

# ENGAGING WITH OUR ABORIGINAL TENANTS



> *Peter Nathan briefs us on the central tenets underpinning Aboriginal Housing Victoria's commitment to successful, ongoing engagement with its stakeholders.*

***"That Aboriginal Victorians secure appropriate, affordable housing as a pathway to better lives and stronger communities."***

Vision – Aboriginal Housing Victoria

Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) was established in 1981 as the Aboriginal Housing Board at a time when the Aboriginal community lacked a voice into government and service delivery to Aboriginal people was poor. In the years since, strong community partnerships have been established and more community-focused modes of service delivery have been implemented. AHV is proud of this history and the sustainability of our service delivery model.

As the organisation has grown, so too has the challenge to institute best practice for the business, particularly in supporting the community while providing high levels of service. AHV's core values form the basis of an ethical framework that guides decision-making and engagement. Our values are:

- Respect and support for Aboriginal identity and culture, and for our tenants and stakeholders;
- Striving for excellence through leadership in Aboriginal housing and best practice service delivery; and
- Integrity, trust and honesty in all our business activities;
- Collaborative relationships with our community, tenants, government and stakeholders; and
- Kindness, compassion, courtesy and dignity in our relationships with our clients, our stakeholders and with each other.

In 2014, the Victorian Aboriginal population was estimated at 50,000, with an annual growth rate of 4.7% from 2006 to 2011, far higher than the 1.7% growth in the general community. This growth can be attributed to:

- Higher than usual birth rates;
- Interstate migration; and
- More individuals identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.



In Victoria, metropolitan Melbourne has the highest density of Aboriginal people (46%) and the remainder reside in regional areas. The social disadvantage most Aboriginal Victorians experience drives the high demand and extreme need for housing support.

AHV manages a stock of 1,522 homes servicing approximately 4,000 Aboriginal residents, which equates to eight percent of total Aboriginal Victorians. Appropriate and effective engagement with these target groups poses significant challenges. Our community engagement strategy seeks to identify and address these challenges. (Samm, 2014)

Community engagement is at the heart of AHV's business and is defined as the connection of multi-party relationships utilising varied community interactions – from community consultations and information sessions to social media messaging. (Community Places, 2014)

There is a risk that engagement can become multi-layered and cumbersome, therefore compromising appropriateness and effectiveness.

In the Aboriginal community, there has been a valiant effort to achieve more participatory and informed engagement. Our business model is dependent upon successful engagement practice with a diverse target audience of stakeholders. Understanding this diversity is essential to instilling a malleable, yet effective guide for community engagement and interaction. (Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 2014)

## **Commitment to Cultural Values**

Successful service delivery relies on the organisation's recognition of the unique status of the Victorian Aboriginal community and their cultural values. AHV takes pride in the rich and spiritual culture, values and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and acknowledges the struggles faced by the community since colonisation.

Culture is central to achieving the organisation's vision, and our legitimacy is derived from the strong relationships that are developed and maintained with our community.

We affirm this relationship by providing housing services that enhance the dignity of AHV's clients and tenants, by respecting and celebrating their cultural beliefs, values and practices. AHV respects the status of Victoria's Traditional Owners and their continued role as custodians of Victoria's lands and waters.

Our commitment to the principles of effective community engagement is underpinned by the integration of internal cultural values and an acknowledgement of the foundation on which the service was historically built – that is, Aboriginal community-led and driven service delivery and responsiveness.

AHV upholds its responsibility of ensuring services are consistent with the needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal community of Victoria. Our principles for engagement form the basis of a structured process in which the recognition of historical and cultural factors underpins our interaction with the Aboriginal community. As a result, AHV plays a potential conduit role with other crucial stakeholders in housing service delivery to address adverse social impacts.



## Principles of Community Engagement

Through AHV's organisational vision, it seeks to empower Aboriginal people towards individual and collective betterment ensuring that stakeholders are invested and empowered in all aspects of their participation with AHV.

The five key principles for AHV's community engagement are:

### 1. Self-Determination

Any engagement will promote and acknowledge Aboriginal peoples' right to ascertain their own outcomes and encourage the development of individual and community wide capabilities. (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015)

### 2. Informed Participation

All interactions with community will be planned with sufficient time for all stakeholders to be able to make objective and timely decisions. This will promote inclusiveness and shared responsibility towards outcomes that are conducive to needs of all relevant parties – particularly Aboriginal peoples. (MacDougall, Rose, Pearson, Hassan, Chiodo, & Abell, 2014)

### 3. Respect and Trust

In order to encourage effective practical participation, AHV notes all stakeholders come to an interaction with inherent skills, knowledge and experience. This will promote project ownership and, in turn, will ensure interactions are honest, accountable and transparent. (Campbell & Christie, 2008)

### 4. Fairness

If there is interest with any engagement process or service outcomes, all efforts must be made to ensure information is accessible and the language conducive to the audience without bias and promoting a shared understanding of the outcome or interaction delivery. (Campbell & Christie, 2008)

### 5. Reciprocity

By understanding the inherent skills and knowledge that all parties bring to any engagement process, there will be an acknowledgement of the value of shared learning. Reciprocal interactions call for all stakeholders to ensure that shared practice and knowledge development is a fundamental goal.

These principles provide a lens through which AHV develops, implements and evaluates interactions with stakeholders that are effective and appropriate.

Successful implementation of AHV's community engagement strategy will:

- Critically analyse how AHV engages all relevant stakeholders, including – but not limited to – tenants, service partners, government agencies and the wider community, ensuring that interactions with stakeholders are informed and objective;
- Promote the work of AHV and encourage better community ownership, providing legitimacy and a clear mandate to service provision;
- Encourage relevant stakeholders to share the values of AHV and promote reciprocity of learning with the intent to further enhance effective service outcomes and partner development; and
- Create linkages with pre-existing strategies and operational structures within AHV, further asserting the need for the service and its ideals.



Community Consultation – Orbost

AHV is putting our strategy in place to ensure efficacy of communication and to best promote our service. We aim to instill an organisation-wide commitment to underpin all interactions with respect and integrity, with a focus on Aboriginal culture, practices and beliefs.

AHV is working towards becoming a practice leader with the intent to steer Aboriginal Victorians towards more sustainable and empowered livelihoods.

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