St Pat's | St Patrick's Community Support Centre

AHURI NATIONAL HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCE 2026

From Misrepresentation to Self-Determination

Disrupting Narratives of Aboriginal Homelessness

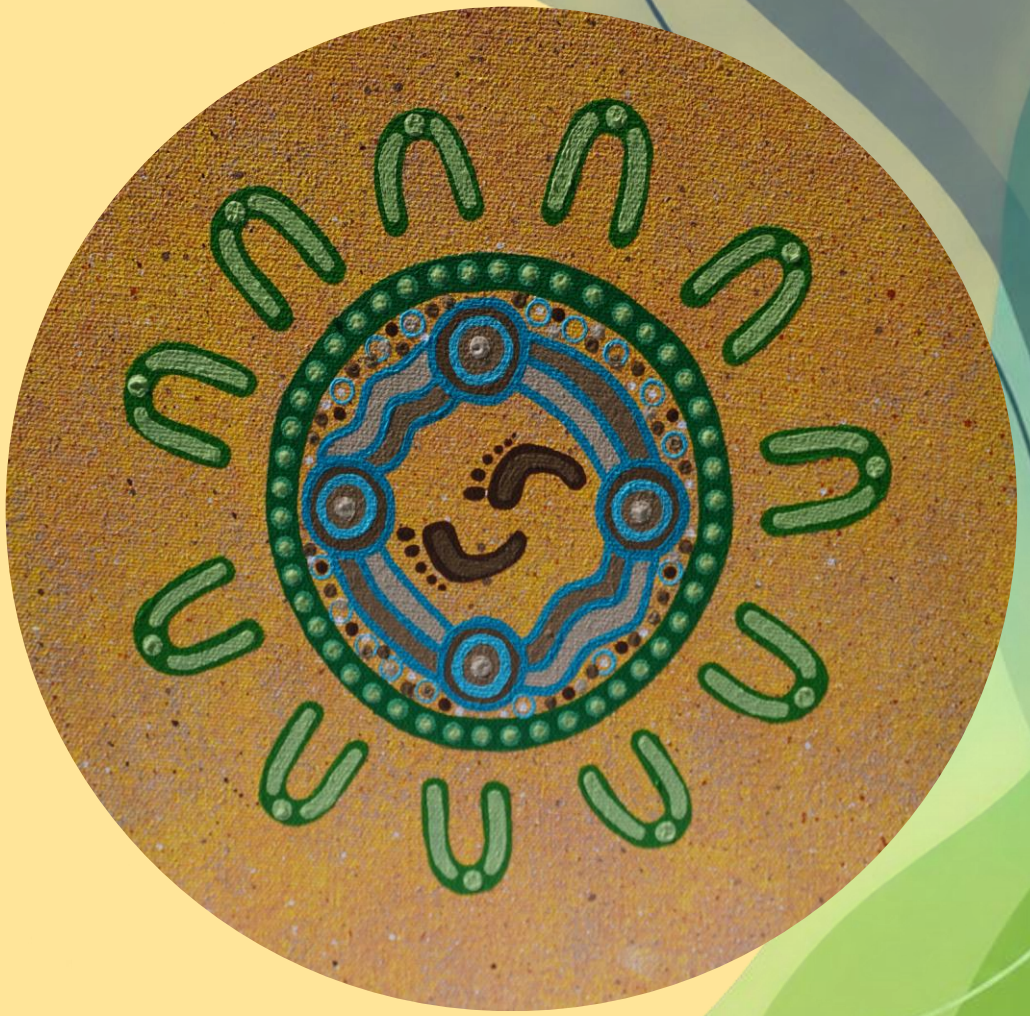
Pauline Boscato | Aboriginal Services Manager, St Pat's - Walyalup

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I want to acknowledge the Larrakia people as the Traditional Custodians of the land we gather on today, and to also acknowledge Elders, Community Leaders, the Lived Experience community and Allies - your guidance, your lived experience, and your cultural authority guide this work.

The *Workshop*

In August 2024, the Western Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (“The Alliance”) and the Office of Homelessness facilitated a First Nations workshop to discuss homelessness tools.



Aboriginal frontline workers said openly what many had been carrying quietly.

The *problem* beneath the problem



When tools are not culturally safe, they are not used, and when they are not used, our people disappear.

Aboriginal frontline worker,
WAAEH workshop - August 2024

The *problem* beneath the problem

1. When tools aren’t used, data isn’t captured

2. When data isn’t captured, Aboriginal homelessness is hidden

3. When we are invisible, resources don’t flow, service gaps remain hidden, and inequity is reproduced.



The Turning Point

The workshop that became a catalyst for truth-telling

Once the space was culturally held, frontline Aboriginal workers spoke with clarity and courage:

“These tools don’t reflect our people.”

“The language is wrong.”

“This doesn’t feel safe.”

“We’re not using them, and that means our people aren’t seen.”

Cultural Communities of Practice

In response to the workshop, a **Cultural Community of Practice**, led by Djenabidet Kalleep, was established and grounded in:

1. **First Nations Data Sovereignty**
2. **Lived experience**
3. **Cultural authority**
4. **Shared decision-making**
5. **Relational practice**

This was not a technical working group.

This was a cultural space.

Cultural Communities of Practice

A culturally governed, Aboriginal-led space for redesign, truth-telling, and shared authorship



… then the real work began

1. A culturally informed companion guide to the AHVTT
2. Revised scripts for explaining the BNL in culturally grounded language
3. A shared cultural schema for asking sensitive questions safely
4. A relational approach to explaining why information is collected and how it is used



The Real Work

Every element was shaped by lived experience.

Every decision was shared.

Every voice held equal weight.

This was Aboriginal self-determination in practice, not theory.

The role of St Pat's and WAAEH

Social Architects for Cultural Leadership

- Designing space for truth-telling
- Elevating Aboriginal Reference Groups as decision-makers
- Protecting Aboriginal staff to speak with cultural authority
- Shaping relational, community-led decision processes
- Embedding cultural governance structures
- Architecting cultural integrity across the organisation

The role of St Pat's and WAAEH

Social Architects for Cultural Leadership

Social architects design the relational, cultural, and structural conditions that enable communities to connect, participate, and thrive.

This model is a blueprint for success - not just for St Pat’s or the Alliance, but for the Nation.



What we learned from Community

When we took the draft work to the St Pat's Aboriginal Reference Group, the response was powerful:

"This work honours our culture."

The tool "feels like us."

"The guidelines would help explain why some Aboriginal people do not engage with services."

"Data must be protected and used ethically, always aligned with First Nations Data Sovereignty."

"Our people are missing out on services because they're not on the BNL, but we also need to know our information is safe."

The intellectual core

Why this matters systemically

This work challenges the myth of neutrality and exposes the cultural assumptions embedded in “evidence-based” tools. Mainstream assessment tools are built on Western assumptions:

- **Individualism**
- **Linear pathways**
- **Disclosure as a prerequisite for support**
- **Standardised risk scoring**
- **A belief that data is objective**



Aboriginal ways of knowing are relational, contextual, and grounded in story.

The broader impact

A model that can be adapted nationally

The Cultural Community of Practice model offers a blueprint for:

Working relationally	**Embedding cultural integrity**	**Sharing authorship**
Building trust	**Creating culturally grounded tools**	**Supporting non-Aboriginal agencies to collaborate ethically**

“When Aboriginal people lead, systems become more accurate, more ethical, and more effective.”

Closing

Homelessness is not a data problem. **It is a relationship & health problem.**

And relationships require:

- ***Listening***
- ***Cultural humility***
- ***Time***
- ***Trust***
- ***Shared decision-making***
- ***Willingness to be changed by what you hear***

Cultural responsiveness is not a checkbox. It is a commitment.

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