

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Friday, 22 November 2019

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WITNESSES

Mr Darren Smith, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Jenny Samms, Special Adviser, and

Mr Peter Jones, Senior Policy Officer, Aboriginal Housing Victoria.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon, and thank you so much for coming. As I have just mentioned, this is being broadcast and it is also being recorded.

All the evidence that you provide to us today at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under the *Constitution Act* and under the standing orders of the Legislative Council. This means you are protected by law; however, any comments that you may make outside here will not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. We will provide you with a transcript in the next few days, which you would be welcome to correct or edit as you see fit.

If you would like to make some opening comments and then we will open it up to questions, that would be great, and thank you very much for providing us with this data pack as well.

Mr SMITH: Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the country that we are meeting on this afternoon, the Wurundjeri and the Boon Wurrung people, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. For those of you who do not know me, I am Darren Smith, I am the CEO of Aboriginal Housing Victoria. Also with me today is Jenny Samms, former CEO of Aboriginal Housing Victoria and currently a special adviser to Aboriginal Housing Victoria on its housing and homelessness strategy, and Peter Jones, a senior policy officer at Aboriginal Housing Victoria. Jenny and Peter have been working with the community in developing an Aboriginal housing and homelessness framework, which we have presented to the Government. We will talk more about that later in the presentation. We welcome the opportunity to address the Committee's terms of reference, so thank you. Mirroring these, our presentation will address the scale and the nature of Aboriginal homelessness in Victoria, the policy drivers of homelessness and housing assistance and the elements of a policy framework required to address the crisis in Aboriginal homelessness in Victoria. So you have the data in front of you, and I will hand over to Peter, who will take you through it.

Mr JONES: Thanks, Darren. The data packs distributed to the Committee highlight the scale of homelessness experienced by Aboriginal people and some of the market-based factors informing these levels of homelessness. Of 58 000 Aboriginal people in our state, almost 11 000 sought assistance from specialist homeless services in 2017–18. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare puts the rate of homeless assistance sought at 17 per cent or 1693 per 10 000 population. This is by far the highest and fastest growing rate of homeless assistance sought by Aboriginal people of the Australian states. While we cannot be certain why this is the case, it may relate to the fact that while social housing constitutes around 4 per cent of the housing market Australia-wide, it constitutes only around 2 to 3 per cent of the market in Victoria.

Additionally half of Victoria's Aboriginal people live in Melbourne, one of the most competitive housing markets in Australia. While Victoria's spending on homeless services is higher than the other states at \$49 per person compared with \$37 per person, our spending on social housing is only half the national per capita rate—that is, \$88 per capita compared with \$166 per person nationally. The absence of affordable housing is one critical stumbling block in addressing homelessness, and the unmet demand is growing very, very fast. Nor are Aboriginal people presenting to homeless services when they do not need them. Fifty-six per cent of Aboriginal people are already homeless when they present—a far higher rate than other Victorians seeking assistance.

We also know from national AIHW data that the majority of Indigenous people who enter the specialist homeless assistance system homeless will exit the system homeless—that is 62 per cent. Victorian Aboriginal people are more likely to re-enter the system within a single year, and 70 per cent of them have been in that system before. Fewer than half of Aboriginal people had a case plan in place following homeless assistance last year, 47 per cent compared with 62 per cent for non-Aboriginal clients Australia-wide. Of the

23 000 Aboriginal households in Victoria, approximately 4600 of those households were in social housing, and a further 4100 were on the Victorian Housing Register waiting list for social housing. Of those 4100 on the waiting list for social housing, the registrar has classified one-third of those, or 32 per cent, as homeless. In the past year 2260 Aboriginal people in our state who were housed were at serious risk of becoming homeless—that is, they were assessed by homeless services as requiring support in sustaining their tenancies.

This data makes clear that the scale at which Aboriginal people are experiencing homelessness in our state is a humanitarian crisis. If this sounds hyperbolic, consider that if the mainstream population sought housing assistance at this rate we would be talking about more than 1 million Victorians seeking homeless assistance and about 600 000 of them homeless. This is a growing crisis.

The number of Aboriginal Victorians assessed by specialist homeless services as requiring assistance grew by 33.6 per cent in the past four years, and the trajectory of growth will continue if existing policy settings remain unchanged. Population projections commissioned by our organisation demonstrate that, using the most soberly conservative methodology available to us, a further 5085 social housing units will be required for Aboriginal people by 2036 simply to meet the household population growth, which is running at 4 per cent per annum. This investment will not begin to reduce current levels of homelessness; instead this is the outlay required for the housing crisis for Aboriginal Victorians not to deteriorate further over the coming decade and a half. Clearly this situation is unsustainable and change is urgently needed.

Darren is going to talk about the policy drivers which are causing this problem.

Mr SMITH: Before we address what the change looks like in this part of the presentation, it is important to understand how we reached this point. And I would like to add that a lot of the views that we express here, even though we have dressed them up in terms that you will be familiar with, have come out very strongly through our community consultations, which have been quite extensive. We have engaged right across the Victorian Aboriginal community over the last 12 months in developing the framework.

In the forthcoming Aboriginal housing and homelessness framework we make the point that the contemporary housing poverty of Aboriginal people cannot be decoupled from the historical experience of Aboriginal dispossession and dislocation. But how this legacy of economic and social exclusion interacts with the existing drivers of homelessness is what should interest policymakers. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has identified four structural determinants of homelessness and housing distress. Our analysis has demonstrated that each of these four drivers impacts Aboriginal people more acutely than other Australians, amplifying our current contemporary housing crisis.

The four drivers identified by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare are: housing market factors, such as access, affordability, security, quality and safety; critical life events, such as family formation and breakdown, mental health and physical health, disability, threats to income and employment and transitions from institutional care; availability of household resources, such as personal finances, insurance and networks; and housing assistance, including social housing, homelessness services and financial assistance such as income support.

Taking them in turn, it is immediately evident that Aboriginal people are disproportionately adversely impacted by, first, housing market failure in Victoria. By that I mean housing which is unaffordable for people on middle incomes to buy, rental properties that are unaffordable for people on income support and a minimum wage to rent—Aboriginal people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed—and a social housing market that continues to shrink. As a tenure relative to the population, our historical poverty inheritance makes us the cohort most dependent on social housing.

Secondly, stressors which compound the fracturing effects of major life transitions: Aboriginal people are vastly over-represented in their experiences of family violence, victimisation and family breakdown; early family formation and leaving home at earlier ages; and transitioning into and out of institutional settings such as out-of-home care, prison, mental health facilities and so on. On almost every indicator of disadvantage, Aboriginal people in Victoria are over-represented. If you move further toward the tertiary end of every system, the rate of over-representation increases.

Thirdly, poverty of household material resources make it impossible for many Aboriginal families to secure their housing. This is perhaps most evident in the handicaps they face in trying to compete in an overcharged and overheated private rental market, which we believe systematically discriminates against Aboriginal people on the basis of race, particularly in regional Victoria.

And finally, we have a mainstream housing and homeless assistance system that lacks cultural accreditation and is dramatically overstrained, and an income support system delivering amongst the lowest benefits in the OECD. One size does not fit all.

In formulating our Aboriginal housing and homelessness framework, we undertook a statewide consultation to better understand the way in which these issues impact on individuals. As you would expect from our analysis, our consultation revealed that some people have particular needs and our housing responses must have the flexibility and capability to respond to those needs. It is something that when we were sitting here listening to the previous presentation was raised then as well. Cohorts with very specific needs include: children in protection and out-of-home care; single mothers who are homeless and single young women sleeping rough; extended families experiencing overcrowding; families torn apart by family violence; people seeking to transition from the corrections system; elders with or without acquired disabilities; and young people, including those in need of specialist alcohol and other drug services.

These factors are overlaid by a historical legacy which continues to resonate in contemporary housing poverty. We are witnessing the continuing impact of past policies which saw the deliberate exclusion of Aboriginal people from the economy, the systematic dispossession of land and the disorientation of forced relocation. While its legacy is historical, this is a contemporary and intensifying crisis. Without a major shift in policy there is no prospect of it dissipating.

Ms SAMMS: If you can bear with us, I will just very briefly go through the way we have tackled this in our framework. The framework is over 100 pages long, so you are not going to get it all today, and you do not want it, obviously. This is primarily about homelessness. The Victorian Government, as an act of self-determination, agreed—and we put up a proposal—to fund Aboriginal Housing Victoria to lead the development of a housing and homelessness framework for Aboriginal people, and this is the first time in Australia. From our point of view we thought we had a fair bit of responsibility to the Government to work in a very responsible way and produce, which we have certainly done, the frameworks with Government. We will see what happens, but certainly they have said they appreciate the forward thinking in much of the framework.

There are a couple of points. In particular I, but everyone, really did travel the whole state. One of the things I just want to remark on is when you go out and talk to people you hear about new and emerging groups, then you come back and you do the data analysis and it matches up. So what we are saying is real. It is what is happening out there, and this business with young Aboriginal women who are now homeless is new and horrifying—really horrifying.

We started from a point of view that homelessness and housing are not separate issues. It is obvious, I know, you might think. But it is not how sectors tend to work; they have their traditional boundaries. We would say—and I do not want to sound oversimplistic—it is housing; it is a lack of housing. Now, you have got to do a lot of things for housing to be successful, but it is a lack of housing. The other key concept in what we are saying is we do not want to be going back in another 20 years—I will probably be dead anyway—saying to government, ‘Give us more social housing’, because it is not going to happen. We know that, and we do need the extra 5000 houses.

Our approach is to move the demand curve so that people become independent so that, firstly, they can get crisis and transitional housing. That is absolutely critical. Some people can go from homelessness to private rental, with support. The private rental market opens up. Some people come out of social housing into private rental. Some people go into private ownership. We are trying to move to independence, and our concept of private ownership is not just a family or an individual owning a house—it is that, and that builds intergenerational wealth—but it is something more. It is also about the Aboriginal community and Aboriginal community organisations owning the properties and making them work for community. And that is important too. So that is where we are coming from. It is about that shift.

I will put my little specs on now so I can come back to my notes. We have designed the framework to respond to the unique housing challenges faced by Aboriginal Victorians. There are some that are the same as for the rest of the community; there are many, many more that are different. We have got a set of goals that are mutual and interdependent, and we have to have an overarching policy approach. The first is restoring primacy to housing and policy. As a platform to thriving life, housing is the greatest opportunity you have to build restorative initiatives and service support, but without it housing in itself can be a complete and utter disaster and not work at all—in fact it can be a very poor investment.

We do need to build the supply for a fast-growing population. We need to open doors to the autonomy of living in the private market and owning our own homes. We need a homeless support system which understands Aboriginal people in response to our needs, and we do not have that at the moment. There is no Aboriginal homelessness system, and the mainstream, for all of their goodwill, do not understand it and do not intersect with Aboriginal providers and people. We need to build the capacity in turn in both the Aboriginal and mainstream systems to make homelessness the exception and home ownership the norm, as is the case for every other Victorian.

Our major challenge is to supply an additional 27 000 homes for Aboriginal people by 2036, of which over 5000 will need to be social housing to maintain the status quo. One of the things I will add in here is: complex disadvantage grows exponentially, so to have your family violence or your mental health creates problems. To have your family violence, your mental health, your justice issues, your drug issues and your child protection issues does not multiply it by four; it multiplies it by probably 100. And that is the problem we are dealing with and we have got to move through.

We want to end up with greater innovation in generating new forms of affordable housing involving private sector investments. We want to build on Aboriginal assets where there is Aboriginal land, where there is Aboriginal expertise, where there is cultural strength. Surplus government land we think we deserve a share of; I think the government is moving to the same view. We want new, fresh models to extend access to home ownership, and we have got a few innovative ideas there, and the Government has come part of the way with that; greater capacity in the Aboriginal community housing sector to develop, grow and maintain supply; and to build new partnerships with philanthropic and mainstream providers. So our vision is a pretty simple one: every Aboriginal person has a home. I think you would probably agree.

We do not want to perpetuate a situation in which the original owners of the land on which we live are the most likely to be homeless on their own land. Dispossession has cast a long shadow, and it continues. One thing we have not mentioned: there is capacity in the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal Housing Victoria is the biggest Aboriginal social housing provider in the country. It owns over 1500 houses and is the only equivalent tier 1 accredited Aboriginal housing association in the country. So we can do it. We know we can do it. We have got the record, and we just need to work to make the most of the assets we have got. Your turn, Darren.

Mr SMITH: To conclude, the failures in the Australian housing market combined with a highly rationed income support offering are by themselves sufficient to explain extensive and visible homelessness in Australia. However, for Aboriginal people the scale of the homelessness crisis is of a different order, and in sounding this alarm we must look beyond market failure and contemporary policy deficits for explanations of its proportions. In responding, we urgently need to agree on a target to reduce Aboriginal homelessness by 10 per cent per annum compounding for 10 years. To build an Aboriginal housing and homelessness service system which understands and responds to Aboriginal people, we need open access points. We need funding and support to Aboriginal providers to become entry and referral points into the homelessness system. Aboriginal hostels and facilities need to be funded and recommissioned. We need new transitional and emergency housing options to be established. We think there is a need to adopt a housing first approach. A housing first approach must be complemented by appropriate support to achieve sustainable housing outcomes, which means that those at high risk are targeted and provided housing, support and pathways, and support in the form of targeted services which respond to critical life events and major transitions, those that we mentioned previously: mental health, drug and alcohol, transitioning out of home care and leaving the justice system.

Homelessness services need to flow seamlessly through to long-term housing. There need to be exit points from transitional housing. We need to cease discharging people from homelessness services into homelessness. In all this, the mainstream and Aboriginal sectors need to work together for the benefit of clients. We need at least

5000 new social housing units over the next 16 years. We need to take pressure off the social housing system through rental brokerage programs to get people started in the private rental market and shared equity programs for people in steady employment to help them to buy modest houses, particularly in regional Victoria. We need all of this and much more.

The development of the Aboriginal housing homelessness framework has confirmed that there are significant strengths in the Aboriginal community. Our resilience comes from the strength of our culture and our community identity. A person who may believe they are lost and alone may be embraced by the Aboriginal community, invited into a culture which cares for and supports the most vulnerable in our midst. It is a very strong cultural obligation to look after others. Aboriginal Housing Victoria aspires to provide homes for those who feel lost and for those that no-one cares for. It is our mission to show that they are not abandoned—that they belong. It is impossible to overestimate how transformative this can be and in a sense how privileged we are to be doing this work. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. It was a privilege to hear that information as well, so I really appreciate this. I think the data and the figures that you presented to us just show that exponential issue of disadvantage, particularly amongst our Aboriginal community. Jenny, you touched on fresh models for home ownership.

Ms SAMMS: Private individual ownership?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms SAMMS: Okay, so where we are going with that—and a lot of these are ideas that have come out of the community and we have learned from overseas, but when it comes out of the community it is embraced—is we are already working, and Darren has got better detail, on a traditional shared equity program with government. It suffers somewhat from lack of savings history, low income levels and no intergenerational wealth, but some of the proposals or ideas we have heard about are, for instance, that co-ops might have houses that need turning over—they have had long-term tenants—and the co-op itself may be willing to kick in for a deposit and the tenants in turn become the owners.

The CHAIR: A sort of provider vendor finance, as it were?

Ms SAMMS: Yes. And it gives people the house, but the other side of it is it takes a depreciating asset off your books so that you can then reinvest in other land; you can subdivide. So that is one sort of an example. There are certainly opportunities that will come out of native title determinations if they are thought through in terms of housing, and this is the important part about it. It might not be private ownership in that circumstance. It might be broadly based community ownership.

This is a little bit of a different one, but we know there is a need for housing with various levels of support for elders. Now, you hear a lot about shorter life expectancy, and it is true, but people are living longer. They are also ageing earlier, and the need for elders housing has been overlooked in the Aboriginal community. I have seen elders personally, but there are elders who are homeless. That to me is just out of the frame. Again, there is Aboriginal land where you can have shared investment and you can provide that sort of housing. So it is not quite the same private ownership model, but it is a safe, secure housing model that needs to be developed. So they were some.

The CHAIR: Can I just quickly ask before I open it up to the other members: I would imagine in doing that, and in that self-determination, this would obviously be providing some employment opportunities in the construction of the houses.

Ms SAMMS: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Is that part of the framework or part of the plan?

Ms SAMMS: Yes. Construction, project management, tenancy management, service support—yes, all of it, absolutely. And that is happening already, but not at the scale it could. It could be scaled up.

The CHAIR: No, but you could scale up. This is one of those areas where there is an existing model that works and we just need to scale it up.

Ms SAMMS: Yes.

Dr KIEU: Thank you for your presence here today. It is very concerning and disheartening to see the scale in terms of the percentage of the homelessness situation in the community. In your submission, in the brief you gave, you say that it will be best to have Aboriginal landowners to provide the housing for the Aboriginal community so that they can promote and preserve the culture and also the understanding in the community better. What do you mean by ‘Aboriginal landowner’? Is it only organisational landowning, or is it an individual private landowning?

Mr SMITH: I think it is both. Buying your house and owning your own home is the primary vehicle for wealth creation in the broader community. It is absolutely something that, if we are actually going to overcome the disadvantage in the Aboriginal community, we actually need to bring forward, to support and to encourage. It is individual home ownership, but it is also, as Jenny was speaking about, other forms of community ownership as well. Really the scale of the problem is such that we need to think about all of the available options and think about how we can actually progress forward on all of them. So it is also about traditional owner groups, it is also about the Aboriginal community controlled organisations that are out there that already have small housing portfolios and about how they can contribute. It is about opening it up for traditional owner groups through things like native title—not native title—

Ms SAMMS: No. I said that too. It is the wrong term. Through land agreements—

Mr SMITH: Through the land agreements in Victoria under the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act*, but also through treaty as well. But treaty should be an enabler for housing options going forward into the future and how that looks. Whether that is the existing traditional owner groups or it is new traditional owner groups, I do not think it matters so much. It is about ensuring that you actually have the organisations that have got the capability to develop the housing and provide the housing for the Aboriginal community.

Ms LOVELL: I was just wondering about the areas of need. Have you identified the areas within Victoria where you have a specific need for housing?

Mr SMITH: Do you mean where the highest demand is?

Ms LOVELL: Yes, where your demand is.

Mr SMITH: I do not think you will be surprised where the highest demand for housing is: Mildura, Shepparton, Geelong, the outer northern and the outer western metropolitan suburbs, Central Gippsland. What am I missing out—Bendigo and Ballarat?

Ms SAMMS: I think there is that fast-growing group around the Mornington Peninsula too.

Mr SMITH: Yes, down in the south. In Frankston and down towards the peninsula as well. They are the highest areas of growth. The major Aboriginal population centres will continue to grow at the fastest rate.

Ms LOVELL: How many offices do you have around the state? Do you just have the one in Melbourne or do you have some located—

Mr SMITH: No. We have very small offices in the regions. We have a one-person office in Mildura, a two-person office in Shepparton, a two-person office in Bendigo—we did have a one-person office in Warrnambool, which is currently being serviced from Ballarat at the moment—and a two-person office in Morwell, in addition to our current two offices in Melbourne.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks for the submission. I have got to say well done to Aboriginal Housing Victoria for being the largest in Australia, which I think is fantastic.

Ms SAMMS: We do.

Mr GRIMLEY: I spent three years in the central desert in Western Australia. I lived in places like Blackstone, Tjirrkarli and Warburton out there, and I can honestly say that housing was never an issue out there, because everybody had a house, which was fortunate for all of us out there. I was a teacher out there. That was fantastic. There were other issues as well. But my question is: in establishing Aboriginal Housing Victoria, to your knowledge, do any other states in Australia have any successful policies or programs in this space similar to Aboriginal Housing Victoria? And if so, can we adopt those to help address the homelessness issue here in Victoria?

Ms SAMMS: When we developed our framework, we consulted, we did a literature review and we certainly had a look at what was happening interstate, and it is fair to say that Victoria's Aboriginal population, because it is urbanised, is different. Victoria's Aboriginal population is not all that much smaller than Western Australia's, but it is hidden and it is spread thin. So it is very hard because you do not have the concentrated populations in the same way. So yes, you can listen, yes, you can learn—certainly in terms of communities developing their own houses et cetera—but we have really got to come up with our own solutions where we recognise the thin spread. And every project you do adds value. So you might create half a dozen houses at Heywood, for instance, and if there are jobs as well, that creates value. You are not going to get the big single solution. I am not saying that you are saying that, but you are not going to get those big bang projects, and that is one of the difficulties in Victoria, be it with Aboriginal education, Aboriginal housing or anything else. I think Darren went through the points of what needs to be done from the homelessness end. I think we know what needs to be done. It is not going to be easy.

The CHAIR: More houses.

Ms SAMMS: And service support.

The CHAIR: And services, yes.

Ms SAMMS: You know, they just go hand in hand.

Dr RATNAM: Thank you so much for your evidence and all the work you are doing on the ground. I have to concur with your framing of it as a humanitarian crisis—the starkness of the figures is very, very compelling. So thank you for bringing the Committee's attention to it. And I concur in terms of needing more houses and the models being really important as well, and their need to be culturally sensitive as well. I was going to ask in terms of taking up that final point that you were just referencing, in terms of service provision, what is the interaction like at the moment? Are members of the Aboriginal community accessing mainstream services? You talked about them not being equipped to be able to respond well, but is it a totally parallel system? Is there some intersection? I am just wanting to get a picture of what is happening at the moment given the numbers as well.

Mr JONES: Our sense is that they are not accessing the services that they need to, and I guess the evidence of that is in the unmet demand for services that we are seeing coming through the data—the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data. The levels of unmet need in those systems are really high, and they are highest in the housing space, so if you look at things like the national data for Indigenous people on emergency housing, it is running at about 25 per cent, so only 75 per cent are even accessing emergency housing. If you move to transitional, it is about 50 per cent. Then if you move to long-term, it is only about 30 per cent who are being housed in the long-term. There are similar numbers around other things like access to alcohol and drug services, which is a real gap.

We know that there is an unmet need that continues to rise around access to alcohol and drug services, which is now at around 40 per cent. Certainly in relation to people who need services through the prison system you would have heard about the process of people not being able to access housing in order to get parole in order to get bail and those sorts of things. There is just a general sense that, as Jenny said, the range of assistance that some families need just is not there, and it is not there in a case-managed way. The data is showing that as well, and the levels of people reappearing in the system, in the homeless support system, suggests that they are just not accessing the support that they need in the long term. People are turning up in the system at a really high rate again and again and again, which just means that their issue is not being resolved.

Mr SMITH: I guess just to add to that, one of the things that Aboriginal Housing Victoria has actually established with some of our own internal investments and small amounts of pilot funding from government is we have really focused on looking at how we support our tenants, and particularly our vulnerable tenants. Given the level of disadvantage and the vulnerability in our tenant population there is value in us actually providing, I guess, low-intensity ongoing contact with our tenants. So we developed a program called More than a Landlord. This program is based on a life coaching approach, where what our coaches attempt to do is to hang in with and mentor and work with tenants to develop and build their aspirations. For example, for many of our tenants there is not home ownership within their extended family, for a lot of them, so experience and knowledge and understanding of what you need to do to own a home is outside their ordinary experience. Actually having somebody outside who can mentor them and can assist them is really useful.

We also know that our tenants and the Aboriginal community in general have high levels of anxiety and depression, and so there are very simple and very basic things that we do to support our tenants around just making sure there is someone there who can hang in with them and keep prodding them with simple things like going for a job. If somebody on the day of the interview decides that they have got all these problems that are happening that mean they cannot go for the job because they are scared of failure, they have got somebody who can actually just hang in there and work with them.

So I guess those kinds of services that hang in with tenants and actually support tenants are really important to sustaining tenancies. It is really important to actually have an ear to the ground and to be able to understand what is going on with the family. Our experience and understanding is that most often when we are in a position where we have to evict somebody it is because they have stopped engaging. There is a problem that is going on in the family or in the household and they are not engaging with services anymore and we cannot get them to engage with services, so developing that relationship upfront is really important to being able to save the tenancy when the crisis actually happens.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you for the submission and your time today. Aboriginal Housing Victoria is the largest Aboriginal housing organisation in Australia and you are saying that you have got 1500 properties, and as per this data pack, 4143 households are seeking social housing. How do you manage the remaining people who are seeking the social housing? Do they go to other smaller housing organisations, or do they go to mainstream organisations? What happens?

Mr SMITH: Those 4100 people are on the Victorian Housing Register. Most of them are on the register because they are seeking public housing. I could not tell you what the figures are of Aboriginal people, how many of them are seeking community housing, but I would suspect it is roughly equivalent to what it is in the broader population. They have got that access to those other housing agencies and to public housing through the Victorian Housing Register.

What do we know? We know that our tenants tell us that they think that it is really important that they have an Aboriginal landlord. Do we really know how Aboriginal tenants feel with other community housing providers? I can tell you how a lot of tenants talk about how they feel in public housing, but that is a bit off the track, so maybe I will not.

So there are barriers. There are barriers for Aboriginal people. There is a mechanism for Aboriginal people to get access to the broader networks, but we know from the data that the numbers of Aboriginal people that are housed by the community housing sector really have not increased over the last six years.

Mr JONES: I think it is lower now than it was four or five years ago.

Mr SMITH: And at the same time the number of Aboriginal people that have been housed by public housing is increasing at roughly the same rate as access to homelessness services is increasing.

Mr JONES: Thirteen per cent of new lettings in public housing last year were to Aboriginal people and five years ago it was 8 per cent, which just shows that they are really at that very, very pointy end of need.

Mr BARTON: Peter, you mentioned before how many people are already homeless before they seek assistance. What do you think the cause of that is? Why aren't they putting up their hand saying, 'Hey, I'm in trouble, can I get some help'?

Mr JONES: I think it is related to the other response that I gave, which is that there is just an absence of housing and so these people have been in the system before and have not been helped. It is not that people do not want to help them—

Mr BARTON: Are they giving up, do you think?

Mr JONES: It is not that they do not want to help them, it is just that there are not affordable houses available for them. You really feel sorry for the people on the front line who are working desperately to try and assist these people. There is just nowhere for them to go. I am happy to provide you with this table from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report from this year, which is just showing a massive growth in unmet demand for emergency housing, transitional housing and long-term housing. They are all going up.

Mr BARTON: We are not meeting it anywhere.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Mr JONES: The unmet demand is going up everywhere. And when you get to the point where you cannot even provide people with emergency housing, then you can understand why they are removing themselves from that system. But in the end they come back with desperation.

Mr SMITH: Look, I think they are putting up their hand. They are accessing the homelessness services. They are being recorded in the system. It is the fact that they are being recorded in the system that they have not got a house. But as Peter was saying, when they leave they still have not got a house. But we also know from our consultations and from going around the state that there are so many Aboriginal people that say, 'We don't even know where the front door to the homelessness system is'.

The CHAIR: Yes, and what we found is that if you can help someone while they still have a house, you will be much more successful. Once they have not got a home, it is a much steeper problem.

Mr JONES: And just to reinforce what Darren was saying before, the tenancies in Aboriginal Housing Victoria are incredibly stable, so people are not falling out of our housing system but they obviously are out of the community housing system because they have not got that additional support that they need. And it would be a good investment for government to actually provide that additional support so that people are not falling out, because it costs more to find them a home in the end.

The CHAIR: Absolutely, and as you say, sometimes it is that light touch. And sometimes it is something more circumstances.

Ms SAMMS: This is not comprehensive. There are just two things that really stood out that are new or newish in our consultations, and I think you can get data support for it. One is while Aboriginal communities have learned to cope with alcohol, the scourge of ice, they cannot. So you might cope with a family member with an alcohol problem; they cannot keep people with ice in the family, so they are out. That is the hardest thing, because the Aboriginal way is not to kick your family out; you bring them in. You are not without a house.

The other one we are finding, and this is something that has happened over the generations, the number of grandparents, which we know about, of course, who are taking on the grandchildren—and sometimes very big families of grandchildren. So that will be kinship care under the child protection system. You may happen to have a son or daughter—more often a son—in their teens, who has offended, car stealing or something or another. If they have got a criminal record, you cannot have grandchildren under your kinship care. So what do you do? Take in the seven grandchildren and tell the 16-year-old to go and find a house? I suspect that is some of what we are seeing congregating around parts of the city as well. Now, that is not comprehensive—I could go further. But they were two things that came up time and time again. And I felt like crying at times because some of those people are my age, and you think, 'How are you coping with seven grandkids anyway?', and then your teens are out. It is sort of silly, isn't it.

The CHAIR: We have unfortunately run out of time. Thank you so much. Are you providing a further written submission to us or just sending—

Mr JONES: We can if you would find it useful.

The CHAIR: The framework—I think if we could have a copy, just for our research, that would be—

Ms SAMMS: We would have to clear it with Premier and Cabinet, but I think it is—

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr JONES: What we can do is provide you with our discussion papers.

The CHAIR: Great.

Mr JONES: We have got a series of 16 papers here that probably have the data that you need.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. If you could send those, that would really assist us. That would be awesome. Again, thank you so very much for coming today.

Ms SAMMS: Thanks for listening to us.

Mr JONES: Yes, thank you.

The CHAIR: All of the stats are showing that while we have an acute homelessness problem, it is just so much more acute in Aboriginal communities, so it is not good enough.

Ms SAMMS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We very much appreciate it, and we would appreciate that extra information, Peter. That would be great.

Mr JONES: I will leave you a copy.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I bet they are going to ask you for an electronic version.

Mr JONES: it is all on our website.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We can call the hearing closed.

Committee adjourned.