**AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin**

# Providing support for Indigenous tenancies at risk: Australian policy responses

INDIGENOUS CLIENTS WHO RECEIVE SUPPORT THROUGH TENANT SUPPORT PROGRAMS SUSTAIN THEIR TENANCIES, ARE LINKED TO EXTERNAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS TO MEET THEIR NON-HOUSING NEEDS AND AVOID HOMELESSNESS.

## KEY POINTS

- Tenant support programs are aimed at assisting those tenants at risk of losing their tenancy to avoid eviction and entry into homelessness, some programs also assist formerly homeless people to enter and sustain a new tenancy.

- This study identified eighteen specialist tenant support programs operating in Australia, five of which specifically provided support to Indigenous people. Mainstream programs also often include services providing targeted assistance to Indigenous tenants.

- The limited data available on client outcomes of tenant support programs, suggests positive results. For example, the HOME Advice program's Wodlinattoai service for Indigenous clients in South Australia reported that of the 27 referrals to the program in 2007-08, all clients sustained their tenancies.

- There is evidence to suggest that Indigenous clients gain an appropriate level of access to tenant support programs, although the administrative data is limited. The mainstream Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP) in Western Australia, for example, supports the most Indigenous households of any tenant support program in Australia; 548 in 2007-2008, compared with 346 non-Indigenous households. This reflects both the high representation of Indigenous households in public housing and the high incidence of homelessness among the Indigenous population in Western Australia.

- Strong linkage with outside agencies is a key element that ensures the success of tenant support programs. These

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programs must not only address the immediate tenancy-related issues that led to referral to the program, but also the underlying needs of clients such as mental health concerns, drug and alcohol dependence issues, urban life skills and strengthening family relationships.

## POLICY CONTEXT

'Closing the gap' in the rate of homelessness among Indigenous Australians is identified as a key indicator of the success of the Australian Government's homelessness reform agenda set out in the recently released White Paper: *The road home, a national approach to reducing homelessness*. Specifically, the 2009 *national partnership agreement on homelessness* states the target of reducing overall Indigenous homelessness by a third on the 2006 Census baseline figure. All Australian governments have recognised the importance of early intervention in reducing homelessness and tenant support programs are seen as a critical part of a homelessness alleviation framework.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study examined the role of tenant support programs, and other tenancy support measures in assisting Indigenous households to avoid homelessness, and sustain tenancies that may otherwise fail. The research involved; a search of policy related literature, a survey of all known tenant support program providers, a series of site visits in three states, and in depth case studies in South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia.

### What do tenant support programs do?

Tenant support programs assist households to sustain at-risk tenancies, in which they:

- Face significant difficulties in establishing and/or sustaining their tenancies due to immediate or long-standing social, health or economic needs.

- Are under threat of possible or actual eviction as a result of rent arrears, accumulated housing debt or tenancy breaches including property damage, inadequate property standards and anti-social behaviour.

All tenant support programs aim to assist tenants to avoid eviction as well as to reduce tenancy related problems such as rent arrears, poor property conditions and reports of disruptive behaviour. Individual programs provide different forms of assistance to clients to address the issues that underlie tenancy problems. Referrals to other services such as counselling, mental health and drug and alcohol services and financial counsellors are a key element of many programs. Many tenant

**TABLE 1: AUSTRALIAN SPECIALISED TENANT SUPPORT PROGRAMS OPERATING IN 2009**

| State | Program Title – year operation commenced<br>Indigenous only programs (shown in red) | Tenure | Specialised Client Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aust Govt | The Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice program 2004- | P, R, H, S, C | Families |
| NSW | My Place 2002- | H – R,C | Rough Sleepers |
| | Allawah Dual Diagnosis Pilot Project 2007- | H | Substance abuse/ mental health |
| | Port Jackson Supported Housing Program (PJSHP) 2004- | S, R | Complex needs |
| VIC | Indigenous Tenancies at Risk (ITAR) Program 2006- | P,T,C | |
| | Social Housing Advocacy and Support Program (SHASP) 2006 | S | Advocacy |
| | Youth Private Rental Access Program 2006 | H, R | Young people |
| | Family Violence Private Rental Access Program 2006- | R | Domestic violence |
| QLD | Same House Different Landlord Program 1997- | T - P | |
| WA | Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP)1991- | P | |
| | Private Rental Support and Advocacy Program (PRSAP) 2003 | P | |
| | Pilot Ruah Tenancy Fast Track -SAAP Innovation and Investment Fund (I&IF) | H - R | Families |
| SA | Supported Tenancy Program (STP) 2002- | P | |
| | Intensive Intervention Program (IIP) 2004- | P | Families/ kinship networks |
| TAS | Private Rental Tenancy Support Service 2005- | P | Multiple needs |
| NT | Indigenous Housing Assistance Program (Tenancy Support Services) 2004- | P, R | Independent living skills |
| | Tenancy Sustainability and Support Program 2009- | P, R, U | |
| ACT | Community Linkages Program: Sustaining Tenancies Program 2001- | P, C | |

P= public housing, R= private rental, H= homeless, S= social housing, C= community housing, T= transitional housing, U= urban community living areas (town camps)

support programs also aim to improve family relationships, to build the capacity of clients in terms of their life skills, to increase their self esteem and to increase their confidence and trust in those delivering services.

There are tenant support programs operating across a range of tenures, and many are targeted to assist clients in specific tenures. Many programs are also specialised in their client focus. Five of the eighteen programs identified provided assistance specifically to Indigenous tenants.

### Targeting support for Indigenous clients

The survey conducted as part of this study, identified several additional drivers of tenancy instability that are specific to Indigenous households, including:

- Discrimination by landlords and neighbours.

- Failure of landlords and housing agencies to appropriately address cultural behaviour and imperatives such as duties of hospitality, extended family responsibilities and demand sharing (see Box 1).

- Lack of understanding of Indigenous patterns of occupation and use of housing (domiciliary behaviour).

- Indigenous belief systems and mourning customs.

- Inability to meet unforeseen expenses such as funeral costs.

- Indigenous patterns of mobility.

- In some cases a lack of urban based 'life-skills'.

- The high number of Indigenous people living in regional and remote areas where there may only be limited support services available.

### Key service delivery principles for Indigenous tenant support

A number of service delivery principles for securing positive outcomes for Indigenous clients were identified by the service providers who participated in the survey, including:

- **Early intervention:** intervene early before the causes of tenancy instability become too great to manage (see Box 1).

- **Client empowerment:** empower clients so that they can successfully manage their own tenancies and engage them so that they are attached to achieving positive outcomes from the program.

- **Local knowledge and trust:** knowledge of local Indigenous communities and the development of trust within communities is vital as is the use of service providers who are local and have credibility in the community (see Box 1).

- **Support workers:** support workers need to be culturally sensitive, able to understand and acknowledge cultural issues, including kinship obligations and have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of local family relationships.

- **Case management:** one-to-one client contact, assertive case management, access to brokerage funds, and the use of named referrals linking clients to specific individuals in external agencies, together with direct transportation to external agencies works best (see Box 2).

- **External support linkages:** good linkages with agencies providing personal support services in areas such as mental health support and drug and alcohol counselling and support is critical to address the underlying sources of tenancy failure (see Box 2).

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**BOX 1: CASE STUDY – MT ISA AND DAJARRA, NORTH-WEST QUEENSLAND**

Many of these drivers of tenancy instability are present in Mt Isa and Dajarra (where the public housing population is 80% Indigenous). While there isn't a specialised tenant support program in operation in the region, tenant support strategies are in place to manage tenancies at-risk. Staff of the Department of Housing North West Area Office have identified five critical times, that extra visitors or extra financial responsibilities place tenancies at-risk. These are; children returning to school, Easter, the Mount Isa Show, the Mount Isa Rodeo and Christmas. A pro-active preventative campaign is run before the show and rodeo whereby tenants are encouraged to come into the office to check their rental credit and agreements, and staff warn all at-risk tenants 'don't miss rent, visitors must be quiet and no damage or abuse'. Before Christmas tenants are encouraged to build up rental credit to prepare for extra expenses, and there is a moratorium over Christmas whereby no immediate action is taken over rental arrears.

These preventative measures are effective; in August 2008 rent arrears for this region was under 1 per cent, which is low compared to other statistics available for other regions in Queensland.

**BOX 2: CASE STUDY – RUAH TENANCY SUPPORT SOUTH EAST (WESTERN AUSTRALIA)**

This program is funded through the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) and supports people who are homeless and at risk of homelessness. Approximately 20 per cent of clients are Indigenous. Key aspects of this program include the development of Tenancy Support Plans which deal with tenancy related problems and Personal Support Plans that address the underlying issues contributing to vulnerable tenancies. Support workers identify community resources and services to which the client requires access and provide transport to the appointment, introduce the tenant to the new worker/agency, provide support throughout the appointment and review the benefits with the client afterwards. The strategy of active engagement with local property managers, landlords and agencies is a critical feature of the success of this service model.

In the first half of 2008, of 36 clients who exited the program, 30 (83.3%) achieved the goal of stabilising their tenancy.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Australian governments have established tenancy support programs largely independently of one another. Each jurisdiction has developed innovative and potentially effective ways of supporting at-risk tenancies and their experiences can provide useful guidance to other jurisdictions. However, in the absence of common data collection systems, it is difficult to evaluate these programs and identify the strategies that prove most successful.

It would be of some benefit if the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness was able to act to encourage the development of common data collection systems and reporting frameworks. This would offer greater ability to set and monitor progress on key indicators in respect to tenancy support, such as the number of at-risk households who sustained their tenancies, and a reduction in the mean percentage of rental arrears and tenancy liabilities.

The data available on the outcomes of tenant support programs for Indigenous clients is even more limited; some programs do not collect data in unit record form that would allow them to differentiate between the outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients. Nevertheless, the data that is available indicates that tenant support programs are effective; eviction, and consequently homelessness is avoided for the majority of both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients of tenant support programs.

## REFERENCES

Commonwealth of Australia (2008). *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness*, The Australian Government's White Paper on homelessness, Canberra.

Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2009). National partnership agreement on homelessness, intergovernmental agreement of federal financial arrangements, Canberra.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 80372, *Sustaining at-risk Indigenous tenancies: a review of Australian policy responses.*

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au.

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300

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