

**MANA-NA WOORN-TYEEN MAAR-TAKOORT:
EVERY ABORIGINAL PERSON HAS A HOME**
The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework

My name is Darren Smith and I am the Chair of the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum (AHHF) and CEO of Aboriginal Housing Victoria.

I would firstly like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Lands that we are meeting on today, the Ngunnawal and Wurundjeri People, their Elders past and present, on lands that have never been ceded.

With me today is Lisa Briggs, Director of Strategy and Performance AHV and Zoe Probyn, Acting DSP Manager. We thank the Senate for the opportunity to participate today.

We are here today to represent the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum, which is made up of 37 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Trusts who provide housing and homelessness services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Victoria.

The AHHF provides oversight, monitoring and accountability for the implementation of the Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort Framework, which means Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home in Gunditjmara language.

The framework covers the entire housing journey from homelessness to homeownership; and provides detailed strategic actions for each step of the way.

In no other portfolio is the moral imperative to restore rights more compelling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than in HOUSING.

We therefore welcome the development of the Housing Australia Future Fund.

However, we are concerned that there is not sufficient focus on the full breadth of the homelessness and housing exclusion needs of all Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander's peoples.

Aboriginal homelessness and housing exclusion is so much more than overcrowding, yet repeatedly, we see policies and initiatives that fail to go beyond this specific symptom of a broken and discriminatory housing system.

Whilst we do not want to take focus or investment away from our brothers and sisters living in remote or very remote communities, we do need the government to recognise and invest in the housing needs of **all** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Aboriginal homelessness is culturally distinct. The drivers of Aboriginal homelessness and the entry and exit points are different. The notion of 'home' and 'homelessness' have distinct and unique meanings for Aboriginal peoples.

Our community's housing challenges are complex and without direct and prolonged strategic investments, they will only get worse

Approximately 80% of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples live in urban and regional areas.

Despite this, there is a catastrophic lack of strategic housing investment for Aboriginal peoples in urban and regional areas. This combined with other systemic barriers create the acute over-representation of our community in homelessness services data.

Compared to other Australians¹, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are:

- 10 times more likely to experience homelessness
- 16 times more likely to live in severely overcrowded dwellings
- 10 times more likely to access Specialist Homelessness Services
- 6 times more likely to live in Social Housing

Right now:

- Victoria has the highest rates of Aboriginal people seeking specialist homelessness services nationally.
- There are 6,000 Aboriginal households on the Victorian Housing Register. This number has increased by 2000 people in the last 12 months
- 17% of Victoria's Aboriginal population sought homelessness assistance last year and all indications are that these numbers will continue to grow

A key activity for the AHFF this year is establishing an Aboriginal-specific homelessness system in response to the current crisis. Work is already underway the co -design of this work.

Homelessness services are already chronically underfunded and only 16 ACCOs currently receive homelessness funding in Victoria. Given the disproportionate level of level of need I have just described, any cuts to homelessness funding would be catastrophic for our community.

¹ 2022 Productivity Commission, In need of repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, Study Report Canberra
<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/housing-homelessness/report/housing-homelessness.pdf>

I would like to take this opportunity to urge the Federal Government to pay its share of the Equal Remuneration Order funding; not doing so represents a 23.5 million dollar cut to Victorian Homelessness services. The community that will bear the brunt of those cuts **is ours**.

In relation to the HAFF, we urgently request that consideration given to developing HAFF targets that will address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in Homelessness Service System.

It is a source of national shame that the First Peoples of this nation are the most excluded, the most disadvantaged and the most dispossessed when it comes to housing.

We urge the government to recognise that access to safe affordable housing is central to closing the gap.

It is no longer acceptable that outcomes for Aboriginal people are an after-thought. Aboriginal targets must be adopted to drive forward progress, and build Aboriginal capacity and capability, which history tells us otherwise will not occur.

We would like to make the following recommendations in relation to the HAFF:

- That a target of 10% of new dwellings produced by the new HAFF investment (\$10 billion) is specifically provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in urban, regional and remote areas.
- That new dwellings delivered under this target must be owned by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations who are housing providers.
- That the Aboriginal target is embedded in the legislation and included in the Minister's instructions to Housing Australia (Statement of Ministerial Expectations)

- This target should be in addition to the \$200 million investment already committed to for repairs, upgrades and improvements to remote Indigenous housing.
- That two seats on the Council are designated for two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with an extensive experience and understanding of Aboriginal housing and homelessness issues. This is in recognition of Aboriginal people's chronic overrepresentation in experiencing homelessness and housing exclusion and will embed the Government's commitment to self-determination and the Voice to Parliament.
- That a special Aboriginal advisory group is established to provide advice to Housing Australia and the Supply Council on development mechanisms, models and vehicles to deliver on Aboriginal targets. The Aboriginal advisory group should be comprised of representatives from Aboriginal community housing providers, State and Territory officials and housing supply experts to provide advice on joint State and Commonwealth mechanisms to urgently advance Aboriginal new housing.
- For genuine self-determination, we must have data sovereignty. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples argues that Indigenous peoples have the right to data that is about them to assist with informed decision making, codesign planning, implementation, monitoring and accountability. Furthermore, the national Closing the Gap agreement priority reform four – talks about shared access to data and information to enable informed decision making on the design, implementation and outcomes` of policies for Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people. This is yet to be realised, we recommended that enabling date sovereignty be a key activity area for the HAFF.

- Investment for programs such as *More than a Landlord* to make sure that Aboriginal people have access to culturally safe tenancy support that helps them to get and keep housing is critical. A safe, affordable home means our people can participate in all other areas of life - school, further education, work, and the broader civic community. Having a home is central to closing the gap.

- We recommend the Government to consider adopting seven key commitments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the recent Productivity Commission's report: they are:
 - A schedule on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing developed with a new National Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing
 - Effective state and territory housing and homelessness strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
 - Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing
 - Commitment to self-determination and increasing the proportion of services delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing organisations
 - Identifying unmet housing need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
 - Indicators and target to measure outcomes and progress
 - Transparency and accountability to the community

We thank you for your time today and the opportunity to address committee members. Do you have questions for us?