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Shelter WA (Inc)  
and  
Bega Garnbirringu Health Service

**Housing Issues**  
**for**  
**Aboriginal People in the Kalgoorlie Region**

Report on a preliminary community meeting

held on

Wednesday 24 October 1995

at

Bega Garnbirringu Health Service

McDonald Street, Kalgoorlie

## **Introduction**

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A proposal by Shelter WA to hold a community forum on housing in Kalgoorlie in October 1995 received strong support from the Aboriginal Housing Board of Homeswest and in principle support from ATSIC Wongatha Council, but sufficient funds to hold the forum in line with the proposal were not forthcoming in time to organise the meeting. It is hoped that the forum can be held in March 1996 and that representatives from the entire Wongatha region will be able to attend.

As an interim measure a small community meeting was organised for Shelter WA by Bega Garnbirringu Health Service. Aboriginal people living in town were invited to attend. Shelter WA acknowledges the work of the staff of Bega Garnbirringu in making this meeting possible and extends thanks to the staff involved and the 17 people who freely gave up their time to attend the meeting.

The report has attempted to summarise the discussions that took place at the community meeting and to document recommendations that arose as a catalyst to discussion for the 1996 meeting. It expresses the views of the participants and not necessarily those of Shelter W.A. or Bega Garnbirringu Health Service. In general people expressed annoyance at the lack of action by the State and Federal Government to halt the housing crisis in Kalgoorlie. The record of discussions has been endorsed by the community prior to distribution in this report.

## **Applications for Homeswest Accommodation**

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It was reported that when applying for Homeswest accommodation an Aboriginal person requires date of birth, DSS income statement and a letter stating Aboriginality.

If people don't know their date of birth and haven't got either of the other two items they are told by the counter staff to go away and get them. Some people often don't know where to go and/or do not know exactly what is required and therefore do not proceed with the application. The Field Worker at Bega Garribirringu Health Service helps people get the information they require but it takes up much of her valuable time.

It was recommended that Aboriginal Liaison Officers be employed by Homeswest to help Aboriginal people with their applications and other queries (apparently a position has been advertised for Kalgoorlie).

## **Allocations**

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The Homeswest waiting list was described by participants as a game of snakes and ladders. Homeswest officers will show some people where they are on the list but not show others. Alternatively an applicant may be told by one Officer that they are on the top of the list, but that they are on not by another Officer.

Homeswest's prior debts policy means that people are not placed on the waiting list until they have paid half the debt. However, the fact that potential applicants are not appropriately or affordably housed affects their ability to repay the debt - applicants reported that if they had a house they would be able to pay. In addition people felt that they should at least be placed on the waiting list while they are making repayments so that there is some guarantee of getting a house eventually.

It was reported that people are not given any choice over the housing they are allocated and that Homeswest don't listen to advice on what type of housing should be provided or is wanted for certain people. For instance, there are a lot of people who are not used to living in houses and have a lot of problems adapting. For example, an elderly couple wanted the oldest house in Kalgoorlie so they could cook/live in the back garden and so their family could visit. Instead they were given a unit in a large complex and had problems cooking on the stove and suffered complaints from neighbours when they had visiting family members. Another example is where a woman wanted a two or three bedroom house and was given a four bedroom house. It was far too big for her needs and there were lots of people she knew who needed a four bedroom house - she was later able to transfer.

In addition to the problem of choice it was perceived by everyone at the meeting that Aboriginal people are openly discriminated against in the allocation of properties. Aboriginal people, it was reported, were often given the worst housing in the worst location and it very rarely met their needs. People reported that applicants were often 'bullied' into taking places they don't want. However because of the one valid offer policy, people felt forced to take properties that were inappropriate so that they did not fall to the bottom of the waiting list. It was reported that while people want a reasonable house, they don't expect it to be new or good looking. The main concern was that it be reasonably secure - people expressed a desire for security screens to be provided. People also raised concern that some of the properties are high fire risks.

Once in the houses they are often denied transfers to better accommodation despite reports that transfers are given to people in more privileged positions, eg people who know Homeswest Officers. The difficulties in getting transfers creates problems especially for workers who often move all over the goldfields region or others who need flexibility to move between places.

People questioned the allocation process when, given the desperate need for housing, there is also a number of places that stay vacant for some time. For example some pensioner units in Coolgardie remained vacant for some months while people couldn't access a place to stay when they were working at Coolgardie.

Finally, people felt that once a property was allocated there was not sufficient notice to find the money for the two week's rent that is required in advance.

## **Tenant Liability (TL) and Maintenance**

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The issue of high tenant liability debts was of particular concern, particularly given its impact on people's ability to reapply for housing.

Most people said that it was very rare to get a tenant liability debt of less than \$1000. The high fee was often unreasonably charged. Two examples were given by participants to illustrate this.

In one case a person moved out of the house and was given a tenant liability bill. The house burnt down and Homeswest built another house. The vacated tenant still has to pay the tenant liability - as a result s/he is unable to access Homeswest housing and is currently homeless.

In other instances, tenants who have lived in the property for long periods, receive large tenant liability bills. One family raised four children in a house and had to pay the full cost of replacing flyscreens after 8 years. Another family had been in the house for 20 years and got charged for tenant liability.

People said that tenants always get charged for cleaning when they move out even if they have cleaned the place so it is spotless. It was also reported that tenants are often charged for damages done by vandals.

Workshop participants were also dissatisfied with Homeswest maintenance procedures.

People reported that there is no regular maintenance and everything in the building is poor quality, relying on cheap labour and cheap material, so breaks easily. Houses are not clean at the commencement of the tenancy of Aboriginal people, though when properties are allocated to non-Aboriginal people the property is fully cleaned and repaired. Poor repairs lead to more damage and then the tenant has to pay all over again.

There were reports of particular problems:

- heaters are often badly installed
- paint wipes off when you are cleaning and that Aboriginal houses are always painted in awful colours.
- Homeswest won't repair cracked floor tiles because they say it is the responsibility of the tenant.
- Homeswest advised that the tenant would have to pay to replace an unworking stove.
- Many houses in the area don't have fences. A family who was suffering harassment from their neighbours asked if Homeswest could put up a fence. Homeswest advised that the tenant would have to pay for the fence but it had to be built to HW standards. Of course the tenant couldn't afford to pay for a fence.

## **Health and Priority Housing**

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2 issues were raised by the meeting.

Firstly, most people are unaware that a form exists to assist doctor's to explain priority housing need to Homeswest. Secondly, many doctors and tenants are frustrated because even when informed of significant medical need Homeswest don't pay sufficient attention.

## **Discrimination**

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Participants at the meeting felt that there were different Homeswest practices for Aboriginal people. Particular issues raised by the meeting in respect to Aboriginal tenancies were:

- maintenance is never carried out on Aboriginal tenancies within a reasonable time irrespective of the rental account
- vacating Aboriginal tenants always receive a tenant liability account.
- Homeswest will not fit flyscreens on the houses of Aboriginal tenants but will on the houses of non-Aboriginal tenants.
- there's a sense by Homeswest tenants that Homeswest is 'always prying into (their) day to day lives'.
- Aboriginal tenants have no choice of where and how to live.

There was a concern that segregation in the town was very obvious and that the Homeswest practices were instrumental in contributing to the division within the community.

## **Freedom of Information**

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People at the meeting expressed concern that outside of any rights under the Freedom of Information Act there was limited tenant access to information. This made it difficult for people to make decisions surrounding their tenancy. The issues raised were:

- it is difficult to get information generally.
- there was a lack of consistency of information provided by different Homeswest Officers.
- a sense that Homeswest were 'only interested in money but won't answer questions'.
- Homeswest won't usually provide an itemised account when requested.
- it is difficult to get Homeswest to admit that they have made a mistake.
- people felt that there was a need for a more 'common sense' approach by Homeswest staff to the provision of information.

## **Types of Housing and Homelessness**

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It was reported that there is both a shortage of housing stock and housing types in Kalgoorlie for Aboriginal people. This particularly affects large families, because there are few 4-5 bedroom houses, single young adults or elderly people.

### **Aged persons**

Aged persons accommodation is seen as a major problem. Participants explained that many old people live and die on the streets. The Aboriginal Hostel costs \$180 per week which is unaffordable for many pensioners, and other hostels and accommodation no longer provide accommodation for Aboriginal people from the Kalgoorlie area. The Little Sister's of the Poor is a nursing home which often accommodates people off the street.

### **Young People**

It was reported that young adults are forced to stay with their families because there is no suitable accommodation in Kalgoorlie. In general, young people can't access public housing unless they have children. This often causes stress in the household and further overcrowding.

Homeswest includes the income of any resident over 16 years in their rental calculations. Participants felt that this means that the family or the young people can not then use the situation to save money to assist the young person to get more appropriate housing and take the stress off the family. Alternatively there may be no contribution from the young person to the housing costs because of other demands on their income, such as the costs of looking for work or going to work. The effect may be that children are often forced out because the rent goes up too much. Alternatively the tenancy may be jeopardised because the tenant is unable to meet the increased rent.

In addition to the question of housing stock there is also the need for support services to young people to provide independent living skills. People reported that even when young people do get houses they often are unable to sustain the tenancy because they require support.

### **Camp living**

It was reported that many people in fringe dweller camps are living in total squalor. The accommodation is sub-standard. There are no cooking and heating facilities in the houses - they are freezing cold in winter and like ovens in summer. There is no drainage on the verandahs so when it rains people have to walk through water to get to the houses. Most of the houses are asbestos and are poorly maintained.

People felt that the community has seen a lot of money squandered because of lack of community consultation and lack of provision for ongoing maintenance. The meeting agreed that there was the need for caretakers to be appointed for each village who could have basic 'fix-it' skills in order to maintain the property.

### **Property held the by the Aboriginal Community**

Many people were concerned that properties in which the Aboriginal community held an interest were being sold for commercial purposes often without consultation with the Aboriginal community. It was the belief of the meeting that one hostel was converted to a backpackers hostel. Land belonging to the Aboriginal Lands Trust was, it was reported, redeveloped for group housing but no Aboriginal people are accommodated in the new development. Many people wanted an independent inquiry into properties held by or for the Aboriginal community in Kalgoorlie. The meeting sought information on what Aboriginal

housing stock exists, where it is located and how much is occupied by Aboriginal people.

### **General**

A central issue to the provision of housing is that of cultural appropriateness. It was stated that it needs to be recognised that many Aboriginal people are not used to living in houses. In addition accommodation may be required for varying and often large numbers of people. For example it was reported that there may be 3 children of a wide age range sharing the one room. This affects older children's ability to study. Further, families may be caring for extended family members due to illness, homelessness etc. In one case reported, there was a family with 5 children and a mentally ill brother-in-law residing in a three bed house. They were not able to access transfer. Participants have seen that lack of appropriate housing has kept families apart because they don't have room for all the children, so some children may be accommodated by other relatives.

In addition to the need for housing that is relevant to needs that are particularly specific to Aboriginal people in the area, the meeting also made reference to other special needs. Purpose built or appropriately adapted housing for disabled people is required and it was suggested that there be a pool of emergency housing for young women and children.

Hence it was felt that housing stock needs to be able to accommodate these varying needs. It is also recommended that community agencies or social workers be available to assist some Aboriginal people to live in their own home.

It was felt that there needed to be special recognition that public and community housing is generally the only housing stock available to Aboriginal people. Private rental is not available because of discrimination and the high rents (and subsequently the astronomically high ingoing costs - bond, rent in advance, letting fees) in the Kalgoorlie area. This adds to the problems of homelessness for Aboriginal people. Homeswest therefore needs to be particularly aware of the lack of choices for Aboriginal people and to therefore give greater recognition of their needs for housing. This extends also to Homeswest's policy of refusing housing assistance unless previous debts are mostly repaid, as discussed under 'Allocations'.

### **Home Ownership**

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Aboriginal people are encouraged into homeownership. Participants raised the point that along with such encouragement, there should be better information of the ongoing costs and implications of homeownership and availability of external advice and support. The example was given of a man who had bought a house in Kalgoorlie. He has since retired from work so is living on a low income. A

storm last January tore the roof from the house. He wasn't insured. No one offered any assistance to him and he is now living in a shed at the back of the block. The meeting felt that such problems could be overcome if people had access to better support and information when they first think of buying and on an ongoing basis. In addition emergency assistance should be available to such homeowners to ensure they don't lose their housing over unforeseen circumstances.

On the issue of home purchase schemes participants felt that they are really only available to people in high paying jobs especially as in many schemes the interest rates increase after the first year or so. It was suggested that public housing rent should go towards assisting the tenant to buy a property, especially where people have stayed a long time in Homeswest property.

## **Rent**

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The meeting generally supported the availability and use of bill paying schemes for rent and other expenses. However there were reports that people had difficulties with the system because of being unable to keep track of what deductions were being made.

There were also concerns over the process by which Homeswest adjusts rents according to the income of residents. Discussion regarding this point is documented above ('Types of Housing and Homelessness'). The further point was made that rents may be incorrectly increased by Homeswest on the basis of wrong information about the household arrangements.

An example illustrating the above two points was given. A pensioner was only receiving \$20 per week after deductions as his rent had been varied for other people supposedly living in the house. It was felt that the deductions were not reasonable as Homeswest had no way of knowing whether or not people in the house were staying there for an extended time or just visiting.

It was suggested that the use of direct debit schemes, which are the basis of the bill paying schemes, authorises the payee (eg. Homeswest) to adjust the deductions without further authorisation of the account holder. It was therefore suggested that direct debit schemes be replaced with periodic payment schemes so that the account holder maintains control of deductions. It was further recommended that people need to be guaranteed that the amount deducted for rent does not exceed 30% under any circumstances. It was also felt that people need to be better informed of their power to control deductions under the bill paying scheme and of Homeswest's processes for adjusting rent.

Of particular concern was the high costs of private rental. Rents average \$250 per week. Ingoing costs include rent in advance, letting fees and around \$1500 Bond so are outside of the affordability of low income people.

## **Eviction**

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There was some dissatisfaction that people are being evicted by Homeswest because of really small arrears, despite having almost completed repayment of previous debts.

The meeting also felt that Homeswest are quick to respond to tenant breaches, for example non-payment of rent, but are slow to act on their own obligations such as carrying out maintenance.

## Recommendations

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1. That Aboriginal Liaison Officers and Aboriginal counter staff be employed by Homeswest to help Aboriginal people with their applications and other queries, including availability of existing Homeswest procedures and options. (apparently a position has been advertised for Kalgoorlie).
2. Provision of cross-cultural training and procedures to assist Homeswest staff to appreciate the special issues affecting Aboriginal people, including the lack of housing options available, and to overcome overt or inadvertent discrimination in the decision making of staff; for example in respect to allocations, transfers, maintenance and general property management.
3. Reassessment of homeswest debts policy to enable people to be rehoused once they have commenced repayment of prior debts.
4. Reassessment of procedures for determining tenant liability, including greater recognition of fair wear and tear over long periods of time. Greater involvement of the tenant in the final assessment of tenant liability.
5. An independent inquiry into properties in Kalgoorlie in which the Aboriginal community has an interest - what stock exists, where it is located, how much is occupied by Aboriginal people, how decisions for redevelopment are made.
6. Greater diversity of housing stock to support to the special and different needs of Aboriginal people in the area, including a range of stock from old to new.
7. Provision of community based support services to provide information and support to Aboriginal people on housing (rental and home purchase) and housing related matters, including the provision of independent living skills and support to young people who are living without family support and to people who are unfamiliar with living in their own house.
8. Appointment of caretakers for each village, with basic 'fix-it' skills in order to maintain the property.
9. Development of an emergency assistance plan to assist low-income homeowners in unforeseen circumstances.
10. A scheme whereby public housing rent is contributed towards the purchase price of the property where tenants have lived in Homeswest premises for a long time.

11. The use of periodic payment schemes and not direct debit schemes in bill paying schemes so that the account holder is able to maintain control over deductions. Better provision of information to users of such schemes as to their rights to control the amount of deductions made.
12. A limit on the amount of rent to be deducted under direct debt schemes to 30% of income.
13. Better provision by Homeswest of information to tenants upon request (eg rent accounts) and as a matter of course where there are variations to the tenancy arrangements, such as changes adjustments to rent under the bill paying scheme.
14. Increase in community controlled housing, including the devolution of Homeswest stock to non-profit housing associations or provision of stock on peppercorn leaseholds.
15. Review of the Aboriginal Housing Board of Homeswest to ensure it has more than an advisory role, has more power and is more responsive to local issues.