

A national plan for Aboriginal housing and homelessness would tackle the devastatingly high rates of Aboriginal children entering child protection

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As the rate of Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering out of home care grows, we must brace for more First Nations young people to enter a homelessness system which is not equipped to support them.

Across the country, the rate of First Nations children entering into out of home care increased from 54.2 per 1000 in 2019 to 56.8 per 1000 as at June 2022, according to the latest Closing the Gap data. In Victoria over the same period, the rate has increased from 89.9 per 1000 to 102.2 per 1000.

Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum (AHHF) Chair Darren Smith argues that it is the absence of safe, secure and affordable housing that can trigger vulnerable families coming into contact with the child protection system in the first place, and the lack of suitable housing is a significant barrier to family reunification.

“When Aboriginal kids enter out of home care, their risk of homelessness is dramatically increased - it’s not uncommon for teens leaving out of home care to experience homelessness,” Mr Smith said.

“What we need is a national plan to address Aboriginal housing and homelessness that recognises Aboriginal homelessness as culturally distinct.

“Victoria’s successful Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort: Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home framework explores the path from homelessness, to transitional housing, to public and community housing, to private rental and into home ownership. It provides solutions. We want to see this plan scaled to a national level.”

Mr Smith recently travelled to Canberra with Aboriginal Housing Victoria to meet with politicians from across political parties about why a national, First Nations-specific housing and homelessness plan would help close the gap.

“Outcome nine of Closing the Gap – that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need – focuses too heavily on overcrowding as an indicator of national housing and homelessness outcomes,” he said.

“While we in Victoria do not want to take focus or investment away from remote and very regional communities, we need governments to understand Aboriginal homelessness and housing exclusion is so much more than overcrowding.

“That is why a national plan that recognises this truth – that the drivers of Aboriginal homelessness varies across this vast continent’s many peoples – is vital.” Housing is central to Closing the Gap.

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