

# ENDING HOMELESSNESS: CULTURALLY SAFE PRACTICES

*'Cultural safety is critical to the social, emotional, physical and mental health of Aboriginal peoples and communities.'* (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning 2019: 8)

## What is cultural safety?

Any effort, action or practice to support ending homelessness must recognise the importance of cultural safety and culturally safe practices (the embedding of the principles of cultural safety in practice). While there are a number of definitions of cultural safety, a commonly used definition is:

[A]n environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening. (Williams 1999)

Aboriginal cultural safety is about creating an environment – in workplaces and services, in institutions, systems and programs – that respects and values people's cultural identity and practices. Culturally safe spaces and approaches recognise the impacts of intergenerational trauma, discrimination, power imbalances and the barriers and biases that exist in mainstream systems and institutions.

Notably, 'Cultural safety is determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities.' (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency c2020: 9). Accordingly, councils should regularly ask First Nations staff how safe they feel in terms of their involvement in actions/efforts to end homelessness. Councils should also ask First Nations community members how they feel within services, and in receiving support in their communities.

A significant body of work exists demonstrating that culturally safe practices are best practice in supporting efforts to end homelessness and non-negotiable in efforts to end homelessness or risk of homelessness experienced by Aboriginal people, families and groups. Some helpful resources on cultural safety and culturally safe practices are listed at the end of this fact sheet.

*'For Aboriginal peoples, cultural safety manifests itself in practice that reflects an understanding, acceptance and respect for the importance of Aboriginal identity, culture, community and endurance.'* (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning 2019: 8)

The [First Nations Inclusion Principles](#) (right) developed through [The Constellation Project](#), a national effort to end homelessness through multi-sector collaboration, are a clear reference point for councils involved in ending First Nations homelessness. Such principles should be considered constantly in any and all actions to end homelessness, as well as for councils as workplaces.

### The Constellation Project's First Nations Inclusion Principles

**First Nations Inclusion Principles** Creating a culturally safe environment for Better Journeys

- Self-reflection:** being aware of how our own beliefs, values, families and community - influence and impact our interaction with others.
- Privileging the voice of First Nations people:** allowing the voice of First Nations people to be the underpinning cornerstone of conversation – "nothing about us without us".
- Recognition of unconscious bias in the conversation:** having the ability to draw attention to unconscious bias while maintaining positive working relationships.
- Cultural load\*:** recognition that many First Nations people at times carry a huge cultural load and obligation for and to their family and communities
- Working in equal partnership:** based on a mutual respect of experience, knowledge and understanding – "we don't need protection we need partners".

\*Cultural load is the (often invisible) additional load borne by First Nations people, where they are the only or one of a small number of First Nations people in an environment.

## Why embed cultural safety practices in efforts to end homelessness?

First Nations people are significantly overrepresented among people experiencing or at risk of homelessness across Australia. And as noted by Noongar Mia Mia in their groundbreaking work in the Western Australian context, [Why Aboriginal Homelessness Needs a Cultural Approach \(2022\)](#):

*'Aboriginal homelessness is different, and the solutions must come from within, by building self-determination and cultural competency in the homeless and housing sectors.'* (Noongar Mia Mia 2022: 2)

First Nations homelessness is different in many ways:

- kinship groups can experience homelessness, requiring different responses from those needed by individuals.
- disconnection from Country can be/is experienced as homelessness.
- poverty and overcrowding are key drivers of homelessness and risk of homelessness.
- homelessness is experienced as a consequence of, and along with, intergenerational trauma and institutional and systemic discrimination and racism.

Moreover, culturally appropriate housing remains a challenge in the Australian housing landscape. Limited choices and options exist for First Nations people moving on from homelessness. Limited choices also exist in terms of services. Our service system is still missing responses that allow people and groups to flexibly move between Countries and communities for cultural reasons.

Ending First Nations homelessness is about much more than housing (Tually et al. 2022). The full range of stakeholders and services needed to end people's homelessness (or prevent it from occurring in the first place), which includes local councils, must meet First Nations communities' want and need for self-determination, with cultural safety, culturally safe practices and cultural competence essential.

Notably also, cultural safety is a foundation of [Closing the Gap](#), Australia's national framework for enabling 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians' (Joint Council on Closing the Gap c2020). Local governments have obligations to organisational transformation, building the community-controlled sector, partnerships and shared decision making, and transparency and sharing of systems (including data) under the [Closing the Gap Priority Reforms](#).

## Some key considerations for councils

- How culturally safe is your workplace, service and/or program culture?
- Are you supporting, working with and/or building the capacity of local community-controlled organisations and networks?
- Whose voices are being heard in efforts/actions to end First Nations homelessness?
- Are you regularly reviewing and improving practice to ensure it is and remains culturally safe?
- Are your systems and processes (including information and data) being governed in accordance with Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles, or working towards this?

## Relevant resources (see also References)

Department of Health and Human Services (2019) Part 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety framework, For the Victorian health, human and community services sector, DHHS, State of Victoria.

Department of Health and Human Services (2019) Part 2: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety framework, Cultural safety continuum reflective tool, For the Victorian health, human and community services sector, DHHS, State of Victoria.

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2019) Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework, DELWP, State of Victoria.

Noongar Mia Mia (2022) Why Aboriginal Homelessness Needs A Cultural Approach, Noongar Mia Mia Pty Ltd.

Tually, S., Tedmanson, D., Habibis, D., McKinley, K., Akbar, S., Chong, A., Deuter, K. & Goodwin-Smith, I. (2022) Urban Indigenous homelessness: much more than housing, AHURI Final Report No. 383, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

Keep an eye out also for the Aboriginal Cultural Capability Toolkit being produced by Flinders University for the LGA South Australia (due December 2024).

## References for fact sheet 5

Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (c2020) The national scheme's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and cultural safety strategy 2020-2025, AHPRA.

Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2019) Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework, DELWP, State of Victoria.

Joint Council on Closing the Gap (c2020) National Agreement on Closing the Gap, At a glance, Joint Council.

Noongar Mia Mia (2022) Why Aboriginal Homelessness Needs A Cultural Approach, Noongar Mia Mia Pty Ltd.

Williams, R. (1999) Cultural safety – what does it mean for our work practice?, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 23(2), pp.213-214.

## About *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government*

This fact sheet is one in a suite which together makes up *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government*. *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government* has been funded by the LGA South Australia as a practical resource for councils across South Australia to refer to in supporting community and council efforts to end homelessness.

The toolkit has been developed in consultation with the LGA, councils and stakeholders advancing end homelessness efforts in SA, nationally and beyond. The fact sheets synthesise what we know from the ever evolving academic and practice evidence about homelessness and how we can end it. The toolkit has been designed with both regional and metropolitan councils in mind. The fact sheets are sensitive to the different contexts in which councils operate, the ways in which homelessness presents for people and within communities and knowing that councils and communities are all at different stages in their ending homelessness journeys.

## Other fact sheets in *Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government*

**Ending homelessness: a toolkit for local government** comprises nine fact sheets that work together to provide a practical guide for councils interested in or working towards ending homelessness with their communities.

- Fact sheet 1: Understanding homelessness: A guide for local government
- Fact sheet 2: Ending homelessness: Why and how?
- Fact sheet 3: Partnering in efforts to end homelessness: Making and having collective impact
- Fact sheet 4: Ending homelessness brightspots
- Fact sheet 5: Ending homelessness: Culturally safe practices
- Fact sheet 6: Local governments, advocacy and ending homelessness
- Fact sheet 7: Local government, disaster resilience and homelessness
- Fact sheet 8: The role of local government in preventing homelessness
- Fact sheet 9: An ending homelessness glossary

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