

Chapter 3: Ending Aboriginal Homelessness in WA

Moorditj Mia (Strong Home): Aboriginal Housing First Support from the Heart

Lara Silbert, Grants and Fundraising Officer, Noongar Mia Mia

Perth is facing an urgent Aboriginal homelessness crisis, and Aboriginal-led community-driven solutions are the key to change. Despite comprising 1.6 per cent of Perth Metro's population, an estimated 42 per cent of the city's rough sleepers are Aboriginal;¹ in other words, Aboriginal people are 25 times more likely to be sleeping rough in Perth compared to the non-Aboriginal population — an enormous overrepresentation. Research from the University of Western Australia (UWA) finds of 56 homeless street deaths in Perth in 2020, 28 per cent were Indigenous.²

'Our family would like my sister's death to be the last homeless person on the streets... Family hurts too when things like this happen. And it hurts here. I'd never walked past a person who's homeless, because I know that ... they need help.'

— Michelle Garlett,
sister of Alana Garlett
(rough-sleeping Noongar woman
and mother of six who died on
Perth's streets in June 2021)³

Western Australia's first Aboriginal Housing First Support Service, Moorditj Mia ('Strong Home'; hereafter, MM), demonstrates a promising foray into self-determination in action. Launched in mid-2021 as a result of a partnership between two Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), Noongar Mia Mia (NMM) and Wungening Aboriginal Corporation, the MM program has been funded by Western Australian State Government for a five-year period.

The program builds on the evidence-based cultural approach of these two leading Aboriginal

organisations, as well as deep insight developed over a cumulative five decades of experience working within the Aboriginal community on Noongar *boodja* (country). The program is also underpinned by the *Noongar Cultural Framework and Noongar Housing First Principles* (introduced in the November 2021 edition of *Parity*); simultaneously, the on-the-ground realities of MM's casework demonstrates what the theoretical basis of the Framework and Principles could look like in action, and is being used to develop a service model for practical implementation.

Working in a culturally-secure, effective way with Aboriginal people on Noongar *boodja* facing homelessness means working differently. It means putting Noongar cultural values at the front-and-centre of the way we work; involving Aboriginal people meaningfully in the design and delivery of services; and understanding where to step back and let Aboriginal people lead the way.

Background

The Department of Communities' WA Homelessness Strategy acknowledges '*non-Aboriginal people[s] ways are not culturally effective and do not offer long-term solutions for addressing homelessness in Aboriginal communities. Self-determination and self-management are still relevant today as when it was first proposed in the 1970s to empower and take control to overcome homelessness.*' Despite the critical importance of self-determination being well-established for half a century, little has changed in terms of meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal voices in the housing sector. This contravenes Article 23 (Right to Development) of the *United Nations Declaration*

on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Australia is a signatory:

'Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development. In particular, indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.'

The Organisations

Noongar Mia Mia (NMM) is an ACCO Community Housing Provider, (CHP) that has been at the frontline of Aboriginal social housing for over two decades. NMM has been formally recognised as the peak housing body for Aboriginal people on Noongar *boodja*. NMM provides supportive housing, addressing homelessness risk factors from a place of cultural and personal respect.

Wungening provides culturally strong, community informed and delivered services, across a wide breadth of areas including alcohol and other drugs (AOD). Originally set up in 1988 to respond to the challenge of AOD amongst the Noongar community, Wungening now delivers a wide array of services for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community, in areas such as family and domestic violence, homelessness, child and family support, and emergency relief.

'These organisations and their staff have a deep and holistic understanding of the challenges that many Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness face.'

— Simone McGurk MLA

The organisations work in partnership to deliver both MM and the Boorloo Bidee Mia ('Perth Pathway to Housing') homelessness facility, two of the world's scant few Aboriginal-led Housing First services. Together, they build self-determination in the housing and homelessness sectors, while growing cultural competency so these sectors can better serve Aboriginal people on Noongar *boodja*.

The MM Service Model

In developing the MM service model, the partners have used a tailored methodology considering:

- customer (service user) insights
- organisational strengths
- key individuals from both organisations with significant breadth and depth of experience, knowledge and skills resulting from decades of delivering services to Aboriginal people across the broader community services sector; including to Aboriginal people who are homeless or at-risk
- desktop research of good practice on Aboriginal homelessness; homelessness; housing first.

Aboriginal people and communities have well-established values and protocols which the MM team respects, understands and places front-and-centre in their work. A guiding principle is the importance of connections — to land, place, family and kinship, culture, identity, spirit. Furthermore, the team is entirely Aboriginal,⁴ with deep understanding of the importance of cultural values and the lasting impacts of colonialism — disconnection from home, family, language and spirituality. Because MM comes from the community, there is a sense of shared ownership and common goals, and the team is uniquely placed to overcome barriers and build relationships of trust.

The MM service model reflects Wungening's stakeholder consultation workshop in November 2020 with people rough sleeping at the Lord Street 'Tent City', with Aboriginal Elders and concerned community members, regarding current housing



Two of the Telethon Elder Coresearchers Charmaine Pell and Oriel Green over at our office with board member Denise Conway

and specialist homelessness support services. Key insights (quoted verbatim) below and are reflected in the six domains of our service model.

Customer Insights Workshop (Source: Wungening Aboriginal Corporation)

1. *I just came out of prison and need a house*

Child protection is looking at me

No-one cares and no one wants to help me

My relationship broke down

I'm black, just need a break, and no-one wants to give me a house

I'm hopeless and helpless

Because I'm using, no one wants to know/help me. I've been kicked out of my home 'cause I've been drinking

I don't have a space where people listen to me/hear me out

I fight with my mob

No one understands me or knows my story

You/everyone thinks I'm no good so I might as well behave that way

I can't change but want to; how do I change?

I'm not white, I'm not educated

My family and others don't want me

I've been in and out of homelessness services; I don't trust anyone around me

What are YOU going to do for ME?

I want to sleep and be safe

2. *Allocation — where I want to live is really important to me (i.e. the location)*

I want to be near facilities I use every day — like public transport

There's family feuding I need to think about when given a house

The place (location) has to have happy memories for me

There are a lot of questions we should be asking up front when allocating a house — this part is SO important — it's different to the whitefella community. You don't really have this with the white fella community (i.e. cultural aspects to consider when allocating a house)

Where all our mob live — you don't have houses in these areas. You don't have the concentration of houses where our people are.

I'll be offered a house and I'll have to turn it down 'cause it ain't

culturally appropriate and then I get put to the bottom of the list 'cause I turned it down and have to start from the beginning again

Your staff aren't our mob — how do they know what we need?

3. There's lots of things going on for me now — I don't even wanna go find a house

I can't be bothered finding a house

Just give me a house so I can get on with me life — get my woman back, get my kids back

Centrelink has cut off my money. Can't you help me? Centrelink is f***ing useless

Why do people keep knocking me back for a house? Why did I get knocked back for a house?

I know where I have to go and who to see to get a house... but the wait list is so long so what's the point?

Where do I go to find a place/ house? How do I get a home? Where do I go? What do I need?

How much will it cost?

But I don't have any furniture

Do I have to go through this all again (forms, questions)? Don't you guys talk to each other?

What good are you guys? You guys are useless. You're meant to help us black fellas

I've tried to get a house but don't have the documents.

I don't want to just take what they've given me. It's no good.

I thought I was on the wait list and now I see I'm not.

I've always just take what the Dept has given us as a house.

4. I've got to get my kids to school.

They make me feel shame (with my life — 'quick help me clean the house up, white fellas coming in and they'll judge me on state of how clean the house is')

This is all harder than what I've done before — setting up a house is hard work, and I don't know where to start — I need your help

I need help to get the rental agreement set up and sorted out

Getting the house set up — I need help with this. I need to get furniture, the electricity set up, all the basics you need to do before you move in.

This transition to a permanent house is a big area to deal with (i.e. preparing people to move into a home). It can be such an overwhelming feeling for our mob.

I also need to get food on the table. It's all too overwhelming and I don't know where to start.

We have the expectation of family to deal with: I've got a house now — do I bring my family in and house them as well? So I not tell anybody? Can't say no when my family needs a bed.

5. What happens in between finding a house and getting the individual the support they need?

There is a housing gap for our mob — there are no hostels and some of our mob like this set up.

How does crisis/transitional accommodation fit in with this? Crisis/transitional tends to be cyclical and you keep going back to the beginning.

I need support now — I know I haven't got a house yet but I need support now.

I want you to help my aunty, brother, sister, cousin etc, cos they need help more than me right now.

You're talking to me now about finding a house — I don't really care about a house now 'cause 'this' (whatever event/ situation) has happened to me and I need help with that now.

You mob just wanna help your family — I know what you're like. You just support drug dealers.

I rang up and spoke to some girl and she told me to do xyz but why can't you do it for me?



Giving out packs to rough sleepers

I wanna change my life and clean up my life (get off the grog/drugs, get my missus/kids back etc). How can you help?

Filled out the form — Is that it? Is that all I had to do?

Why do I have to fill out this paperwork now?

You should have my details. I filled out the forms last time.

Why do I have to come to you guys — you aren't the ones with the houses.

6. *Who do I call when it's out of hours and I need support?*

What matters to me is how people talk to me and interact/engage with me. It should be with respect.

I want you to work with me and help me get a better life and not just tell me what to do or put me down.

I want to be left alone. I've got my house and I'm all good now.

Nag, nag, nag. That's all you do — you don't really listen to me to hear me out.

I need some extra support right now — life is pretty shit (wrap around support)

Why do you send me to so many people? I want to stick with you, cos I trust you.

'One Dream, One Team'

The MM team takes a 'one team, one dream' approach; regardless which partner an MM caseworker is employed by, they identify personally and collectively as MM. They are recognised by clients as a unified group. Casework aligns with Aboriginal preferences for a community of collective care; caseworkers always go out in groups of two to three people, with a key caseworker and one or two rotating caseworkers. This means any client should know any caseworker, and any caseworker should know any client. This also mitigates turnover fatigue; already-exhausted vulnerable people do not have to repeat their story and find themselves starting again from the beginning (often the case in conventional interventions).

The MM Service Model in Practice

The MM team finds the six domains highly relevant in their day-to-day work. In particular, building relationships has been key to engagement. These relationships are built through trust, yarning and sitting with, and without blame or shame; they come with an agenda, without power dynamics of 'rescuer' and 'rescued', and in a way that empowers the client.

Shame and Trust

Kaarnya (shame) is discussed in detail in the November issue of *Parity* ('Noongar Cultural Framework and Noongar Housing First Principles'); in particular, this involves harm reduction and empowerment, engaging and re-engaging without blame or shame, taking small steps forward and backward celebrating successful experiences but also learning from experiences of pain and frustration without *kaarnya*. Clients are heavily traumatised and dispossessed - not only of land, but even of a safe roof over their heads. Many are Stolen Generations themselves or the children of Stolen Generations parents; many have experienced child abuse and/or family and domestic violence. Even talking about their situation can be very triggering, and significant trust and sitting with is required before caseworkers can break down those barriers. This process takes as long as it takes, and it must be client-led.

Yarning and Sitting With

The way that caseworkers yarn is underpinned by cultural sensitivity, values and protocol. The shared Aboriginality of the casework team and the clients opens doors, but cultural sensitivity and protocols must still be followed, and casework must be delivered based on shared Aboriginal constructs and values — walking together in the same world. In particular, working from a shared understanding of the importance of *moort* (family and kin), *boodja* and *kaartdijin* (cultural knowledge), how these interconnect and where our clients are placed within these networks (See: 'Noongar Cultural Framework', *Parity* November 2021 edition, pages 16 to 20). As such, MM caseworkers will follow the Noongar cultural protocol of starting by asking about their mob (family), establishing shared kinship ties, etc.

'Yarn, don't be a rescuer... People want their power back.'
— Leonie Pickett,
MM Program Coordinator

Yarning and sitting with effectively should create a relationship in which the client feels empowered. Clients do not want to be 'rescued' and are likely to find frontline workers who take that stance to be patronising and insulting. Rough sleepers often feel voiceless

Six Domains of Service

Domain	Key insights
Relationship:	Building a relationship is the most important thing. When this is established then it is ok to move onto the 'topic' at hand.
Shame:	Our own people sometimes feel shame and don't want to talk about their circumstances; and sometimes don't want to talk to our own people either
Trust:	Build trust with us and then we will start opening up — not before then - and this may take time but you can't give up
Yarning:	When yarning (talking) with us start with who's your mob, your family... etc. Get to know us by yarning with us
Sitting with:	It will probably take a long time to 'get a toe in'; make sure your message is clear and repeat it over and over — 'I am here to help.' 'Sit on the street, everyone has a story.'
Approach:	It's the way you approach people that will make us want to talk. 'Don't wear flash clothes' and 'uniforms can intimidate.'

and invisible and lose a sense of identity; on the streets, passers-by actively look away so as not to see them. MM's work involves giving them back their voice, empowering them with choice and self-determination; and walking with them until they feel powerful enough to walk by themselves — never walking in front of them or behind them.

As we will see in *Noongar Housing First Principles in Practice* (this issue, pages 30 to 34), regaining identity and voice can be something tangible like identification documents, or something of great intangible value like self-determination in location of housing, or finding ways to use lived experience to help others.

Housing First Support in a Housing Crisis

MM Mia is a long-term Housing First support service of five years' duration. State Government housing investments are still in progress. The service is being delivered consistently with Housing First, and finding housing is the highest priority element of MM's work; however, housing remains scarce in the midst of WA's rental crisis. MM thinks outside-the-box to find housing, working with organisations such as Department of Communities, Anglicare, Communicare, Indigo Junction, Boorloo Midee Mia and private market affordable housing provider Urban Fabric to find safe, secure housing for clients. This involves not making promises that you cannot keep, in alignment with the Kwop Daa ('good talk' that is open and honest) element of the Noongar Housing First Principles (*Parity* November 2021 edition, pages 21 to 23).

The lack of guaranteed housing initially meant overcoming understandable skepticism. Rough sleepers would ask questions like: 'there's lots of services out there — what makes you any different? If you don't have a house for me, what can you help with?' However, not only MM have had some successes in finding housing, but the team has also been of service in other ways. Gaining or re-gaining



Our receptionist Shauna Parfitt with some Xmas gifts for tenants

ID documents and getting placed on the priority housing waitlist have been particularly important achievements, but support can take many forms: whether having a yarn, providing transport, or even attending court to advocate for clients (which recently helped prevent a prison term).

As a result, positive word-of-mouth has spread quickly about the service, paving the way to build relationships of trust from initial contact. The team has demonstrated ongoing commitments: that they will never give up on finding clients a home. They are known for finding other ways to be of genuine help and support, and that they are part of a strong Noongar and Aboriginal community that sees them and values them. This aligns with the Noongar Housing First Principle 'Culturally appropriate active engagement through Kwop Daa'; rough sleepers who have been exhausted by services and workers that make promises but do not deliver, know that the MM team will walk together with them on their journeys.

Systems Change: From the Streets to the Sector

The way the MM team works also reflects NMM's Mia Moort ('House Family') ongoing research project. So far, this has involved the development of the *Noongar Cultural Framework and Noongar Housing First Principles*. The Framework expresses cultural values of Noongar people, identifying points of disjuncture between Noongar and settler cultural values, and how this disjuncture can place pressure upon Noongar and Aboriginal people to make untenable cultural compromises to stay housed. The Noongar Housing First Principles are a set of principles which reflect

these cultural values, reimagining the mainstream Housing First Principles in a culturally-effective fashion.

Mia Moort and MM have a significant collaborative relationship: the MM team can work more culturally-effectively with this understanding, while the day-to-day frontline work with a caseload of 40 Aboriginal rough sleepers⁵ forms an evidence basis from which Mia Moort can develop a service model for practical implementation. By yarning with the MM team about the on-the-ground realities of their work, Mia Moort can take the next stage of the project: ensuring Mia Moort goes beyond a theoretical basis by delivering training both to leadership and frontline workers across the housing and support sectors, for meaningful systems change.

'There have been many reports written about Noongar people, about Aboriginal peoples across Australia; but a report alone will not drive the change that so desperately needs to be seen, changes that as Elders we have been pushing for, for decades now. Changing a system isn't an easy task, and this change has been put in the too-hard basket for too long. Continuation of [Mia Moort] will enable [Sandra Harben] to actively present, teach and inspire the Housing and Support sectors all around WA.'

— Telethon Kids Institute
Ngulluk Koolunga Ngulluk Koort
(Our Children, Our Heart) Elders.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2021/08/Boorloo-Bidee-Mia-homelessness-service-opens-in-Perth-CBD.aspx>
2. <https://nit.com.au/indigenous-death-highlights-urgency-of-wa-homelessness-crisis/>
3. <https://nit.com.au/indigenous-death-highlights-urgency-of-wa-homelessness-crisis/>
4. Currently Aboriginality is not a hiring requirement, but deep understanding of Aboriginal culture and context is.
5. As part of serving Aboriginal rough sleepers, the Moorditj Mia team also serves their partners, some of whom are not Aboriginal.