

Statement regarding high levels of homelessness in Walgett.

13 July 2023.

Dharriwaa Elders Group (“DEG”) and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service Ltd (“WAMS”) are making this statement because news stories will shortly be appearing in the media and we want to contribute Walgett Aboriginal community views and perspectives.

DEG and WAMS thank Homelessness NSW for bringing together data for the first time that shows the extent of homelessness in NSW Local Government Areas.

The new Homelessness NSW dashboard reveals that Walgett Shire has the highest rate of homelessness in the state¹, and we know that the rate of homelessness in the town of Walgett – incorporating Namoi and Gingie Village will be even higher than the rate of the Walgett LGA.

Christine Corby AM, Gamilaraay Elder and Founding Chief Executive Officer of Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service Ltd said today:

“The burden of homelessness in our community affects the whole community. WAMS is well aware of the social determinants of health and is fighting a losing battle to reduce chronic disease and promote community wellbeing while members of our community continue to suffer from homelessness and overcrowded housing.”

“Everyone deserves privacy and has the right to raise their family in comfort and safety. Homelessness brings despair. If we don’t fix the causes of this despair then we are contributing to greater mental health issues for our community and requiring holistic care responses from WAMS and the community sector that we are barely resourced to provide.”

“I call on the Walgett Shire Council to work urgently with NSW and Commonwealth governments and the NSW Aboriginal Land Council to provide every resident with safe shelter and a place to call home.”

This is not a new problem for Walgett.

As outlined in the Keynote Speech given by DEG’s Founding Speaker, George Rose OAM to the 2nd NSW Aboriginal Housing Office Conference in June 2003;

“I’m 77 and I would say that all around NSW, there has been hardly any improvement for Aboriginal people, in housing and in general. I’m the Chairperson of the local community working party which was setup in 1996 to oversee the building of 19 new houses and the renovation of 48 existing houses that were built from 1964. Back then the family in each house might have had six kids. Now all those kids have their own families and their kids have families. If you just do the arithmetic you’ll see that it’s not enough. I think we’d be short of at least 40 homes to house our people properly now. We have a high percentage of young people in our community, so when they have families we’ll need more again. We see the results of overcrowding in health statistics.”

“I want you all to realise the urgent need for more Aboriginal housing in NSW.”

¹ Walgett LGA has 285.6 rate of homelessness per 10,000 which appears to be higher than any other rate when each LGA of NSW is clicked on page 2 of the dashboard at <https://homelessnessnsw.org.au/data/housing-and-homelessness-dashboard/>

As documented by a Dharriwaa Elders Group letter sent to the head of the Walgett Local Emergency Management Committee in September 2021 in relation to the problems facing community members needing to isolate during COVID outbreaks locally:

The Walgett Remote Service Delivery Local Implementation Plan (2010) cited that the ABS 2006 census data indicated:

“30.5 percent of Indigenous homes in Walgett are overcrowded - defined here as having two or more usually resident persons more than the number of bedrooms. Indigenous household overcrowding is more prevalent in Walgett than in NSW overall, where the rate of overcrowding is 14.6 percent.”²

The fact that Walgett has twice the state average for overcrowded housing would assist experts to estimate the public health emergency housing need in Walgett. There has been no significant investment in social housing since 2006 so more houses in Walgett are clearly needed.³

This older housing stock means Aboriginal people in Walgett generally live in poor quality and designed housing which does not respond appropriately to climate and requires extensive energy to heat and cool homes throughout the year - resulting in financial stress on occupants.

Due to the low number of new houses provided there is also a limited amount of affordable housing and rentals available, meaning overcrowding with multigenerational households is common. There is very limited housing for specific groups and purposes including young people, Elders and crisis accommodation resulting in many of these groups being forced to leave Walgett for access to safe, accessible and affordable homes.

Yuwaya Ngarrali (the community-led partnership between DEG and UNSW) prepared a briefing paper: *“Housing in Walgett Town and Gingie Reserve, 2016: Summary of Census Data”* in August 2021 which states:

“Clearly, overcrowding is a significant issue among Aboriginal households in Walgett and Gingie, with approximately one in ten Aboriginal households in Walgett (10.9%) and one in four (26.7%) in Gingie being overcrowded.”⁴

This study, which didn't include the over 20 houses in Namoi Village, refers to 273 Aboriginal households in Gingie Village and town. This is taken from the Census data which we know underestimates Aboriginal data.

The Housing and Environmental Health Plan prepared by Murdi Paaki Services Ltd in 2022 under the NSW Ministerial Agreement to improve Aboriginal social housing in the Region describes the unmet housing need for the Walgett Aboriginal community as 65 dwellings. It states that 11 require modifications and 19 need extra bedrooms.

Dharriwaa Elders Group Community Troubleshooters today counted 22 community clients with complex needs who have been homeless for many years and are couch surfing or housed temporarily in Walgett motels.

² Page 40, 4.5 Healthy Homes, Walgett Local Implementation Plan, 2010

³ There may be have been 5 additional houses built for general Aboriginal social housing in Walgett since the 2006 census

⁴ Page 9

DEG's Community Troubleshooter Kim Sullivan: *"I work with the homeless of Walgett every day and I find it hard to understand why Australian governments have ignored their need for safe places to stay. It's cruel, and the trauma they live with every day because they are homeless is digging them into early graves.*

The data has been visible for years and years and still no government has had the guts to do what is needed. Instead they leave the land council to fail and more and more families to deal with overcrowding. Everyone knows that our life expectancy is bad. Resources must be immediately devoted to improving the quantity and quality of social housing and supported accommodation services in Walgett."

The current model for providing social housing is broken and must be changed.

69 houses are managed by the Walgett Local Aboriginal Land Council and 101 by NSW Aboriginal Housing Office and other social housing providers. All are fully occupied and many are over-crowded. Walgett's community social housing providers are forced to operate within a losing business model. Walgett's existing social housing is mostly over 50 years old, built without climate and energy efficiency and now in need of multiple repairs. Insurance premiums have increased to prohibitive rates. Community housing providers do not have the income or local tradespeople to maintain the poorly built houses. Houses destroyed by house fires are rarely replaced. Some tenants are on rent strikes while they wait for multiple repairs. Most social housing tenants are experiencing rental stress and recent energy price rises are forcing households to choose between buying food and water⁵ and meeting rent and power bills. We fear many residents could be facing homelessness and most community housing providers are certainly unable to provide well-maintained, energy efficient, thermally comfortable homes.

Dharriwaa Elders Group's plans for supported accommodation

In DEG's Yuwaya Ngarrali partnership with UNSW, with Wiradjuri building designer Samantha Rich, Dharriwaa Elders Group has been developing plans for a cluster of independent living units for Elders, a model of housing that will contribute towards Aboriginal young people's wellbeing and reduce their contact with the criminal justice system, and options for emergency accommodation. We have done this by undertaking a community-led process, conducting housing workshops with Elders and other community members to understand the local housing needs. Yuwaya Ngarrali's Samantha Rich has also researched best practice management models and is preparing culturally-appropriate, energy-efficient, climate-suitable plans for shovel-ready investment.

"The research that DEG has had me undertake shows the dire need for supported accommodation for the homeless and those very close to homelessness in Walgett. Those who are homeless are often shipped out of town, or placed in motels where their safety cannot be guaranteed. Otherwise, family will generally support and carry the load of housing the homeless which puts pressure on the home situation and also puts pressure on the housing to perform in ways it was not designed for.

We have seen all this in our work and are designing different caring accommodation solutions so that wellbeing is prioritized for the Walgett Aboriginal community."

Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service call for local, NSW and Commonwealth governments to:

⁵ https://www.dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/WalgettReport_A130223b_web.pdf

- audit the NSW Roads to Home⁶ program to reduce building contractor errors and bring better outcomes for Walgett LALC tenants;
- step in to ensure the building of the new Dept. of Communities and Justice women's safe house is urgently resumed so that more women can be supported to independent living and homeless men can be housed properly and not left in motel rooms without the meals and other supports they need.
- provide urgent project management and capital supports to community social housing providers so they can better meet the housing needs of the Walgett Aboriginal community. This will require ongoing funding to ensure that existing housing stock is properly maintained, and increased funding for a new, more humane management business model. Local trades workforce development, and the building of new culturally-appropriate houses suitable for the climate and long-term conditions are also urgently required.
- make more land available for social housing and supported accommodation within the levee bank.
- pro-actively prepare Walgett for climate resilience including the provision of non-profit community-owned sustainable energy solutions and negotiated insurance premiums for nonprofit community organisations and community social housing providers.
- fund Dharriwaa Elders Group plans for supported accommodation for Elders, children and young people and emergency accommodation options for when families are affected by floods, fire, pandemics and sudden life events rendering them homeless.

We ask that you limit your responses to emails. Contact: wendy@yuwayangarrali.org.au; christinec@walgettams.com.au.

⁶ <https://alc.org.au/the-roads-to-home-program/>