

# ABORIGINAL HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

Culturally informed and culturally led housing and homelessness services are the key to change

Shelter WA's vision is for all Aboriginal people to have access to a safe, affordable and appropriate home that enables them to thrive.

**We believe that the principle of self-determination must underpin the delivery of housing and homelessness services for Aboriginal people.**

Research shows that Aboriginal people face significant disadvantage in housing markets. For example, compared to other Australians, Aboriginal people are less likely to own their own home and experience homelessness 8.8 times the rate of non-Aboriginal people.<sup>[1]</sup> **In WA, while Aboriginal people represent 4 percent of the WA population, they represented 50 percent of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) clients in 2022-23.**<sup>[2]</sup> These figures have worsened over the last five years.

There is a current lack of low barrier and culturally safe service and accommodation options for Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness. This includes a critical shortage of crisis, transitional and short stay accommodation options in both metropolitan and regional areas.

The WA Government's *All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030* has a significant and welcomed focus on reducing barriers faced by Aboriginal people in accessing housing, and empowering Aboriginal people and organisations to design and deliver services and accommodation that meet their needs. Realising this commitment will require additional resources, investment and commitment to ensure housing and homelessness services for Aboriginal people are culturally led and culturally informed.

Specifically, greater investment is needed to expand Housing First programs for Aboriginal

people experiencing homelessness, drawing on the Housing First practice principles developed by Noongar Mia Mia.<sup>[3]</sup>

Significant reform is also urgently needed in the management of public housing including ending evictions into homelessness. This requires increased early intervention and prevention initiatives, such as culturally led tenancy support services, and greater cultural competency of staff and practice in the Department of Communities.

Embedding the principle of self-determination involves listening to the voice and lived experience of Aboriginal people and involving them in decision making, which is critical to the improvement of services.<sup>[4]</sup> It also incorporates greater ownership and control around what and how data is collected, utilised and interpreted in the sector.

**Shelter WA is also calling for greater resourcing and commitment to enable the growth of a strong and diverse Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations (ACHO) sector in WA** that can provide culturally safe and informed support for Aboriginal people. This would include the establishment of an ACHO peak body in WA alongside resources and support for ACHOs to increase their growth capacity and capability.

The quality and availability of housing is particularly poor for the 15,000 Aboriginal people living in remote and town-based communities in WA.<sup>[5]</sup> **Researchers have found that the current stock of regional and remote Aboriginal housing is unable to provide healthy and comfortable indoor environments, with significant health and wellbeing impacts.**<sup>[6]</sup> This is being exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, especially extreme heat, and by the persistent issue of overcrowding.<sup>[7]</sup>

[1] AIHW (2024) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health performance network. 2.01 Housing. Data from 2021 Census.

[2] Productivity Commission (2024) Report on Government Services. Part G: Housing and Homelessness. Table 19A.4.

[3] <https://noongarmiamia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NHFP-Report.pdf>

[4] For example, please refer to the findings and recommendations of the Aboriginal-led research project Birdiya Maya Homelessness Research Project: community report (2023). <https://www.wungening.com.au/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=5c4a5a40-21fb-4c5b-8818-8ecb936f247f>



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Enhanced minimum standards are urgently required for social housing in relation to energy efficiency and thermal comfort. Implementation would require investment in energy efficiency retrofits for social housing and the installation of appropriate heating and cooling systems especially in regions that experience extreme heat.<sup>[8]</sup>

**The ongoing costs of remote housing are significant and require long-term sustainable funding commitments from the Commonwealth Government with co-investment from state governments.** Shelter WA supports National Shelter's position that state and territory governments should develop specific Aboriginal housing strategies as part of their bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth in the National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness (NASHH). This is an important step in realising Target 9 (reducing overcrowding) of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

Shelter WA also supports the reform of the head maintenance contract for the maintenance of housing on remote Aboriginal communities to reduce inefficient costs and processes and create localised maintenance services that support regional and Aboriginal employment.

## Shelter WA recommendations:

- That the Commonwealth Government and WA State Government adopt a principle of self-determination and embed this principle across housing and homelessness services for Aboriginal people.
- That the Commonwealth Government and WA State Government provide increased new investment to ensure that housing and homelessness services are culturally informed and culturally led.
- That the WA Government urgently and significantly increase investment in new crisis and transitional accommodation for Aboriginal people, including additional short stay accommodation facilities in the regions.<sup>[9]</sup>
- That the Commonwealth Government and WA State Government provide new investment to support and grow the ACHO sector, including the development of an ACHO peak body, support for organisations to become registered, and a commitment to transfer income generating public housing stock to the sector.
- That the WA State Government work with local Aboriginal communities to reform remote housing maintenance contracts to ensure they meet need and are culturally designed and delivered. New contracts should be place-based, support local businesses and enhance local economic growth and employment.
- That the WA State Government increase investment in tenant advocacy services for Aboriginal tenants to sustain tenancies and prevent evictions.
- That the WA State Government invest in a statewide 'healthy homes' retrofit program for all social housing to improve thermal comfort, energy efficiency and the cost of living for tenants.<sup>[10]</sup>
- That the Department of Communities work with Aboriginal service providers and Aboriginal people with lived experience of homelessness to review current operational policies and practice – with an objective of reducing evictions and barriers to Aboriginal people's access to social housing (for example debt policies and identification requirements).

[5] Department of Communities (2022) Remote Aboriginal communities. Retrieved from: <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/departments-of-communities/remotely-aboriginal-communities#:~:text=About%2012%2C000%20people%20live%20in,Aboriginal%20communities%20throughout%20Western%20Australia.>

[6] Lea, T. et al (2021) Sustainable Indigenous housing in regional and remote Australia, AHURI, Final Report no.386.

[7] Arabena, K. Holland, C. and Hamilton, S. (2021) Reimagining Indigenous housing, health and wealth: the necessary economic response to unlock the potential in the Indigenous

Estate. NATSIHA, National Shelter and Shelter WA.

[8] For more detail about proposed minimum standards please refer to Make Renting Fair's 'Out with the Mould: The Case for Minimum Standards in WA' report releasing in October 2024 at <https://makerentingfairwa.org.au/resources/reports/>

[9] This was a recommendation (no.27) of the Inquiry into the funding of homelessness services in WA, published June 2023. The recommendation specified the need to expedite development of short stay facilities in Perth, Geraldton and East Kimberley and to investigate the need for facilities in other regions.

[10] This program should include additional measures like energy efficient water heaters and rooftop/community solar to further reduce emissions in social housing, and to better equip tenants for climate changes. In extreme climate zones such as the Kimberley, individual or community batteries should be included to maximise use of renewables to power air conditioners and reduce energy bills to help combat energy poverty.