

## Tangentyere Council Inc.

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3 October 2005

Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness

Thank you for providing Tangentyere Council with an opportunity to provide comments to the National Homelessness Strategy Consultation Paper on Indigenous Homelessness.

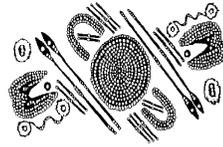
Enclosed herewith are comments on issues related to definitions of homelessness, successful strategies undertaken by Tangentyere Council that impact on homelessness, issues associated with homelessness of Aboriginal people in Central Australia, and recommendations for change.

Tangentyere Council extends an invitation to the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness to visit the Council to discuss these issues further and see first hand the impact of homelessness many Indigenous people in Central Australia face.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'William Tilmouth', written in a cursive style.

William Tilmouth  
**Executive Director**



## **Tangentyere Council's Submission to the National Homelessness Strategy Consultation Paper on Indigenous Homelessness**

### **1. Outline of Submission**

Tangentyere Council thanks the commonwealth advisory committee for the opportunity to provide comments on the National Homelessness Strategy Consultation Paper on Indigenous Homelessness. Tangentyere Council has been involved in the provision of housing services to Indigenous people in Central Australia since it commenced operating nearly 30 years ago.

This submission draws on this experience in assisting Aboriginal people in Central Australia in housing and a wide range of related areas over the last 30 years.

The submission provides:

- Comments on the definition of homelessness as it affects Aboriginal people in Central Australia;
- Information on initiatives of Tangentyere Council that are relevant to homelessness of Aboriginal people in Central Australia;
- Recommendations for improving the situation of Aboriginal people in relation to homelessness.

### **2. Background**

Tangentyere Council is the resource and advocacy body for 18 Town Camps in Alice Springs and provides a wide range of services to these Town Camps, the wider Alice Springs community and to a number of remote communities in the Central Australian region. Over the past 25 years since incorporation, the council has developed services in response to need, and has established a structured program and service delivery base that strategically responds to the following:

- Housing and Infrastructure
- Municipal Services
- Employment and Training
- Education
- Youth and Family services
- Financial Services
- Social Justice
- Social Services
- Aged Care

Through a strategic approach to the development of services, Tangentyere has been able to provide a “whole of community” and “whole of family” approach to its delivery of programs and services. The Council’s coordination of programs and services is thus similar in thinking to current “whole of government” approaches to services for Indigenous people. Tangentyere’s grass roots connections with its constituency means that services can be developed to meet actual need and change and develop according to changes in those needs.

This Council’s approach to issues of housing and homelessness are integrated with a wider approach to youth, family and aged services, financial services and social justice interventions, within a “one stop shop” location.

### **3. Issues related to Definitions of Homelessness of Aboriginal people.**

Tangentyere Council agrees with the Consultation Paper’s recognition that:

*while there may appear to be similarities between certain forms of Indigenous and non-Indigenous homelessness, **fundamentally the causes and contexts of Indigenous people’s experience of homelessness is different.** (p13)*

Due to these fundamental differences, Tangentyere Council does not however view the Chamberlain and McKenzie three-tier definition of homelessness as sufficient to describe the experience of Indigenous homelessness, particularly in Central Australia. The particular experiences of homelessness of Aboriginal people should not be lost in one national definition of homelessness for the sake of convenience in regard to simplicity of enumeration.

The Keys Young identification of five distinct types of Indigenous homelessness of Indigenous people (p12) is far more comprehensive and relevant and in Tangentyere’s opinion is sufficiently different to the Chamberlain and McKenzie definition to warrant either revision of the latter, or to be used as a separate definition for the purpose of identifying Indigenous homelessness.

Tangentyere Council has identified the following particular experiences of homelessness in Central Australia that occur frequently.

#### **3.1 Discrimination**

There is substantial anecdotal evidence of blatant discrimination carried out against Aboriginal people in the private rental and short term accommodation markets. Rental accommodation becomes unavailable when an Aboriginal person inquires about it. This makes it difficult for people who cannot access public housing due to long waiting lists. It is particularly difficult for those who are attempting to rent for the first time and do not have a rental history.

Related to these discriminatory practices are situations where people are evicted without due notice or proper adherence to legal requirements. Those who are not aware of their rights may be evicted without opportunity to address issues or find alternative accommodation.

Discriminatory practices also occur in the short term private accommodation sector. People may be over charged, and many instances occur of motel or private hostel owners/managers exchanging accommodation for art work on terms that greatly favour the accommodation provider.

#### **3.2 Homelessness related to lack of regional services.**

Many people in remote parts of Central Australia are forced to travel to Alice Springs for health, financial, education and other services as well as for shopping and visiting family in hospital or prison. These people are then forced to find short term accommodation or stay with families or stay in the riverbed.

This need to travel to Alice Springs for services is most immediately felt in the area of health. Aboriginal people in Central Australia have clearly documented (though probably underestimated) extremely high levels of chronic disease. Renal disease is one such chronic health problem that is life threatening but for which services for many Aboriginal people are inadequate, particularly services that are within easy access of their home. This means that people in poor health with little money need to find some sort of accommodation in Alice Springs, along with carers and intermittent family visitors.

This could be avoided if more services were available within communities and closer to where people live. An example of where this has made a difference is in the provision of dialysis services at Kintore in the far west of the Northern Territory. People are able to access reverse respite in Kintore which results in family not needing to make the trip to town to visit renal patient and find short term accommodation for the duration, and patients can maintain contact with family networks and traditional country.

If people are to have genuine choice about staying in their own home, within their own family, culture and community, and in many cases avoiding homelessness for themselves and their family for the period they require those services, then regional development policy has to seriously address the provision of services that are available within the communities in which people live.

The exacerbation of short term homelessness due to the need to access services in Alice Springs is not confined to those living in remote areas. Many elderly and/or disabled people living in Town Camps would be able to remain in their own homes rather than reside in a nursing home if adequate support was provided to them. Tangentyere has identified 24 elderly people in Town Camps who require community aged care services and another 60 who require HACC services in order to be adequately cared for. This is in addition to those for whom funds are available to care for.

### **3.3 Inadequate Public Housing**

In Alice Springs and many other places homelessness has been increased by the reduction in public housing stocks. There is now a waiting list of one year for priority applicants alone. Renal patients are at the top of the priority list, followed by those with other illnesses, then those escaping domestic violence. There needs to be a substantial increase in the supply of public housing to avoid the situation of people who would be able to rent and maintain a house having no means of accessing one and potentially becoming homeless or in very insecure, substandard or unsafe housing.

An increase in publicly funded hostel accommodation is also urgently needed to provide a reasonable level of short term accommodation. The current need of many people to visit Alice Springs from remote communities for short or long term access to services results in at least short term homelessness for many of these people.

### 3.4 Spiritual homelessness

This aspect of homelessness is probably least adequately covered by the Chamberlain and McKenzie three tier definition.

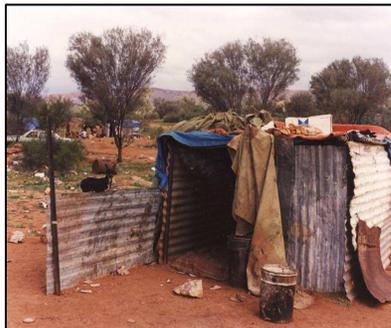
Spiritual homelessness occurs in a number of ways and is an ongoing legacy of the Stolen Generations policy and experiences. This may relate to loss of country or loss of family and kinship ties. It still occurs when there is insufficient resourcing of Aboriginal run services for young children at risk, and children are placed with non Indigenous carers. These carers may be excellent but better resourcing of Indigenous organisations and Indigenous carers may prevent the need for this to happen and avoid the undermining spiritual homelessness that the children may suffer.

This situation is at times unintentionally exacerbated by placing too many children with an Indigenous person who has insufficient resources to cope with them. Further support for the carer in relation to care and cleaning and associated practical matters may make the difference between children being able to stay within their own family and cultural framework or not. Grandmothers play a particularly important role in the care of children and increased support for the huge amount of work and care they commit to this role would be an extremely cost effective way to reduce the potential spiritual homelessness of children.

At times the substantial efforts of Indigenous people to avoid spiritual homelessness in relation to contact with country are not supported. Tangentyere Council provides support to two Town Camps that do not have security of tenure. While other Town Camps were granted special purpose leases, which have since been converted to Leases in Perpetuity, these two Town Camps have not been granted this leasehold.

This means that Tangentyere Council is not resourced for its support of them and that people live in tin sheds with no access to municipal services such as power, water or sewerage. While this may seem to fit the definition of tertiary homelessness, the people living there could not be more “at home”. Any “homelessness” is in fact related to inadequate housing and services rather than people being homeless. The following photos portray how most Town Camps looked in 1975 compared to today. Sadly, conditions on these two Town Camps without tenure are more similar to those of the Camp pictured below in 1975.

#### ***A Town Camp living environment in 1975***



## ***A Town Camp dwelling in 2005***



### **4. Positive and successful initiatives of Tangentyere Council**

Of fundamental importance to the success of housing and related services by Tangentyere Council to Town Camp residents and other Aboriginal people in Alice Springs and remote areas is the provision of services by Aboriginal people to Aboriginal people and under the control of Aboriginal people.

#### **4.1 Services Directly affecting Homelessness**

Of particular effectiveness in addressing and preventing homelessness are the following services described below that are provided by Tangentyere Council. These services have a number of common elements that increase their effectiveness greatly in providing services to Aboriginal people in Central Australia:

- They are Aboriginal run and controlled
- They work within Aboriginal family systems and culture, not against them
- They link in with other services, both within Tangentyere Council, and outside of it, including the police, drug and alcohol services and housing services.

##### **4.1.1 Safe Families**

In 2002 the model for the Tangentyere Safe Families Project was developed through a series of community consultations and discussions with Indigenous leaders, community groups and service providers with an interest in the provision of a safe and appropriate crisis accommodation services. In the discussion and workshop sessions it was unanimously agreed the proposed model should address issues in such a way as to not only remedy the immediate problems, but address longer term issues whilst maintaining respect for the cultural integrity of Aboriginal family systems.

Following 18 months in the development and consultation phase of the program, the operational work of the program began in February 2004. In April 2004, 3 Aboriginal Family workers were employed in the program and began family support work with 'at risk' families whose children were at risk of being permanently removed into the child protection system.

Safe Families Aboriginal family workers participate in collaborative joint case management with other youth service provider partners to identify and address the issues facing children, young people and their families in the areas of education; training; employment; health and well being; cultural identity; legal support; income and substance abuse issues. Many of the children and young people referred to Safe Families are identified as routinely receiving little or no meaningful support from immediate family.

The primary focus of the Family Support Work over the past 18 months has been to connect children and young people back to a safe living environment within their family structures, utilising family mapping procedures to determine the appropriate people to care for them. This work has included:

- Identifying short-term crisis accommodation and basic physical needs where no other long term option exists in the interim;
- Delivering intensive support to families, to enable them to provide and resume care of / for their children;
- Delivering an intensive case management model to monitor and support extended kinship care placements to ensure placements remain intact and highly functional;
- Providing intensive support processes to young people and making appropriate referrals to service providers for additional supports identified as necessary to maintain the integrity of the placement and wellbeing of the young person;
- Delivering strong links/with Aboriginal support networks for young people and their families; and
- Providing opportunities for young people to reconnect to family and culture.

In October 2004 the Family Group Safe House was opened with its first intensive family support placement. This placement consists of a mother with 4 children who had been removed into protective care. The children have been reunified with their mother and aunt and the family will continue to receive intensive Family Support for 3 months prior to moving into their own accommodation.

This program is currently experiencing a crisis in funding with a \$500,000 shortfall in funds to run the program.

#### **4.1.2 Wardens Program**

The Wardens provide regular patrols of public spaces in conjunction with the Alice Springs Town Council and with assistance from the Police.

The Wardens work in conjunction with the Referral Officers (see below) and Day Patrol to follow up on clients. This has improved their ability to deal more effectively with the complex issues affecting homeless people in the community; and continue effective family case management of people who are stuck in town and require assistance to return home.

There are also effective referrals to and from other agencies. There is continued involvement with the Four Corners Council ( a group of male elders who can advise on matters relating to traditional law and culture), with the Wardens providing support and taking direction from the Council regarding cultural issues.

The Wardens have been working on youth and sniffing issues in the Alice Springs area in conjunction with Tangentyere Housing to assist and support Town Camps dealing with anti-social behaviour issues. Wardens have also developed a relationship with the NT Police Aboriginal Community Patrol Office unit, with visits to Town Camps and assistance between the parties when required.

Tangentyere Patrols work closely with the Police services. Regular meetings are held between the respective services. A Memorandum of Understanding (M.O.U.) has existed between the two services for some years. Working partnerships have also been formed with the Alice Springs Town Council and Drug and Alcohol Services Association (D.A.S.A.)

#### **4.1.3 Referral Office**

Tangentyere Council provides a reference service. This service was established to assist Wardens, Day/Night Patrol with follow up assistance for clients who are seen on a regular basis by these services. The referral services was expanded to receive referrals from other services and agencies requiring assistance with clients.

The primary services provided by the Referral Officers are:

- Case Management and client follow up
- Co-ordinating Return to Country referrals
- Providing Emergency Relief

The Referral Officers co-ordinate the Return to Country program and provide Emergency Relief services to ensure other support is provided as needed to individuals and families. The referral protocols for both Return to Country and Emergency Relief have been revised, with stricter guidelines and closer accountability of the users of the service.

This service has networked with services outside Tangentyere including Aboriginal Housing, Correctional Services, Alice Springs Women's Shelter, DASA and other social services. The service also receives numerous phone inquiries.

The Referral program has been a valuable service and is a vital program within Council and the wider community. It is the first time the Council has had the capacity to follow up people who repeatedly present to our patrols and other service areas. This service has allowed for constructive case management and support people suffering from chronic alcohol abuse and issues that stem from or lead to such abuse. In addition the program provides case management for clients who are homeless. This program is a welcome addition and provides important outcomes for ongoing change in the life of individuals and families.

#### **4.1.4 Mobility Study**

This study was undertaken by the Research Unit at Tangentyere Council (refer attachment I). The study identified the extent and causes of short and long term homelessness. The study estimates that, on top of a permanent population of 1600 to 1800 people, there are an additional 500 people staying in Town Camps at any time, increasing to several thousand during peak events such as football finals and the Alice Springs show. It identifies the reasons for people visiting Alice Springs, including illness and poor health, funerals, and to visit relatives in hospital or prison. Tangentyere Council and the town Camp Housing Associations are not resourced to provide services to these people, many of whom may stay in the town Camps for substantial periods of time.

## **4.2 Integrated Services related to Housing and Homelessness**

The following description of a wide range of Tangentyere Council's services is provided in order to illustrate the importance of a cohesiveness range of programs and services that together, enable people who are in poverty and would otherwise be at high risk of homelessness, to live in reasonable housing with secure tenure. This is made possible by linking housing services to social, family, education, employment and other services.

The importance of providing a wide range of coordinated programs and services to the ability of a particularly disadvantaged population of Aboriginal people should not be underestimated.

### **4.2.1. Direct Housing Services**

The executive support officer coordinates approximately 90 meetings per year relating to Governance including 18 AGM's per year and regular Housing Association Meetings for 18 Housing Associations (Town Camps), resulting in

- Minimal internal disputes and increased community capacity
- Community control, responsibility and self management
- Support of Indigenous Governance
- Ongoing education regarding government policy direction

The housing office organises repairs and maintenance of existing housing (2073 R&M completed in 2003), manages environmental health services, rent collection, construction of new housing and education of residents to identify and manage household and community issues.

### **4.2.2. CDEP**

The CDEP program manages 285 participants and the work activities identified in any year, as determined by both participants and the Executive. While the CDEP program at Tangentyere has a broad range of roles and activities, it helps to maintain housing and reduce homelessness through provision of the following services:

- Garbage
- Fencing
- Wood lot – heating cooking
- Waste management and recycling
- Camp Maintenance
- Community Development
- Environmental management
- Speed Humps.

### 4.2.3. Social Services

The Social Services Division has four main departments, all of which provide vital services affecting the difference between staying in a safe and functioning home and being homeless, either directly or in the context of not having a safe place. :

#### ***Youth and Family Services Department***

- The Youth and Family Services Department has five significant programs aimed at provides services from 0-18 years across a spectrum of services and needs. These include an Intergenerational Learning Centre supporting whole of family and whole of community approach to redress inhalant substance misuse, family violence, health, social and economic issues,
- an Early Childhood Intervention Program providing playgroups and early children learning and parenting skills on town camps,
- a Youth Activity Service,
- Safe Families Program delivering early intervention and crisis accommodation (see 4.1.1 above).
- A Youth Link Up Service that is a regional program working with 20 remote communities and Alice Springs to address Inhalant Substance Misuse and youth related needs from both a community and regional perspective.

#### ***Social Justice Department***

This Department promotes expertise within the Indigenous community to address social behaviour issues and offer strong mediation, crisis intervention, prevention and other services to reduce engagement of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice systems. The services include:

- Night Patrol
- Day Patrol
- Wardens (see 4.1.2 above)
- Referral Office (see 4.1.3 above)
- Remote Area Night Patrol (supporting up to 15 remote communities).

#### ***Health and Well Being Department***

Includes

- Social & Emotional Well being
- Aged Care Program

#### ***Research Department***

This Department (currently unfunded) aims to place Indigenous people in the centre of research where they determine research agendas, participate in the research in all stages including analysis and presentation. The current research project that has been undertaken in partnership with the Centre for Remote Health looks at mobility of people in the region and how this translates to Town Camps and also Public Tenancies. This will give us the most accurate assessment to date of population numbers on Town Camps and the context of mobility and associated social issues. This is particularly relevant to issues of homelessness and provision of services on a regional basis.

### 4.2.4. Banking and Financial Management Services

There are 4 main arms to this service which are all part of the One Stop Shop provided at Tangentyere Council:

- Westpac Bank agency
- Financial Counsellor
- Food Voucher system
- Centrelink office

#### **4.2.5. Employment Services**

There are 3 main arms to this service which are all part of the One Stop Shop provided at Tangentyere Council:

- Centrelink Office
- Tangentyere Council Job Shop
- Tangentyere Council CDEP

### **5. Recommendations**

In view of Tangentyere Council's substantial experience in working with issues of housing and homelessness of Aboriginal people in Central Australia, that alleviate homelessness and reduce the likelihood of homelessness, the Council makes the following recommendations. Please note that some of the recommendations relate to matters under the jurisdiction of the Northern Territory government rather than the Commonwealth government but, in the interests of a "whole of government" approach to Indigenous homelessness, they are included herewith:

1. Establish an independent advocacy body for housing rights in the Northern Territory. This would be independent of government and include representation from Indigenous people and organisations as well as other community representatives. It would be able to provide independent advice to people on their housing and tenancy rights as a measure to reduce current practices of illegal and discriminatory practices.
2. Establish a full Tenancy Review Board to conciliate, mediate and arbitrate disputes relating to tenancies.
3. Increase the supply of public housing for long term rental and ensure that planning processes do not mitigate against the increase and maintenance of existing public housing.
4. Provide additional government hostel accommodation in Alice Springs.
5. Upgrade and increase the standard and number of houses on Town Camps to meet housing standards elsewhere and reduce overcrowding where this is unwanted.
6. Increase funding for safe houses as a stepping stone to longer term housing for those experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse.
7. Return the local decision making authority of the Indigenous Housing Assistance Services Program of Northern Territory Housing to Alice Springs to enable a greater voice for Aboriginal people in Alice Springs in the decisions that affect their housing.
8. For adequate funding for Return to Country initiatives to operate to ensure community people who are stranded in town centres have means to return to their communities (currently an NT Government funded program)
9. For appropriate funding be direct to Day Patrols and adjoining Referral Program to provide case management for homeless people.