



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## Official Committee Hansard

# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES  
STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS

**Reference: Needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**

WEDNESDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2000

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

## **INTERNET**

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to: **<http://search.aph.gov.au>**

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER AFFAIRS**

**Wednesday, 1 November 2000**

**Members:** Mr Lieberman (*Chair*), Mrs Draper, Mr Haase, Ms Hoare, Mr Katter, Mr Lloyd, Mr Melham, Mr Quick, Mr Snowdon and Mr Wakelin

**Members in attendance:** Mrs Draper, Mr Haase, Ms Hoare, Mr Lieberman, Mr Lloyd, Mr Melham, Mr Quick, Mr Snowdon and Mr Wakelin

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

The present and ongoing needs of country and metropolitan urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Among other matters, the Committee will consider:

1. the nature of existing programs and services available to urban dwelling indigenous Australians, including ways to more effectively deliver services considering the special needs of these people;
2. ways to extend the involvement of urban indigenous people in decision making affecting their local communities, including partnership governance arrangements;
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 from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program);
4. the maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in urban areas, including, where appropriate, ways in which such maintenance can be encouraged;
5. opportunities for economic independence in urban areas; and
6. urban housing needs and the particular problems and difficulties associated with urban areas.

**WITNESSES**

**BOYSON, Mr Ian, Director, Indigenous Policy Unit, Community Branch, Department of Family and Community Services..... 133**

**MacGILLIVRAY, Mrs Delilah Phyllis, Business Manager, Indigenous Community Segment Team, National Support Office, Centrelink, Department of Family and Community Services ..... 133**

**MONK, Ms Sioux, Director, Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement Management and Development, Housing Support Branch, Department of Family and Community Services ..... 133**

**RUSHTON, Ms Tricia, Assistant Secretary, Community Branch, Department of Family and Community Services ..... 133**

**SMYTHE, Mr Stephen, Assistant Director, Indigenous Policy Unit, Community Branch, Department of Family and Community Services ..... 133**

**WINZAR, Ms Peta, Assistant Secretary, Parenting Payment and Labour Market Program, Department of Family and Community Services ..... 133**



Committee met at 4.17 p.m.

**BOYSON, Mr Ian, Director, Indigenous Policy Unit, Community Branch, Department of Family and Community Services**

**MacGILLIVRAY, Mrs Delilah Phyllis, Business Manager, Indigenous Community Segment Team, National Support Office, Centrelink, Department of Family and Community Services**

**MONK, Ms Sioux, Director, Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement Management and Development, Housing Support Branch, Department of Family and Community Services**

**RUSHTON, Ms Tricia, Assistant Secretary, Community Branch, Department of Family and Community Services**

**SMYTHE, Mr Stephen, Assistant Director, Indigenous Policy Unit, Community Branch, Department of Family and Community Services**

**WINZAR, Ms Peta, Assistant Secretary, Parenting Payment and Labour Market Program, Department of Family and Community Services**

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing of the committee's inquiry into the needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I warmly welcome the witnesses. As you are aware, the government is spending a record \$2.3 billion on indigenous specific programs, and this inquiry, as you will have noticed from the terms of reference, we hope will encourage indigenous people to become more involved in decision making at the community level and strengthen partnerships between the community and government. It is hoped that the inquiry will assist the government and the parliament to continue to develop and introduce practical measures to help indigenous people. We hope this inquiry will be a very positive one, helping and encouraging people like you in the challenges that you have.

Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath, you should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Commonwealth parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter that may be regarded as a contempt of parliament.

My aim is that this hearing will finish by 5 o'clock, if that will help you as well as members of the committee, and some members might have to leave just before that. I anticipate there will be a number of questions we will not be able to ask you but, if we write to you with those questions that we do not reach, we would like your cooperation in giving us written responses on those.

**Ms Rushton**—We are very happy to do that.

**CHAIR**—We are all practical people when we get down to business. We have received a lot of very helpful information and we are grateful for that. Do you have a short opening statement which you would like to make?

**Ms Rushton**—An extremely short one, just to say that FACS does not have, like some departments, an indigenous-specific branch. We have indigenous issues being managed across

the portfolio, so my ability to answer micro detail or very detailed questions is limited. I have brought people here anticipating your emphases, but there may be quite a few questions of detail that we will need to take on notice. I apologise for that, but it is part of our approach to managing these issues.

**CHAIR**—I think we all applaud the whole of government approach, which is good. In choosing the people to be with you today, you have obviously done that after thought. Could you give us a brief insight as to why you chose those people in your approach to this issue?

**Ms Rushton**—After some liaison with the secretariat, we have brought people with a very strong understanding of housing. I have brought Ian Boyson with me because he runs the policy unit within the branch which has the overview and he could direct us to where you might find the information even if we cannot give it to you right now. Delilah is here because Centrelink are very important in providing social security services and other services to indigenous people, and we have been working with them, of course. Ms Winzar is here because of her labour market focus, and economic participation is obviously important.

**CHAIR**—You have done well.

**Ms Rushton**—I have not brought child care, for instance, or disability.

**CHAIR**—Yes, where do you start and where do you end in things like this. I want to share something with you. We have only been out on the road once, to Western Australia, so far in this inquiry, and it was in the very early stages. We have not made any judgments; we have got an open mind. But the very first visit was to our good friend Barry Haase's electorate and, in Kalgoorlie, we met with community people. The thing that struck me—although I have not made a final judgment it did strike me fairly strongly—was that there appeared to be a lot of groups interested in housing in that community working separately, yet the actual client base and the stock of housing would have been better managed, in my opinion, if there had been a single coordinated approach. That was one thing that struck me as a problem, although people were doing a good job and trying very hard at local level to do what was needed.

The other thing that struck me—and this was in Perth as well—was that recently elected people representing ATSIC seemed to have been thrown into the deep end. They perhaps were not aware of the strategies that had been developed over preceding years to deliver services to indigenous people, or, if they were, they were not telling me that—perhaps they did not have a chance to tell me that; I do not know. Have you any thoughts generally about how to better deliver services in a coordinated way at community level? Have you any thoughts about whether there are just far too many organisations?

**Ms Rushton**—That is a big question.

**CHAIR**—It is a big question, but I want to try and tease it out.

**Ms Rushton**—I have thoughts. I do not know whether you would class them as evidence based information but I will give you my thoughts.

**CHAIR**—Okay.

**Ms Rushton**—I will begin with one of the things that is a major piece of work I am responsible for at the moment, which is the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. No doubt you will have seen copies of this and be aware of the principles that are the framework for that approach, which are things like a more coordinated approach, working in partnership, and local solutions to local problems. Part of the philosophy that underpins that strategy is the idea of paying attention to the particular networks between government agencies, community services and individuals in communities, and trying to support those networks. In the theory, those networks are sometimes called social capital—the glue that holds a community together. Part of what underlies this is the idea of paying attention to how those things might work, and supporting them. A project that we might fund under this strategy, which rolls out from 1 January, might be something where a number of players—in, for example, Kalgoorlie or Fitzroy Crossing—get around the table and say, ‘We’ve got a problem with our kids and substance abuse—or vandalism or something like that—and we want to see what we can do about that together.’ We would fund a group to do that. So we are aware of the problem with the disjointedness of some service delivery.

In saying that, I would also refer back to the original point you made about housing. Under the Commonwealth-state housing agreement there is an Aboriginal rental housing program. In the bilateral agreements that the Commonwealth has with each state and territory government, we allow flexibility on how that money is spent so that it is not just spent on housing stock but can be spent on developing the management capacity, the leadership in the indigenous community, to actually manage more effectively. Despite what I think you saw in Kalgoorlie, some of the work that is being done by indigenous people—and the particular indigenous person’s name has gone out of my head—in looking at issues like home ownership for indigenous people in Western Australia is trying to tackle some of those issues. That is a general comment on coordinating service delivery.

Another thought I have is that we need to be careful not to create a great burdensome architecture at the Commonwealth level about trying to join everything up because it is important, but, rather, to somehow empower people at the local level to join up where it is sensible. I know with the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program that in the new memorandum of understanding and agreements we have put in place in the last few months—I used to own that and now I do not—we emphasise the importance of linkages for homeless people in joining up.

My general comment is that it needs to be done. I would recommend it be done at a local level. The philosophy behind the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy would be encouraging that. In many different places across the portfolio there would be examples of that attempt to join up. Certainly it underpins the Prime Minister’s social coalition philosophy.

**CHAIR**—I have found Aboriginal people very keen to take on a leadership role and to manage their own affairs at the community level, and that is terrific. I have also found that there is a fair bit of reticence, even fear, on their part as to whether they will be able to do it. Problems of management failures in the past, and goodness knows what, hold them back a bit. But I have also found that being able to give examples of successful programs and delivery of services provides a great level of inspiration to people who want to have a go. In that context, I wonder if it would be possible to be provided in the next little while with some examples that you and your colleagues think would provide good examples to other communities in Australia.

We could perhaps look at them, and we might be able to visit them, learn from them and maybe use them as a light on the hill for others. Could we impose on you to do that?

**Ms Rushton**—We would be delighted to do that. I would also like to mention that one element of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is something called the ‘can-do initiative’, which is exactly that—to promote good practice and good experiences in communities to other communities. The technical term would be ‘bridging social capital’—to give the ideas around to difference communities. That is being facilitated.

**CHAIR**—I can envisage a chapter in our report headed ‘The can-do chapter’. You have whet my appetite. On that basis, we will move to questions.

**Ms HOARE**—I was going to ask that question—thank you for that, Mr Chairman. Because of the low income received by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, would you be able to provide me with the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are on the full Newstart allowance compared with the percentage of non-indigenous people who are on the full Newstart allowance? I would also like to know the percentages of those who are on part payments—whether it be family top-up payments or whatever. If I am correct, I think the percentages may indicate that there are more indigenous families on top-up support payments—because of their low incomes—than there are on the full Newstart allowance. Do you know what I mean?

**Ms Winzar**—We are a little handicapped, at least at the moment. Because customers disclose their Aboriginality voluntarily, our records would tend to understate the number of indigenous customers who might be on any particular payment. Perhaps Ian or Delilah might like to add something to that.

**Mr Boyson**—There have been some changes made to the Centrelink processes for collecting information on indigenous customers to align the questions that are asked were the ABS standard question. But, as Ms Winzar has said, it has been a voluntary field in the past, both for customers and for operators, so we have some concern about the actual numbers that we can produce on indigenous customers. There seems to be an undercount. There is some work being done at the moment in trying to quantify how far under that is. That information can be supplied, we can pull that information, but that qualifier needs to be taken into account.

**Ms HOARE**—The reason I ask this is that there would seem to be a large percentage of indigenous people receiving part income support. Is there a better way to deliver a part income support program from the government? Do you know if policy development areas have been looking at this?

**Ms Rushton**—That might be something that you would ask DEWRSB, the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, because you are really talking about the employment opportunities and remuneration. That is really the driver of that issue, as I understand it. It might be something to follow up with DEWRSB.

**Mr Boyson**—It is probably worth bearing in mind that, of people of work force age, a high proportion of indigenous people are actually employed in CDEP programs—some 30,000



people across the country—and this impacts on the number of people who are listed as full-time Newstart recipients.

**Ms HOARE**—I understand that.

**Ms Winzar**—Can I just get some clarification. When you asked about delivering those partial income support payments, or top-up payments, are you interested in alternative methods instead of paying individual customers? Is that the direction of your question?

**Ms HOARE**—Paying individual customers, but not individual amounts—not paying a bit of family payment, a bit of Newstart allowance and a bit of other payments. The top-up type payments are said to be parenting, family payment, Newstart allowance or a pension of some kind. Is there a better way to consolidate those payments for families?

**Ms Winzar**—There are a couple of issues that are perhaps worth noting. One is that I notice you have a copy of the McClure report into welfare reform. One of the recommendations in that report is that, as part of some steps towards simplifying the income support arrangements, governments think about introducing a single payment for people of work force age—that is, instead of having a parenting payment, a carer payment, a Newstart allowance or whatever—subject, of course, to means testing and other qualifications—that it just be the one payment for everybody in a range of circumstances. That might help simplify it for people and improve their understanding of what they are actually getting.

**Ms HOARE**—That is what I am thinking about for people who are traditionally on low incomes receiving income support top-up—making it a bit simpler and not as bureaucratic.

**Ms Winzar**—And we would endorse that. We would want a simpler, less bureaucratic income support system, but we also acknowledge that that is a long-term proposal. You would be looking at the next 10 years or perhaps even longer before you got to that nirvana type stage.

**Ms Rushton**—I might top up that question. The movement in Centrelink—and Delilah might be able to talk about that a bit more—towards giving you someone in Centrelink, if possible, who always deals with you, while it does not simplify the payments, can actually simplify the experience. The officer will know the complicated story and the customer will not have to keep retelling it. That is going a little way towards addressing the issue.

**Mrs MacGillivray**—I am coming to this from different angles. When you first started talking about using that money, it was about using the money in a different way in a family context and a community context, and there have been discussions around that. Some of the discussions were around building stronger communities. I addressed a conference in Alice Springs in April, and there was a cry from the community's perspective. We talked about regional councils, who were saying, 'Let's have some flexibility in the policies and how the funding comes in.'

Policy makers need to think—and so do we—about the direction a policy is going to go in; you still need to protect the rights of individuals in that. One of the proposals that Noel Pearson talks about relates to how that money comes into the family and whether it comes into one pool and the pool is used in a different way. We have been grappling with that. Trish might talk about that a bit more, but it is really about flexibility.

To come back to one-to-one contact and the experience for the individual of presenting as an indigenous customer, we obviously need to recognise the barriers—urban, rural and remote. Or if it is indigenous people coming from remote communities to an urban environment, there are cultural language barriers and all sorts of issues there. But the one-to-one contact system allows that person to sit with that customer and talk about their experiences, what payment they are on, if they are on a payment or not and what the appropriate mix is as opposed to a person being on Newstart who really needs to be on disability or something else that is going to add some value to your life.

**Ms HOARE**—Thank you. I would appreciate a copy of the paper you presented in Alice Springs, Delilah.

**Mrs MacGillivray**—No worries.

**Ms Rushton**—I refer you to reference 1 on page 9 of that report that we provided. It talks about the statement of care pilots, which is another innovation. That answers your question from another angle as well.

**Mr LLOYD**—In your opening statement, I understood you to say that the Department of Family and Community Services does not have any indigenous specific branches. Is that correct?

**Ms Rushton**—Yes, that is right. There is no branch called ‘indigenous’ branch. Peta is a branch head, I am a branch head and a lot of us share different things that are documented in here.

**Mr LLOYD**—What does CDEP come under?

**Ms Rushton**—CDEP is with Peta and with ATSIC. Centrelink has a role, obviously. We have special childcare programs.

**Mr LLOYD**—That is really what I am leading to. How much communication and interaction is there between your department and ATSIC? Is it such as to look at different programs that both departments are delivering, to stop duplication and to work in with each other on housing and other areas? Is there that interaction, or are you both going off on your own tangents?

**Ms Rushton**—We work closely with ATSIC on indigenous housing and on strengthening indigenous community pilots which is looking at more innovative ways. We work closely with Centrelink and with ATSIC.

**Ms Winzar**—I think there are connections at a range of levels. In terms of the higher policy directions—and I think Tricia has mentioned a couple where there is strong cooperation—through ATSIC’s regional presence and FACS’s state offices there is a fair amount of liaising at that level. Of course, in local communities the ties between Centrelink and CDEP projects in particular would be quite strong. We tend to come together around particular program issues, for example, perhaps trying to increase the number of people that are taking up CDEP as an option or trying to increase the number of people on CDEP who are getting their right social security entitlements. We would address that collectively.

**Mr LLOYD**—Invariably, wherever we go the first thing that is raised is the problem of money, whichever community we go to. We will say to them, ‘But the government is spending \$2.4 billion on Aboriginal and indigenous issues and there’s \$4 billion for housing.’ They basically say, ‘Where is the money?’ It is frustrating from our point of view, and I am sure it is frustrating from your point of view as well. I am also concerned at the lack of knowledge, among some of the ATSIC department people and some of the commissioners, of the actual programs that are available. That is why I am interested to know how much interaction there is between the departments and particularly the commissioners. I do not see that they are getting the training that they need as well as their elected representatives. Obviously that is not really your area but it is a concern to me that these people are elected and then they do not have the training and the back-up between ATSIC and other departments that are relevant to their position to be able to go out amongst their communities and have a meaningful input.

**CHAIR**—So, too, do a lot of members of parliament.

**Mr LLOYD**—Absolutely.

**CHAIR**—We learn something every day.

**Mr LLOYD**—Mr Chairman, my comment there certainly was not in any way directed directly at ATSIC commissioners because I am speaking from experience. When we are elected to a public office we do not have a training facility as well and it is very difficult to get up and running. I have seen that in all areas so it is not just directed at ATSIC commissioners. It is an area where I think we all need to have the assistance of the departments and I have seen it in some of the areas that we have travelled to.

**Ms Rushton**—I just might bring to your attention the indigenous roundtable that Minister Herron and Minister Newman recently ran. Two ATSIC commissioners were involved in that, Eric Wynne and Brian Butler, and they are continuing as part of a working group on indigenous issues. That may assist, because that was about ways of indigenous community capacity building across government, not just for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. That may be an opportunity to increase that understanding at another level as well with the commissioners, not just with ATSIC staff.

**Ms Winzar**—I think it would be fair to say that we work strongly with all community organisations in keeping them up to speed with changes in the rules and programs that are available, and so on. Certainly it is an issue for ATSIC commissioners, but it is no less an issue for other community organisations and, as you have said, for yourselves, too.

**Mrs MacGillivray**—I think it is fair to say after my comment about what communities were saying in Alice Springs that, clearly, we want the integration at all levels, starting from the local indigenous community councils who give views that there is not enough funding, and that is because of the way the funding comes in, and other areas of responsibility. We need the integration from that level right through to the top. Some of the strategies are the interdepartmental forums and there is a deputy secretaries group that meets. We have actually now had Pat Turner, the previous CEO of ATSIC, come in as an executive director in Centrelink looking after indigenous issues so she is having discussions at those levels.

I think as different departments we do still work in our stove pipes. We have been making some real structural arrangements to try to get people more connected across the business, as Trish said, so everyone is considering that integration, even within departments. We have done that in Centrelink and, as Trish has said, FACS has done that as well. It saves managing those relationships externally at all levels. So you might have a connectedness at the higher level with the group Trish described, but to really get the issues from the ground through to the top so they do not bottleneck somewhere in between, I think it is fair to say there is still a bit of work to be done there.

**Mr HAASE**—I have got a long list of not only questions but topics as well. This is perhaps a Centrelink question—I am not sure. The first thing that comes to mind is that I was looking at a summary of your notes on banking and financial services and I was reminded of a situation that exists in Kalgoorlie where the method of identification for payment is done on a plastic card basis—a registration card that is identification and justification for receiving, et cetera. It acts as a bankcard or identification card with the department. Are we agreed on that? All right. These are credit cards for accessing cash in bank by the individual, complete with pin number. There is a good system going in Kalgoorlie right now where a particular person holds about 20 of them, and has the pin numbers, and accesses those cards on behalf of the individuals and doles out cash as appropriate—we hope. Is there any awareness of this potential rort that is going on, and is anything being done in the department to control or investigate it?

**Ms Rushton**—I am not aware of that. I will have to clarify that. I am not sure about who is holding this. Is this a Centrelink customer?

**Mr HAASE**—No. This is Fred Nerk, who offers this private and very lucrative service to individuals.

**Ms Rushton**—I am certainly not aware of the particular issue in Kalgoorlie.

**Mr HAASE**—I am prepared to be general. I know it exists and I need you to know it exists.

**Ms Rushton**—We are aware of communities where people have been given a cheque as their social security benefit and then the local store has charged \$10 to cash that cheque, so the person is \$10 down before they even get started. There is a story in here about a trial, in partnership with Westpac, to provide banking services with the Tangentyere Council and Westpac in Alice Springs to overcome those kinds of issues—to empower indigenous people to actually interact directly with banks without having to have middle people, who are sometimes not that helpful, as you have documented.

**Mr HAASE**—Given that we have 11 minutes at this stage, I suggest that the efficient way to address today would be for you to take that on notice. Would you care to take that on notice and provide some comments.

**Ms Rushton**—Yes.

**Mr HAASE**—I am not talking about A to Z answers; I am talking about comments. Most importantly, I want you to be aware of some of the things that are happening out there in the dirt. You mentioned banks, for instance. Typical today is not the creation of, but the closure of,

banks throughout regional Australia and this makes more and more limited the availability of banking service as we know it. The only reason that this is relevant is the fact that we are talking here about urban dwelling individuals and, when they come with no experience of urban dwelling, most of these situations that we as mainstream population take for granted become absolutely horrendous and are the start of all of the problems that follow.

The next question I am going to ask you concerns the provision of temporary accommodation in urban areas for desert dwelling Aboriginal people when they are visiting towns. There is no general consideration to look for accommodation ahead. There is a tendency to simply come to town. That is a very reasonable expectation but there is a great shock sometimes and the facilities that are in the scrub, where they are all at home, are not quite the same in the city or in the urban areas. What is being done? I realise that there are Aboriginal Hostels but is enough resource going into the creation of Aboriginal Hostels?

**Ms Rushton**—Aboriginal Hostels are aligned with ATSIC.

**Mrs MacGillivray**—I think they get direct line funding from DoF.

**Mr HAASE**—So it is not an area that you would be responsible for?

**Ms Monk**—Certainly the Commonwealth-state housing agreement from DIMA allows states and territories a large degree of flexibility on what they spend their money on. The Northern Territory particularly is well aware of the issue you have raised about people coming into towns temporarily and how to address that issue. I do not think they have come up with the answers yet but they are actively dealing with the Aboriginal communities to try and come up with some solutions under the current bilateral agreement that we have in place with them.

**Mr HAASE**—It is interesting. You see, I think we all fall into the trap—and you are suggesting that others do too—that when we say there is a problem and it needs to be addressed, we immediately think of a responsible department and where is the funding and what housing can we create? We do not ever think of the process from the other end—the education of individuals and making them aware that there should not be an expectation.

**Mrs MacGillivray**—I have worked for Aboriginal Hostels for seven years in their research area, so I am aware that we did have some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers—a lot of the customers are Centrelink recipients and so on—who will come in and pay a fee for accommodation. That is the basis of the accommodation they receive at Aboriginal Hostels. Under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, which FACS looks after, there are other providers of accommodation. Even with women's refuges or other hostels, a lot of our people will never stay in them because of the circumstances they are in, whether it is that they are not used to living in that sort of housing or whatever. They would not stay there. They prefer to stay down the park. We looked at funding under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. Aboriginal Hostels actually funds hostels under that program because of the limited funding in SAAP.

There are other options. We do the research with communities and look at what are the appropriate options—is it just a shed that needs to go up?—recognising the access issues for these customers and so on. At the end of the day, it is again individuals making choices.

Aboriginal Hostels has a no alcohol rule. A lot of the customers who do not want to stay in hostels are the people who want to drink. Aboriginal Hostels will be able to answer some of those questions in terms of some of the research they are doing now and where that is leading, but under that program they had company hostels as well as community hostels. Working with communities, they would identify those needs and work out what the options were. In Mt Isa, say, there is an Aboriginal hostel, which is a company-owned hostel, and other hostels there that actually cater for other groups that do not want a bed or whatever.

**Mr HAASE**—It is a major problem. For anyone who is not aware, it is an absolutely major problem in urban centres. It has local governments tearing their hair out. Wiluna, where we have predominantly Aboriginal council members, have a task on their hands that they cannot jump over. In Laverton and in Leonora—in all those towns—they have huge problems. There seems to be no solution, because never does it appear that the solution is found in instruction or encouragement of the people to consider what they should do when they go to town. There seems just to be an acceptance that ‘There is a problem, we therefore must provide housing.’ I will move on.

Following on with the accommodation situation, when presence becomes a little more than temporary, and often state housing is accessed, what do those housing providers accept is the responsibility of signatories to leases, primarily parents, with regards to maintenance of the dwelling, because this is another major problem area?

**Ms Rushton**—That would no doubt vary from lease to lease.

**Ms Monk**—It is the responsibility of the state and territory governments to set the tenant rights and responsibilities.

**Ms Rushton**—But I would put it to you that the research that Healthabitat has done is probably relevant here.

**Mr HAASE**—Yes, you have a heading here on housing.

**Ms Rushton**—The work that Paul Pholeros and Paul Torzillo of Healthabitat have done on the reasons why indigenous people, wherever they are, have less than a 60 per cent chance of having a working toilet are that 70 per cent is due to poor initial construction of indigenous housing, 20-something per cent is due to lack of available maintenance, some other reasons, but less than five per cent is from vandalism or deliberate misuse. So the issue of the tenant’s behaviour, in terms of why indigenous housing is not as it should be, is a very minor issue according to their research.

**Mr HAASE**—Would that research be an amalgamation of Australia-wide research?

**Ms Rushton**—Yes.

**Mr HAASE**—I would suggest that there were alarming exceptions at the end of the data when you took specific locations in regional Australia?

**Ms Rushton**—I could find that out for you.

**Mr HAASE**—I am very much interested in that. Peta, you made the point that you do not have any figures on indigenous people per se with regards to particular statistics because it is not compulsory, of course, for people to declare their ethnicity. What is the policy across the board with regards to encouragement or otherwise of clients to declare their ethnicity?

**Ms Winzar**—That is probably one for Delilah, I guess, in terms of the Centrelink—

**Mrs MacGillivray**—Prior to September this year the system did not support asking the question. We did a lot of work with the ABS, the Bureau of Statistics, where they did the research in the medical arena. They found that non-indigenous people were uncomfortable with asking the question. It is always optional for the customer to declare whether they are Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both, or they do not wish to answer. So we have actually done an exercise this year and released a system enhancement that allows me as a customer service officer to ask the question, otherwise I cannot go to the next field.

In answer to your question, there is a training strategy for staff around that, and there is also a communication strategy targeted at our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customers to say, 'This is why we ask the question. It is to improve our services. However, it is optional for you to answer the question.' That system enhancement will allow us to collect data better. The ABS asked all government departments to standardise the question so that the information is consistent. That system enhancement went in in September, so we will probably see some differences in our data. There is data there now, and a figure of 180,000 comes to mind. There is only 300,000 indigenous people in the country, and that could be multiple payments and whatever. But it is the validity of the data and what sort of analysis you do with that and how you use the data that would be a concern to us, that is all.

**Mr HAASE**—Do you ask for confirmation, for proof of?

**Mrs MacGillivray**—For particular payments like Abstudy and the indigenous wage assistance card there is eligibility criteria. Our policy people might clarify this, but it is not about eligibility, it is about identifying.

**Mr HAASE**—So if you ask me the question, and I answer in the affirmative, I get the benefits?

**Mrs MacGillivray**—Yes, if it is about Abstudy, whether you are entitled to it—

**Mr HAASE**—So there is no anthropological evidence required, or heritage evidence?

**Mr Boyson**—You probably need to separate them.

**Ms Winzar**—Abstudy does have some further rules. It is not simply enough to assert Aboriginality; you have to, as I understand it, be accepted by the local community, have somebody vouch for you.

**Mr HAASE**—So it would be attested to by somebody else—

**Ms Winzar**—Yes, that is correct.

**Mr HAASE**—who was previously attested to or recognised?

**Ms Winzar**—Yes.

**Mr HAASE**—Is there a perception by some of your clients that ‘I will perhaps be entitled to greater benefits if I declare my Aboriginality’?

**Ms Winzar**—There certainly is a perception amongst some of our customers that that is the case. That perception is usually held by non-Aboriginal customers, and it is certainly the case, I think, that Aboriginal customers do not receive additional benefits to those available to non-Aboriginal people. Abstudy is a good case in point, where the rates of payment are often lower than those for students of non-Aboriginal descent and the eligibility conditions are in some ways much tougher.

**CHAIR**—In the context of what you are saying, it might help the inquiry and everybody else if we ask you to respond in writing with details of those programs that are exclusively available to indigenous people and not available to non-indigenous people.

**Ms Winzar**—We can certainly provide that information, but perhaps it might also help if we give you the details of the parallel program which is available to other customers, for comparison.

**CHAIR**—Yes, of course, that is very important, so that my question is not seen in any way as being other than a genuine question to try to help reconcile Australians and deal with wrong impressions. That is great, I appreciate that.

**Mr WAKELIN**—The funding allocation in the Commonwealth-state housing agreement, appendix 6.1, gives us a reasonable picture, but I am still a little confused. The first question I have on that is about the combination for Aboriginal housing being the ATSIC capital component as well. Each state will have a slightly different agreement but, in terms of capital funding for housing, does ATSIC have some capital funding for housing as well? Does that link across with some of these projects here?

**Mr Boyson**—You are talking about the CHIP program for ATSIC?

**Mr WAKELIN**—Yes, that is the one. I was going to ask one of the staff, but I could not quite catch their eye?

**Mr Boyson**—These are programs within the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement. So there is the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program, which operates within the Commonwealth-state housing agreement, which is separate from the housing programs that are operated through ATSIC.

**Mr WAKELIN**—And there is really no linkage? I seem to remember that in certain states sometimes capital conglomerations occur.



**Mr Boyson**—There is a linkage on the ground in particular states.

**Mr Smythe**—Tricia mentioned earlier the bilateral agreements at the state level just to get rid of the overlap and duplication of programs that we know have existed. You have structures at the state level where ATSIC people and state people, usually on Aboriginal housing boards, pool their money, either actually or notionally. Decisions are made on planning of housing and the distribution of resources on the basis that both pots of money are pooled.

**Mr WAKELIN**—In previous years there was some evidence of nepotism or whatever other word we might like to choose in terms of some money going to where the power might be at certain times. Indeed, some of these bilateral or trilateral agreements actually end up looking at being more state based. The question really is how much input do you have, do you just allocate the funding and encourage that?

**Ms Rushton**—We have a Commonwealth-state working group that has come up with a whole lot of guidance about how the money should be spent and what the emphasis should be, and Stephen can probably compact what those emphases are.

**Mr Smythe**—The Commonwealth sets the policy directions. The FACS minister looks at each state's Aboriginal housing plan each year, and it has to approve the plan before the money is released to the states. So we check the plans and make sure that programs fit with the directions the Commonwealth has set, and the money is not released until the minister approves those plans.

**Mr WAKELIN**—It is going to take a little while to try and get to the basis. With regard to those criteria that you need to assure yourself about before you sign off on, could you give us some indication of the performance indicators? For example, Ms Rushton, you touched on the issue of substantive housing and the reasons why the housing stock may not be as strong as it might be. Do you reassure yourselves about design and the integrity of the builders and the—

**Mr Smythe**—This is a work in progress. There is a lot of work being done on performance measurement. ATSIC and FACS have got together to actually design some guidelines. They want to see the states construct their plans. It looks at things like how many houses have been built and whether they have complied with standards. I notice you have got this document—and that is the standard basically.

**Mr WAKELIN**—For example, I hear prices for good strong houses but I also hear prices that knock my socks off. I worry a little about consultancy and about how many layers of—I will not say bureaucracy—decision making there are to build a house that I would have thought I should have been able to build, even in a remote or regional community for, say, hypothetically \$100,000. I see it is up to \$200,000. I am just signalling it to you. There is no magic answer here, and I am not being critical, I am just saying that is what my eyes and ears tell me. At the local level there is also some evidence of a little bit of profiteering. It is all happening out there in the market, ending up with some pretty good houses. I am just wondering how you are going with those measurement indicators.

**Ms Rushton**—I suppose our major focus with all of this work, and with the work that Stephen has been integral to, is to move away from 'build and abandon'—just build the houses

and whatever—to a process of healthy housing. This is quite a major piece of work. It has the health and housing indicators and it works with the states in a collaborative and cooperative way to get everybody on board to understand that the best outcome in terms of health and participation for indigenous people will be built off the back of this healthy housing.

**Mr WAKELIN**—That is music to my ears as I am the chair of another parliamentary committee that is just about to report on indigenous health. That is it: how many dollars gets you how many houses? I will not go on. I have made the point and I do not need to go on any longer, because time is of the essence.

**CHAIR**—Again that highlights that earlier question. Could you give us some examples—a couple of illustrations—of success stories along Mr Wakelin's line of questioning?

**Ms Rushton**—Love to.

**Mr WAKELIN**—Tricia Rushton, is that data on the housing, the reasons why certain failures may have been occurring, publicly available and available to the committee?

**Ms Rushton**—I believe so. It is published data.

**Mr WAKELIN**—I think we would probably agree. I just was not clear whether we had agreed to get that information.

**Ms Rushton**—That is Healthabitat's report to us.

**CHAIR**—For the record, that further information will be provided to the committee.

**Ms Rushton**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—With a summary thereof.

**Ms Rushton**—Yes. It is a well-presented document actually.

**CHAIR**—I am trying to get to the real nub of it.

**Mr WAKELIN**—In terms of this last question on Commonwealth-state relations, I am looking at, say, the Northern Territory. I understand the high indigenous population and I come over to state matching funds, \$6.6 million, and I am just struggling to understand the formula. Can you give me any clue? It is a total picture: there is a higher indigenous population in the Territory. Can you explain to me the ratio of state funding? It might well be a similar percentage or—

**Ms Rushton**—Sioux is going to talk about that.

**Ms Monk**—It is not surprising that the formula was not obvious to you. It is partly historical. The matching funds are linked only to base funding and not to the identified programs. So Aboriginal rental housing, crisis accommodation, and community housing, states do not match

those programs. That is an historical thing. It was additional money the Commonwealth is providing.

**Mr WAKELIN**—My question is: are you satisfied that the states are not playing too many games? The states will always play games, with all due respect to my wonderful state friends.

**CHAIR**—South Australia is worse than anyone else!

**Mr WAKELIN**—Victorians do it too. I need reassurance that you are satisfied when you sign off that the states have not buried it, put it in a hollow log, all the old tricks of the trade. How rigorous are we in there? Are we pretty solid?

**Ms Rushton**—We are rigorous.

**Mr WAKELIN**—We chase them a bit?

**Ms Rushton**—The matching formula is set into the CSHA. There is no flexibility around that. They have to provide a minimum matching amount, and their financial returns must specify the amount they match. And the housing chief executive officer must certify.

**Mr WAKELIN**—When I hear the word ‘flexibility’ I see the word ‘opportunity’ too. You know what I am talking about. I will quickly move on. Concerning the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy—domestic violence—I have seen a few television advertisements. I am sure it is in your area, specifically. Do you regard that as being in your portfolio?

**Ms Rushton**—The Office of the Status of Women had some grants for the management of domestic violence. There are some particular programs that we have which are documented in here.

**Mr WAKELIN**—I do not want to dwell on it. I thought it was a very courageous television commercial, challenging people, challenging entrenched views perhaps, and I just wondered whether you were satisfied. If you do not have any link then you are not actually responsible. In your area of responsibility, is there more that you can do?

**Ms Rushton**—FACS has been doing some innovative work. Some of it is indigenous work. I have not got the exact details in my head. They are in here. I want to make the point that a lot of what we do that does not look as if it is directly addressing domestic violence is actually in the spirit of one of the principles of early intervention and prevention, which is part of this strategy. A lot of family strengthening in communities will impact positively on domestic violence issues.

**Mr WAKELIN**—It is pleasing to see that what used to be known in Alice Springs as the taxi banking system is changing. You are trying to do something about that in Alice Springs?

**Ms Rushton**—Alice Springs, Tangentyere Council, and Westpac

**Mr WAKELIN**—You mentioned that. I may have missed the answer but you are seeing some progress there in terms of trying to develop that financing.

**Ms Rushton**—There is a pilot program where Westpac is providing banking facilities. This is documented in the report that we have given you.

**Mr WAKELIN**—I saw it there. That is fine. I just revert back to what I used to hear when I used to go to Alice Springs on previous committees.

**Ms Rushton**—Absolutely.

**Mr WAKELIN**—Were you aware of the taxi financing system?

**Ms Rushton**—We are well aware of that. Westpac has come on board, and we are very pleased about that.

**Mr WAKELIN**—With due respect to the taxi industry—

**Mrs MacGillivray**—We are doing some work around the banking issues and empowering customers and helping with some education. However, at the end of the day it will always be individuals deciding whether they give their keycard to somebody, for various reasons. I needed to say that. It is not to suggest that this banking pilot scheme is going to solve all the world's problems. We are actually focusing on a small amount of customers. It is a strategy. You do not know that you have got a choice until you are offered some choices. You may have only ever known a cheque. If you are offered a keycard and the opportunity to learn about how to use it, then that is another option and I can make a choice. But at the end of the day I still might make the choice to give my card to someone and have them look after it.

**Mr WAKELIN**—And you are just counselling caution on how it might change things.

**Mrs MacGillivray**—Yes. It is not going to save the world, but it is an option. We recognise it is an issue and there is an opportunity to ask, 'Is there some education program here we need to do?' We recognise there is.

**Mr WAKELIN**—You have got some examples of income testing on the housing. How reassured are you about this income testing? It would be a state matter and they would manage it, I am sure. But in terms of the agreement, how much reassurance do you need on this income testing?

**Mr Smythe**—To ensure the housing is targeted to the most needy?

**Mr WAKELIN**—Yes.

**Ms Monk**—You are correct in saying that it is a state and territory responsibility to set those criteria. The agreement merely specifies a guiding principle that housing assistance should be provided to those most in need—priority assistance to those with highest needs, those whose needs cannot be met by the current rental market.

**Mr WAKELIN**—What proof is required?

**Ms Monk**—Delilah might be able to help with this but, for people on Centrelink payments, certainly Centrelink provides the customer with a statement to take to the state housing authority that specifies their level of payment. I am not sure if that also specifies other private income. But there are processes in place at the state level.

**Mr WAKELIN**—Are we reassured about the income testing access to the housing?

**Ms Winzar**—Only in the sense of the information that Centrelink provides to help its customers verify their income for access to state housing. It is an entirely parallel processes, as I understand it. State housing does its own verification of private income and so on.

**Mr WAKELIN**—I agree with Barry Haase that the issue in Ceduna around the town camp coming in from outside causes significant difficulty for local government. In fact, people coming from the ALGA conference will want to talk to me and to the minister about this issue. It is ongoing and very difficult. No-one has the solution yet. We really need to try to respect the impact that national policy can have on regional communities. We need to respect the fact that, whilst it may never impact on 99 per cent of Australians, it impacts very significantly on a number of communities. I ask you to respect that. No-one has the answers yet.

In certain communities you will have an Aboriginal child-care program and a non-Aboriginal, or predominantly white, child-care program. You mentioned earlier a whole-of-department approach. What do you see in the future? I think that people are very good and that there is a degree of tolerance—I would not want to suggest anything else—but when you have Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in relatively small communities, it does create a little tension from time to time. What is your experience in providing specific Aboriginal child-care programs in smaller communities?

**Ms Rushton**—In terms of conflict in the communities?

**Mr WAKELIN**—Yes.

**Ms Rushton**—I certainly would not be able to answer that in terms of my experience of conflict in communities. I can refer you to the documentation reference 1.10.11, where we give you the location of the multifunctional Aboriginal children's services.

**Mr WAKELIN**—I have seen that.

**Ms Rushton**—I would imagine that there may be some information about the success of these in communities.

**Mr WAKELIN**—I do not advocate policy change. I just would like to think about how we integrate them in the future. They are integrated now—and that is fine—but I am just a little nervous at times about smaller communities where viability has been tested and how we might work together. That is all I wanted to say.

**Mrs MacGillivray**—I suppose in some ways I would challenge a ‘one size fits all’ model in smaller communities, given that we are talking about a different customer group. We talked a lot today about communities driving solutions, and the solution may well be that two child-care centres are needed because of the different care needs in that community.

**Mr WAKELIN**—It comes to the rub if the non-Aboriginal centre is starting to struggle for numbers and the Aboriginal child-care centre is going on reasonably well. A number of Aboriginal families who may be doing very well, on reasonable incomes, could be using the Aboriginal centre. That puts on the pressure, and little tensions that we do not really need can develop. It is just a matter of how we should think about it in the future. People do not say anything aloud; they just quietly mention it to you. I am just saying that, in time, it is something that we could think about. If it is going to be driven by the local community, maybe people could come together and talk about how they could work together and share resources—that sort of thing.

**Mrs MacGillivray**—You are talking about partnerships.

**Mr WAKELIN**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—I have one matter that I would like you to give us some guidance on, although not necessarily today. I have been to some communities where it has been evident that substantial sums of money—income—are being invested by the community in real estate, income producing assets and the like, and yet the vast majority of Aboriginal people living in those communities are totally reliant on welfare. Also, in some of those communities, I have been told, some of the people can acquire goods and have the account sent to another organisation. To what extent, if any, have you looked at this in connection with income testing to see whether there is any need to ask further questions in the application forms and the returns of income to determine whether there is a regular source of direct or indirect income that is not being counted? Have I stunned you? Are you aware of that? Is anyone aware of that?

**Ms Rushton**—I have an answer but I think the experts here—

**CHAIR**—Do you want to make a preliminary comment on that?

**Ms Rushton**—My preliminary comment would be that we are always trying to ensure that people get the right payment, that they get just the right amount that they are entitled to get under the Social Security Act.

**CHAIR**—That is just what I would like them to get too.

**Ms Rushton**—That is for all customers, under all circumstances. That is what the social security system is all about, to give people their entitlement. I do not know that that issue with indigenous people has come to our attention as a bigger risk for the social security system than for many other non-indigenous people in all sorts of other circumstances. That is my general comment about that.

**Ms Winzar**—There are perhaps another couple of issues that are worth noting for you. One-off gifts for any social security customer are not taken into account in assessing somebody’s

---

income support entitlement. Ongoing in-kind support, for example, providing accommodation for someone, free board or whatever, is taken into account. But obviously there are a lot of in-kind provisions which we would not capture simply because it is not cost effective for us to do so. In some cases, for example the LET system, the Local Exchange Trading system, we allow people to trade LET system credits without affecting their social security entitlements at all. It is quite a vexed issue, as Trish has indicated, trying to make sure that people do get the amount of income support that they need, that their circumstances warrant. I suspect that there are many types of transfers of benefit across the community that we would not even come close to catching.

**CHAIR**—My question is based on that objective that you have, but also to try to assist people not to be so reliant on welfare, in their own interest, if it is possible for them to become self-sufficient. Is there a link with the Australian Taxation Office on these income tests?

**Ms Winzar**—There is quite a lot of data matching that goes on with the Australian Taxation Office. We match with the employment declaration forms that employers submit when they put somebody onto their payroll. We match against people's taxable income to compare what amount of benefit they receive and so on. That throws up quite a few overpayments each year.

**CHAIR**—So there is no exception made in respect of linkage tests with ATO?

**Ms Winzar**—No.

**CHAIR**—It does not matter whether you are non-indigenous or indigenous, it is a standard procedure.

**Ms Winzar**—That's correct.

**CHAIR**—That is as it should be.

**Mr LLOYD**—Could I just add to that, particularly in the area that you were looking at. In relation to communities that receive mining royalties or benefits, how is that assessed to a community? The communities that we have dealt with say that that is private money that they can allocate in whatever way they want, which is fine. In society, that is how it should be, but at the same time there should be an assessment of income on individual families. I just find that that would be very difficult, I would think.

**Ms Winzar**—You are absolutely correct; that is the way it should be, but it is very difficult. It is difficult to trace the dispersal of any mining royalties which would come to particular individuals. Again, for us there would be a question about cost effectiveness. In some cases those royalties would be quite sizeable, but in many cases they may not be sizeable at all.

**CHAIR**—I have something to share with you, so you will know why I ask these questions. I was at a community where there was a celebration because the particular investment—it had been a part grant from ATSIC and a loan—had been paid off after 10 years and the building was generating a good business activity, which was very profitable. I innocently said to the two directors who sat on the board with the indigenous community, 'Isn't this great now that you've paid it off and it is a cash flow positive, very good, well-managed business. Have you got any

plans now to distribute the dividends to the community so that people can buy houses and enjoy the profits and send their kids off and buy scholarships?'—all that sort of thing. They said, 'No way, we're going to find another property worth \$2 million and we're going to gear it up and borrow so that we can borrow that amount again and pay that off because these people aren't ready for money yet.' So the money was actually pyramiding into more assets with no strategy to disperse it.

**Mr LLOYD**—And the communities were not getting the benefit of it.

**CHAIR**—As these people were briefing me, I saw people in abject poverty walking by. It has preyed on my mind. That is why I asked the question. I have not got any hidden agenda; it just worries me. What is the strategy here?

**Ms Rushton**—That is one example. The Nguiu in the Tiwi Islands, through their store, have raised enough money through various activities to fund their own kidney dialysis equipment. They are able to keep people on the island rather than sending them to Darwin for it. As Delilah said, that is a matter of community choice.

**CHAIR**—That is fantastic; that is a great story.

**Mr WAKELIN**—A huge success story.

**CHAIR**—I have shared a thought with you. I would like to thank you all; I think it has been a good two-way discussion. The further questions we will send to you and the information you will give us will be a great help. We will try and do justice to the information as a committee. Before I close the public hearing, I thank you for your attendance today and I particularly thank Hansard.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Lloyd**, seconded by **Mr Haase**):

That this committee authorises publication of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 5.27 p.m.**