

# **COPING WITH MAINSTREAM HOUSING VALUES: A NOONGAR PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Part 1**

### **Noongar Perspective On Housing**

This paper is written from my own experience as an Aboriginal lady with knowledge of how Aboriginal people may be treated when applying for accommodation with both the public and private sector of housing. This paper attempts to show both the public and private sectors responses to Aboriginals applying for accommodation. These examples are from a country town setting in the late 1990s to 2003.

#### **Access to Housing in a Small Country Town**

##### **Private Sector – Housing Mission Statement**

*To constantly foster the professionalism of real estate agency practice, the interest and goodwill of agents, their clients and the business environment in which agents operate.*

When applying for housing in the private sector, the house you are offered may appear to depend a lot on the colour of your skin. It is commonly experienced by those of Aboriginal descent, that you may only be offered the old run down places. During housing applications, an Aboriginal may be forced to endure institutional racism in its most subtle form. A recent example of this known to me was a young Aboriginal man who applied for private rental and was given a list of all the oldest properties to check out. He was disappointed with the homes, which the real estate agent had offered him, so he sent his non-Aboriginal sister-in-law to ask for a home. She was given a completely different list of properties to look at and choose from. Although this case is now in the hands of the Equal Opportunity Commission, it shows that racism still continues to prevail within private rental.

##### **Public Sector – Housing Mission Statement**

*Finance that meet the needs of communities in Western Australia, ' to provide access to public housing, land and finances. '*

There are still homes earmarked as Aboriginal housing within the public sector and in my opinion this could be seen as both negative and positive depending on the condition of the homes. Within the community I live in some of the housing for Aboriginal Australians are sub standard. If an Aboriginal person is offered one of the oldest places in town, they are afraid to refuse, because according to State Housing policy, refusal results in the client being put at the bottom of the list for assistance. This also results in stress for both the client and the extended family whom, rather than see their family on the street, will take them in. Thus the overcrowding while the client is in a state of homelessness. Because of all these pressures Noongar clients are desperate and therefore move into the sub-standard houses, where they continue to live in the depressive condition.

##### **The Marribank Story – A Post-trauma intervention for homelessness**

Post trauma caused through past atrocities is something that affects almost every Aboriginal Australian. It is a major contributor to shaping dysfunctional families and drug and alcohol abuse within the Aboriginal communities. In 1989 I was employed to work at Marribank Mission as a support worker in conjunction with the social worker, with the goal of reuniting Noongar children back within their own natural families. This entailed being a support or friend to the parents who came to stay at the mission.

## **Reuniting families from the stolen generation**

When I first went to work at Marribank it was as a support person for parents being brought to the centre to be reunited with their children. Some of these parents did not have much previous contact with their children and therefore it was a time for the natural families to mend broken relationships. Parenting skills had to be established once again, or for some families a whole new way of life had to be learnt.

Mothers and fathers came to the mission to live and get to know their own children, some staying for a couple of years and others for only a short period of time. Once the families were able to manage both physically and psychologically the social worker would find them a place to live in the community where they came from.

## **Addressing homelessness – private and public housing**

Throughout the eight years spent at Marribank many families came through and each family came with their own personal baggage, but the common crisis was homelessness. Some came without having the basic skills for keeping house. Because this was a critical area of concern, we developed a group house cleaning and gardening program. This program involved all the women getting together and going into each other's homes to help with the cleaning and gardening each week on rotating basis. The program was highly successful.

Families who had been evicted from Homeswest properties also became part of the Marribank community. The social worker worked with the mother and children, while the men worked on the farm for two days a week. This covered most of the rent and therefore each family was able to buy things for their children and homes. The families gradually began to understand and maintain their commitments to keeping their Homeswest rental properties. After a couple of years an arts and craft program was set up and everyone who wanted to be involved worked in the industry two days a week. Each participant was put on an EEA program through CES a government work initiative to help supplement people on low incomes.

## **Support for housing-related intense issues – alcohol and drugs**

Many in the Marribank program were families who wanted a place away from the town area because of alcohol or drug problems. Marribank community was a centre that was off limits to any alcohol and drugs and this was made clear to anyone coming to stay. These families also become part of the arts and craft industry once they had worked through their initial crisis. The social worker worked with the family to help them through their crisis, whilst everyone else offered their moral support.

Most families stayed for a couple of years, using Marribank as a drug-free haven and a lot became involved in producing artwork. A significant number of these people are free from alcohol and drugs and still do art work today and this has been proven by longitudinal studies conducted by the University of Western Australia. Even though the families have now moved away we still have contact with each other, and they tell us about their artwork, which most continue to do and sell.

## ***Changing Rooms* – a creative project with Homeswest**

Currently I am working on a new project to help support Homeswest tenants who are at risk of eviction and hence part of the Anglicare WA Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP). Inspired by the TV program, *Changing Rooms* will involve volunteers and tenants working together to improve the interior quality of their homes. Each tenant will choose a room they wish to be improved, and the whole group will take turns doing a room at a time and assisting with interior decoration. Homeswest are supporting this program with issues like repairs and painting.

## **Part 2**

### **Bridging The Gaps**

Mainstream rental housing is a well-established and complex system with rules of operation. Eviction is the great abyss for all families that fail to understand how the system works. In terms of public rental housing, the system has many imperfections, like all other systems devised by a society of imperfect people. However, this system is currently our best attempt to meet the needs of Australian families at risk of homelessness. Hopefully it is a developing and evolving attempt, and a genuine response to the many and diverse needs of Australia's peoples.

In terms of the Noongar Aboriginal people within Western Australia, there is recognition that white people's housing is a complex system with rules, codes and values of operation. Not everyone understands these rules. Not everyone can speak the language. Not everyone can read the language or respond in similar patterns of writing. Interpreters are needed. One form of interpreter is the SHAP worker.

The Supported Housing Assistance Program or SHAP, is a further attempt by the Public Housing system to help families understand and apply the rules and values necessary for maintaining a rental property. It is available for families at risk of eviction who are willing to work towards positive solutions in conjunction with Accommodation Managers while the SHAP worker provide a variety of means of practical support and counselling. Every SHAP service is unique as is every family in need of support.

### **Bridging the language gaps – computers and people**

In our age of technology we are becoming more and more slave to the language of computers and computers speak the language of money. Bank computers. Centrelink computers. Housing computers. Public Housing in WA has a complex computer system that links with Centrelink in an attempt to manage tenant accounts and ensure accurate rental (25% of tenant income) is collected via a direct debit system. Sometimes the computer shuts down or makes mistakes. Real people get left to sort out the mistakes, usually Accommodation Managers and tenants. Unlike computers, real people have feelings, stressors and mental inadequacies. Real people can fail to understand, be offended or take things personally. Real people get angry.

Explaining the Public Housing computer system to Noongar tenants is a definite communication challenge. The system has complex accounting processes where tenants have numerous 'accounts' or compartments for monies credited or owed. There is the rental account, the bond account, the water account, the tenant liability account, the vacated arrears account, the bad debt account, the sundries account, and still others. Each tenant has an overall account number for his or her property, however, if a tenant transfers from one property to another, a new account number is created. Some tenants have several account numbers in their history if they have occupied a number of properties at different locations or towns. The computer system is programmed to 'spit out' letters to tenants with computer-scanned signatures as a result of debts or variations in Centrelink payments. Sometimes these letters are in direct contrast to verbal advice received from personal contact with Public Housing employees, or personal debt negotiation arrangements made with Accommodation Managers.

The SHAP bridge is to teach the tenant that while a mistrust and monitoring of the computer system may be healthy, the key to managing the system effectively is maintaining a trust in people. Computer mistakes can usually be tracked, verified and corrected, with the help of people. Computer errors are not generated on a personal basis, they occur as a matter of indifference. Through persistent communication, simple explanations, drawings, assisted meetings or supported

phone calls, gradually the communication bridge is created and supported. If it is strong enough, it will stand when the SHAP interpreter is no longer present, where both Housing employees and tenants can speak about issues with respect, while both maintaining a strong effort to speak the other's language. If the bridge is strong enough, Noongar tenants gain the confidence to understand or query their accounts payments with Housing staff as needed.

### **Debt, damage and neighbour complaints – the road to eviction**

Referral to the Supported Housing Assistance Program occurs when the tenant is seen to be at risk of eviction for a few key reasons. These relate to debt, damages, overcrowding, and property standards of upkeep or anti-social neighborhood complaints. The presenting issues risking the tenancies are usually symptomatic of more complex underlying issues that are impacting on the whole family. In the Great Southern area of Western Australia, Noongar clients comprise between 70 – 80 % of tenants who use SHAP services.

### **Values in conflict – the property versus family, spirituality and culture**

The strength and priority of Aboriginal values in relation to their family, culture and spirituality is well known within multicultural Australia, yet remains a barrier to maintaining housing without societal conflict. Public Housing codes of behaviour especially demand tight restraints on size and occupancy of rental properties. It is not easily acceptable for family 'visitors' to come and stay for a while, or for tenant families to wander for a term elsewhere. The idea of the Aboriginal 'fluid' family that shares and travels and expands and contracts according to family needs and events is in conflict with a system that requires an ideal of family 'stability'. The system is designed for a family structure that rarely changes and where applicants know in advance whether they will need only 1 bedroom or two or three. The system cannot easily respond to the level of change and spontaneity that an Aboriginal family needs to have flexibility, freedom and life, nor comprehend the confusion and despair of struggling to comply with rules to keep their haven from homelessness. The rental property is that haven, as no other solution is readily available.

Thus the culture that is the Noongar's intricate family support system can also become the trigger toward eviction within mainstream housing. During times of funeral or family illness or crisis, rent becomes food provision for extended family members. Every room in the house is potential shelter for weary long-traveled mourners to lay their head. Paintwork becomes damaged, fly-screens are torn, keys are lost and windows are broken to gain entry. Water use escalates as do costs for heating, cooking and lighting. The home becomes noisy. The children play and fight and laugh and throw a stone or two. The neighbours complain.

For the Accommodation Manager, the priority must be the property; the asset; the rent monies owed; the cost of the damages; the perceived status of the Housing organisation; the good relationship with the many other neighbouring tenants. In terms of work performance, the measure of each successful or problematic tenancy is as a measure of his or her effectiveness as a housing manager. Conflicting values occur over a property, which is symbolic of one person's means of employment while another's life and family home. Opinions and priorities are polarised.

In terms of spiritual issues, they are both sacred and private, and cannot easily be explained to a housing system. Yet Noongar families can be placed in spiritual conflict when a housing rental property is allocated to them which they cannot occupy for spiritual reasons. To have to explain, document or verify the spiritual belief associated with that property is itself a trespass and degradation, especially if the belief is scorned, challenged or refuted. In this area of cultural sensitivity, Noongars are at their most vulnerable.

## **Bridging the gaps – practical means of SHAP intervention**

In the absence of immediate revolution within the WA housing system, there are interventions that do seem to work in reducing the number of families evicted and specifically helping Aboriginal families. Housing is continuing to fund and expand housing support services along the lines of SHAP support. Why SHAP works is in the strength of the support model as outlined below:

### **1. SHAP as a long-term intervention**

Many support services have tight time frames where clients are allocated only a short period during in which they can have support. If change does not occur, families are moved on or referred to other services (if available). The SHAP worker, as long as the family is willing and cooperative, can offer more long-term support that can be both intensive and low-key according to changing needs. There is time enough to see families develop and learn and to gradually withdraw support once empowerment has occurred.

### **2. SHAP services are developed in partnership with families and Accommodation Managers**

Although the issues of referral are outlined by the Accommodation Manager, the plan for working on the issues is worked out with the family. The issue that could result in immediate eviction is prioritised, however it is the family that sets goals for other areas of support that are impacting on the tenancy and the family.

### **3. SHAP and home visits**

SHAP workers have the privileged position in being able to meet with families in their home environment. While this can also create vulnerabilities for the tenant and carry risks for the worker, it is an outreach from the system to the tenant in a recognisable and friendly human form. This is a language that Noongar people understand. When done respectfully, gradual rapport develops. From the front driveway, to the verandah, to the door, to inside when invited.

### **4. SHAP as translator, mediator, counsellor and advocate**

SHAP is in continual communication with both tenants and housing managers and this bridge is essential in helping each understand the other's values, constraints and obligations. Housing manager contact occurs through monthly case-management meetings as well as phone calls and office visits. Many tenants do not have phone connections and SHAP is often conveyor of important messages via home visit or notes in the letter-box. If there is a problem, the goal is to talk about it with whoever can fix it.

### **5. SHAP using minimal documentation**

As services are in demand and workers often stretched, Anglicare WA SHAP service documentation is kept to a minimum as required for effective case-management and reporting accountability to the funding body. This frees workers for maximum involvement with client families and minimum time behind desks writing reports or case files.

### **6. SHAP as 'doing whatever it takes'**

SHAP is unique in that workers are able to offer a range of supports to people in a flexible way. The result is like a mobile personal family social worker who has the expertise, energy and time to gather information to help families access whatever they may need in a variety of target areas. Practical support is also provided. For a typical SHAP worker, some of the practical interventions to help tenants stabilise or improve their housing have included but are not limited to:

- Transport to important appointments and for shopping
- Delivering weekly copies of accounts to monitor rent and debt payments
- Helping with cleaning and supplying mops, buckets and cleaning products
- Removal of clothes and rubbish from the property

- Finding food, clothing, furniture
- Assisting removalists for relocation
- Applying for loans for fridges, washers, vacuum cleaners
- Attending and explaining house inspections and associated reports
- Translating and teaching tenants how to store and file important documents
- Drive-by checking of homes at risk of break-in while tenants are away
- Getting phones, gas and electricity connected and budgeted for
- Reading water meters and teaching tenants about water conservation and reporting leaks
- Assisting tenants to document and attend housing appeals
- Writing letters to neighbours
- Advocacy, linkage and referral to many other agencies of support
- Listening, counseling, believing and offering avenues of hope or positive suggestions for problems that can be solved
- Ensuring the goal is always empowerment of the tenant and improved relationship with housing rather than SHAP dependency

### **Future directions for public housing as an innovator or proactive agency to prevent homelessness through rental evictions – construction**

Australian home construction designs are constantly changing and the ‘open plan’ style of living with larger rooms and shared family spaces appears to becoming more and more popular. Within the harsh Australian environment, communal rooms allow conservation in terms of heating or cooling. Houses can be designed to allow shade or increased airflow. This style is also much more receptive to accommodating larger Aboriginal families. Within public housing construction constraints of limited funds, ever increasing demand and the use of the tender system, the budget is usually the strongest designer input. However, there are signs of positive changes and recognition that Aboriginal families benefit hugely from particular design features. Within the South Western WA area, larger 5 bedroom plus properties are being constructed to accommodate extended Aboriginal families. However, these places are unique and limited and demand remains high.

Further attention to housing design in consultation with Aboriginal people would result in more innovative and creative constructions. Designs that feature large central communal living areas and that minimise unnecessary walls, cupboards, walkways or passages. Construction should be solid and strong enough to withstand the wear and tear produced by a large family. Some SHAP client families come from a mission background where there was no family home to care for. On becoming a rental tenant, the upkeep of a home is an alien experience. Floors are for walking on, not sweeping or cleaning. Walls are for protection, not for painting or décor. It takes time for understanding of home upkeep to develop as well as the appreciation of the benefits to a family of a stable home that is safe and clean.

It is difficult to communicate in an informative, positive, nonjudgmental and concise way how Aboriginal people join the path to homelessness via the clash between mainstream housing culture and values. Mainstream housing is an entrenched society that is governed by white people’s design, behavioural codes and monetary systems. To survive in this society, Aboriginal people must either conform or find means of instituting change. Both these actions need support. While we as Australians wait for change to occur in terms of social justice for many disadvantaged groups within our country, homelessness remains a tragic and crucial issue. Let us continue to work to prevent it both creatively and collaboratively in recognition of our united values of families and homes for families, however that may occur, and at both a state and national level.