



**A Way Forward for Housing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia:
National Shelter Policy Statement**

August 2010



Above: Attendees at the National Shelter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples housing forum included representatives from every State and Territory Shelter apart from Victoria, and key representatives from ATSI community housing organisations throughout Australia.

Summary

Background

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identifies an alarming shortage of housing for Indigenous¹ households, with 20,000 extra dwellings needed to meet the immediate housing needs of these households.² In addition to this need, Indigenous peoples are disadvantaged in all sectors of the housing market including home ownership, private rental accommodation, public rental accommodation, community housing and homelessness.

This has sparked international concern. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing remarked in 2006 that he was “particularly disturbed” by the adverse housing conditions he observed in Indigenous communities in Australia, describing it as a “humanitarian tragedy”.³ The Special Rapporteur observed that a lack of affordable housing, lack of appropriate support services, overcrowding, significant levels of poverty, a lack of culturally appropriate housing and underlying discrimination are all factors that contribute to the severe housing crisis.⁴ He found the absence of adequate and comprehensive participation processes for Indigenous communities in decision-making to be the “most disturbing” element of the crisis.⁵

The recent Commonwealth allocation of resources to expand the supply of housing, particularly in remote communities, is long overdue, but falls well short of meeting the need. A disturbing element of the reforms is that rather than heeding the Rapporteur’s call to provide adequate and comprehensive participation processes for Indigenous communities, delivery of Indigenous housing is increasingly being taken out of Indigenous hands, leading to an increased risk of inappropriate housing design, delivery and management. There is also an absence of advocacy bodies specifically for Indigenous housing and no peak Indigenous housing body in Australia.

Goal

To provide effective responses in the Indigenous and mainstream housing systems to meet the critical and dire housing need of Indigenous peoples and assist in overcoming the barriers they face to housing, while simultaneously promoting self-determination and capacity of Indigenous peoples to manage their own housing.

Key Points

1. More resources need to be urgently directed to producing the needed 20,000 dwellings.
2. Indigenous community housing providers must be supported to play a central role in meeting this need, and in developing the skills and ability to continue meeting the housing needs of Indigenous peoples into the future.
3. Indigenous peoples need to be closely involved in all aspects of the response, from developing high level Indigenous housing policy to on the ground housing and service delivery and management.
4. Mainstream government and community housing providers need to genuinely engage with Indigenous peoples to develop appropriate housing and support models in order to address issues of overcrowding and sustain tenancies.
5. Programs need to be developed to support Indigenous peoples to better access the housing market, including home ownership and private rental, and to address discrimination.
6. To ensure that Key Points 1 to 5 are achieved in a way that is respectful of Indigenous people's human rights and fosters self determination, governments need to support and adequately resource the establishment of an Indigenous owned and controlled National Indigenous Housing body.

Full Statement

Introduction

On 26 and 27 July 2010 representatives from Indigenous and mainstream housing organisations and peak bodies met in Brisbane under the auspices of National Shelter. The meeting included delegates from all States and Territories, except Victoria.

The purpose of the gathering was to discuss a range of housing issues facing Indigenous peoples and to develop possible solutions to those issues. This included improving access to housing, increasing the supply of housing, sustaining tenancies and maximising the involvement of Indigenous peoples in the development and ongoing management of Indigenous housing. This report provides a summary of the issues discussed and the resolutions of the delegates.

Background

The meeting discussed a range of background material, including a background paper prepared beforehand by National Shelter and presentations during the meeting by Rhonda Phillips from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, and Eddy Bourke from the Community Housing Federation of Australia. The following is a summary of some of the key research data on Indigenous housing.

1. *Indigenous peoples on average are younger than other Australians, have a larger proportion of people suffering with serious chronic health and disability burdens and live in larger households.*

- An estimated one-third (32%) of Indigenous Australians are living in capital cities and a further 43% in regional areas.
- The median age of Indigenous people in Australia is 20 years, compared to 37 for non-Indigenous Australians.
- The average number of occupants in Indigenous households is 3.4 persons per household, compared to 2.6 for non-Indigenous households.
- Proportionally more Indigenous households have at least one member with a disability, and more households contain extended family members of several generations, from infants to frail elderly relatives.⁶

2. *Indigenous peoples are more dependent on rental housing, and particularly social housing, than other Australians.*

- 36%⁷ of Indigenous households own or are purchasing their own home, while 60% are renting. This contrasts with the non-Indigenous population where 69% of households are owners or purchasers and only 27% renters.
- 27% of all Indigenous households rent from the private rental market, while 29% rent from either a public housing authority or a community housing organisation. By contrast, only 4.4% of non-Indigenous households rent from public or community landlords.
- Of the households living in social housing:
 - approximately 40% rent mainstream public housing;
 - approximately 22% rent public housing reserved for Indigenous households;
 - approximately 38% rent housing managed by Indigenous community agencies;
 - approximately 1% are in housing managed by mainstream community organisations.⁸

3. *There is an extremely high level of unmet housing need amongst Indigenous peoples in Australia.*

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare carried out its most recent assessment of Indigenous housing need in 2009, using mainly 2006 data.⁹ Their key findings are:

- 9,248 Indigenous people were experiencing homelessness; 20,739 Indigenous households were overcrowded; and 8,331 Indigenous income units were in financial housing stress.
- The Indigenous population is in higher need than the non-Indigenous population regarding homelessness and overcrowding.
- The number of additional dwellings required to help those in most need was estimated to be 9,795.
- The dwelling need gap was 11,538 dwellings, considering extreme need only, or 19,429 if considering all need.
- It is estimated that in addition to the established dwelling need gap (in 2006), an additional 529 dwellings were required in 2008 for those in most need, with a further 3,137 dwellings needed by 2018.
- The majority of dwellings are required to reduce overcrowding.

4. *There have been major shifts in Indigenous housing policy across Australia, at Commonwealth, State and Territory levels. Many of these have damaged the trust and goodwill of Indigenous peoples toward government.*

- The Community Housing and Infrastructure Program was progressively wound down from 2005 onwards, and eventually replaced with the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program and the National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing, which are both focused purely on remote communities. Meanwhile, responsibility for oversight and future funding of urban and regional Indigenous community housing organisations is in the process of being taken from the Commonwealth government and passed to State and Territory governments. Between 2001 and 2006 the number of Indigenous community housing organisations reduced by 20%.
- At the end of 2008 the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program was discontinued as part of the overall reduction in specialist programs accompanying the negotiation of the new National Affordable Housing Agreement with funds included in the overall allocations for social housing.
- At both State and Commonwealth levels there has been a move towards ‘mainstreaming’ the management of Indigenous housing, with Aboriginal Rental Housing Program housing increasingly managed by public housing authorities along similar lines to mainstream housing, and pressures on community housing providers to hand over their stock to be managed by State and Territory housing departments.
- Evidence indicates that since 2003 State and Territory housing departments have substantially improved access to mainstream public housing for Indigenous households. However, there are still major issues with sustaining the tenancies and overcrowding.

Key Issues

Participants in the forum identified a wide range of issues affecting Indigenous households and communities across the country. There was a high degree of commonality. These issues are summarised below.

1. *Need for sustained funding levels to increase housing supply*

Delegates welcomed the commitment of funds to Indigenous housing through the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program and the National Partnership on Remote Indigenous Housing, the commitment of funds to social housing through the Nation Building economic stimulus and the improved performance of mainstream public housing in providing access to Indigenous households. Nonetheless, there was consensus that these initiatives will not fully address the significant housing problems facing Indigenous Australians in the immediate short term or into the future. More housing is needed now and there is a need for a guaranteed commitment of resourcing to be sustained into the future to meet the needs of the rapidly growing Indigenous population, and to solve the high levels of homelessness and overcrowding amongst Indigenous peoples. Between 2001 and 2006, the Australian Indigenous estimated resident population increased by 58,700 or 13%. The jurisdictions with the highest growth rates were Western Australia (18%), the Northern Territory (17%) and Queensland (16%).¹⁰

2. *Need for genuine commitment to Indigenous participation and self-determination*

There were strong expressions by delegates that in the process of 'mainstreaming' housing provision, the importance of self-determination has been ignored. There are a number of aspects to this:

- Governments need to understand that there are significant cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and also between different Indigenous peoples. Solutions need to be developed and implemented in close cooperation with Indigenous peoples in each community. A 'one size fits all' approach will be futile.
- Indigenous community housing organisations have a crucial role to play in meeting the needs of Indigenous households, by providing an alternative structure for managing Indigenous housing which can be tailored to the needs of local communities. As well as providing culturally appropriate housing they are a valuable source of social capital in communities, foster Indigenous management skills and

provide support to communities far beyond the provision of housing. It is imperative that governments reverse the current trend towards 'mainstreaming' these organisations and support the development of a robust, sustainable Indigenous community housing sector.

3. *Need for improved efforts to overcome the barriers Indigenous people face gaining access to mainstream housing*

Delegates discussed a range of issues compromising the ability of Indigenous households to access and sustain housing through mainstream social housing programs and through the open market, including home ownership and rental housing.

- Indigenous home ownership rates are substantially lower than those of the mainstream community. The factors behind this are complex and not well understood. They include issues around intergenerational poverty, lack of employment and income, land title in remote locations, discrimination and cultural factors. These issues require further research and policy development to identify possible ways to increase rates of Indigenous home ownership.
- Indigenous households and people working with Indigenous households report endemic discrimination against Indigenous households in the private rental market. Much of this discrimination is indirect or systemic and some of it is overt. The difficulties that Indigenous peoples face in accessing the private rental market are disproportionate to those faced by non-Indigenous peoples. As such, it is an issue that needs to be addressed.
- While acknowledging improvements in recent years, delegates pointed to ongoing issues with cultural inappropriateness, and some instances of discrimination, in the mainstream general social housing sector. There is a need to build stronger working relationships between mainstream social housing providers (government and non-government) and Indigenous peoples in order to overcome prejudices and develop culturally appropriate ways of managing Indigenous tenancies in mainstream social housing.

4. *Need to support Indigenous community housing organisations in their transition to mainstream regulatory and funding systems*

The transition of Indigenous community housing organisations into mainstream systems of funding and regulation presents challenges both

for the organisations themselves and the State and Territory housing departments. A successful transition will require:

- a deliberate and properly resourced transition process to support organisations to move from one system to another;
- a parallel process between Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, with Indigenous involvement, to resolve outstanding issues around land tenure, caveats and restrictions over the use of land;
- appropriate guidelines for managing existing housing and new housing when supplied;
- a genuine two-way process of negotiation between Indigenous peoples and State and Territory governments over the suitability of existing policy settings for Indigenous housing;
- a costed commitment to forward budgets, strategies and processes supporting the viability and growth of Indigenous community housing organisations over the long term.

5. *Need to recognise and respond to Indigenous transience and mobility through flexibility of housing supply and tenancy management models*

One common element in Indigenous communities across the country is the issue of mobility or transience of Indigenous peoples. This mobility is driven by a number of factors, including:

- cultural issues, with people travelling to take part in important cultural and family events or to honour family obligations;
- economic issues, with people travelling to urban areas seek work or participate in education;
- health issues, with people travelling from remote or regional communities to urban areas for medical treatment;
- legal and child protection issues, with people travelling to attend court hearings, tribunals and reviews;

Policy responses to Indigenous housing need to consider mobility, as it has consequences and flow on impacts for a number of factors including for dwelling location and design, including:

- fluctuations in household size (with some houses temporarily overcrowded for short or long periods, while others are under-occupied as the residents locate elsewhere for the duration of the matter they are dealing with);
- Indigenous transience and homeless in urban and regional areas when people get 'stuck' as a result of Centrelink breaches or other circumstances, unable to either go back where they came from or access secure housing in their new location.

The Way Forward

Our Policy Program

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Staying Engaged

Delegates were emphatic about the value of the development of a national Indigenous housing alliance. They thus resolved to:

- continue to meet at appropriate intervals under the auspice of National Shelter;
- build the network through involvement of a range of relevant agencies including Indigenous and non-Indigenous housing organisations, other key NGOs working in or with Indigenous communities, key international organisations, and the private sector;
- build constructive working relationships with government bodies at Commonwealth, State and Territory levels;
- work towards the creation of a formalised, Indigenous-controlled national housing alliance or peak body.

Endnotes

¹ In this document, the capitalised term “Indigenous” is used to describe the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.

² From [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Indigenous housing needs 2009: A multi-measure needs model, 2009.*](#)

³ United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, *Mission to Australia: Preliminary Observations* (2006), available for download from http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/international_docs/pdf/un_sp_housing_missiontoaustralia_15aug2006.pdf, retrieved 18 August 2010.

⁴ Ibid, page 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Data from the ABS Census 2006, Indigenous Community profile.

⁷ <http://www.anz.com/Documents/AU/Aboutanz/Community/AN5610-Home-Ownership-August-FINAL.pdf>

⁸ Data drawn from [Vivienne Milligan, Rhonda Phillips, Hazel Easthope and Paul Memmott, *Service directions and issues in social housing for Indigenous households in urban and regional areas*, AHURI Positioning Paper No. 130, June 2010.](#)

⁹ From [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Indigenous housing needs 2009: A multi-measure needs model, 2009.*](#)

¹⁰ <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4705.0Main+Features12006?OpenDocument>