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The Hon Lou Lieberman MP
Chairman
House of Representatives Committee on
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Ref: Inquiry into needs of urban dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Dear Mr Lieberman

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the matters currently under consideration by the Committee.

1. Housing – general

In the view of the Social Responsibilities Commission, the key area of need is – and has been for a very long time – housing appropriate to the physical and cultural needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in urban centres.

The Commission's advocacy worker comes into contact almost on a daily basis with indigenous people who are in utterly inadequate housing. Often this is the result of taking on the responsibility of sheltering family members who have been evicted (or otherwise forced out) of accommodation. This results in overcrowding which contributes to subsequent evictions.

The long waiting lists for public housing also contribute to overcrowding in households who have been successful in gaining accommodation. Information available to the Commission indicates that in Western Australia, even the 'priority' waiting list has 100 names on it, and the 'normal' waiting list runs to four years.

Likewise, when single parents lose their tenancies due to imprisonment, the children are likely to be accommodated with grandparents or other members of the extended family. On release, these people should be provided with housing to enable them to re-establish themselves with their children, and to allow the extended family to regain its normal balance.

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Indigenous families are often comprised of above-average numbers of children – between 4 and 10 children rather than the average ‘2.4’ – and so require houses of 4 or 5 bedrooms. Houses should have large paved areas outside to enable children to play without endangering garden beds. (Garden beds simply add to pressures on tenants to maintain areas to some notional standards.) Bathroom facilities should match the size of the family and home, with two toilets readily accessible.

It is crucial that housing is accompanied by off-street parking.

Families may find themselves in need of additional space on a permanent basis through taking in extra members of the extended family through deaths or marriage breakdowns or other circumstances. Such extra demands should be met by provision of additional rooms, not by crowding existing rooms.

Housing providers should also be aware that families may be required to accommodate extra people when funerals are held locally, or when people need to attend hospitals or visit others in hospitals. Indigenous people are rarely in a position to afford motel accommodation in such situations, thus relying on relatives is the norm. Families also draw emotional and spiritual support from each other at such times.

There is also a critical shortage of refuge accommodation for Aboriginal people seeking relief from domestic violence, or needing to shift due to evictions. The latter needs to be examined very carefully, as there are indications that the application of some Centrelink income-withdrawal policies are leading to evictions.

Access to parks, lakes, reliable public transport and services are also of critical importance when establishing housing for indigenous people.

2. Housing – youth.

Young people often require a place of their own, so that their privacy can be assured from younger siblings. Thus there is a need for smaller living units of 1 or 2 bedrooms, preferably in suburbs nearby the extended family.

3. Housing – young women.

Young women, in the age range 17 – 30, with partners and young children, benefit enormously from having close contact with their mothers. This does not need to be on a ‘next door neighbour’ basis, but rather, neighbouring suburbs. If a woman’s partner leaves, even for a short period, she is often left vulnerable and afraid to live alone. The poor public transport service in Perth adds to the pressures experienced by these women.

4. Grandparents.

In the extended indigenous family, grandparents and great-grandparents provide an enormous sense of strength, solidarity and spiritual strength. Their nearby presence is extremely valuable for young men and women as they seek to bring up the new generation. Thus, making housing available for them in close proximity can be a means of strengthening the

family. These same grandparents, however, should also have ready access to accommodation with on-site care when they are past the age of sharing in such family roles.

5. Advocacy workers.

The Commission's experience is that indigenous people frequently need advocacy in their dealings with government agencies. We have been able to provide a very limited service through the good offices of a volunteer worker.

However, we believe that the minimum requirement for such a service in metropolitan Perth is for two indigenous women and one indigenous man. These people could maintain contact with individuals and groups to investigate and advocate for services.

Such a service could be duplicated in each State and Territory, with a regular national meeting with your Committee as a means of exchanging ideas, innovations and information.

6. Youth services

The typical activities provided for young indigenous people extend no further than football and netball. This ignores even the provision of other sports, such as cricket, pool, fishing and swimming. Bush camps during school holidays which offer challenge and group solidarity activities would be another valuable addition.

While some families are able to get their children into such activities, others are so busy merely surviving that television and boredom are the only activities available.

7. Education.

As in rural communities, and in spite of more one-to-one tuition for primary school children, far too many teenagers are missing out on continuity of education. As a result, they are less likely to graduate from high school than their non-indigenous counterparts, and are likely to have lost all confidence in their abilities to 'make the grade'.

Such young people are likely to be offered their next educational opportunity in gaol.

There is a range of reasons for such deficient schooling: medical conditions not diagnosed and treated (whether hearing loss or other), family crises which disrupt school attendance (including eviction and re-location), early death of parents, and poverty – the simple lack of money for proper nutrition.

There is a clear need for a campaign by health services to alert parents to be aware of hearing problems in their children.

Government funding of tutors drawn from the wider community to assist students on a one-to-one basis would be a valuable means of reversing some of these negative trends, and to encourage young people that they have the ability to succeed in applying for courses in TAFEs and other post-secondary institutions. Such a scheme operated in the southern suburbs of Perth for some time, but was suspended due to the withdrawal of the funding.

8. Funerals.

Many families have to deal with, and pay for, up to 10 funerals in a year. A cemetery plot costs more than \$700, which is an enormous burden. This submission urges that burial plots be made available to indigenous people free of charge, as the land was unlawfully taken from them.

The Commission wishes the Committee well in its work, and looks forward to the report of the inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Professor Peter Newman
Chairperson
November 10th, 2000