

## New home offers safe haven for racially abused Indigenous family

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If home is where the heart is, Thorne Smith was feeling broken inside.

A few months ago, the public housing complex in Melbourne's north where he lived in with his two young daughters felt more like a prison, trapped by the racist taunts of neighbours.

When *The Age* visited [in February](#) to highlight the gap between the lives of Indigenous Australians and the wider community – in cities, not just the outback – it wasn't clear the Smith family would stay together.

"I saw it in the paper and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, what a shocking story'," said Jenny Samms, head of Aboriginal Housing Victoria.

However, a subsequent investigation found the family had fallen deeper into the gap than realised: the Department of Human Services had missed that the family was Aboriginal so Samms' organisation had never been notified.

"We have a priority group who are in very dire circumstances," Samms said, and once the mistake was discovered, her organisation immediately put the Smith family on a waiting list to find a new home.

The task was not easy. Aboriginal Housing Victoria owns 73 houses across the state and manages more than 1500 others on behalf of the government.

However, Samms said there was a major problem with damage to houses, often related to drug use, family violence or other symptoms of disadvantage.

Up to \$30,000 had to be spent to fix a house for the Smith family so they could move to a nearby suburb, with no government cash to assist.

Samms was also able to call in a personal favour to find furniture and linen with donations from a retirement village.

However, she is concerned at what she calls a "systemic failure" to provide safe public housing.

The message from officialdom was that the Smith case was not urgent because the family already had a roof over their heads.

"We've been able to do this for one and might be able to do it for 10. But we cannot do it for everyone," Samms said.

Thorne Smith, who moved into the new home a few weeks ago, feels a lot better and there is a football ground nearby where the girls can play.

Lisa Thorpe from the Bubup Wilam Aboriginal child and family centre, who has followed the Smith family case, said the new home was life-changing.

"If you want change in people's lives, they have to be housed properly; not in dumps, but in a place they feel safe," Thorpe said.

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/new-home-offers-safe-haven-for-racially-abused-indigenous-family-20150531-ghdgrh.html>*