

**Submission
No 31**

INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

Organisation: Homelessness NSW

Name: Ms Sue Cripps

Date received: 30/01/2008

Homelessness NSW.ACT



Standing Committee on Social Issues
Parliament House
Macquarie St
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Re; Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

Dear Committee members

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

General Comments

Homelessness NSW is the peak body for the adult homelessness sector in New South Wales. We represent homeless services for single men, single women and families. We work collaboratively with Governments, other peak bodies, community organisations and the private sector to advocate for homeless people and services that support them.

Being homeless is a complex issue, created by the failure of a variety of service systems. Homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless are affected by common themes that include social exclusion, an ineffective service system, lack of access to housing that is affordable to people on low incomes and a lack of support and supported accommodation services.

At the time of the 2001 Census it was estimated that there were 26,676 people homeless in NSW¹.

¹ Chamberlain, C and Mckenzie, D, 2004 Counting the Homeless 2001 New South Wales 2 2004 New South Wales At A Glance, Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS Catalogue No. 10303.1

According to the *SAAP Act 1994* a person is homeless if they do not have access to safe, secure and adequate housing. A person is considered not to have access to safe, secure and adequate housing if the only housing to which they have access:

- damages, or is likely to damage, their health; or
- threatens their safety; or
- marginalises them through failing to provide access to adequate personal amenities; or the economic and social supports that a home normally affords; or
- places them in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing; or
- has no security of tenure-that is, they have no legal right to continued occupation of their home.
- A person is also considered homeless if he or she is living in accommodation provided by a SAAP agency or some other form of emergency accommodation.

The member organisations of Homelessness NSW provide accommodation to some of the most vulnerable people in NSW. They are people who may have difficulty in keeping to the terms of the tenancy agreement. They provide support as a condition of the tenancy to try to ensure tenancy agreements are not broken and that tenants avoid eviction. They aim to develop people's skills to carry out their tenancy responsibilities successfully and live independently. This support is achieved through the following measures

- case management;
- assessment and referral;
- early intervention and re-establishment of family links;

Homelessness NSW believes that the right to adequate safe housing is a fundamental human right. This right to housing is set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and a number of other widely adhered to international declarations. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and

necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Homelessness NSW will be concentrating our submission on Term of Reference 1 (b) (v) – housing. However we believe that secure housing is of such importance in people's lives that it impacts on 1 (b) (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi) namely health and wellbeing, education, employment and incarceration and the criminal justice system. This is supported by numerous studies including the work by Sanders² and Brown and Brown³.

Current situation

By any measure indigenous Australians remain among the most disadvantaged members of the Australian community. The provision of appropriate housing is principal in resolving some of this disadvantage.

Homelessness NSW believes that the built environment should only be viewed as part of the solution towards the provision of housing. Where physical buildings are provided without any necessary support the likelihood of a successful occupancy is diminished. This was highlighted by the 2007 PriceWaterhouseCoopers report into Indigenous housing. Physical infrastructure including water, power, roads and sewerage were all part of the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) but no there was funding for services that would assist people to maintain their occupancy.⁴

The rate of homelessness of indigenous Australians is higher than for other Australians. This is evidenced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report *Demand for SAAP accommodation by homeless people 2005–06*. 31% of all people with a valid unmet request for immediate SAAP accommodation were indigenous peoples. As at 30 June 2005, an estimated 2% of the Australian population were

² *Housing tenure and Indigenous Australians in remote and settled areas*, Sanders, W. Discussion Paper No. 275/2005. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Aboriginal Research, ANU

³ *The Northern Territory intervention: voices from the centre of the fringe*, Alex Brown and Ngiare J Brown *The Medical Journal of Australia*, MJA 2007; 187 (11/12): 621-623.

⁴ PriceWaterhouseCoopers, February 2007, *Living in the Sunburnt Country, Indigenous Housing: Findings of the Review of the Community Housing and Infrastructure Programme*, p. 30.

indigenous peoples, yet 27% of people with a valid unmet request for accommodation were Indigenous.⁵

Indigenous Australians were more likely than other Australians to request immediate accommodation - 62% compared with 50%.⁶

The rate of home ownership is markedly lower in indigenous families than non-indigenous. In 2002, a much lower proportion of Indigenous people (27 per cent) than non-Indigenous people (74 per cent) lived in homes someone in their household owned or was purchasing.⁷ The 2002 figure of 27% was an higher than the 1994 figure of 22%.⁸

Many indigenous people live in remote areas and have to travel to regional centres to access basic services. People who are in town temporarily may stay with family in overcrowded houses or in public places. Some indigenous people live in public places in urban areas. Some choose to live in these places either temporarily or permanently. Some may wish to return to country but require services that are only available in urban areas; others lack the means to travel home. Connection to country may mean some indigenous people experience lack of access or a loss of control over their use of public places as homelessness. Indigenous people are also disproportionately affected by laws that govern public space.

Family violence is the primary cause of indigenous homelessness. Forty percent of the indigenous people in homeless assistance services are women escaping domestic violence. Indigenous women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence and to sustain more serious injuries than non indigenous women. Indigenous women living in rural and remote areas are more likely to be affected by domestic violence than the non indigenous population.

⁵ Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, *Demand for SAAP accommodation by homeless people 2005-06*, p 33.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Steering Committee for the Provision of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators 2005 Report*, p xxviii

⁸ Ibid.

Many indigenous people live in housing that does not meet their needs. Indigenous people are six times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions than non indigenous Australians. Overcrowding due to a shortage of housing is more severe in rural and remote areas. Living in overcrowded conditions can lead to ill health, family violence and disruption to education and work. Overcrowding constitutes a high percentage of the hidden homelessness among people who are from an indigenous background.⁹

Homelessness in indigenous communities cannot be understood without reference to the legacy of colonisation and dispossession¹⁰. A history of physical and cultural displacement places many indigenous people at increased risk of homelessness. Concepts of country are fundamental to the culture and identity of many indigenous people. Some may not identify as being homeless if they have a spiritual connection to the land they live on, regardless of the type of shelter they live in. Some indigenous people may experience separation from their traditional land, family or kinship groups as spiritual homelessness.

What needs to happen?

1. Indigenous communities would benefit greatly by being better supported in engaging directly with state and territory and national government on culturally appropriate ways to effectively support and accommodate that community.
2. The supply of long-term, affordable and culturally appropriate housing needs to be increased, to levels that meet demand, particularly in rural and remote areas of Australia.
3. Homeless assistance services require greater staffing levels (management and general staffing) by indigenous people, which will make the services more accessible to indigenous people.
4. Government policies that took far more account of restoring traditional connection to country and reconnecting the Stolen Generation with family and culture, would produce policy that was significantly more effective because it would address the spiritual element of indigenous homelessness

⁹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Social Justice Report 2003* (2003) <www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/sjreport03/data/append1.html> at 29 September 2005

¹⁰ Keys Young, Department of Family and Community Services, *Homelessness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Context and Its Possible Implications for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program* (1998) iii

Should you require further information on the contents of this submission, please contact Digby Hughes, Policy & Research Officer on phone: (02) 9319 7111 or email: po@homelessnessnsw.org.au

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sue Cripps'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Sue' being more prominent than the last name 'Cripps'.

Sue Cripps
CEO

30 January 2008