



**Shelter SA**  
Housing: a basic human right

## **Beyond Political Ideology – The Mainstreaming of Aboriginal Public Housing Policy**

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“Houses through their very structure allow for and perpetuate stability, privacy and future-orientation; while [Aboriginal] camps through their very structure allow for and perpetuate mobility, intimacy and immediacy.”

(Musharbash 2008:151)

### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

Australian public housing policies and service provision do not incorporate evidence-based information about Aboriginal culture and this is extremely detrimental to Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> people. When compared to other countries, Australia is regressing in the provision of public housing for Aboriginal people rather than developing because of the mainstreaming of policy and service provision. This paper supports the efforts of Shelter SA to raise awareness and lobby Federal and State governments to remove assimilationist housing policies and services and develop alternatives that reflect evidence-based, culturally appropriate knowledge and still pay attention to accountability and transparency. Shelter SA is the peak body for housing and homelessness in South Australia but the issues raised here are applicable on a national level. The aim of this work is not to ‘preach to the converted’ but to re-ignite debate and discussion about detrimental mainstream housing policy and practice.

#### **Methods**

Shelter SA has collected primary data over the last four years through focus groups and interviews with Aboriginal people under the guidance of their Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Branch. Key themes and a number of direct exemplar quotes are presented

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<sup>1</sup> the term Aboriginal is used in this paper to describe Aboriginal people from all areas in Australia and surrounding Islands. It is acknowledged that particular groups have preferences for what they are collectively named.

here, complemented by supporting literature, including a number of journal articles and research reports, purposefully selected for review with preference placed on material produced by Aboriginal researchers and authors.

## **Results**

What is known and talked about by Aboriginal people regarding family and kinship, mobility, domiciliary arrangements and housing design is not incorporated into mainstream public housing policies and service provision. Mainstream tenancy support programs do not address the drivers of tenancy problems and do not realistically address culturally inappropriate housing, policy or services, at best they are a ‘band aid’ measure, at worse they fail to address entrenched discrimination, stereotypes and racism. The key themes to emerge from the analysis of primary data include the following:

1. Genocide and assimilation;
2. The meaning of home:
3. Mainstreaming
4. Cultural obligations to accommodate family; and
5. Maintenance and housing design.

## **Conclusion**

It is time to call upon all Australians to demand that their Government demonstrate the political will required to improve the situation of Aboriginal people to increase access to public housing, the suitability and quality of the housing and appropriate tenancy rules by developing and implementing evidence-based policies and services.

# Beyond Political Ideology – The Mainstreaming of Aboriginal Public Housing Policy



This original painting by Joylene Warrior was the image of the annual Homeless Connect: Homelessness, Health and Housing Expo organised by Shelter SA in 2011. Joylene is a local, emerging Indigenous artist whose paintings have appeared in several exhibitions over the past 2 years. This stunning painting was produced in the Art Class at Byron Place Community Centre and exhibited in this year's SALA Festival. Art classes are extremely important to homeless people. The classes provide people with a creative outlet, encourage social interaction and regular connection with services as well as giving people a sense of achievement and purpose.

## Introduction

The Encarta Dictionary definition of mainstream is “the ideas, actions and values that are most widely accepted by a group or society, e.g. in politics, fashion or music” and is used in this paper as a term that reflects the ideas, actions and values of the majority, Eurocentric culture in Australia. When public housing policies and services are mainstreamed they do not incorporate the cultural values or aspirations of minority groups. Another definition of mainstreaming is as a “principled approach to collaborative engagement” (Maaka and Fleras, 2009) that does recognise “the need for indigenous concerns and realities to be incorporated into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all policies; encourages

policymakers to adopt an indigenous perspective; and promotes the full participation of indigenous stakeholders in policymaking so that indigenous peoples' needs and aspirations migrate from the margins to the centre (see also Hanson 2007; Poole 2008). The latter definition of mainstreaming is lacking in Australian public housing policy.

It is clearly articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) that Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making that affects them and that States will consult and cooperate in good faith with the Indigenous peoples to obtain their consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them. When Australian public housing policies are compared to those of other countries such as Canada and New Zealand, Australia is regressing rather than developing, with consistent mainstreaming across the states and territories and as such, they do not comply with the United Nations Declaration. Consultation and participation are one aspect of involving Aboriginal people in policy development and implementation. In addition to continuing to be excluded from policy processes including their design, implementation and evaluation (Maaka and Fleras, 2009), there are many tensions between Aboriginal cultural values and priorities and those of Government in relation to the mainstreaming of public housing policy and service delivery.

What can be described as 'evidence' is contested in the academic literature and according to Marston and Watts (2003) the 'irreducible richness and complexity of social reality' affects the definition of the term. A sociological conception of 'truth' and one way of addressing complex issues is to access multiple sources of information that includes research that utilises good quality methodology and methods *as well as* taking into consideration the perspectives of those who have a stake in the issue at hand. The term 'evidence' is used in this paper to describe information that is reliable, accurate, credible and accepted by Aboriginal people,

including quantitative and qualitative sources. The term ‘evidence-based policy’ is also debated in the academic literature (Marston and Watts, 2003) and plainly put it describes the intersection between research and policy development, where policy is largely (and sometimes wholly) influenced by political ideology. The term as it is used in this paper refers to the seeming lack of evidence in policy development which been commented on by many authors from different disciplines as long ago as 1979 (Long, Memmott and Seelig, 2007, Heppell, 1979, Elvin et al, 2010). Elvin et al conclude that calls to pay attention to the accumulated evidence have not been heeded (2010:5). The depth and breadth of high quality research into Aboriginal housing and homelessness is noticeable, as is its lack of application in Aboriginal public housing policy and service delivery. As one example, Elvin et al (2010:5) quote the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery (2009) and the objectives it contains which include the following:

- Increase access to suitable and culturally inclusive services
- Increase standards
- Increased level of governance and leadership
- Simpler access and better coordination of services
- Increase economic and social participation

The same authors ask how these objectives can be achieved when “evidence of the impact of mobility, Aboriginal kinship, domiciliary arrangements and spatiality” are not included in policy and service delivery (Elvin et al, 2010:6).

Shelter SA is the peak body for housing and homelessness in South Australia with a brief to conduct advocacy, research and education around housing policies and services that affect people on low incomes who also live with disadvantage. The lack of evidence-based policy and service provision was raised both in Shelter’s submission to the SA Housing Strategy

Green Paper and their review of all the Green Paper submissions. Emanating from South Australia, the issues raised in this paper however, are applicable on a national level. It is argued that Australian public housing policies and service provision are not evidence-based and that this is extremely detrimental to Aboriginal people. The paper is organised around five key themes including genocide and assimilation, the meaning of home, mainstreaming, cultural obligations to accommodate family and maintenance. The conclusion contains a call to action for all Australians to insist upon more effective and relevant policy for the Nation's first people.

## **Aim**

The aim of this paper is to bring back the fundamental problem of mainstreaming public housing policies and service delivery for public debate and illustrates the poor fit with evidence-based, culturally appropriate knowledge about Aboriginal housing needs and aspirations.

## **Methods**

Secondary and primary data inform this paper. Primary data were gathered and analysed over the last four and a half years and findings are presented through describing the common themes to emerge from this qualitative work and a number of direct participant quotes. Primary data has been collected at a number of Shelter SA events held in South Australia, two Aboriginal Housing Forums, one at Nunkuwarrin Yunti and one in the Southern Region - 'Looking at the Aboriginal Housing Crisis in 2009'. Two Aboriginal community housing workshops were held, one at Tauondi Aboriginal College and the other in the Peachey Belt area, both titled Aboriginal Community Housing Workshop - 'What's happening at your place'. Other data has been collected from monthly Aboriginal Homelessness and Housing Support Branch meetings since 2007. Data have also been collected from other associated

meetings with service provider organisations, State and Federal Government meetings and Aboriginal community members. It is estimated that at least 800 people have participated in these activities since the inception of the Shelter SA Aboriginal Homelessness and Housing Support Branch in 2007. The literature reviewed provides context for the key themes.

### **Key Theme 1 Genocide and Assimilation**

The breaking down of a minority culture by a dominant culture is called genocide and unfortunately, Australia is the only country in the world that has a history of enshrining genocide in legislation. It is widely accepted that the purpose of Aboriginal legislation aimed to break down Aboriginal culture. Genocide can take many forms including murder, causing serious physical or mental harm and the forcible transfer of children of the group to another group (Tatz, 1999) as described by the following quote:

... while physical killing was a feature of Tasmania, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, a different facet of genocide was under way in Victoria and New South Wales. As early as 1858 in Victoria, there was a call for treating "half-castes" differently from "full-bloods". The (first) Protection Board said, in relation to "half-castes", that it had a duty to "interfere at once to prevent their growing up amongst us with the habits of the savage, as they possess the instincts, powers of mind and altogether different constitution of the white man". By 1886, forced assimilation was in full swing: the Aborigines Protection Act 1886 (Vic).

(Tatz, 1999:24)

A notorious enactment of genocide and one that continues to confront people, including both Aboriginal and white Australians, is the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families - the 'Stolen Generation'. Genocide, however, is a difficult and sensitive topic. We often hear white people saying today, 'why should I be sorry - I didn't do it'. Simply by



being white however, people benefit from belonging to the dominant culture and when discriminatory policies and practices are not challenged the status quo is maintained. Whether or not people are comfortable with this notion, we cannot simply bury our heads in the sand about the appalling, third world status of our first people. One participant in the Shelter SA consultations said that:

*Sometimes when Aboriginal people speak out it seems too hard-line or hostile towards non-Aboriginal people. This has got to be understood! Aboriginal people have lived their whole lives being treated like second class citizens, lived with it every day, so that when they are given an opportunity to speak, their words have a force behind them that some non-Aboriginal people find disturbing. We need information about Aboriginal friendly services and resources available to us so that we can help our people. Who is listening to people's problems and issues? Who is helping? We need more Healing or Yarning Circles where people can come and feel supported.*

Culturally appropriate housing is seen as being of “great importance to the social, cultural and economic strength of Aboriginal peoples in urban areas” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996a). Assimilation is a tool of genocide and in turn, when culturally inappropriate public housing is provided for Aboriginal people, housing becomes a “tool used to assimilate people” (Elvin et al, 2010:6). The following quote taken from Walker and Barcham, 2010.318-319) demonstrates the links between housing and culture:

Adequate and affordable housing is central to quality of life in cities (Hulchanski, 2002). When state responsibility to resource common social standards of citizenship is upheld, self-government by Indigenous communities or organisations in the design and implementation of housing programmes has tended to improve outcomes in urban areas, compared with mainstream social housing, because of the closer adherence to

culturally linked conceptions and aspirations of what a home entails, management styles, and design (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1999; Memmott, 2003; 318 R Walker, M Barcham, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Waldegrave et al, 2006). This is consistent with a growing body of evidence from a variety of policy fields which shows better outcomes when designed and delivered by Indigenous peoples (eg, Durie et al, 2002; Minore and Katt, 2007). As one group of scholars has recently argued in Canada, Aboriginal quality of life can be improved only on Aboriginal peoples' own terms and not pre-packaged Eurocentric terms (Sale'e et al, 2006).

(Walker and Barcham, 2010:318-319)

A simple explanation of what stereotypes are and how they lead to discrimination and disadvantage provides the context for a discussion about the way that dominant groups maintain their status quo and contribute to 'mainstream' ideas and practices. A stereotype is a belief about specific social groups or individuals that are standardised and simplified ideas about them based on some prior (often wrong) assumptions. When people are seen as being different or 'other' than the dominant culture they are stereotyped, unfairly based solely on their appearance. Whether they are right or wrong, stereotypes are "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann in Klineberg, 1974). Social and cultural norms describe behaviours that are socially and culturally acceptable – they are about the way people are expected to act. They are often as irrationally formed as stereotypes, are one-sided and inherently reflect selfish interests.

In 1995, Herrnstein teamed with Charles Murray, a political scientist, and published the controversial *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). *The Bell Curve* is a voluminous study about the assumed inherited intelligence differential between

persons of African and European descent. According to the authors, genetic endowment will dictate intelligence, socioeconomic achievement, social pathology, and intelligence, which will be increasingly unequally distributed across the world's racial populations. As societies become more technological, they contend that stratification by cognitive ability will prevail. Given the genetic nature of this phenomenon, social programs and other government compensatory interventions are then ineffective and a waste of tax dollars. This notion is grist of the "dumb Black" stereotype that has permeated Western academy since its origin. Accordingly, the Bell Curve is heretofore unsubstantiated as a valid premise but manages some validity extended from the prestige of that academy.

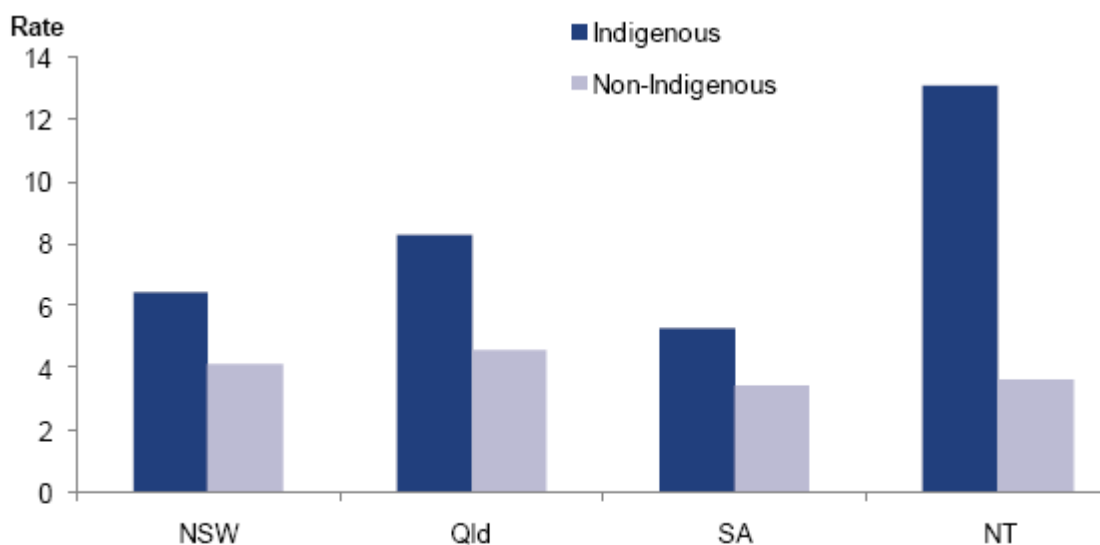
(Hall, 2001:109)

Deviance, a sociological concept, describes behaviour that is not in keeping with norms. We can observe deviance when we see negative reactions of people towards behaviour that is not in keeping with norms. Social stigma and discrimination are the result of not complying with the social and cultural norms of majority populations that create a "them and us" mentality. In this way, people who are different from "us" are negatively stereotyped, become dehumanised, and therefore do not deserve attention or empathy. Discriminatory practices are the result of the interplay between stereotypes and deviance and create disadvantage for minority groups that affect their access to income, education, employment, housing and health, which are the social determinants of health. Professor Kickbusch, the 2007 Adelaide Thinker in Residence, recommended actions to support the implementation of Health in all Policies across South Australia but the South Australian Housing Strategy Green Paper (2011) only refers broadly to 'healthy lifestyles' and 'improving health' for Aboriginal people. During the Green Paper consultation workshops held in 2011, one recommendation

put forward by participants was to establish closer links with Health SA to jointly address the impact of housing on health.

Many Aboriginal people have a good standards of living but there are too many living with unacceptably low levels of life expectancy, education, health and employment and there are significant gaps between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population (FAHCSIA, 2012a). The last Closing the Gap Report (COAG, 2012) shows some improvements, but the latest statistics are disheartening, especially when each number represents a life that is lost - over 200 Aboriginal children die before they are five years of age **every year** - there is still a very long way to go as the graph below taken from the COAG report demonstrates (infant deaths are those of children less than one year of age):

**Figure 1 - Infant deaths per 1000 live births, by Indigenous status, selected States and Territories, 2006–2010**



Notes:

The only reference to Closing the Gap in the SA Housing Strategy Green Paper (2011) is “Improving service responses and supporting partner agencies to do the same for

Aboriginal people is essential in contributing to ‘Closing the Gap’ and reducing disadvantage for Aboriginal South Australians”. This highlights another way in which the policy context is not clearly represented in relation to public housing for Aboriginal people nor is there any detail provided about how State Government intends to implement improvements to services.

## **Key Theme 2 The Meaning of Home**

Providing housing in fixed neighbourhoods and in the European style is a poor fit with the culture and values of Aboriginal people who abandon properties when an occupant dies, have no strong value of object possessions and have culturally distinct household structures with high levels of family visitation (Elvin et al, 2010:6). Powerful cultural norms have driven Aboriginal people to initiate and participate in highly creative and adaptable practices to resist structural limitations and an example of this is house-swapping as part of sorry business or to be nearer family, without the ‘official’ consent of a government landlord (Elvin et al, 2010:6). The motivators of mobility are kinship and social relations and it is well-known that mobility builds and maintains social capital (Elvin et al, 2010:7). bell hooks<sup>2</sup> (1990), an African American academic and cultural commentator, whose understanding of home aligns with the Aboriginal experience, writes about the homes of ‘black folk’ in America as sites where marginalised people can return each day to support and foster their relationships in the following two quotes:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a home-place, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut), had a radical political dimension. Despite

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<sup>2</sup> *bell hooks purposefully written all in lower case*

the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's home-place, was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanisation, where one could resist (1990:42).

Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside, in the public world (1990:69).

According to participants in the Shelter SA consultations, Aboriginal meanings of home also speak of 'belonging' and of traditional lands where community and landscape come together to create an unqualified sense of union. For Aboriginal people living in urban environments, meanings of home also embody notions of safety from the world where they are a minority and a space where relationships are affirmed and family connections reinforced. The following quote describes the experience of complete integration offset by a history of domination and resistance to it:

*For me the meaning of home has many layers. There is home, which are my traditional lands, where I feel safe, like I belong and where I don't have to explain myself to the world. But my house where I live in Adelaide is my home because it is where my family comes and it is our safe haven from a sometimes hostile world. It's where we go and we know that the rules don't change and we know what to expect - love, caring, nurturing and shelter.*

A participant from Jabiru describes her understanding of home:

*Home is the feeling I get when I arrive at Darwin Airport and smell the Territory air.*

*Home is when I jump into the fresh waterholes in Kakadu, feel the soft water on my skin. Home is when I am safe from harm.*

Picking up on these ideas of safety, the concept of cultural safety has emerged as one way for people and organisations to approach working with Aboriginal people. The theory behind cultural safety encourages a focus on continuous self-reflection and lifelong learning. Phillips (2004:8) provides this definition of cultural safety, relating to health care services for Aboriginal people:

Ensuring that those individuals and systems delivering health care are aware of the impact of their own culture and cultural values on the delivery of services, and that they have some knowledge of, respect for and sensitivity towards the cultural needs of others.

Phillips (2004:8) also states that “There is much written about slightly different but related terms, such as ‘cultural security’, ‘culturally appropriate’, ‘culturally aware’, ‘culturally valid’, and ‘culturally competent’” however, many of these terms imply that once you have achieved security, awareness or competence, learning and growth cease.

### **Key Theme 3 Mainstreaming**

A number of National Partnership Agreements have been developed through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). They apparently ‘commit’ governments to a common framework of outcomes, progress measures and policy directions to ‘guide reform’. FAHCSIA (2012b) documents state that “the agreements build on current initiatives, address shortfalls and in many cases provide significant additional funds”. The National Partnership Agreement on Social Housing for example is put forward as contributing to outcomes including the following:

- people being able to rent housing that meets their needs,
- people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness achieving sustainable housing and social inclusion, and
- Indigenous people having improved housing amenity and reduced overcrowding.

(FAHCSIA, 2012c)

The consequences of a ‘we know what is best for you’ approach to policymaking and service delivery perpetuate a Eurocentric status quo and sees Aboriginal people forcibly incorporated into the system of another culture (Maaka and Fleras, 2009) and as policy is value-laden and socially constructed, when it is mainstreamed, it is infused with dominant values and ideals. It is argued in this paper that Aboriginal Australians are still not able to rent public or private housing that meets their needs due to discrimination and racism in the private rental market and cultural barriers in public housing. Mainstream public housing is not sustainable or amenable for Aboriginal people unless they fit into the western housing paradigm and comply with the cultural and social norms of the dominant culture. The term ‘overcrowding’ is used all the time by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, showing that the use of the term by the dominant culture has been so pervasive that it has entered into the Aboriginal vocabulary even though it represents a lack of understanding by white people about the reasons why Aboriginal people do not remain living in one place and why many people from one family live in one place as well as Aboriginal culture generally. It is difficult to see how the rhetoric of the Partnership Agreement on Social Housing translates into practice for Aboriginal people in the current policy and service delivery environment. When the barriers are well known, it is even more difficult to see why these are not reflected in policy and service delivery.



In South Australia, tenancies previously managed by the Aboriginal Housing Authority have been transferred to mainstream management and the Authority no longer exists. It is not known how the tenants affected by the transfer are faring and research is required to shed light on this issue. Aboriginal public housing tenants abide by RTA and mainstream public housing rules, but this denies their cultural beliefs and practices. An example of mainstream housing policy and practice comes from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services of the Northern Territory Government and their ‘Remote Public Housing Tenancy Rules’ (Attachment 1). Tenancy support programs appear to be helpful in supporting Aboriginal tenants to maintain their tenancies and avoid eviction but do not address the ‘drivers’ of tenancy problems (Elvin et al, 2010:13) which have never been part of policy-making and include the following:

- Discrimination by landlords and neighbours
- Failure of landlords and housing agencies to appropriately address cultural behaviour and imperatives such as duties of hospitality to extended family responsibilities and demand sharing
- Lack of understanding of indigenous patters of occupation and use of housing
- Indigenous belief systems and mourning customs
- Inability to meet unforeseen expenses such as funeral costs
- Indigenous patterns of mobility

(Flatau et al. 2009:3)

If Australian policy-makers do not begin to incorporate Aboriginal cultural values and needs, more examples of tenant ‘rules’ may emerge that are clearly discriminatory. The Tenancy Rules clearly do not take culture into account and are not compliant with the Northern Territory Residential Tenancies Act 1999 (Northern Territory Government, 1999), allowing

public housing authorities to evict tenants for 'not following the rules'. There is a notable imbalance balance between landlord rights and tenant rights, with the former taking precedence.

Aboriginal participation in and control over their lives, essentially self-determination, is being reduced through the mainstreaming of services and what is perceived as a broad lack of authentic consultation. At the same time there is no evidence that mainstreaming improves Indigenous policy and service delivery, but many indications that it fails to deliver positive outcomes and negatively impacts on individuals and families. For mainstreaming and the 'whole-of-government' approaches that are currently so popular, to work credibly, they have to be developed and implemented in partnership with Aboriginal communities and their organisations. If this does not occur, Aboriginal inequality is also effectively being mainstreamed, accepted and unquestioned.

As repeatedly stated by participants at the Shelter SA Tauondi Aboriginal community housing workshop in May, the mainstreaming of Aboriginal housing is strongly opposed by workshop attendees who believe that there is a need for a dedicated Aboriginal housing agency that understands the cultural obligations and family responsibilities that are distinct to Aboriginal people and communities. It was also commonly agreed by participants that there is a tangible lack of cultural competence within public housing and other agencies and that mainstreaming services magnifies this lack. One participant at the Tauondi workshop stated:

*Aboriginal Housing should not have been mainstreamed. Aboriginal people need their own housing authority. We need representation, especially since the Aboriginal Housing authority was dis-banded. An Elected Aboriginal Board should oversee the governance of an Aboriginal Housing Agency and be accountable to the regional councils within their jurisdiction. There is no Aboriginal voice! There is no advocacy*

*for Aboriginal people. Aboriginal Housing Officers will treat Aboriginal people respectfully and understand the issues.....why are we re-inventing the wheel, when there are Aboriginal people who could provide an excellent service. For most Aboriginal people their first front counter experience is offensive as there is no understanding of the Aboriginal way, so we need an Aboriginal housing authority, staffed with Aboriginal customer service people and we need it now!*

An elder told this story highlighting the need for non-discriminatory and responsive services:

*I was standing in the queue waiting to speak to a housing officer. There was a young lad in front of me. When it was his turn to be served, the white housing officer behind the front desk was so rude to him, so racist and off-hand with him that the lad started to try and jump the counter to punch the guy out! I reached out and grabbed his arm and pulled him back. He was wild, so angry! But I said listen, the only person whose going to get into trouble here is you brother! You'll end up in the lock-up if you don't calm down. I told him that I had heard what the white housing officer had said and that he had treated him like shit, like a bag of shit! I told him, we deserve better than this but don't get yourself into trouble for that racist moron behind the desk! This is the kind of shit we put up with every day of our lives...no wonder we get angry!*

#### **Key Theme 4 - Cultural obligations to accommodate family**

According to Elvin et al (2010:1) the main value pursued by governments is financial accountability but it is family that Aboriginal people value most and family and culture that guides their actions. It is rare to have Aboriginal households made up of nuclear families. One Australian study found that a substantial number of participating Aboriginal households experienced change both in their household composition and in the location of the house they

lived in during the course of the study (Elvin et al, 2010:1), ‘impelled’ by family and cultural needs.

Social, political, economic and cultural structures are affected by agency, “namely the actions of a group of actors or of individual actors who are exercising autonomy or choice, that have an effect on outcomes that we are observing” (Elvin et al, 2010:15). Agency is contested concept in the academic literature however, in an Australian study, agency was used to illustrate the way that Aboriginal families made decisions about who would occupy public houses and notified government departments after families had taken possession of those properties (Elvin et al, 2010:15). So despite the constraints of the social, political, economic and cultural structures, the Aboriginal participants demonstrated their capacity to act through intra-community mobility arrangements that met their own needs and “are often best placed to negotiate the best solutions for housing issues given knowledge of local conditions” (Elvin et al, 2010:43).

Agency and intra-community mobility must both be recognised in order to effectively and appropriately house remote Aboriginal people (Elvin et al, 2010:1). A Kaurna Elder participant in one of the Shelter SA consultations spoke about cultural obligations to accommodate family:

*Housing is a very sensitive issue for Aboriginal people because of racism, displacement, disadvantage and stolen lands. A friend of mine had sixty traditional people staying at her place for about two weeks for sorry business. She spent her whole pension check in a day and then had to go begging to services to get food parcels for the next two weeks. How many people want to give you anything if you say you have sixty people staying with you? No-one!!!! But she couldn't turn those people away. Anything she has she is expected to share. It's our cultural way.*

Large, extended families living together in accommodation that is too small or with poor amenity, can quickly lead to family problems, including alcohol abuse and violence. For Aboriginal people, “traditionally, social pressures were worked out in the context of open spaces, mobility and relocation of dwellings” (Elvin et al, 2010:6). A lack of appropriate and accessible options makes it difficult to relocate and when combined with the effect of mainstream public housing tenancy regimes, “personal responsibility or agency in the management of intra-community mobility that satisfies cultural norms and relieves social tensions will be curtailed” (Elvin et al, 2010:6). Social policy rhetoric conveys a message to citizens that it aims to address social problems like the ones described above, which contribute to negative stereotypes, yet policy makers continue to ignore evidence-based material. One community member spoke about her household at the Shelter SA Northern Aboriginal Community workshop. She has two sons and seven nieces and nephews whose parents are deceased.

*I am the only support these kids have! The education and the health systems have let me and the kids down. They are all camping at my place, taking drugs and drinking all the time. They won't go to school! I pay for everything; I am supporting them, feeding them and trying to care for them. They have trashed the house and the front yard and the back yard. They kicked the inside doors off. I can't force them to leave. They are my family, my brother and sisters kids! I have a true obligation to these kids. Look, I'm still paying off a Housing SA damages debt when my brother was having a psychotic episode and smashed stuff up. He has bi-polar disorder and he's homeless. I want a skip to take away the rubbish in my yard but I cannot afford that, not looking after all these kids as well. I want air-conditioning. My house is really hot but I can't afford that. I'm just living; surviving day to day and nothing is getting better. It's*

*getting worse. I got no support, no help and now I reckon I will just walk away and live on the streets myself. It's all too hard!*

### **Arrivals from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY Lands)**

Aboriginal people who come from communities on the remote South Australian APY Lands call themselves Anangu. In recent years, within the Adelaide city and metropolitan area there has been an increase in people arriving from the APY lands who are recognised by local, urban Aboriginal people, as Traditional. The main reason these Traditional people move to Adelaide is to access tertiary health care. Across Australia kidney disease is a serious and growing problem and access to dialysis is rarely available in remote Anangu communities. The influx of Anangu in Adelaide is exacerbated by the Northern Territory's decision to accept only a very limited number of South Australian's for dialysis treatment in Alice Springs (The Anangu Lands Paper Tracker, 2012). The following table from the Anangu Lands Paper Tracker (2012) provides information on the distances between 7 APY communities and 3 cities/centres in which renal dialysis is available as follows:

	<b>Distance by road to Alice Springs</b>	<b>Distance by road to Port Augusta</b>	<b>Distance by road to Adelaide</b>
<b>Amata</b>	483km	1124km	1429km
<b>Iwantja</b>	414km	825km	1130km
<b>Kaltjiti</b>	485km	962km	1267km
<b>Mimili</b>	474km	885km	1190km
<b>Pipalyatjara</b>	685km	1326km	1631km
<b>Pukatja</b>	420km	1027km	1332km
<b>Watarru</b>	815km	1456km	1761km
<b>Average</b>	<b>539km</b>	<b>1086km</b>	<b>1391km</b>

**Please note:** The distances listed in this table are indicative only. The exact distance of a specific journey would depend on the route taken.

Being removed from family groups and country has a profound effect on Aboriginal people. In 2009 the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council NPY Women's Council wrote to the South Australian Government to express their "extreme distress" at the impact the dialysis policy would have on renal patients stating that:

The recent decision to force new patients to undergo treatment only in their home state ... is likely to make end stage kidney failure even more distressing and unsettling for sufferers.

And

We hardly need to let you know that it will be virtually impossible for clients to visit home or family to visit them when they live so far away from home.

#### The Anangu Lands Paper Tracker, 2012

Most Anangu arriving in Adelaide do not initially sleep rough in the parklands or surrounding areas. Usually, they stay with family and relatives, possibly moving from place to place. Some keep moving because there is already overcrowding or conflict in a household and many exhaust their accommodation resources and end up living on the streets. It is very unusual for housed Anangu families not to have other people staying with them and the extensive, regular traffic through their houses can place an heavy financial burden on the rent-paying tenant who is culturally obliged to honour their kinship responsibilities, and while they may do this very willingly, the cost of feeding and accommodating people is often beyond their financial means.

According to the South Australian Social Inclusion Unit, who managed a small study into Anangu in Adelaide in 2009, there were a minimum of 20 households of Anangu in the Adelaide metropolitan area. There were approximately 400 people, many of them children, living in those households. In the 12 households that participated in the scoping study, of the 80 people residing in them, 43 were children. Services connected and working with Anangu do not seem to be able to provide what is practically required for Anangu to function appropriately in an urban environment. The quote below describes a particular Anangu woman's living conditions reflect the gap between service delivery and the provision of material, practical support:

*How is it that a prominent 64-year old (Anangu) Aboriginal woman in Adelaide, with chronic disease, who is bedridden, does not have the basic health hardware such as handrails, a working fridge or a telephone to call an Ambulance? She does not have ambulance cover or for that matter even a disability parking pass. She does not have an out-of-hospital care package or an aged-care package. She is living in overcrowded conditions, in a house that until recently was infested with mice and cockroaches and yet she is connected to 25 different programs and services.*

Monsignor De Cappel (2009)

The problem of balancing centuries of cultural tradition with a totally foreign ideology has created serious problems for those people who choose to live in urban environments. It is not surprising therefore, that when Anangu arrive in metropolitan Adelaide they seek family and extended family that will support their related world view, their “ways of seeing, knowing and being” (Martin, 2001).

### **Key Theme 5 – Maintenance & housing design**



Maintenance is a huge drain on the finances available for public housing, especially when housing stock ages and maintenance is not kept up to date. The design of housing specifically for Aboriginal families does not always take into account domiciliary behaviour and this impacts on the sustainability of tenancies and wear and tear on properties (Elvin et al, 2010:7). Some of the remote housing has been built recognising this fact, but the 30% of Aboriginal people living in the urban setting are still living in homes with standard domestic fit-outs. Houses are not designed to accommodate large numbers of visitors. Mainstream expectations about how gardens will be kept also impact on public housing tenants. One participant in the Shelter consultations described how a mainstream housing provider dealt with a tenant whose lawn was overgrown as follows:

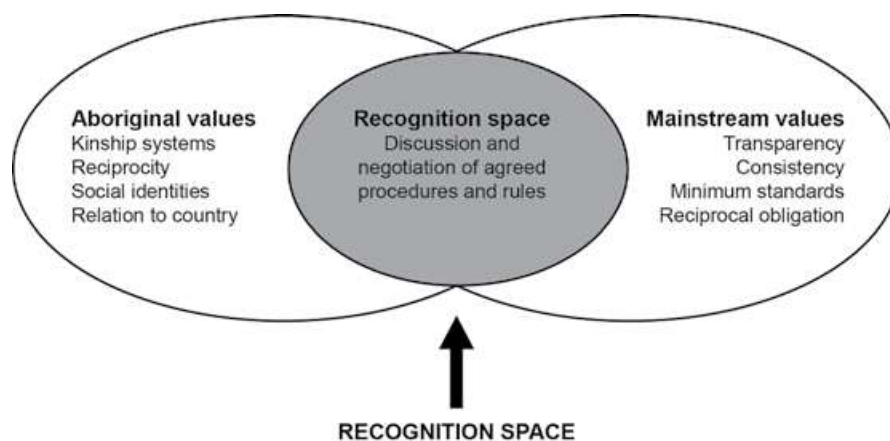
*My brother and my elderly mother live in a public housing property. My brother has complex issues and finds it difficult to do practical stuff around the garden and the lawn had grown too high. He asked me if I could come around and mow it for him but before we could even organise that a housing officer called at the house. He told my brother if he didn't get his yard cleaned up he would be evicted. As well as that, he told him that maintenance could come around and do it. He said that they would charge him \$1,000 for mowing and slashing and then \$500 to take the rubbish away. That's \$1,500 to clean a yard! Ridiculous! So my son and I went over and did it ourselves. Took a couple of hours but it was fine. They know that there's such a long waiting list now for people and houses are so hard to get, that they can just push people around and scare them. Scare them with eviction and stuff because they don't live the same way as white fellas.*

## **Conclusion**

The South Australian Housing Strategy Green Paper (the Strategy) was released in 2011 and is a draft of the proposed final strategy. Shelter SA prepared a submission to the Strategy (Shelter SA, 2011) based on several sources of evidence including research and academic literature, the results of a consumer consultation around the Strategy, involvement in a State Government consultation about the ‘Access Project’ and input from Shelter SA branches (Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Branch and Agencies Supporting the Housing Needs of Refugees and Asylum Seekers). The Shelter SA submission drew attention to the paucity of attention to Aboriginal housing and homelessness issues and referred State Government to the huge body of information that exists in relation to the needs, values and culture of Aboriginal people in relation to where they live. At the date of writing it is unknown if the State Government will heed the Shelter SA submission by altering the draft and paying attention to evidence-based material.

Elvin et al (2010:44) use the example of a ‘recognition space’ where constant mediation between culture and mainstream society could take place. The recognition space concept was developed by Mantziaris and Martin in 2000 and adapted later by Taylor in 2008 in Figure 2 below:

**Figure 2**



A commitment to an Indigenous self-determining autonomy approach to policy making and service provision that is in keeping with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples could entail the following elements as suggested by Fleras (2000):

1. Recognition of Indigenous people as possessing distinctive ways of looking at the world;
2. Respect for Indigenous difference and distinctiveness through its incorporation into policy making;
3. An acknowledgement that they alone possess the right to decide for themselves what is best; and
4. Endorsement of their status as sovereign in their own right, yet sharing in the sovereign of society at large.

It is time for all Australians to call for action and demand that Federal, State and Territory Governments demonstrate the political will required to improve the housing situation of Aboriginal people through a return to self-determination that enhances increased access to public housing and improves the suitability and quality of the housing in conjunction with the development and application of tenancy rules that respect Aboriginal culture and values. The breadth and depth of high quality research into kinship, mobility, domiciliary arrangements and housing design leave little doubt about what is required for policy and service development. Government rhetoric about the value of creating social capital through social and economic participation is prominent in social policies, but is conveniently ignored when it comes to public housing for Aboriginal people. If Governments are serious about strengthening communities and closing the gap, they must move away from mainstreaming and begin the change process by entering into a ‘recognition space’ to engage Aboriginal people in the development of public housing policy and services.

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