

## Project background

### About this series

This information sheet is designed to help non-Aboriginal organisations find better ways to deliver effective and relevant services to Aboriginal people who are experiencing intergenerational poverty and homelessness. It is part of a series capturing key learning and ideas from the award-winning Wongee Mia action learning project, in Western Australia.

### Origin of the project

Wongee Mia was born out of the frustration of seeing two Aboriginal tenancies end in eviction, in less than three months. The tenants were participating in the 50 Lives 50 Homes initiative<sup>1</sup> and their experience demonstrated that no project could truly be committed to ending homelessness without developing a clear understanding and strategy for dealing with Aboriginal housing challenges. Wongee Mia began with an open mind, acknowledging it did not have the answers, and recognising the importance of listening and learning from the people who were living with the consequences.

Aboriginal people are 10 times more likely to experience homelessness than others in our community.<sup>2</sup> They are also more than three times more likely to experience overcrowding – with the general concept of overcrowding failing to recognise variations in the notions

of family and cultural responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Overcrowding is frequently linked to family violence, property damage, noise and neighbour disputes, which can contribute to loss of tenancies and a return to homelessness.<sup>4</sup> The Wongee Mia project was established to develop a model that directly addresses these concerns.

Wongee Mia works with a single, extended Aboriginal family. The family has experienced intergenerational homelessness and poverty. For years, many of its members have been sleeping rough, or without stable accommodation. The project aims to break the cycle of evictions, resulting from overcrowding and anti-social behaviour, which contributes to the large number of family members who are homeless and who rely on others who are housed to provide shelter. The project started with a single housed

individual and progressively expanded its caseload to include those family members who put his tenancy at risk. The aim was to address homelessness in the wider family, identifying them as people in need rather than seeing them as a “problem”. This has developed into a close working relationship across a large, interconnected family (both housed and homeless) with strong connections to family Elders for advice and guidance.

“

They're my family. I tell them...they camp at my place for the night and they (family) must move on the next morning.

”

“

I know what it's like to be homeless...feeling cold, unwanted, unloved...

I don't want to wish this on my worst enemy.

”

Project learnings and evaluation are captured through action-research meetings and frequent yarning groups with both Elders and family members. The groups also generate new service development ideas so that the project's service model is being continually adapted and developed to ensure it meets the family's specific needs and aligns with their culture.

1 Now the Zero Project

2 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: a focus report on housing and homelessness. Canberra: AIHW; 2019

3 Doherty, J.; McPherson, S. The impacts of overcrowding on Victoria's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and adults. Parity 2019, 32, 10.

4 Memmott P, Greenop K, Clarke A, Go-Sam C, Birdsall-Jones C, Harvey-Jones W, et al. NATSISS crowding data: What does it assume and how can we challenge the orthodoxy? 2012.

### Tenancy number one

Robbie is a Noongar man who was born in Perth WA, the eldest of five children, and raised by his biological mother, grandparents, and extended family members.<sup>8</sup> Growing up, he was exposed to family violence, grief and loss, alcohol and drug use, physical abuse and racism, and interactions with youth detention. He became transient, shifting from place to place, using alcohol and solvents as a mechanism to dim his pain and sadness. Now in his early 40s, Robbie has had only three tenancies in his adult life, mostly in lodging and transitional properties. None of these has lasted more than five months. However, with the support of Wongee Mia, he has now been housed for more than three years. His attempts to address his alcohol use have been unsuccessful, with the most recent resulting in medical advice that it was not safe to continue.

### Gifting the name

The name Wongee Mia has been gifted to the project by family Elders, with the support of other family members. It is named after Robbie's grandmother, who was a strong woman and a great advocate for strengthening family ties

and providing shelter and homes for her family. Wongee (meaning strong woman) is the name her family called her. Mia means home. On selecting Wongee Mia as the project name, the family chose something that is meaningful to them and stresses their ownership and engagement in the work. Staff in the project recognise the significance of being gifted the name and the responsibility they have to honour Wongee's aspirations for her family to have a home.

### Support for the project

Wongee Mia was established with funds from a Mercy Foundation Grant to End Homelessness and internal resources from Ruah Community Services. This was followed by further seed funding from a PwC Foundation Homelessness Innovation Grant. Having established the merit of the project, the Sisters of St John of God Ministry Initiatives have underwritten the work for a further two years including funding to employ a second worker.

Wongee Mia won the national HESTA Community Services Team Excellence Award in 2020 in recognition of its outstanding success.

“

The (Wongee Mia case manager) has helped me so much to get me into a home and staying put. Sometimes I cry because I know she's trying to keep me off the streets. Her job hasn't been easy especially working with me...my lot...that lot. I've told my lot...go and see her.

If she can help me, she can help you.

”

### Key question for your own work:

What is the inspiration for your service model - and can you design the program by starting with the stories of the people you work with?