

National Housing Conference 2001

A Noongar and Wadjillar journey of working with Aboriginal people who are at risk or experiencing homelessness in Perth Western Australia

INTRODUCTION

We believe that mutual respect is important in the beginning of any relationship, along with a desire to know more about those we come in contact with in both our personal and work lives. Where we come from and who we are shapes not only our lives, but also those who surround us. On this basis, we would like to express our respect and appreciation to the traditional landowners of this area and to thank them for the opportunity of being here today. We would also like to express our appreciation to the conference organisers for allowing us the opportunity to come and exchange our experiences and knowledge with everyone here about our journey of working with Aboriginal people who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness in Western Australia.

Today, we will present our understanding of why people become homeless and our specific focus is on Aboriginal homelessness. These views are not intended to be exclusive, but are our viewpoints to understanding what is a very complex and concerning issue. These viewpoints are a combination of our agency's perspective, our life experiences, our individual cultures, our collective wisdom and that of other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who work within the field and/or of individuals in need of services such as ours. Within this presentation, we will put forward and examine the difficulties faced when working to address Aboriginal homelessness. This will include exploring impacts on homeless individuals, agencies and staff from both a non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal perspective, in addition to presenting clashes that arise through community and societal expectations and pressures.

We will also put forward what we perceive as realistic responses in working towards pathways out of homelessness. Furthermore, we will look at how we can build relationships in the community sector that we work within, to not only strengthen those working relationships but also assist at-risk groups to work towards sustaining their own housing. Our presentation is also being given in the context of the new environment within which we are living in Western Australia, which has directly arisen as a result of a change of government.

It is the first time in many years that we have come to see an opportunity for change and which, in the current climate, is likely to be a positive change with possible practical outcomes for homeless people. We also truly hope that this is the beginning of a bipartisan approach to the provision of holistic responses to homelessness.

NO PLACE TO CALL HOME AS WE MAY SEE IT

There are many reasons why people become homeless within our communities. These reasons have an individual, community and cultural aspect to them and have their genesis both in present and past experiences. Yet as individuals, communities, governments and societies, we still struggle to understand what it means to be homeless and how to define it so that it *helps* the homeless rather than decreases the statistics or eligibility. We then struggle with how to work effectively together and with the individual or family to prevent homelessness and to assist them to sustain what most of us perceive as a home. A home, is a place where we may have shelter, a sense of security, somewhere to go and a feeling of belonging. In reality, most of us are trapped by our individual ideologies, value systems and the structures of our societies that can both allow us to be creative but also lays down the rules by which we are required to abide in order to live our own lives within our communities.

Aboriginal homelessness, to a large degree is hidden within our community and many may not consider it to be homelessness at all. The perception of who is homeless often depends on the definition used and who is doing the defining. Hidden homelessness has been identified by a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies, government and non-government, as being very evident within the metropolitan area of Perth. The high level of hidden homelessness in this region can, usually, be linked directly to the cultural obligation that Aboriginal people have to support extended family members. These families are not counted as primary homeless or, at times, even homeless at all, as they are living with relatives and as such, may not be seen as being homeless themselves. The number of relatives staying at one location however, can frequently be three or more families in one household and may involve anywhere from five individuals up to thirty or more.

On a daily basis, agencies such as ours encounter families who are in public, community and crisis housing options who are supporting not just their own family members but many of their broader family as well. In many situations, these extended family members make use of housing provided to their relatives because they cannot access their own housing. This could be due to their past housing histories and/or direct racial discrimination in the private rental sector. Consequently, these people live on the edge of homelessness. At the same time, many Aboriginal people do not perceive these shared living arrangements as *living on the edge of homelessness* but as a way of life - Living with family, no matter how crowded it is, is acceptable for it provides everyone with a spot to call their own.

This leads us to face many questions in how to address what most perceive as homelessness. We believe that as a community we need to question what we mean by homelessness and whether it has the same meaning for those who we call homeless. We also need to question our values and where homelessness fits within these in our society. For example, does homelessness affect us because we see it in the park or in the street and leaves us with a feeling of fear, loathing or uncomfortableness? In such a scenario our response to homeless is likely to be borne out of the emotions felt. Effective responses need to go beyond emotional reaction to assist in the implementation of holistic

responses. We need to look at whether people themselves consider they are homeless. This question needs to be asked even when people request crisis accommodation, sleep in the park, live under a bridge or apply for housing in what is perceived as the conventional home with four walls and a roof. In some situations, we may have to accept that some people only need or want a place to wash up, keep their belongings safe and to sleep without someone calling them homeless.

Homelessness, as previously mentioned, has different meanings for different people. In fact being homeless for some people means taking control over what is possible for them in their life. This type of thinking does not fit comfortably with people who believe that everyone should have a house and be responsible for everyday activities that relate to the mainstream population. Homelessness is also usually mentioned as a negative, but for some people there are positive aspects about being 'houseless'. Some of these positives include: not having to pay bills; freedom from tenancy obligations; having no one to answer to; being able to drink or take drugs if you want too; having a holiday; having instant gratification; knowing all your money is yours; the ongoing excitement of the city; meeting lots of people and making the most of the moment.

For Aboriginal people, who have a history of moving from place to place, though be it within their own specific regions, what is normally considered to be homelessness can be a way of maintaining an easily mobile way of life. Aboriginal people in Western Australia have always placed a high value on central meeting grounds and gathering places. Being in one place and feeling you have to stay at home just to look after a building does not fit with being part of a group of people for whom participation in a central gathering is essential. Staying home within the confines of a house can be restrictive when everyone else is out in a central place which is far closer to historic lifestyles of being together, sharing, yarning and having that sense of belonging, not often gained from mainstream society.

For example, in Perth, we have always had central places that Aboriginal people. Whether the presence of these places has been reinforced by Colonisation is irrelevant. Aboriginal people from Perth who are not homeless also frequent these areas. The Aboriginal Medical and Legal services are also now located within these areas. Over the years these localities have become a central place to meet relatives, have a yarn, socialize, have fun, get access to free entertainment, share resources, feel good and gain a sense of belonging. Only a small percentage of these people who go to these central places may be said to be homeless. Many of the people that frequent these central areas are visitors from other locations and others who live in either their own homes or with relatives. They visit the areas for the reasons listed and then go home for while.

VULNERABILITY TO HOMELESSNESS

The points presented below outline our understanding of why some Aboriginal people become homeless. The points are not intended to be exclusive nor are they, necessarily, the most important. These are:

Colonisation

Colonisation has impacted severely on Aboriginal people. It has resulted in loss of history, spirituality, direction, health, lifestyle, culture, language; identity and loss of respect for elders in the family. Aboriginal people are gradually becoming lost within the European way of thinking. The combination of living for today and materialism has led to a path of destruction for many Aboriginal people.

Impact of the stolen generations

Many Aboriginal people who have grown up in missions and have been abused physically, mentally and emotionally. Some of these people have not had their parents and grandparents to teach them parenting skills, culture and language. There are also many other skills that they have missed out on. Many Aboriginal people are today still in mourning and some have never found their relatives who have become lost in the system or who have since died.

Previous and current paternalistic government policies

Historically, any government policies that were designed for Aboriginal people were designed to extinguish Aboriginal people's rights. There were policies to take half-caste children away and raise them as white so that the eradication of Aboriginal people was increased. These policies also banned Aboriginal people from practicing their own language and cultural beliefs and enticed them into following the Christian faith that the missionaries believed in. Aboriginal people had no rights as Australians to vote until the 1967 referendum, which gave them this right, but were never acknowledged as the first people of this country. It has been hard for many Aboriginal people who have experienced these past policies to understand, trust and know how to obtain the rights that are available to them. Aboriginal people today are used to being told what to do, where to go and how to behave, but not necessarily how to successfully challenge systems that have worked against them for over 200 years.

Cultural obligations

One of the Aboriginal people's obligations is sharing with their own and extended families. This nearly always gets them into trouble, particularly in relation to housing, which is only built for nuclear families. Aboriginal families have always shared what they have and housing is no different to sharing food. A consequence of this tradition is that it often leads to problems within mainstream housing systems. The expectation that housing will be shared with the wider family often creates a risk for the tenant and is one of the major reasons for evictions. It is an ongoing problem as those evicted move on the next relative and the overcrowding dilemma continues.

Discrimination from landlords, neighbours, and the general community

Discrimination is for Aboriginal people a part of everyday life. It is experienced in a variety of ways and often in such a way that, either because of shame or lack of self-esteem, it goes unchallenged. Landlords tend not to lease properties to Aboriginal people at all. This means that access to housing for Aboriginal people is largely limited to State Housing Providers and community housing and crisis accommodation programs. Landlords who do house Aboriginal people are often put under considerable pressure from the latter's neighbours with complaints that can range from a shoe lace left on their

front lawn, to property values going down, to too many people visiting, to genuine complaints of inappropriate behaviour. All of these types of complaints, regardless of how frivolous they are, may result in eviction and possible homelessness for the Aboriginal household, if the complainant's protests are strong enough. Ignorance and fear of Aboriginal people and their culture are considered as being the major factors leading to lack of opportunity, discrimination, feelings of rejection and shame, anger, distrust, and often homelessness.

The lack of appropriate housing and how this is defined

The lack of appropriate housing has been and still is a huge problem for Aboriginal families living within the metropolitan area. Further impacting on availability of appropriate housing has been the many Aboriginal people coming from remote areas because of health reasons and having to be close to large hospitals. Given that many houses constructed today are built for nuclear sized families, they do not lend themselves to Aboriginal ways of living with large families. Lots of traffic in small houses often creates property damage, complaints of noise and problems with landlords.

The extent of housing that is accessible to Aboriginal people

The housing accessible to most Aboriginal people is limited to public housing, community housing options and crisis accommodation with limited access to home purchase and private rental. While this continues, an ongoing environment for breeding homelessness will be created.

Applicants' previous histories in both the public and private housing spheres

Applicants' previous history in both the public and private housing spheres limits opportunities to demonstrate change of behaviours. Some individuals and families remain homeless for years at a time. During these periods of homelessness little may be learnt about how to manage and maintain a home should the opportunity to move into a house arise. Frequently people in this situation also perceive that they don't necessarily require support when they get a home. In some cases this is correct but in many situations lack of support leads to temporary housing and pathways back into homelessness, thereby creating what is usually described as *the revolving door syndrome*.

The absence of appropriate skills in maintaining housing

Different housing arrangements, lack of appropriate role models, due to the stolen generation, and the disruption of Aboriginal culture through colonisation has led to many Aboriginal people being unable to maintain a European style of housing. This impacts on some indigenous groups more severely than on others and for some, maintaining a house is an irrelevancy.

The lack of employment and financial resources

Aboriginal people have through a number of generations been over-represented in unemployment statistics. Lack of opportunity to gain experience often due to racism and inadequate educational backgrounds in mainstream school systems, leads to limited finances and poverty. The additional cultural obligations to share at all times also impacts on their financial resources. High death rates of Aboriginal people for a variety

of reasons and at earlier ages than the rest of the population, add not only issues of ongoing grieving but also to the draining of financial resources as a result of funerals. The lack of finances makes it difficult to pay rent from one week to the next and to resolve rental arrears. Shared housing with no legally shared responsibility severely impacts on the registered household tenant. With this requirement to meet cultural means that Aboriginal people are frequently living on the edge of homelessness or becoming homeless. The ongoing lack of meaningful employment opportunities for Aboriginal people will continue to ensure generational poverty and the consequent problems that arise from this.

Violence against partners, family violence and violence generally

Family violence, feuding and violence generally, which has arisen primarily as a consequence of the loss of culture, identity and life roles, shatters the stability of many Aboriginal families. The violence, which is frequently life-threatening, causes high levels of mobility with women and children entering refuges and crisis accommodation and leads to houses being trashed. In Perth this year alone, there were six deaths relating to relationship violence and four of these involved Aboriginal women. The reality though is, that the majority of women and family relatives return to live together due to obligation, love and family connections. The cycle then begins again with no probable escape in sight. Young Aboriginal children grow up with violence as a way of life and are at high risk of going on to perpetrate violence throughout their lives.

Substance abuse issues

Substance abuse issues for Aboriginal people have been catastrophic and involve solvents, alcohol, illicit drugs and poly-drug use. Substance abuse is considered to be one of the main issues that impedes Aboriginal people from maintaining healthy family lifestyles, housing, employment and longevity. Substance abuse is also considered a major inhibitor, stopping individuals/families and young people from participating in processes that could lead to opportunities of healing and other healthy outcomes.

Mental health issues or worries

Within Western Australia there are many Aboriginal people who experience mental health issues but do not seek diagnosis or treatment. Largely, the extent of Aboriginal people with mental health issues is currently not quantifiable. However, on a daily basis staff who work in outreach services and people within the Aboriginal community come in contact with this group of people. People who need support in how to deal with their mental health. It is difficult for the Aboriginal community and the wider community to assist when people are fearful of services and reluctant to come to terms with issues associated with their extreme behaviour, especially where individuals do not see their behaviour as a problem or worry at all. As a result of their mental health issues, which are compounded by a lack of understanding of how to help themselves with these worries, people face ongoing homelessness and are at risk of being ostracised from the community in general. Correctional institutions are common collection points for this vulnerable group of people with suicide being a real risk and a potential outcome for many.

Shame

Paramount to Aboriginal people gaining greater access and equality to mainstream services and opportunities, is for the wider community to understand the concept of shame. Shame has resulted from the denigration of Aboriginal people since colonisation. It is the consequence of being discriminated against, being humiliated and rejected for generations. Shame affects the very core of one's identity and the experience of shame is different from being ashamed of something one does. The shame felt by Aboriginal people usually stops them from accessing services that are available to them. Their sense of shame impedes them asserting their rights. Understandably, many Aboriginal people lack the confidence and self-esteem so necessary to self-assertion.

A lack of supportive networks

Given Aboriginal people's ongoing experiences of a lack of opportunity and discrimination, supportive networks are vital to their ability to be able to maintain a stable home. Support networks can include a variety of sources from family, extended family, friends, organisations, understanding neighbours and being in a location that feels safe and connected to these central networks. Isolation and distance from these supportive networks creates instability, unusual behaviour, feelings of being judged and a loss of that sense of belonging to family networks and/or community.

The short time frames in which to effectively work with people

The length of time available to work with Aboriginal people is instrumental in assisting and supporting them to obtain, where necessary, appropriate skills in maintaining housing. In the main, Government funding given to organisations dictates that change be created and maintained within very short timeframes. However, generational issues and the need for time to build mutually respectful working relationships, regardless of whether or not the worker is Aboriginal, clash with funding requirements and the conditions necessary for the maintenance of real change or skill development. This leads to individuals and families frequently being referred back to support agencies for additional assistance to avoid eviction.

The *welfare model* of working that reinforces homelessness

Generations of Aboriginal people have been or know somebody who has been through the welfare system, whether it was growing up in a mission or provided with money, food and clothing when needed. Both government and non-government agencies need to ensure that they work in ways to encourage Aboriginal people to take responsibility for their own lives, families and homes. Consequences of not encouraging responsibility lead to the belief that they do not have to pay rent, it is acceptable to never pay bills because someone else will always pay them for you and your neighbours can be extensions of your own household for transportation, phone calls and food. Other consequences of welfare dependency include people's lack of ability to believe in their own self-worth, loss of ability to be independent in their own right and limited self-confidence to do things on their own, without the support of an agency or department. Welfare-reinforced dependency leads many people to homelessness.

IMPACTS ON THE HOMELESS

In our experience, Aboriginal people are over-represented in applications for housing to supported accommodation agencies such as our own and within the public housing system. Aboriginal people also frequently face generational unemployment and poverty because of discrimination. They have limited or no skills relevant to obtaining or maintaining employment. The lack of employment options, when associated with substance abuse, living in poverty, poor health, welfare dependency, limited educational opportunities, housing instability and over-representation within the justice system have enormous consequences. The compounding effect of such experiences frequently leads to low self-esteem, shame, depression, violence within families, feelings of hopelessness, a deep sense of loss and family breakdown. This, not surprisingly, often sees families moving to refuges and then on to further homelessness. One family's homelessness also frequently affects the housing of their relatives, which compounds further homelessness. Largely, as Aboriginal homelessness is hidden by cultural obligations, impacts can vary from living in overcrowded circumstances to living on the street or in parks. In addition to the above-identified consequences for homeless people, some of the very negative personal impacts on individuals who are homeless and which are visible to the community are:

- Nowhere to put belongings;
- Nowhere to sleep safely;
- Inability to keep belongings, including money (having to share);
- Inability to have showers;
- No facilities for cooking food;
- No privacy;
- Inability to adequately look after self;
- Greater likelihood of substance abuse;
- Difficulty in taking control of self;
- Susceptibility to sickness;
- Vulnerability to being involved in crime;
- Having children open to abuse;
- Misunderstanding from the community;
- A belief that no one wants to help;
- No pride in self;
- A feeling that there is no future and a decision to living only for today;
- Inability to escape the cycle.

IMPACTS OF WORKING WITHIN HOMELESSNESS

Working within the housing and support sector impacts on agencies and their staff in many ways, apart from the usual expected resourcing struggles. These impacts vary and the extent of impact is largely dependent on the management of the organisation, staff supports and the staff involved in the work itself. Personalities and style of working, regardless of culture and educational background, are also fundamental in how working within this field affects both the individual and the agency. Within Centrecare we have both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff and all staff are employed on the basis that they

will work with all cultures, though consideration is also given to client choice and appropriateness of gender etc. Some of the impacts and issues that can also be advantages are as follows:

Cultural background of staff

For Aboriginal people working with Aboriginal clients, there is an immediate connection. An Aboriginal person having experienced prejudice and racism, knows the connections and the history and understands what the clients have experienced, and still experience, in the community, so they tend to be more sensitive to these clients' issues. Non-Aboriginal people have to work harder to demonstrate that underlying understanding. Therefore building a relationship is instrumental in being able to support that individual or family.

Connection to the Aboriginal community

One of the disadvantages to being connected to the Aboriginal community is that you are expected to liaise and negotiate outside of work hours. Furthermore, conflicts can often arise if interventions are not seen as being beneficial to the client or client's extended families. This is not the same for non-Aboriginal staff. However, there is still an expectation that a worker's further contact with a client, even if years apart and regardless of the outcome of that past contact, is perceived by the Aboriginal client as being part of a continuous relationship, at some level. The relationship is considered as seamless at all times by the client, but with different levels and expectations required from the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff.

Who clients think you are

Many tenants often perceive non-government staff as state housing or welfare workers belonging to organisations with whom they often have huge disagreements over housing. Aboriginal staff are often asked to choose between "them and us". This can place a lot of workers under pressure because of their commitment to their job and obligations to their community. Considerable time is required to ensure that people in receipt of services know there is a difference between government and non-government staff. However, in some respects it would appear much easier for clients in receipt of such services to say that it is the 'welfare' or the 'landlord'. These terms provide much easier explanations than words such as counsellor or community caseworker, which can bring with them feelings of shame.

Obligation to the Aboriginal community

Aboriginal workers, that have an intimate understanding of the obligations to family and extended families, find it very hard to tell Aboriginal clients that they are not allowed to have their extended families living with them because it causes concern for the general community. Often this is seen as the worker trying to be a white person and can fray relationships among the worker and tenant. For the non-Aboriginal worker this is not an issue, but more often than not, the non-Aboriginal worker is considered an outsider and would be expected to have such views. Therefore, such information, if delivered by a non-Aboriginal worker, may be more acceptable to those family members who may be the cause of the difficulties surrounding a particular household.

Who speaks for whom

People tend to see some Aboriginal people as spokespersons for the whole Aboriginal community, regardless of where they are from or their relationship to the members of the community - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Usually these spokespersons are men, which creates even further difficulty for Aboriginal women in having a voice in their own right. This leads to self-questioning as individuals try to determine how to participate and have an independent voice as an Aboriginal person. This is particularly difficult when many see Aboriginal people as a collective and don't allow for individual views. There is a need for understanding within both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community to clarify who speaks for whom and whether Aboriginal agencies represent individual Aboriginal people. Within this, Aboriginal people with their individual differences need to explore how it is possible to both lead, have a voice of their own, be heard individually and at the same time have a collective voice.

Cultural naiveté

Non-Aboriginal people, for one reason or another, tend to believe the words of the last Aboriginal person they have spoken to. The extent of this depends largely on how many interactions they might have had with Aboriginal people in a meaningful and ongoing way. Naiveté and a lack of understanding that Aboriginal people are not all the same and have many different viewpoints often bring about this type of response.

Fear of not being culturally appropriate also plays a role. It impacts on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff and agencies differently. For example Aboriginal individuals can become angry about misconceptions they have heard and it can be difficult for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to have alternative views, without being ostracised by others in forums or in meetings. Cultural naiveté can also lead to inaction and/or over then lead to something be perceived as culturally appropriate and therefore no action taken, when in fact something needs to be done.

Alternatively, over-reaction to a circumstance because of lack of knowledge and understanding could result in further problems rather than possible appropriate solutions. Talking things over with more than one Aboriginal person can help people to gain more informed knowledge surrounding the circumstances in question.

Immediate solutions

A problem for some people is the need to find a solution straight away - both as workers and as Aboriginal people in receipt of services. Additionally, funding bodies often expect instant, perfect change. There is a need to look at partial, positive changes, regardless of whether people are Aboriginal or not, while making sure that we don't impose our solutions/values on clients' lives. Then we can work towards long term sustainable change, if that is what is required. Getting caught up in how long we should or shouldn't be involved sometimes leads to withdrawal of services prematurely, or not persisting long enough to obtain even minor change.

Living in two cultures

Aboriginal workers are a part of both cultures. This creates both positives and negatives. On one hand there is often an immediate knowledge of issues, families, history if it

relates to their local area. On the other hand, Aboriginal workers can be strongly affected by their work as the experiences of their clients are similar to those they inevitably live day in and day out, as a part of their intrinsic being, with the same impacts and dilemmas. Aboriginal people inevitably enact a Community Development model of working. That is, an Aboriginal person lives and works in the community and has different experiences, to non-Aboriginal people, in the course of their work. Consequently, for Aboriginal workers, this type of work can be exhausting and burnout is a genuine possibility. This is particular so due to the extra responsibilities that can be placed on Aboriginal workers to find the solutions necessary for the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. For most non-Aboriginal staff, it is easier to separate work from home life and are, therefore, less likely to suffer burnout.

Racism and discrimination in the workplace

Racism and discrimination, either directly or indirectly in the workplace or in the line of carrying out their job, is an ongoing issue. For the workers there is a need to ensure that they are not being racist and discriminatory. They also need to work out how to deal with it, when on the receiving end. Both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community and the community generally, have an impact in this area. For example, neighbours and local communities play a big part in how people from different cultural backgrounds are accepted and welcomed in a particular locality.

Frequently, as an agency that provides accommodation and services to Aboriginal people, we experience, along with the Aboriginal family, ongoing acts of racism and discrimination. Neighbours regularly contact us with complaints and expressions of fear about the families that we house.

In the majority of cases, the fears and complaints are baseless. There are, however, times when the complaints are justified and are not culturally based. Then we, or the State Housing Authority, are required to take action under the Residential Tenancy Act which may in turn lead to a person or family becoming homeless. These decisions are never taken lightly. The provision of support offered is always intensive and great flexibility is demonstrated in an effort to assist the household to address the problems faced. A particularly strong stance is taken against other agencies that make the occasional statement based on the belief that some sort of racism has occurred. In these instances, the agencies concerned inevitably assume that a non-Aboriginal staff member is involved in the intervention.

On these occasions, the impact on both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff is profound. It attacks not only the integrity and underlying values of the work undertaken, but in one single statement devalues all work undertaken. In some situations it has meant 18 months or more of everyone's lives, including the householders', being put at threat of homelessness. In these instances the accusations are usually based on a limited knowledge of what has taken place, regardless of the worker's culture. Furthermore, it reinforces a *welfare* way of working that places no value on models that work to assist clients to address issues that lead to either placing their housing at risk or to them becoming homeless.

An accusation of racism or discrimination against an Aboriginal worker, by an external Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal person, can be particularly problematic. Especially when the accusation is based on the presumption that the cultural identity of the staff member concerned is non-Aboriginal. These accusations not only undermine the work of the agency but also the cultural integrity of the Aboriginal staff member involved. Events of this type reinforce a history that devalues Aboriginal people's input in decision making. Such preconceptions need to be challenged to ensure that all staff are treated and valued equally. Supporting staff members to retain a sense of self-worth, as well as a belief in their agency's mode of operation, is paramount in the retention of a healthy team of workers which seeks to encourage clients to take responsibility for their actions and not perpetuate welfare dependency.

Choice of services and access

Many mainstream agencies do not receive funding specific to the provision of services for Aboriginal people. However, many Aboriginal people come to agencies such as ours for services. There is a view, which suggests that Aboriginal people should only be serviced by Aboriginal organisations. This view is held by some Aboriginal-specific agencies and some government departments. In conflict with this position are funding bodies who are increasingly dictating within their contracts with mainstream services that they must increase their services to Aboriginal people and be culturally appropriate. There appears little concern over the conflict that services face in this debate as they wade through what, at times, appears a political nightmare that does not respect the right of Aboriginal people to choose from whom they seek services. It has been our experience that many Aboriginal people have their own ideas about choosing the type of organisation they will approach for assistance. We believe they also have a right to choose to be helped by those agencies with which they feel comfortable. In our view, the essential element is not who provides services, but rather whether an organisation is committed to the provision of non-discriminatory assistance that is based on a respect for individuals and their culture and their right to choose.

Financial cost

The financial cost of housing homeless individuals and families can be extremely high, despite intensive support, bond systems, tight management structures and adherence to the Residential Tenancies Act. Further to this, the aforementioned current designs of housing, based on limited household traffic and small family sizes create additional problems for most Aboriginal people. Design, size and sturdiness of structures need to be key aspects of working towards the promotion of healthy Aboriginal lifestyles. Currently, we are limited by funding availability, community opposition and a lack of opportunity to trial new housing designs. Part of that can be directly linked to fear of further failure and associated financial costs. Changing the attitude of "Not in my back yard" is also central to the success of any new initiatives from agencies such as ours or from Aboriginal agencies or Regional Housing Associations. People may be supportive of helping those who are homeless, as long as it is not in their suburb or local government authority. Without a change in this attitude the capacity to effectively deal with homelessness is greatly restricted.

Limited financial resources

Current financial resources to meet the demand for Aboriginal people to maintain their housing is not enough. This relates to the amount of appropriate housing and support options. In terms of government identified housing issues, public housing, to date, has not been geared to the Aboriginal extended family unit.

In terms of support, which also costs money, time is a construct that doesn't necessarily match clients' concepts of how much support time they need. Funding contracts and specified outcomes need to recognise this. Extended time spent supporting someone doesn't mean that welfare dependency is being created. It needs to be accepted that generational issues may require support for a lengthy period of time but not necessarily on a continuous basis.

HOW WE PROVIDE THE SUPPORT AND WHAT WE DO THAT WORKS

Through four outreach-based programs, Centrecare assists approximately 75 families on a weekly basis and at least 60 of these client individuals/families are Aboriginal. Within our work, Centrecare has adopted a philosophy that steers away from the perpetuation of welfare dependency and a welfare mentality. The emphasis is on assisting families and individuals to find their own solutions, not *fixing and solving* client dilemmas and problems for them. This has enabled the agency to work hard at empowering and respecting individuals and families. Centrecare believes that respectful services draw upon a philosophy that creates an atmosphere in which individuals are guided rather than lead.

As an agency, Centrecare has found that the provision of services to Aboriginal people has to date been far more successful when families are supported within their own homes. Since kinship and respect are core features of Aboriginal culture, we accept that working with Aboriginal families, in their homes, often means working with very large, extended family groups. This offers opportunities for both working with and learning from, Aboriginal families in a culturally appropriate and sensitive manner.

From our experience, the main issues facing the target group are often multi-dimensional. From this perspective, Centrecare has found that exclusive strategies which only seek to answer the presenting problem/s, often fail to effect ongoing change because the presenting issues are normally only a reflection of other contributing factors. From this perspective, Centrecare's model is aimed at working in a holistic manner to address, where possible, family, relational and community interactions.

People in need of our services are therefore offered support in a number of ways including individual counselling, couple and family counselling, advocacy, parenting information, financial counselling, case management, alcohol and drug counselling, and referrals within our agency and to generic community agencies. As such, the service operates according to community development principles and uses holistic and realistic approaches to enable clients to find their own solutions to the problems they face and to improve their opportunities for self-determination.

For the majority of individuals and families with whom we come in contact, the working relationships developed are seamless, evolve, develop and strengthen over time. People tend to come back to our agency if they require additional support, regardless of time. People also tend to identify with the staff they have worked with but readily accept someone else on the basis of recommendation or previous experience with our agency.

There is a difference in the way our agency's workers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, relate to Aboriginal people, in that it is relationship-based. This then informs the underlying way in which we work with people from all cultural backgrounds. In this sense, it is the reverse of what usually happens. That is, normally a worker would present the mainstream cultural understanding, therapeutic interventions and educational knowledge with everyone in the same manner and in a formal way.

In our work with Aboriginal people, counselling is experienced by them as a support, having a yarn, someone to talk with outside of the household, etc, not as formal counselling. The relationship between client and counsellor is closer than it would be in a formal setting, as you are within the confines of people's personal space and their home. However this does not mean relinquishing clear boundaries.

Persistence has been a key feature of our work, as has acceptance of what is realistic for people to achieve. Persistence is linked with how long we can hang in or are willing to hang in there with people. Being willing to persist has often demonstrated our commitment to clients and has proved successful in many situations. Additionally, our willingness to reassess someone's circumstances, even if the person has declined support at earlier stages, has proven successful with a large number of people. Continuity and willingness to be involved over time, in bad times and in good times has assisted many people who have needed our services. Persistence does not mean, however, that we disrespect people's right to decline a service or that we will work with people who are disrespectful of our agency or our workers. A mutual and healthy respect is fundamental to every working relationship in which we participate, whether with a client, government agencies, non-government agencies and the community generally.

Though Centrecare may be viewed as a predominantly non-Aboriginal and Islander counselling and support service, it has gained a solid reputation for being able to provide for the needs of Aboriginal and Islander families. This is reflected in the statistics recorded by the agency and also in the testimonials from Aboriginal and Islander clients. Centrecare also values the experiences and knowledge that other agencies, community groups and individuals have contributed to the agency to help work with Aboriginal and Islander people in a respectful and empowering way.

Within our team we always try to remain flexible and not static in what we do, trying new things and adapting as we go and need to. Ultimately, we see two pathways we can take as a multicultural team. We can give up or take the road together. We believe that there has to be hope, a vision to look forward to and an ability and environment to educate one another. This at times involves hurt, pain, and personal struggles but also an environment in which we talk, feel comfortable with each other and learn together.

WHAT WE SEE AS IMPORTANT IN PATHWAYS OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

Ensuring and developing pathways out of homelessness is unfortunately not simple, as history has demonstrated it is actually much easier to create homelessness. Pathways out of homelessness inevitably require a continuum of responses and opportunities for individuals and families to access, in order to move onto that pathway. Some people may not be ready to take that pathway and may continue to impact negatively on other people's opportunities as well. Others may step onto that pathway then either fall off it or decide to jump off it. However, many individuals and families will successfully move out of homelessness if access is available in a continuum of responses. These include adequate length of support, opportunity to try again and access to appropriate housing options.

We believe that the following are important steps in developing long term pathways out of homelessness for Aboriginal people:

Time, resources and respect

More adequate financial resources are required to provide staff and time to work with people in many different ways. This may include counselling, teaching people some managing and organisational skills, the development of routine, encouraging motivation and to be energetic, problem solving, how to make choices and look at consequences, learning about respect of other people and property, teaching clients how to take control and take responsibility. It is also important to find ways for individuals to learn about their family history and to develop pride in their ancestors. Receiving lots of positive feedback for their efforts also provides people with the confidence to do the things they want to do.

Models of service delivery generally

The therapeutic or healing relationships that you develop with Aboriginal people can only be developed over time and need to be relationship-based and not based on a medical design of service delivery which is usually constructed from European frameworks of practice and understanding. It is important to know where people have come from and their life stories, history and current circumstances. This may need to include a mutual understanding between worker and client developed through the sharing and exchange of information. This does not necessarily mean that the worker must divulge their life history or current circumstances. Additionally there must be an understanding and appreciation of cultural obligations to family, including understanding where they are coming from and seeing it through their eyes. Demonstrating respect and understanding for the person and their family is vital in the development of any positive working relationship with Aboriginal people.

Models of service delivery need to be based on self-empowerment, self-determination and be solution focused and away from the ongoing creation, maintenance and support of welfare dependency for Aboriginal people. It is difficult to move away from a model of service delivery based on welfare dependency. This movement is not only difficult for Aboriginal people but also for government and non-government agencies and the broader community. It is the year 2001 and there are still many people who are welfare-orientated and feel they can't survive without the assistance of handouts. It is our belief

that Aboriginal people need models of working that encourage them to become proud of who they are, strong as individuals and as a race, to be independent again and to get their younger generation to take control of their lives for the future.

The individual worker delivering the service to Aboriginal people

People working with Aboriginal people have to have an understanding about history, culture and difference in values, as well as be non-judgmental, genuine, interested, flexible, honest, friendly and not be afraid of discomfort or long silences within meetings. It is important to be able to show that you can feel ok in many different situations whether it is messy or dirty, a rough or hectic environment and that you can see past the physical presentation. Further to this, you need to be respectful, have a lot of patience and be able to demonstrate that you are in it for the long haul. This is difficult when you work in an environment where there may be constant turnover of staff. You also need to be person/family focused and not afraid to work with what is presented on the day. You largely have to be yourself and find a way where what you do and how you do it does not conflict with your own values, boundaries and employer expectations.

Housing options

Many Aboriginal people do not need support to maintain their housing but just need access to housing whether it is private rental, public housing or community housing. The housing provided, however, may need to be designed in different ways to respond to different needs and uses of families. For example many Aboriginal families may be happy with their current housing options and experiencing no difficulty in maintaining their existing, standard housing option. However, for other Aboriginal individuals and families, larger style housing that allows for high traffic of visitors would be more appropriate. What constitutes culturally appropriate housing inevitably has different meanings in different places and the location of the housing also needs to be taken into account.

Making it work within the community

There is a tendency to perceive homelessness as a concern for individual families or for a single government department such as the State Housing Authority and not the community. Often, it is also not seen as a structural issue. However, in the majority of homeless cases, many agencies are involved in either providing support or in ensuring that help is made available to those concerned. This assistance is provided in Western Australia through such bodies as the Department for Community Development, the Ministry of Justice, Centrelink, the Mental Health Department, Job Networks, the Education Department as well as non-government agencies.

There exists a need for greater co-ordination and effective communication between those agencies providing support. Homelessness in essence cannot be seen in isolation and we need to find a way for the community to come together to assist in addressing the consequences of homelessness for both the individual and the community. This also needs to include the individual and the family taking part in decisions and responsibilities that impact on their lives.

Research into homelessness, policy development into homelessness, policy decisions of both government and non-government agencies and models of practice currently exist in a silo mentality. Arguments exist over how much money should be spent on research in order to develop ways of counting homeless, evaluating existing programs and to inform policy approaches to homelessness. The counter argument is that millions are wasted annually on research and evaluation that could go a long way to assist those who are currently homeless.

THE FUTURE

For any improvement to take place, the future will inevitably need to include increased resources and time to focus on strengthening individuals, families, the Aboriginal community and the community sector generally. It will also need to see partnerships developed between government and non-government, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies in addition to focusing on the following:

- Community education via television commercials and newspapers that provides a positive image of Aboriginal culture;
- Recognition of traditional areas. That is, signage to promote traditional landowners with geographical areas. For example, “*You are entering Noongar territory. Please respect this land and its traditional owners*”. This does not mean respecting unacceptable behaviour of any group of people, but is a way of respecting traditional landowners and for other Aboriginal visitors and people to respect the territory that they enter;
- The acceptance and development of culturally appropriate gathering places in central areas;
- The development of more creative employment options that enable Aboriginal people to maintain jobs in the long-term;
- The development of a more user friendly education system for Aboriginal people;
- The development of more community and crisis accommodation options for Aboriginal people such as co-operatives, cluster housing, sobering up centres, and a continuum of accommodation from short term to long term;
- Facilities that homeless people can have access to for the opportunity of a shower, and to keep their belongings safe;
- Design and implementation of different styles of housing that take into account their utilisation by large numbers of people;
- The creation of more community development models that are focused on working with those Aboriginal people who require support in accessing and maintaining stable accommodation;
- More funding to employ Aboriginal outreach workers within both Aboriginal and mainstream services;
- Increasing the funding of existing Supported Accommodation Assistance Program providers so that more people can be helped;
- Creating an adequate timeframe and atmosphere within which people can develop the necessary skills and emotional strength to change their life circumstance;
- The use of a methodology that focuses on solutions rather than problems;

- Building relationships based on all parties being non-judgemental, understanding, respectful, equal and sensitive to one another;
- Mainstream agencies and Aboriginal agencies (both government and non-government) working closer together to develop new knowledge, understanding and different ways of working;
- The development and promotion of joint services and strategies that involve Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies working together.

CONCLUSION

As individuals, workers, policy makers and members of the community, we need to reframe our questions, viewpoints and work practices to invoke different responses and therefore create different impacts. Focusing continually on the problem can actually contribute to perpetuating the stereotypes of Aboriginal people and assist neither those who are housed nor those who are homeless. Pathways out of homelessness is not easy to find or maintain as there are many hurdles and obstacles in the way. Many of the hurdles and obstacles may be self-created or created by others or by society generally. It is important nonetheless that we endeavour to provide various opportunities to access the pathways, to encourage people to take responsibility, to develop their own solutions and for all of us to steer away from maintaining or creating ongoing welfare dependencies for Aboriginal people.

It is also our belief that research, policy development, policy decisions and models of practice need to be more interactive and include the practice of collaborative models of working. This may mean that there may be a loss in terms of the way in which each of us perceives things should or will work. There may also be a greater financial cost, as new approaches are developed and implemented. There will also be an emotional loss in the discovery that existing ways may not be the best ways to do the work and that something else may be better. Additionally, it is easier to hold onto our individual ways of operating than it is to work collectively together. However, the costs of not trying to work together as a community, across all levels of government and non-government, will inevitably have a greater emotional and financial cost for everyone, especially those who are homeless.

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