



# Evaluation of the Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy

Aboriginal Consultation Report

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For Homelessness NSW

Publication Date February 2022

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## Acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

<b>ACCO</b>	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
<b>AHURI</b>	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited
<b>ASES</b>	Australian Service Excellence Standards
<b>CoP</b>	Community of Practice
<b>DCJ</b>	Department of Communities and Justice
<b>JWA</b>	Joint Working Agreement
<b>IP</b>	Industry Partnership
<b>MOU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>NDIS</b>	National Disability Insurance Scheme
<b>SHS</b>	Specialist Homelessness Services
<b>Strategy</b>	NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express our deepest appreciation to all those who assisted in completing this report. A special gratitude we give to the Aboriginal managers and CEOs, managers of mainstream services, Aboriginal workers, and their organisations who contributed and provided generously their time, expertise and knowledge in working with Aboriginal clients, and communities. We recognise the importance of hearing our Aboriginal workers, clients, and communities.

We acknowledge country of where those organisations are placed including, Gadigal, Bundjalung, Awabakal, Darkinjung, Gambayggirr and Yaegl lands.

# 1. Introduction

Homelessness NSW is contracted by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to deliver the NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy (Strategy), on the understanding that this is done under auspice and in partnership with Domestic Violence NSW and Yfoundations.

Homelessness NSW has contracted the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) to evaluate the Strategy 2017-2020 and to provide research to support the development of the Strategy 2020-2024 (Evaluation).

The report details the findings of the Aboriginal consultations component of the Evaluation.

How the NSW Homelessness sector supports its Aboriginal workforce and staff is of particular importance as the number and proportion of clients who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander accessing NSW specialist homelessness services (SHS) has grown steadily over the past decade. In 2019-20, around a third of NSW SHS clients identified as Aboriginal (Table 1). It stands to reason, that the NSW SHS system should be calibrated to meet the needs of this major client group.

Table 1: Number and proportion of clients, Australia and NSW, by Indigenous status, 2011-12 to 2019-20

	Number of clients									Average annual change
	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	
<b>Australia</b>										
Indigenous	43,642	46,607	49,615	53,301	61,700	64,644	65,184	68,853	71,582	6.4
Non-Indigenous	157,227	160,739	167,286	173,955	190,488	196,689	194,072	195,993	196,739	2.8
Not stated	35,560	36,830	37,100	28,401	27,008	26,941	29,539	25,471	22,141	-5.8
All clients	236,429	244,176	254,001	255,657	279,196	288,273	288,795	290,317	290,462	2.6
% Indigenous	18%	19%	20%	21%	22%	22%	23%	24%	25%	
<b>New South Wales</b>										
Indigenous	11,140	11,146	11,618	11,925	18,535	20,030	19,914	20,920	20,475	7.9
Non-Indigenous	35,586	34,091	34,398	32,665	47,256	50,835	48,885	48,719	46,796	3.5
Not stated	5,379	6,716	5,770	3,671	3,924	3,351	2,829	3,910	3,101	-6.7
All clients	52,105	51,953	51,786	48,262	69,715	74,216	71,628	73,549	70,372	3.8
% Indigenous	21%	21%	22%	25%	27%	27%	28%	28%	29%	

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report, Data tables: Historical tables SHSC 2011-12 to 2019-20, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/data>.

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## 2. Methodology

The Evaluation has four components.

**1. Impact and process evaluation of the NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2017-2020.**

Evaluate how well the 2017-2020 NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy [2017-2020 Strategy] was implemented and delivered and what its impact has been.

**2. Formation of the future NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy.**

Establish the context and needs for the future NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy (Future Strategy), including changes to the operating environment and priority areas for development and improvement.

**3. Formative evaluation and training needs assessment of the NSW homelessness services workforce.**

Establish the characteristics and training needs of the NSW homelessness services workforce to inform the development of the Future Strategy.

**4. Assess the organisational sustainability across the NSW Homelessness Industry.**

How sustainable are NSW homelessness service providers, what are the main risks to sustainability, and what would help overcome these risks (especially for Aboriginal-led organisations, and for organisations that are subcontracted to provide homelessness services)?

To answer these research questions, the Evaluation adopts a mixed methods approach. The key components of the research approach are as follows:

- an online survey of NSW Specialist Homelessness Services provider organisations and staff
- focus groups with sector representatives and key stakeholders
- direct consultations with Aboriginal organisations
- analysis of existing datasets.

The Aboriginal consultations, on which we report here, aimed to explore the issues facing Aboriginal organisations and workers in the NSW Homelessness sector, to ascertain the effectiveness of JWAs and to identify how to best grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations.

The Aboriginal consultations further explore the findings from the sector survey, which highlighted several issues around training, supporting Aboriginal staff and clients, and developing cultural competency across the NSW Homelessness Sector.



The Aboriginal consultations consisted of 2 group interviews and 4 individual interviews with representatives from 8 Aboriginal organisations in NSW and representatives from the Aboriginal Community of Practice (CoP), which included workers in mainstream as well as Aboriginal organisations. Table 2 shows the organisations that were interviewed and the funding/partnering arrangements they use for service provision.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic AHURI researchers were unable to travel to NSW to undertake the consultations face-to-face. Homelessness NSW engaged an Aboriginal consultant, who worked closely with AHURI researchers and led the engagement with Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal workers in the NSW Homelessness Sector. The consultant acted as liaison between interviewees and AHURI researchers, provided guidance on issues of relevance and assisted with the analysis. The consultant's relationships with and knowledge of the Aboriginal housing and specialist homelessness services (SHS) sector in NSW were invaluable in identifying and liaising with persons who have deep knowledge of the Aboriginal SHS services and Aboriginal organisations in NSW.

Conversations in the focus groups and individual interviews were organic and free-flowing, and the questioning guide provided in Appendix 1 was used primarily as a starting point for discussion. The reason discussions were loosely structured was to enable participants to freely share their experiences without being constrained by interviewers' preconceived ideas.

Interviews were done jointly between AHURI researchers and the Aboriginal consultant using video conferencing. Where this was not possible, the consultant conducted interviews face to face or over the phone.

The organisations included in the consultation differ in their size, scope and funding (Table 2). To preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of consultation participants, their names and positions are not identified in this report. Participants represent a range of different job roles, including CEOs, senior managers, and front line workers.

Table 2: Consultation participants

Organisation name	Partnership / funding	Number of consultation participants
Casino-Boolangle LALC	JWA with Momentum Collective	2
Aboriginal Corporation for Homeless and Rehabilitation Community Services	Receives assisted support funding directly from DCJ .	1
Women Up North	JWA with Momentum Collective	1
Gurehlgam Corporation	JWA with Momentum Collective	2
Bungree Aboriginal Corporation	Stand alone agency that receives direct funding from DCJ	1
Platform Youth Services (Uniting) (mainstream organisation)	Receives direct funding from DCJ	1
Momentum Collective (mainstream organisation)	JWA with Casino-Boolangle LAL, Women Up North, Gurugram Corporation	1
Warlga Ngurra Women's and Children's Refuge	Stand alone agency that receives direct funding from DCJ	1

Source: Authors.

## 3. Previous findings

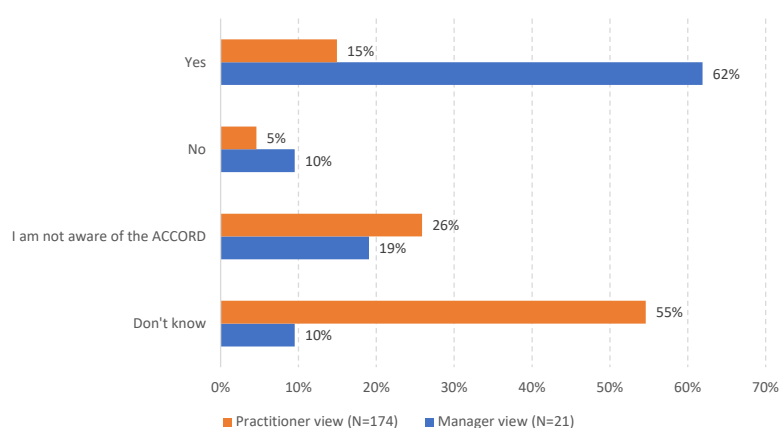
This section summarises the from the survey of the NSW Homelessness Sector that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and the sector’s cultural competency.

### 3.1 Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord

The Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord<sup>1</sup> (ACCORD) is a key initiative of the *NSW Homelessness Industry and Workforce Development Strategy 2017-2020*. The ACCORD was developed by the NSW SHS Aboriginal Reference Group in November 2017. It is intended to be an active guiding document to assist organisations to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples by taking a holistic and human rights approach to redressing Aboriginal homelessness.

The survey found that while 62 per cent of CEOs and senior managers in the NSW SHS sector thought their program had signed up to the ACCORD, only 15 per cent of practitioners thought this was the case and over half (55%) were unsure (Figure 1). High proportions of both managers and practitioners were unaware of the ACCORD.

Figure 1: Has your program signed up to the ACCORD?



Source: Authors.

The survey also asked respondents about what steps their organisation had taken to operationalise the ACCORD and increase its impact. Again, responses highlighted that many were unaware of the ACCORD or wanted further information and training about it. While some programs had taken steps to ensure the ACCORD was integrated with their Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) and their organisation’s overall strategy, other organisations were only beginning to operationalise the ACCORD in meaningful ways.

<sup>1</sup> Homelessness NSW (2017) *Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord*, Sydney, Australia, <https://homelessnessnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Redressing-Aboriginal-Homelessness-Accord.pdf>.

### 3.2 Characteristics of Aboriginal workers and clients

The survey found that around 35 per cent of clients accessing NSW SHS identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, making this a major client group.

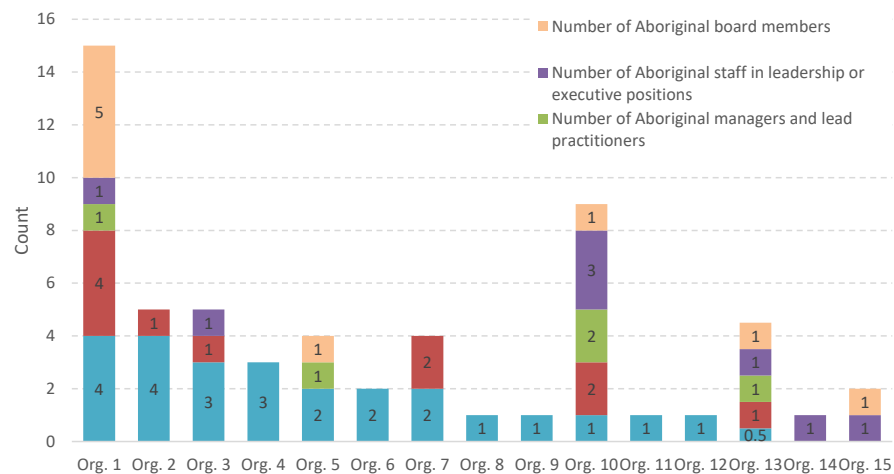
The survey asked all respondents whether their organisation provides services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 43 per cent answered their organisation does not provide Aboriginal specific services; 27 per cent provide Aboriginal specific services but are not contracted to do so; and a further 27 per cent are contracted to provide Aboriginal specific services.

Individual level responses to the survey showed that only 8 per cent of workers who responded to the survey identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Organisation level responses to the survey showed that NSW SHS organisations employ relatively few Aboriginal staff members, and even fewer are in manager, leadership, or executive positions.

Of the 24 responding organisations, 15 (63%) had Aboriginal staff (Figure 2). Organisation 1 is an ACCO and stands out for the high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the board and in senior positions. Notably, there is a very low number (5) of Aboriginal managers and lead practitioners across all the other organisations surveyed.

Figure 2: Staff who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander



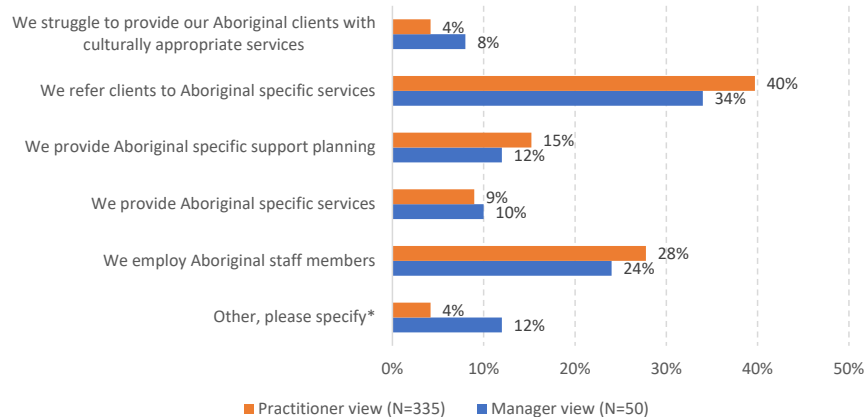
Source: Authors.

Comments made indicated that many organisations had difficulties attracting and retaining Aboriginal staff and did not know how to address this.

### 3.3 Culturally appropriate services

The survey asked senior managers / CEOs and practitioners to identify how their program ensures that Aboriginal clients are supported in culturally appropriate ways. Results show that referral to Aboriginal specific services is the main mechanism by which programs seek to achieve culturally appropriate support (40% practitioners, 34% senior managers / CEOs), followed by employment of Aboriginal staff members (28% practitioners, 24% senior managers/CEOs) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: How does your program ensure Aboriginal clients are supported in culturally appropriate ways?



*Multiple responses were allowed.*

Source: Authors.

### 3.4 Survey implications

Survey data shows that there is considerable room for improvement in increasing organisations' cultural competence and safety. This includes:

- Increasing the number of Aboriginal staff members, especially in senior management and executive positions.
- There is a need for the IP to engage in further promotion, education and training about the ACCORD to increase knowledge across all levels of the sector, and especially among practitioners, and to assist organisations to implement the ACCORD in meaningful ways. In addition, practical strategies are needed to ensure that the ACCORD is implemented in ways that increase the cultural competency of SHS organisations and their staff.
- There is scope for the IP to provide leadership, education and training to assist NSW Homelessness sector organisations to further develop and strengthen their capacity to provide culturally appropriate services.
- There is considerable scope of the IP to offer support and training to leaders in NSW Homelessness Sector organisations to develop and strengthen their capacity for meaningful engagement with Aboriginal communities, and to strengthen the provision of culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal clients.

Crucially, the survey highlighted that Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal workers face unique challenges, which is further explored in this report.

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## 4. Consultation findings

The consultations highlighted the profound and lasting impacts of the Going Home Staying Home reforms of the NSW SHS policy and funding on NSW Aboriginal organisations. Due to the reforms, many Aboriginal organisations lost their funding or experienced a substantial decrease in funding, and now face substantial barriers to accessing direct funding for the provision of SHS services. The reforms also deeply impacted Aboriginal organisations' ability to access housing for their clients. Even now, only few Aboriginal organisations (the consultation was only able to identify two organisations) receive direct NSW State Government funding for the provision of SHS services. Nonetheless, Aboriginal organisations are frequently called upon to provide culturally appropriate support for SHS clients. This places high demands on these organisations, as the clients referred to them almost always experience high and complex needs, there is only a small number of Aboriginal organisations and a high level of demand for their services, and the funding received by Aboriginal organisations is not concomitant with their responsibilities. Consultation participants identified that Aboriginal organisations are frequently in a position where they provide support to the SHS sector, but are not part of the sector. Some organisations felt they were on the periphery of the service structure. Participants noted that DCJ funding was not aligned with industrial relations wage increases, which results in staff wages stagnating on the same level – yet organisations were expected to meet increasing client numbers and cope with growing client complexity.

*We have had no say what role is or how to fit in the sector. (consultation participant)*

*Organisations feel they are a resource to the sector rather than being part of the sector. (consultation participant)*

The consultation identified a great diversity in Aboriginal organisations' and Aboriginal workers' experiences of working in the NSW Homelessness Sector. This ranged from a large organisation Aboriginal organisation that receive direct DCJ funding, to smaller organisations that struggle to access funding. Personal experiences included Aboriginal workers who felt well supported by a mainstream organisation to those who felt their organisation and funding arrangement did not value them as a worker. Below we describe key themes that emerged from the consultations.

### **Example 1: A directly funded stand alone organisation that works across service provision sectors**

Bungree Aboriginal Association is located on the Central Coast and is an Aboriginal Community based organisation that provides a wide range of services. Bungree is the largest Aboriginal not for profit organisation on the Central Coast. It employs around 35 permanent and casual staff and operates and delivers 28 funded programs and services to the Central Coast, Newcastle and Upper Hunter. Bungree is also one of the largest Aboriginal providers of housing on the Central Coast and is a registered Aboriginal Community Housing Provider with NSW Aboriginal Housing Office and Since 2015, Bungree has been registered Community Housing Provider under the National Regulatory System – Community Housing as a Tier 3 provider. Bungree owns its own capital stock and manages properties for the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office in the Central Coast, Newcastle and Karuah regions. It is also registered provider for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Bungree was identified as one of the most successful Aboriginal organisations and providers of social services by NSW Homelessness sector representatives and key stakeholders prior to the Aboriginal consultations. It was cited as an example of an independent, well governed, and financially viable Aboriginal controlled community-based organisation that provides quality services that meet the needs of its community.

Housing and homelessness services provided by Bungree include Housing Pathways, Together Home Program, Rent Choice Youth, and Specialist Homelessness Services. Bungree employs 5 staff members in the homelessness team and one staff member specifically for the Together Home Program. Being a housing provider is Bungree's smallest program, but is the largest revenue maker

A key feature of Bungree is that it builds on an integrated service model that includes providing housing, homelessness and health services, as well as child protection (including an Aboriginal family preservation team), provision of housing for people exiting prison and aged care. All programs are connected to each other and can refer to one another, which supports service continuity. In addition, Bungree has MOUs with other support services that are provided in the general community. Bungree provides services to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients.

This multi-sector integrated service approach sets Bungree apart from many other Aboriginal providers. Most Aboriginal providers work across one or two sectors, whereas Bungree is across five to six sectors. To support this, the organisation has multiple accreditations for quality and standards, including Australian Service Excellence Standards (ASES), NDIS, aged care and various national standards.

Bungree identified recruitment and training of staff, including in trauma-informed practice, as a barrier, particularly for rural and regional areas. In response the organisation has developed a proactive and inclusive approach to recruiting staff and growing the skills and capabilities of its workforce. The focus of recruitment is on experience of case management, rather than homelessness specific knowledge. The reasoning for this is that staff need to have the skills to work with high and complex needs clients, and that specific training for housing and homelessness related issues can be accessed through the MTS training calendar. Staff are then supported to achieve any required formal qualifications. Bungree supports its workforce to achieve formal training and certificates (a Certificate IV in Community Services is the minimum standard). This includes partnering with a TAFE to provide training on-site so workers can achieve their qualification and continue working, providing time off for study, paying for tutors to support new Aboriginal workers to achieve their certifications, and support for study groups. There is no requirement that staff remain with Bungree when they have achieved their qualification, as the investment in staff training is considered as capacity building to enable Aboriginal staff to also have a positive community impact.

*If staff leave, they are leaving with a qualification ...and help their community when they go back and be a shining light. (interviewee)*

As a result of this proactive approach to training Bungree indicated they do not struggle to attract and retain staff.

## 4.1 Growing the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to become part of the homelessness sector

Consultation participants identified a range of barriers and opportunities to growing the capacity of Aboriginal housing and SHS organisations.

Several respondents felt that Aboriginal organisations are not well integrated into the SHS sector. A key issue is that there are only four Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in NSW. Very few Aboriginal led organisations receive direct NSW State Government funding to provide SHS services. Most Aboriginal organisations link with the NSW SHS sector either through JWAs (see below), a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or through informal arrangements.

Several respondents expressed that there is a need for more Aboriginal homelessness providers in the sector. Discussions of what is needed to grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to provide SHS services included:

- The Aboriginal housing sector needs to develop a business model that will enable them to diversify business and start looking into becoming a SHS provider. One participant perceived that Aboriginal housing providers operate mainly as rent collectors and should shift their practices to assist tenants to sustain their tenancies (e.g., social landlord, case management).
- Growing organisational capacity includes governance structures, the board and operations of an organisation.
- KPIs for service delivery to Aboriginal clients, most of whom experience high and complex needs, should be outcomes oriented rather than time limited. There is need for a better understanding of Aboriginal clients requiring long-term support and intensive engagement.

*[We] had a client on the books, who has never been housed in 30 years, for whom [we were] getting criticism by DCJ why that person is still on the record, even if he is not visited every week. But reality is that person gets in touch as soon as anything happens, and responses need to be quick. The criticism is that no new clients are being supported. (consultation participant)*

- Homelessness NSW could help Aboriginal organisations to gain a better understanding of the homelessness sector. Setting up forums or information sessions for organisations interested in moving into the homelessness sector could create a better understanding of sector and required preparations, such as accreditation and operational changes. This could create more interest, involve more communities, including creating employment in remote areas, and help expand services.
- Several smaller Aboriginal providers could form a consortium to become a SHS provider.
- There needs to be stronger and more genuine collaboration between Aboriginal and mainstream organisations, including through MOUs.
- ASES and compliances are tools that allow Aboriginal organisations to apply for grants and SHS funding.

## 4.2 JWAs, partnerships and collaboration

JWAs are a mechanism by which Aboriginal organisations partner with mainstream organisations in the provision of SHS services. Consultation participants had divergent views on and experiences of JWAs.

Participants were critical of JWAs as a vehicle to integrate Aboriginal organisations into the SHS sector and grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations. Participants noted that there has been little increase in the funding associated with JWAs since they were introduced and that to date, there has been no systematic review of whether JWAs are working well.

Participants felt that support to assist Aboriginal organisations to become stand alone providers of SHS is lacking and that JWAs were not effective in building the capacity of Aboriginal organisations. Most JWAs do not include funding to support organisational capacity building and JWAs are often under-resourced in terms of providing and funding training, assisting organisations to achieve accreditations (such as ASES), and funding to pro-actively manage the relationship between JWA partners. One participant noted that since the introduction of JWAs, not one Aboriginal organisation had achieved a status as an independent provider due to their involvement in a JWA.

Some participants indicated that at an operational level they have good working and collaborative arrangements with the partnering mainstream organisation, including regular meetings and shared resources. However, other organisations felt their inclusion in the JWA was a 'tick box' exercise rather than a fully fledged partnership. Some mainstream organisations have multiple JWA's with Aboriginal organisations and feel that these work well.

Heavy case loads and high client complexity affect most JWA partners. Participants observed that although Aboriginal clients are sometimes assessed as having low-to-medium needs, in their experience most Aboriginal clients have high and complex needs. This mismatch between the support contracted and the work required, impacts JWA partners' ability to manage their case loads and meet their KPIs.

*Low and medium contracts and their KPIs are difficult to meet, because workloads in practice are higher. Review of KPIs is needed to incorporate the high needs of clients. [It's] constant work to ensure KPIs aren't breached and to explain why workers aren't meet them. So, the recommendation for any JWA would be to have two Aboriginal workers instead of one to ensure a workable case load. (consultation participant)*

Several participating organisations collaborated via MOUs. Some organisations used MOUs in addition to JWAs, others used MOUs and were not in a JWA. In one example, an Aboriginal organisation had an MOU with a mainstream organisation to provide cultural support to Aboriginal clients, but no brokerage money was associated with this support.

### 4.3 Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord

*There need to be overarching policies and procedures to guide services, which is a reason why the ACCORD was embraced. Because this felt like an overarching guide that is believed, funded and supported. That is what we need. (consultation participant)*

Most consultation participants were aware of the ACCORD, but many did not know its details. Others felt that the ACCORD was not well known. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that the ACCORD constitutes a set of guiding principles for collaboration and achieving positive outcomes towards closing the gap in Aboriginal homelessness, rather than a concrete set of actions. Participants felt that the ACCORD had not had the impact that had been hoped for and while it has the potential to guide services, it is not generally embedded within organisations. Participants noted that to be impactful, the ACCORD needs to be up to date and linked with funding and supporting material.

*The ACCORD was created by the CoP. Initially everybody was excited about the ACCORD, but now people are a bit skeptical. A lot of resources were put into creating the ACCORD, people want to see it succeed – perhaps [we] need a champion for the ACCORD. Seems the ACCORD is last year's news, there need to be true affirmative actions associated. (consultation participant)*

These sentiments were echoed in consultations with mainstream organisations, many of which had Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) in place or were in the process of developing RAPs. RAPs were seen as advantageous as they link to meaningful actions to work towards reconciliation. Several organisations in mainstream consultations noted that the support they received from Reconciliation Australia in developing their RAP had been helpful in initiating reconciliation initiatives and embedding reconciliation in the organisation.



Participants in the Aboriginal consultations observed that while RAPs were now being adopted across the sector, their development and implementation often remain the responsibility of Aboriginal workers, rather than that of managers or decision-makers. This reflects the systemic issues that are prevalent in 'closing the gap'.

*[The] service sector needs to be taking leadership from Aboriginal people, not grant it.*  
(consultation participant)

## 4.4 ASES

Participants had diverging views on ASES. Larger organisations embraced ASES as a way to build capability within the organisation and across the sector.

*Growing the capability of Aboriginal organisations is key to growing the sector. Accreditations, such as ASES, can function as a reference to assess organisational capability.* (consultation participant)

Smaller organisations viewed ASES as an administrative burden and felt ill-equipped, even with support from Homelessness NSW, to undertake the accreditation.

*We'll need a miracle to meet requirements. Can't see us meeting those.* (participant)

Organisations that struggled to achieve ASES fear this will further disadvantage them in their capacity to access SHS funding from DCJ.

## 4.5 Cultural competence

*Mostly it is about finding solutions, resolution instead of 'slamming' organisations around culturally appropriate services. [My] own take on cultural appropriateness is about respect and treating people stepping into a service regardless of their background well, rather than workers necessarily needing to be Aboriginal, which is not the case in every health service.* (consultation participant)

The consultation asked participants: What would be needed to improve the cultural competence of the organisation in which you work? Participants noted that workplaces are not necessarily culturally appropriate for staff and clients, and could do more to make Aboriginal people welcome and safe. For example, organisations wishing to enter into partnerships or collaboration with Aboriginal agencies and communities should first develop a level of cultural competence.

### 4.5.1 Understanding the demands on Aboriginal staff

Consultation participants highlighted that mainstream organisations need to develop greater understanding of the demands on Aboriginal staff. In addition to support work, Aboriginal workers' responsibilities often include being representatives for RAPs and CoPs, providing informal cultural support to other organisations and meeting local community expectations. There are often no clear boundaries between work and private life. This raises the question of how organisations support their workers culturally?

*Aboriginal workers are on the job 24/7. Examples include people showing up at their house for support or when meeting them in shops.* (consultation participant)

*[My] role is quite stressful. I try to be involved and be part of the organisation. I'm a member of the RAP committee as well as part of the Community of Practice addressing Aboriginal homelessness. In general, just being active in bringing in an Aboriginal voice for Aboriginal issues and homelessness.* (consultation participant)

Because of strong community ties and cultural obligations and the small number of Aboriginal workers and large number of Aboriginal clients, Aboriginal workers carry a disproportionate load. In addition, frequently the complexity of support needs is not sufficiently acknowledged.

These stresses can contribute to a high rate of Aboriginal staff turnover, which creates issues with consistency and building lasting and trusting relationships.

Consultation participants highlighted the need to provide cultural support to keep workers strong so they do not burn out, and keeping staff safe from expectations to be too personally involved. In some instances there is an expectation that Aboriginal staff have 'all the answers' or are the 'expert' with all the solutions, which can lead to them being exploited and not valued.

*For clients there is a lot of support, but not so much for staff. (consultation participant)*

Participants noted that there are limited opportunities for cultural supervision for staff and there is a lack of an Aboriginal specific support program for workers to call to talk through issues, such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

*An Aboriginal worker can be in the same position as the clients, which is different from non-Aboriginal workers. (consultation participant)*

Aboriginal workers can have positive experiences working in mainstream organisations if the right supports and processes are put into place.

*I haven't worked for an employee that felt more comfortable with then [name of mainstream organisation]. (consultation participant)*

#### **4.5.2 Recruiting and training Aboriginal staff**

Consultation participants noted that recruitment of Aboriginal staff occurs mainly for entry level roles, but that more Aboriginal people are needed in executive roles and on boards.

*[There is] usually [a] generic response in the employment of Aboriginal staff members. Roles are mostly trainee roles, starter-jobs, rather than encouraging executive roles or on the board. (consultation participant)*

Participants observed that support to enable Aboriginal staff to advance to leadership positions is missing in some organisations.

*With more senior roles the excuse is that there is already one Aboriginal person on that level, but why not more? (consultation participant)*

Consultation participants identified that systemic issues are prevalent in 'closing the gap' in Aboriginal employment, including better recognition of lived experience and the role of local communities. Thus, generic approaches to recruitment often exclude Aboriginal applicants on the grounds that they do not fit the formal selection criteria. However, participants noted that several Aboriginal and mainstream organisations have successfully developed innovative approaches to recruiting Aboriginal workers at all levels. These approaches include connecting with local Aboriginal communities to find suitable people to fill the position, providing cadetships for people with lived experience and providing support and training to build formal skills and capabilities as part of employment. [See example1 for alternative approaches to training and recruiting Aboriginal workers.] One participating mainstream organisation works closely with the local TAFE to bring in Aboriginal students to create pathways to employment. Consultation participants identified the need for other forms of training, such as applied training, peer training and mentoring.

In relation to Aboriginal board members, the consultations identified the importance of acknowledging community connections and lived experience equally to formal qualification. Participants noted that a genuine commitment to having more than token representation on the board was needed. Some organisations, including mainstream organisations, had made commitments to having high levels of Aboriginal representation on their board and were close to achieving this. This included having a deliberate recruitment strategy for Aboriginal staff, including developing a strategy to become an employer of choice.

*If you want genuine Aboriginal people on a board there should be more acknowledgment, valuing of lived experience and standing in local community, rather than qualifications and background checks as main criteria. (consultation participant)*

### 4.5.3 Understanding the needs of Aboriginal clients

Many consultation participants highlighted the complexity of issues facing Aboriginal clients and that this is at odds with the structure of funding arrangements, length of service contracts and KPIs.

*[There is] need for a better understanding of Aboriginal clients requiring long-term support and intensive engagement. [consultation participant]*

Participants noted that Aboriginal clients should have the choice of whether to use mainstream or Aboriginal services.

*Consumers should have choice on what service they go to, as some Aboriginal people don't want to go to an Aboriginal service, for example due to safety issues, or family connection to workers. (consultation participant)*

While mainstream organisations have an important role in supporting Aboriginal clients, consultation participants noted that cultural support and understanding could be lacking in mainstream organisations, which could contribute to negative outcomes.

*Yet, mainstream organisations do not have an idea on how to treat the client and they come back to Aboriginal organisations after dropping out of services, which may accentuate issues and makes it harder to solve these. (consultation participant)*

### 4.5.4 Cultural competency training

Consultation participants noted that cultural competency training was important, but that the training provided through MTS was too broad to be locally meaningful. They noted that more in-depth involvement with local culture and communities is needed and that cultural competency training should be delivered by someone with lived experience of local culture.

*The delivery of training should be by someone who actually knows what Aboriginal culture is like, especially when you are living off-country in a refuge or homelessness environment. (consultation participant)*

One of the mainstream organisations employed and internal trainer for cultural awareness.

Issues of cultural competency were also relevant when dealing with government departments and the housing sector in relation to their knowledge of the work involved in supporting Aboriginal clients. For example, there may be limited understanding of the additional work done within community and the need to meet community expectations to be in the community instead of just working from the office.

*... that person (from the department) was saying that 'we are not doing the work'. That was 'funny', because the night before had to pick a fella up at 9 o'clock from the railway station, who had just got out of jail, and took him to the temporary accommodation. The next day [we were] told of not doing the work, despite having worked 15 hours the day before. (consultation participant)*

## 4.6 MTS Training

Many participants accessed MTS training. Overall, participants found MTS training to be beneficial, though some pointed to the fact that the courses can be repetitive and greater flexibility in delivery and assessment may be beneficial.

*Just finished the 'emerging Aboriginal leaders' training. Overall, a good course. I learnt a lot... Delivery could have been done a bit different, more interactive format would be preferred, instead of needing to find time to do assessments in everyday working life. (consultation participant)*

*MTS training keeps on going through repeat, so have done most courses and looking for something new. Once you've done them, you've done them. (consultation participant)*

Consultation participants identified that MTS face to face training is not easily accessed by providers in rural and regional areas because of travel distances and that the increase in online training had been helpful because it increased availability and reduced cost. Time and resource constraints were also barriers to accessing training.

*Question: Have you accessed the MTS training?*

*Response: No, I don't get time and often I'm the only worker here so I can't attend as there is no replacement. Have not had training for some time. (consultation participant)*

## 4.7 Housing

Lack of affordable and appropriate housing is a key issue. Consultation participants noted that needed housing often did not exist and that discrimination in the real estate market makes it difficult for Aboriginal people to find housing.

Consultation participants highlighted the importance of staying on country but that the lack of housing often meant this was not possible, for example as there are no refuges locally.

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## 5. Conclusion

The NSW Homelessness Sector supports a high proportion of Aboriginal clients (around 35%) but this is not matched by a similarly high proportion of Aboriginal staff or Aboriginal led organisations that provide SHS services.

While the sector is nominally committed to providing culturally specific support for Aboriginal clients and Aboriginal staff, and developing the cultural competency of its workers and organisations, the consultations show that there remains room for improvement.

- **Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness Accord.** While many organisations have signed up to the ACCORD, awareness of the ACCORD is lower among practitioners than managers. The consultations highlighted that while it was important for the sector to have a set of guiding principles, the impact of the ACCORD was limited as it does not link to a set of meaningful actions to work towards reconciliation. Homelessness NSW should consider relaunching the ACCORD. DCJ should champion the ACCORD within the department and across the sector and provide funding to assist in its implementation. The Reconciliation Action Plans supported by Reconciliation Australia provide a model of how the principles espoused by the ACCORD can be linked to meaningful actions to embed these in organisational culture.
- **Aboriginal staff.** There is a need to increase the numbers of Aboriginal staff, especially in leadership positions and on boards. Opportunities include tailoring recruitment procedures, job selection criteria (e.g., focus on community connections and lived experience), training and career pathways, having more Aboriginal specialist roles and roles designated for Aboriginal workers, and working with local communities and elders. There is a need for mainstream organisations to develop a greater awareness and understanding of the demands faced by Aboriginal staff and provide culturally specific support to them. The research showed that there are mainstream and Aboriginal organisations in the sector that are leading the way in recruiting Aboriginal staff and providing culturally safe workplaces. There is scope for these organisations to mentor other organisations in the sector to grow their capacity.
- **Growing the capacity of the Aboriginal organisations.** The consultations highlighted that Aboriginal organisations are not well integrated into the homelessness sector. While Aboriginal organisations are an important resource to the sector, they are not part of the sector, and most do not receive direct funding from DCJ to provide homelessness services. This creates equity issues and constrains organisations' capacity to deliver the needed quantum and intensity of services required by Aboriginal clients, most of whom experience complex issues. DCJ needs to reconsider how it supports Aboriginal organisations.
- **JWAs.** Many Aboriginal organisations that participated in the consultations were tied into the NSW Homelessness Sector via JWAs. This worked well (at the operational level) for some organisations. However, the consultations showed that at the systemic level JWAs have failed as a mechanism by which to grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to progress towards becoming independent providers of SHS services. The limited resourcing for capacity building and the fact that JWA funding has remained stagnant contribute to this. DCJ should undertake a systematic review of JWAs and assess whether their continued use benefits Aboriginal organisations in the NSW SHS.

- **ASES.** ASES has an important role in growing the capability of all organisations in the NSW Homelessness sector. However, consultations identified that smaller organisations can struggle to achieve ASES accreditation due to the large administrative and compliance burden involved. This is not unique to Aboriginal organisations. Some organisations felt ill-equipped to achieve ASES, even with assistance from Homelessness NSW and feared that this would further marginalise them in the SHS sector.
- **Cultural competency.** Mainstream organisations can benefit from cultural competency training that is locally meaningful and that is delivered by someone with experience of local culture. Government departments also require development in cultural competency. It should be a condition of a JWA that organisations have achieved cultural competency and that most cultural competency training is locally specific. For example, Homelessness NSW could develop a list of local resources for cultural competency training and refer homelessness providers to the appropriate resource for their local area.
- **MTS training.** Many consultation participants found MTS training to be beneficial. However, some indicated that they were not funded to access this training; time constraints and long travel to and from face to face training were barriers for regionally based organisations.

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# Appendix 1: Interview questions

## **A culturally safe workplace (questions for Aboriginal workers working in mainstream organisations)**

- What is the experience of Aboriginal staff working in mainstream organisations?
- What would a culturally safe workplace look like?
- What barriers/challenges do Aboriginal staff face to working in mainstream organisations? (e.g., workload, job selection criteria, expectations, professional/career development)
- How can the IP support organisations to provide a culturally safe workplace for Aboriginal staff?

## **Cultural competence training (questions for Aboriginal workers working in mainstream organisations)**

- What would be needed to improve the cultural competence of the organisation in which you work?

## **Training (questions for Aboriginal organisations)**

- Does MTS training delivered by Homelessness NSW meet your needs? What works well, what does not work so well? Are there gaps? (e.g., career advancement, specialist courses)
- What training do you / does your program/service access from sources outside the MTS training calendar? What is the reason for this? Who provides this training?

## **Redressing Aboriginal Homelessness ACCORD**

- How well is the ACCORD working? How is it operationalised? Is it making a difference?
- What are the barriers to the meaningful implementation of the ACCORD?
- How can the IP support organisations to better operationalise the ACCORD and promote it to all levels of the sector?

## **If you are in a JWA, what is the relationship like with your partnering organisation?**

- What support do you get from your partnering organisation?

### **Do you have regular meetings or reviews of the JWA? How often do you meet?**

- Do you feel part of the partnering organisation or do you feel you are a resource or outreach to them?
- Does the partnering organisation include the JWA in their strategic planning/annual planning etc.?
- Does the partnering organisation share resources/ hot desking/ staff days/retreats/MOU's with other orgs that include you?

### **What training support is there for the JWA?**

- Is this in the JWA budget?
- Who pays for the training?
- What is the nature of the training? Is it adequate?
- How could the training be better?

### **Do you have relationships with other services or governance structures outside the JWA?**

- Which ones?
- What is working well about these relationships, what is not working well?

### **Growing the capacity of Aboriginal organisations**

- How can JWAs be used to grow the capacity of Aboriginal organisations to become part of the sector rather than a resource to the sector?
- What are the barriers faced by Aboriginal organisations to meet DCJ tendering requirements?

### **How can the IP support Aboriginal organisations better?**

- Overall, how relevant do you think the IP is for Aboriginal organisations?
- Do you feel you are aware of the supports provided (e.g., ASES support grants, one-on one support, the capability framework and free training)?
- What sort of assistance can the IP provide to Aboriginal organisations?
- How could the IP be more relevant to Aboriginal organisations?





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