

# TANGENTYERE COUNCIL INC.

SUBMISSION TO

INQUIRY INTO NEEDS OF

## URBAN DWELLING

ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES

### 1.0 Introduction

Tangentyere Council Inc. was founded in 1977. In that year Tangentyere began its fight for the Aboriginal people living in deplorable conditions in the creek beds and waste land surrounding Alice Springs. All the residents of these camps are former ‘fringe dwellers’. Today they call themselves Town Campers. They say it with pride. Most were born in tin sheds, humpies, and old car bodies, maybe if they were lucky in a tent.

The eventual granting of **Special Purpose Leases** (excisions from the municipal land of Alice Springs) to the Aboriginal residents of the ‘fringe camps’ of Alice Springs sought to recognise the rights and needs of “people the Land Rights Act forgot”. On the Special Purpose Leases different Aboriginal communities have built the renowned Alice Springs Town Camps.

The Town Camp communities are incorporated separately as either Aboriginal Corporations (under Commonwealth law) or Associations (under Northern Territory law). Each of the eighteen (18) Town Camp organisations is affiliated with Tangentyere Council Inc. Each is comprised of a largely distinct indigenous community based on language and kinship groups. There are approximately 1,200 people now permanently living in 195 houses and 65 tin sheds on the Town Camps. It is estimated that as well, approximately 400 people are residing temporarily as visitors (invited and uninvited) in the various camps.

### 1.1 Tangentyere’s Philosophy

Tangentyere Council Inc. is incorporated as an Association in the NT. Tangentyere is an Aboriginal community controlled agency that provides an extensive range of social and infrastructure services and support to the residents of the Alice Springs Town Camps. Tangentyere’s motto is “**Our bosses are our clients and our clients are our bosses**”. This

motto underpins Tangentyere's approach to service delivery. As such Tangentyere can be described as an inter-sectoral provider of Primary Health Care (PHC) services.

## **1.2 Grass Roots Community Development**

The Tangentyere *Grass Roots Model* community development involves working with small urban groups (the Town Camps) formed on the basis of family ties and kinship. The technique of local action in a specified geographic and social space supports communities to develop strategies to address the needs of each identified community. Tangentyere Council sees its role as resource to and support for the locally developed initiatives of these communities. Since many of the problems faced by town camp communities are similar, Tangentyere has the capacity to provide well developed, tried and true formulae to problem situations. Each Town Camp supports the other in their joint struggle to provide an ever-improving quality of life to their members.

## **1.4. One Stop Shop**

Some of Tangentyere's services are delivered from its Resource Centre at 4 Elder Street in Alice Springs. We call this our **One Stop Shop**. At Elder Street members are able to access the Westpac Bank agency, the Centrelink Office, including a Family Assistance Office, the Job Shop (a member of the Job Network), Tangentyere's Housing Office, which provides tenancy and repairs and maintenance service, Tangentyere's Post Office, The Aged Care service, buy firewood, and purchase electricity cards. Our bus service collects people every day from their homes on Town Camps and transports them to the **One Stop Shop** and then on to the Milner Rd Supermarket which is partially owned by Tangentyere with Centrecorps. The bus later returns to transport people and their shopping home. Another bus service picks up and drops off over 40 children per day to different schools in Alice Springs. Tangentyere thus provides a wide-ranging service meeting the daily life needs of its members in a culturally appropriate manner.

## **1.5 Marginalisation**

In Central Australia the experience of Aboriginal people is one of marginalisation. For Aboriginal people in Alice Springs it is an immediate felt experience. The Arrernte people of Alice Springs are physically marginalised. Their first experience is one of dispossession. They have been evicted from their own country. They have been invaded and forced from their traditional homes. Despite the development of Special Purpose Leases some of our

members still actually live on the fringes of the town. The Native Title holders of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) live in a group of tin sheds without toilets, showers, hot water or electricity on the margins of the Alice Springs. These people do not use the fancy word “marginalisation”, instead they continue say that they are "fringe dwellers". "Fringe dwelling" truly describes their lives. They physically live on the fringes of the town and they experience life on the edge of survival. Alice Springs is still a contact zone. The non-Aboriginal invaders and the Aboriginal owners are still locked in a contest over space. Aboriginal people in Central Australian know that their continued existence and determination to survive is resented by the occupying forces. This contest is debilitating and energy sapping. It is a continuing injustice. This contest over the right to continue as a living people is the major challenge facing our people.

### **1.6 Plight of Native Title Holders**

While this one group of Native Title holders still lives a fringe dwelling life, all of the people associated with Tangentyere Council have recently had the same experience. This experience gives rise to a multitude of subsequent problems. Tangentyere's members are sick. They have very high rates of diabetes, kidney disease and heart disease. They have very low levels of western education. They are almost all unemployed. Their kids are in trouble with the law. They are poor. Issues like mandatory sentencing impact directly on their lives. Alcoholism takes away many of their loved ones. In many ways their lives are tragic.

The challenges facing Tangentyere are to do something about the big picture - get land rights for the traditional owners of the land - and to do something everyday about the results of dispossession, the sickness and alienation that follows. Our challenge is to assist people who have been disempowered under a racist system to achieve justice, equity, opportunity and improved life chances for our 1200 members and for the many other Aboriginal people in Central Australia we speak for.

### **1.7 Tangentyere Model**

Tangentyere is established as a multi-service agency providing a variety of essential services to Town Campers. These services include:

- Housing - rental, repairs and maintenance, capital development, infrastructure provision,

- Health related - Homemakers and old peoples services, nutrition with meals on wheels cooked in our kitchen
- Education - two partnerships with the Northern Territory Department of Education to provide appropriate education to Town Camp kids,
- Youth Services - providing a mobile recreation program for 300 kids and a Youth Drop in Centre in the main street of Alice Springs
- Land Care - running a nursery and a land management program for Town Camps and remote communities
- Night Patrol and wardens service - helping to reduce the level of incarceration of Aboriginal people and reducing the impact of the criminal justice system on our people
- Employment services - we have a CDEP program with 260 places and we run a Job Network Provider agency, the Tangentyere Job Shop,
- Banking service - at a Westpac bank agency on site and the development of a Rural Transaction Centre as I speak,
- Financial counselling - through an on site service dealing with tax, superannuation, and local consumer affairs problems such as people being ripped off by Taxi drivers
- Enterprises - such as our architectural firm known as Tangentyere Design and a construction company, Tangentyere Constructions which completed \$1.6m business in 1999/2000.

The list goes on and on.

## **1.8 Staffing**

Tangentyere employs about 80 people both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal at four sites in Alice Springs. About 80% of our employees are Aboriginal. We are controlled by an Aboriginal elected Executive. All major decisions of Tangentyere are made by the Executive.

Tangentyere was the parent of a number of other important Aboriginal organisations. These include Yipirinya School, a two way, bi-lingual, primary school operating in three Indigenous languages of Central Australia; the Tyeweretye Club, an Aboriginal social club located in the southern suburbs of Alice Springs. Tyeweretye was developed to provide Aboriginal people with a place where they could go for a beer without being under scrutiny and also as a place where harm minimisation principles of alcohol use could be modelled. Finally, the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Programs Unit (CAAAPU) which provides alcohol treatment and counselling is another child of Tangentyere.

## **1.9. Advocacy**

Tangentyere has adopted another very important role for many years - the role of advocacy. Often we are the voice of Aboriginal people in Central Australia and indeed in the Northern Territory. Members of Tangentyere's staff sit on a variety of boards, councils and committees advising government about the most suitable ways to provide services to Aboriginal people.

These include the Indigenous Housing Authority of the Northern Territory (IHANT); the Northern Territory Area Consultative Committee (NTACCC); the program reference group of the Reconnect Program, which is a program designed to address the problem of homelessness and youth suicide; the Secondary Indigenous Education Reference Group; the Territory Advisory Committee of SAAP; the Alice Springs Alcohol Representative Committee (AARC) which is trying to do something constructive about the excessive consumption of alcohol in Central Australia by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike and many more.

We are the conscience of the nation as well. We have been speaking out about the plight of Aboriginal people for more than twenty years. We have achieved land justice for some Aboriginal people in Alice. There is still a way to go in that field. We have been loud in our condemnation of Mandatory Sentencing. It is one of the most disgraceful injustices perpetrated in Australia in the last few years. But our history since white settlement is littered with similar examples of injustice. We have been advocating for better and more culturally appropriate education for our youth and we have been expressing the strong concerns of our people worried about our declining health and well being.

## **1.10 Visitors**

Importantly we welcome many visitors to Tangentyere. We provide these guests with an insight into the way Aboriginal people through their organisations are meeting the challenges

of the modern world. Territory Health Services (THS) sends participants in the A.C.A.P. program to Tangentyere for their essential introduction into Aboriginal self-determination. These visits offer visitors an insight into how a locally based Indigenous organisation goes about the business of self-determination.

**In the following sections we draw attention to some of the lessons Tangentyere Council has learned from its experience. We offer these insights to assist in focusing on and addressing the continuing plight of Urban dwelling Aboriginal people in remote Australia.**

## **2.1 Addressing the Terms of Reference 2**

**Ways to extend the involvement of urban Indigenous people in decision-making affecting their local communities, including partnership governance arrangements.**

While the NT is a leader in the establishment of Town Camp Housing Resource Services such as Tangentyere Council, Julalikari Council and Kalano there has been very little development of the concept of Community Housing through cooperatives in the NT. The Alice Springs Aboriginal Urban Housing Service may appear to be an attempt at this sort of development. This service has had a very difficult early life and is still not functioning as hoped for.

The major problem in this field appears to be the method of formation and establishment of the cooperatives in the NT. It appears that the Alice Springs agency was established with a head lease transfer by Territory Housing of some housing stock to be managed by the new service. The nature of the transfer, the amount of money provided by the Territory Housing to the new agency for repairs and maintenance, the age of the stock and the requirement that the tenancy be linked to Territory Housing waiting lists all appear to have conspired to make the program hardly viable.

Yet the idea of having a locally based, locally run, indigenous management structure providing housing for local people, has great merit. The difficulties experienced by the Alice Springs service appear to be preventable if the service was properly established initially.

The idea of Housing Coops or Community Housing is that the members combine to provide housing for their members. This is different from the way the Alice Springs service was established where it was required to provide a management service for what had once been clients of Territory Housing. Housing Cooperatives are voluntary associations seeking to provide an essential service to their members as an alternative to having that service provided by the state. They fill a niche, but fill it with a different approach to state run housing providers. This element was not part of the Alice Springs model.

This approach is the one that underpins the Housing Associations affiliated with Tangentyere Council. These Housing Associations are responsible through their membership arrangements for decisions about tenancies and development. As locally based member organisations they are best able to meet the emerging needs of their members.

**Recommendation 1.**

**Tangentyere Council recommends that the Commonwealth Government provides leadership and promotes the establishment of viable Aboriginal Housing Cooperatives in Urban Centres in the NT to provide a realistic alternative structure for Aboriginal people seeking to be more effectively involved in and responsible for their own housing.**



## 2.2 Addressing Terms of Reference 3.

### **The situation and needs of Indigenous young people in urban areas, especially relating to health, education, employment and homelessness (including access to services funded under the SAAAP program).**

The National Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) operates in the Northern Territory. It is managed by a section of the Territory Health Services (THS). Data from the National collection indicates that the homelessness situation in the NT is quite different from that in other states and Territories. The major difference is that over 60% of people described as homeless in the NT are Aboriginal.

The definition of homelessness in SAAP is quite broad. For instance it classifies a person as homeless if they are living in unsatisfactory accommodation such as in a “double up” arrangement where an adult child of a family who is in a relationship with a partner and with a child (children) is forced to reside in the same house as the parents. This occurs widely in Aboriginal situations in the NT. This is not traditional Aboriginal extended family living but forced-shared accommodation because of an insufficient supply of suitable housing. It exists in many urban centres. It is common in Alice Springs and especially in the Town Camps. This situation occurs because **the rate of new household formation is not being accompanied by the provision of sufficient housing to meet the need.** It leads to a variety of unsatisfactory outcomes. These include emotional and psychological pressure on all members of the family. The younger family does not have sufficient space to work out the emerging relationships that must be negotiated in a partnership. The older members are sometimes stressed by the requirements of childcare that they must pick up. The restricted physical space leads to health and hygiene problems. Sometimes services can't sustain the pressure of numbers using bathrooms and toilets.

These living circumstances are correctly described as homelessness. The consequences of this situation are that from time to time the situations worsen and individuals and whole families find that they have no alternative but to leave these stressful environments. Then we have people without shelter and exposed to even more stressful circumstances.

The SAAP program is designed to prevent and preclude these situations. At present it is not. **At present SAAP is mostly supporting crises refuges in the NT.** There is certainly a huge problem of family violence leading to the need for Women's shelters. There is a large

problem associated with homeless youth. These crises are met by shelters and accommodation services. But there is a need to seek to pre-empt and **establish effective early intervention strategies** to seek to meet the problem described above. This requires a re-jigging of the SAAP arrangements to allow for more case management services that may not be closely linked to an existing crisis driven service but may exist working collaboratively with a Housing provider such as Territory Housing or some of the Community Housing providers in the Territory.

## **Recommendation 2.**

**Tangentyere Council calls for the establishment of Case Management Services provided as an adjunct service of Community Housing and Territory Housing providers free of charge and across the entire housing sector of the NT.**

### 2.3 Addressing terms of Reference 4.

#### **The maintenance of ATSI culture in urban areas, including where appropriate ways in which such maintenance can be encouraged.**

The *Yarrenyty-Arltere* Learning Centre is an example of an Inter-generational learning environment where Aboriginal youth are given the opportunity to learn alongside and from their elders. It offers a great opportunity for cultural maintenance and repair. (The *Irrkerlantye* Learning Centre is another example of this approach. Both have been established by Tangentyere Council in partnership with other providers.)

This project addresses the marginalisation of the Aboriginal youth living at *Yarrenyty-Arltere* one of the Town Camps of Alice Springs. Many of these kids have been inhalant substance abusers. Quite a few have criminal records. They are sure candidates for Mandatory Sentencing. This project works as an early **intervention programme** to prevent these youth from coming into contact with the criminal justice system. At *Yarrenyty-Arltere* kids are going to school for the first time for many years. They are engaged in worthwhile recreational activities and they are engaging in respectful contact with their own culture and tradition through the inter-generational cultural activities sponsored by the project which involves elders teaching about the tradition and the law.

The existing program is a partnership between Tangentyere Council the *Yarrenyty-Arltere* Housing Association, Gillen School (NTDE) and IAD. It is progressing reasonable well at *Yarrenyty-Arltere*. The school program (delivered by Gillen primary School) is now operating with about 12 to 15 youths attending everyday. Many of these children had not been to school for many years before this initiative. Many have very serious educational disadvantages. Many can hardly spell their own names. The teaching work here is difficult and will take many years to overcome accumulated disadvantage. But it is a start and progressing OK.

The Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD) programs are now in full swing. About 15 other participants are involved every day in either Horticulture or Living Skills training programs. These are adult education programs. The concept here is based on the idea of inter-generational learning. It has elders and youth together participating in accredited courses and demonstrates to each cohort the sense that learning is a valued activity. It also provides an

opportunity for elders to play a role in providing moral guidance to youth and provides opportunity to engage in cultural learning not available in other settings.

What are the outcomes of this program? Well principally we see a group of marginalised people now at the centre. Instead of being unable to access educational services this group is now participating in a comprehensive program. Such reversal of past experience has a great impact on self-esteem. Secondly the program acts as a diversion. While kids are in school they are not petrol sniffing, they are not committing criminal offences, they are not harming themselves and others. This activity makes them fitter, stronger and tireder. At the end of the school day they have less energy for nefarious activity. The program provides them with food. They are healthier and stronger.

What are the problems? The biggest problem is in ensuring local Aboriginal control over this project. Without local control by the *Yarrenyty-Arltere* community this program could be seen as simply more of the same old way of doing things, namely providing something **for** Aboriginal people rather than **working with** and **under the control of the Aboriginal community**. It is especially important for the success of these sorts of programs to have a grass roots community development officer employed whose mandate will be to work alongside the community, providing information about resources and approaches that will be best used under community control to ensure that the processes and direction of the Learning Centre are in the best interests of the local community.

Without this grass roots control we cannot expect to achieve long lasting engagement of the local community nor any lasting positive outcomes.

We have been developing this approach for some time. It has been a difficult slog to establish government support for a program that is quite different from the way service and education and development have been presented in the past.

### **Recommendation 3**

**We recommend that the Standing Committee investigate this methodology further with a eye to providing moral support to Government departments who receive applications for funding of these sorts of ventures. They are opportunities for the development of community capacity and social capital.**

## **2.4 Addressing Terms Of Reference 5**

### **Opportunities for economic independence in urban areas**

While Tangentyere Council has successfully established its **Job Shop** business as a member of the Job Network the provision of Intensive Assistance and Community Support Programs for severely disadvantaged job seekers will never make a major impact on Aboriginal unemployment in Alice Springs until the economy of Alice Springs becomes more open and provides greater opportunity for more unskilled and semi-skilled employees. It is the nature of the labour market that is the major impediment to Aboriginal participation in Alice Springs.

Even in traditional areas such as municipal services the number of employees required to fulfil these tasks has reduced over time. The Alice Springs Town Council is employing fewer staff as machines become more efficient. The same is even the case in the Tangentyere Council workforce where the Council has discovered that in order to meet budget constraints it must reduce employment and become more technologically efficient. So in 2000 Tangentyere Council has fewer employees than in 1998.

Tourism is the major growth area in Central Australia. The tourism market demands a particular sort of employee response. In Tangentyere's experience we have great difficulty in stimulating employment in 'front of shop' type activities. Not many young Aboriginal people are keen to expose themselves to the demands of customer service. This is understandable from an individual perspective. This industry is very demanding because as we know the customer is always right. In the larger sense the consequences of this is that many young Aboriginal people have difficulty breaking into the labour market. In a sense it has become even more restricted because of this personal choice.

Other most significant factors include award conditions applicable to most industries. If the award for a work place does not include provision for ceremonial leave for Aboriginal employees and an Aboriginal employee is required to attend ceremonies then the employee will absent him/herself from the workplace without leave. This gives rise to accusations that the employee has gone walkabout and may lead to dis-employment. Similar situations occur in regard to attendance at funerals. If awards can be developed that provide the right for Aboriginal employees to fulfil their cultural obligations without recrimination then there is a chance that there may be some improvement in Aboriginal labour force participation.

Tangentyere Council is considering further investigation into the development of an Aboriginal Labour Hire company. By aggregating the supply of local labour into a company with support from CDEP it may be possible to develop future labour involvement without some of the problems outlined above.

Tangentyere is also exploring the development of an Aboriginal Group Training Company. The existence of a wide ranging construction industry in Central Australia provides some hope for the establishment of a group training venture which accommodates the needs of trainees and industry.

Both these developments will require considerable financial support and expert technical advice from government. With a new venture in the building of the Alice to Darwin railway and continuing growth in the mining sector these two areas hold out some hope for some employment expansion.

There have been some examples of Aboriginal participation in the cultural tourism industry. This associated with the demand for Aboriginal Arts and Crafts also has potential.

#### **Recommendation 4 a**

**Support is made available for establishment of locally based Arts/crafts enterprises operated by Town Campers on their own land and in situations where they can work comfortably and without scrutiny but still be able to produce and market quality product to the expanding tourist market for these items.**

#### **Recommendation 4 b**

**That Tangentyere be financially supported to establish an Aboriginal Group Training Company and an Aboriginal Labour Hire Company in Central Australia.**

#### **Recommendation 4 c**

**That appropriate awards accommodating the special concerns of Aboriginal employees be adopted in all industries in Central Australia.**

## **2.5 Addressing the Terms of Reference 6**

### **Urban housing needs and the particular problems and difficulties associated with urban areas - Building standards in Urban areas.**

Over the last four years there has been a significant increase in the number of houses constructed for Aboriginal communities under the Indigenous Housing Authority of the Northern Territory (IHANT) and National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) programs. These houses have been built both in remote communities in Central Australia and in Alice Springs. All the houses have been built to special standards making them suitable for Aboriginal residents.

Both IHANT and NAHS have specific standards which are designed to ensure that the houses meet environmental health standards and are durable enough to sustain the higher than average occupancy rates common in Aboriginal tenancies. These new designs are replacing older designs which have been found to fail the health requirements of Aboriginal families and to have very short lives – that is, they are demolished and replaced within 15 years of construction.

We will not go in to detail about the specific standards. Principally they cover the materials of construction and special aspects in regard to bathrooms and toilets and verandahs.

It is now common for these houses to be constructed of solid brick (concrete block). This makes both the internal and external walls much stronger and resistant to damage. It protects occupants from invasion and reduces fire risk. Ceilings are now made of ‘mini-orb’ – a steel rib material that is damage proof. Windows are made of ‘lexsan’ a plastic like smash resistant material. Windows are covered by steel screens and fire escapes are built into every room.

Toilet cisterns are made of steel. Bathrooms are made larger – to accommodate wheelchairs and are tiled extensively. There are normally two toilets in two different areas and two washing areas. Wet areas are designed at a lower level than the floor level of the rest of the house to prevent accidental flooding of the house from blockages in the laundry or bathroom.

Most new houses have verandahs on at least two walls, many have four. The reason being to make use of the outside area of the house for shade and windbreak. This is in acknowledgment of the style of living common for many Aboriginal residents where much

time is spent outside the house. It also makes it possible to accommodate visitors without too much invasion of privacy.

These standards are now in use in the construction of Town Camp houses in Alice Springs. They are the minimum standards recognised as providing necessary environmental protection for the occupants and for prolonging the life of the building (protecting the asset).

Tangentyere Council is concerned that these standards do not apply to normal public housing construction in Alice Springs. We are aware that many 'Housing Commission' houses have plaster walls. All have plaster ceilings. Most do not have two toilets. Most do not have substantial verandahs. Wet areas are not set down. Windows are made of glass.

Obviously there are consequences of these construction characteristics. It is harder to keep standard 'Housing Commission' houses clean. It is harder to ensure minimum damage to plaster walls. Glass breaks easily and is dangerous.

We feel that it is time for a complete investigation into the standards applied to the construction of public housing in urban areas as it is clear that increasingly the occupants of these houses will be 'welfare' tenants of whom the majority will be Aboriginal in the Northern Territory. It appears that there is a steady increase in rural – urban migration in Central Australia with increasing numbers of Aboriginal families moving into Alice Springs and seeking permanent accommodation there. Much of this movement is understandable, being a response to the need for accommodation near the renal unit for instance and also being a response to the very high cost of living in remote communities.

#### **Recommendation 5.**

**Tangentyere Council suggests that it is time to undertake an investigation into building standards in urban centres to ensure increasing amenity for all tenants of Territory Housing.**