

To the Committee Secretary,

The WA Catholic Social Justice Council considers that indigenous communities must be consulted and involved in all efforts to improve their health, education, employment and housing needs. There are many successful programs operating in these areas and relevant State Government Departments will no doubt make submissions to this Committee.

The Committee must also obtain the views of those Aboriginal organizations which operate in these areas as they are ideally placed to assess the effectiveness of these programs. Also as they are often required to deal with people who are unable to be helped by Government agencies they are more able to advise your Committee on the need for further services.

Our society's failure to deal with the problems confronting Aboriginal people has resulted in the high incarceration rate of Aboriginal men, women and children in this state who are often sent far from their local support systems to a city prison where they are at risk of becoming another death in custody.

In relation to the question of housing we make the following points.

First and foremost, the housing needs of Western Australian Aboriginal people are more desperate than most other Aboriginal communities in Australia - chiefly because of the State's isolation and consequent cost of building construction and maintenance. 50% of Western Australia's 50,000 Aboriginal people live in regional areas.

Land ownership and control is an essential element to empowerment of Aboriginal people and is inextricably linked to responsibility for looking after housing (in WA the Aboriginal Lands Trust is handing back its 27 million hectare estate direct to Aboriginal organisations over the next 5 years).

A key issue in Western Australia is a lack of funds to meet existing and new housing needs, although this is a common concern across Australia. This affects budgets for construction, maintenance and repairs. The funding problem is also exacerbated by the increasing cost of building homes, particularly in remote areas.

Aboriginal communities lack skills and training associated with management and maintenance of community housing stock. The State and Commonwealth governments need to place greater emphasis on training Aboriginal people in housing construction, maintenance and management. The current term is "capacity building" - building up the confidence and capacity of communities to meet the challenges of maintenance and management themselves (not rely on Government agencies to come and fix the plumbing or broken doors and windows).

Capacity building and proper training could lead to economic development for communities. In terms of housing management, the high cost of living in some areas usually results in rent payments being overlooked. This leads to insufficient community funds being available for maintenance and repairs.

In some cases, overcrowding has been made worse by inappropriate housing designs. Some housing built in previous years has not taken account of the harsh environmental conditions, resulting in early breakdown and maintenance problems.

This submission is made by the WA Catholic Social Justice Council.

Kerry Macfarlane
Secretary.