleepers in Perth additionally found that different approaches to Aboriginal housing were needed. The review considered that to strengthen the Aboriginal Housing First approach in the state, more housing was required to be provided by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, and more Aboriginal support services and support workers were needed to help Aboriginal people maintain their tenancies in culturally appropriate environments.^{ix}

These findings collectively highlight the importance of Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations as service providers for Aboriginal people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or who for any other reason require social or community housing, and the demand for adequate investments into those organisations to deliver housing services for Aboriginal people.

In its 2021-22 Budget, the Government of Western Australia delivered a record amount of investment into homelessness and social housing measures. This included funding to deliver the Housing First Homelessness initiative designed to reduce rough sleeping and provide intensive case management for service users, and for the Boorloo Bidee Mia supported accommodation facility in the Perth CBD.^x These initiatives demonstrate that there is an understanding within the State Government of:

- a. The demand for supported affordable housing as a response to homelessness; and
- b. The demand for Aboriginal-led homelessness and housing programs, to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness in Western Australia.

Despite the nature of these investments aligning closely to housing programs like those delivered by Southern Aboriginal Corporation, we do not receive any sustainable funding from the State

Government to support the management of our 75 properties, which provide housing solutions for over 100 Aboriginal families. We are a preferred housing provider of the Department of Communities, which is responsible for the administration and management of homelessness and housing related programs in Western Australia; however, as our registration as a tiered community housing provider is in progress and not yet finalised, and as conditions of eligibility for State and Federal funding generally include being a registered community housing provider, we are ineligible for that funding.

There are four Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations in Western Australia, none of which are yet registered as tiered community housing providers.^{xi} This means that all the Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations in Western Australia are ineligible for any funding provided, for example, through the Social Housing Economic Recovery Package for new builds, and through the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation for access to grants and finance options.

The financial administration of the homelessness and housing sector in Western Australia, specifically the absence of predictable, sustainable and long-term funding from State and Federal Governments for those organisations, which regardless of their registration status provide uniquely effective housing solutions for Aboriginal people, not only leaves those providers isolated with limited internal capacity to grow and diversify their service provision, but also contributes to increased risk for Aboriginal people seeking access to Aboriginal controlled, culturally appropriate social and community housing services. This ultimately represents a disingenuous commitment from the State Government to improve housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and to trusting Aboriginal organisations to deliver services for Aboriginal people.

The impact of this lack of funding is particularly visible in the Great Southern and Southwest regions of Western Australia, where there is significant demand for Aboriginal housing in an unfriendly housing market, yet there is no State Government investment into Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations. Recent comments from the Department of Justice about the lack of available transitional housing options for recently released prisoners in Albany provides relevant commentary on this point:

“The Department of Justice does not have its own housing stock, nor is it directly involved in the leasing arrangements by service providers for public housing properties. However, the Department is aware of the current situation in the Great Southern Region and is working with the Department of Communities and relevant NGOs to find a solution.”^{xii}

Additionally, the Albany Women’s Crisis Accommodation service run by Anglicare WA has reportedly been overwhelmed by demand for short-term accommodation options, with the short supply of affordable housing representing a serious problem for women experiencing family and domestic violence and increasing their risk of homelessness. In December 2021, the Crisis Accommodation service reported that the centre had seen a 61 percent rise in demand for its services in the past 18 months, and a 50 per cent increase in requests for crisis accommodation.^{xiii}

The lack of investment by the Government of Western Australia into Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations is inconsistent with Priority Actions 1.1 and 1.4 of the Government’s own All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia’s 10 Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030:^{xiv}

- Priority Action 1.1: Strengthen the role of Aboriginal organisations and communities in designing and delivering culturally appropriate responses for Aboriginal people.
- Priority Action 2.2: Increase the availability of appropriate accommodation and service options for Aboriginal people and families.

When housing is recognised as a crucial social and environmental determinant of health^{xv} and an influencer of outcomes in other areas of a householder’s life, including physical and mental health, education and skills development, labour market outcomes and economic opportunity, crime and safety, social and community outcomes, and empowerment,^{xvi} it is also reasonable to see the lack of

investment in Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations as directly inconsistent with efforts to achieve outcomes under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, specifically:

- Outcome 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy long and healthy lives.
- Outcome 8: Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.
- Outcome 9: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need.
- Outcome 14: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.

This is reflected in the Closing the Gap Jurisdictional Implementation Plan: Western Australia progress update from September 2021, which identifies Outcomes 1 and 8 as ‘highly aspirational’, and Outcomes 9 and 14 as ‘aspirational’.

In 2021, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, in their policy position paper on the demand for Aboriginal housing to support Aboriginal health, additionally identified that the health impacts of the inaccessibility of effective housing solutions for Aboriginal people had been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic:

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of the importance of housing for maintaining health and slowing and stopping the spread of disease. Significant Australian, State and Territory Government leadership and investment is urgently needed to improve housing and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Under the current funding arrangements for community housing providers in Western Australia, the ineligibility of Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations for funding provided through State funding streams has had demonstrated adverse impacts on service providers and service users, ranging from reduced capacity to intake new housing clients and promote home ownership within Aboriginal communities, to poorer health and wellbeing outcomes and increased psychosocial stress and other social and emotional issues for Aboriginal people and families.^{xvii}

Effective action on homelessness therefore requires a commitment from the State Government to fund homelessness and related social and community housing programs that recognise the unique experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and respond accordingly. The accessibility of Aboriginal controlled services is critical to helping Aboriginal people out of homelessness, building capacity within service users to ensure the risks of them returning to homelessness are minimised, addressing their needs in culturally safe and appropriate ways, and improving their health and other related outcomes.

Recommendation 1: Ensure adequate and long-term funding investments into Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations to continue the provision of homelessness and other related social and community housing programs, to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people who are experiencing homelessness in Western Australia

To increase the accessibility of homelessness and housing services for Aboriginal people in Western Australia and to reduce the number of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness, the State Government must therefore commit to long-term, predictable and sustainable funding for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, to continue the provision of homelessness and other related social and community housing programs and meet the unique needs of Aboriginal people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Given that none of the Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations in Western Australia are yet registered as community housing providers with the Community Housing Registration Office under

the Community Housing Regulatory Framework, the funding must be clear that it is available to community housing providers that are still in the process of achieving registration.

To continue to displace Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations from providing services for Aboriginal people will only further entrench Aboriginal disadvantage and continue to represent disingenuity from the State Government on improving housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recommendation 2: Increase investment into existing homelessness and related social and community housing programs in regional areas

Homelessness is experienced at disproportionate rates in regional and remote Western Australia. The 2021 Heat Map Summary of Homelessness and Housing Stress released by Unlock Housing and Shelter WA^{xviii} found that:

- The proportion of rough sleepers was significantly higher in regional Western Australia than in the metropolitan area (15% compared to 10%).
- The proportion of people temporarily staying with others was higher in regional Western Australia than in the metropolitan area (22% compared to 21%).
- The proportion of people living in severely overcrowded dwellings was significantly higher in regional Western Australia than in the metropolitan area (48% compared to 39%).

In the South West region specifically, the Heat Map Summary found that:

- There were 788 people experiencing homelessness.
- 38% of all renters were experiencing rental stress.
- 21% of all mortgage holders were experiencing mortgage stress.
- 65,361 households were earning less than \$650 per week.

There is obvious demand for targeted investment into homelessness and related social and community housing programs in regional areas. To effectively respond to homelessness, increase the accessibility of services and reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness in Western Australia, the Government of Western Australia must therefore ensure adequate and long-term funding for homelessness and related social and community housing programs in regional areas, and in doing so prioritise funding for service providers that already exist and deliver services in those regional locations. Those services must be supported to expand and build their service delivery capacity, rather than introducing new services into the sector.

Like funding for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, funding for homelessness and social and community housing programs in regional areas should be available to community housing providers within the sector that are either already registered as a community housing provider with the Community Housing Registration Office, or in the process of achieving registration as a community housing provider with the Community Housing Registration Office.

To continue to exclude Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations from funding for the delivery of homelessness and housing services in Western Australia will be ineffective and is ultimately discriminatory.

Recommendation 3: Build the capacity of the Aboriginal Community Housing sector to promote sustainability and leverage growth

The National First Peoples Housing Authority,^{xix} in commenting on the status of funding for the Aboriginal Community Housing sector across Australia, noted that:

Many Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHOs) are small and have less well-developed organisational governance, workforce capability and business systems than the rest of the community housing sector. Organisational scale and operating

subsidies are inadequate to address tenant need and cover the costs of service provision... If ICHOs are to secure their futures and protect their existing assets, they need to explore ways to consolidate their operations and build scale, without losing the advantages of local engagement and branding. The benefits to tenants will be more, and better, housing. Communities will also be able to retain important assets. This is an area in which government could work with community housing peak bodies to build ICHO capability. Capital investment to support organisational reform, bring properties back into service and grow the capacity of these organisations to own, manage and grow rental stock would create long-term benefits.

Unlike other jurisdictions, there has been “very limited effort of investment by the WA Government in building the capacity of the Aboriginal Community Housing sector.”^{xx} In 2021, an investment in capacity building for the four WA based Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations came from Lotterywest, in the form of a COVID-19 Grant to Shelter WA to deliver a project focusing on optimising the Organisations’ assets, building on their professionalism, and building collective capability supported by technical expertise. Given the role that Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations play in ensuring safe and supported housing solutions for Aboriginal people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, it is essential for the Government of Western Australia to continue to grow their value by providing necessary investments in capacity building across the Aboriginal Community Housing sector. Per the recommendations of the National First Peoples Housing Authority, the State Government must invest in the capacity of Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations to “grow, leverage their assets, and provide quality tenancy and property management across their portfolios.”^{xxi}

Additionally, consideration should be given to capacity building projects like ‘Aboriginal Housing Victoria’. In 2016, the Victorian Government agreed to transfer social housing assets worth \$500 million to Aboriginal Housing Victoria to own, manage and develop on behalf of the state. Aboriginal Housing Victoria now provides affordable housing to over 4,000 low income Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians.^{xxii} According to Shelter WA, the Victorian Government was of the view that:

The transfer of properties would:

- *Achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal people.*
- *Provide more affordable homes to Aboriginal Victorians by increasing the social housing stock of Aboriginal Housing Victoria.*
- *Provide secure housing for Aboriginal Victorians and continue to strengthen cultural and community ties.*
- *Allow Aboriginal Victorians to manage their own affairs, such as housing.*
- *Align the needs of the Victorian Aboriginal Community in the long term.*

The Government of Western Australia should consider a similar body to Aboriginal Housing Victoria in Western Australia, which could directly contribute to improving housing and other outcomes for Aboriginal people and families in Western Australia.

This investment will be critical to achieving progress against Outcome 9: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned their priorities and need, of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

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