

# Case Study

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## Wunan Transitional Housing – Transforming Lives in the East Kimberley



### Background

In the East Kimberley as few as 11% of Indigenous people own their house, compared to 41.8% of non-Indigenous people<sup>1</sup>, and the majority of families do not consider home ownership an option in their lifetime or that of their children. Yet home ownership is consistently identified in research and by Indigenous people themselves as a key indicator of intergenerational wellbeing: owning a home is closely related to improved outcomes in education<sup>2</sup>, income and employment; and it provides a secure asset base against which people can borrow and upon which they can create wealth<sup>3</sup>.

The East Kimberley Development Package Transitional Housing program was developed in 2012 by the Wunan Foundation, to move motivated Indigenous people and their families into their own homes by removing barriers that might prevent them. Barriers include unemployment and welfare dependency, lack of access to savings or loans, low incomes, and lack of financial literacy. Funded by NAB, the WA Government's Department of Housing and Royalties for Regions, the program includes home loan application assistance, money management services, family counselling, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, employment and training support, and incentives for keeping children in school. Tenants have to meet criteria linked to stable employment, school attendance and program commitment. Over 100 tenants have engaged in the programme since 2012, with 55 transitional houses tenanted (40 in Kununurra and 15 in Halls Creek) and strong demand for more indicated by a long waiting list. A second stage (TH2) seeks to almost double this, to meet demand and also leverage the wide social benefits emerging from the Cashless Debit Card trial in the region<sup>4</sup>.

### Approach

In October 2015 Sarah Nattey, Senior Advisor in Remote Indigenous Housing at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, was seconded to Wunan to help develop TH2. Her brief was to produce a \$25m proposal for the WA Government to extend the program by 50 new transitional houses.

Working with Transitional Housing Manager Debbie Cain, Sarah began by identifying and costing the resources required for the program's expansion, including the houses and the wrap-around services essential to the program. Wunan's model for social change was central to this: developed by Chairman Ian Trust, it articulates the conditions for transitional housing to be a major catalyst in moving Indigenous people from crisis to stability. Sarah held discussions with regional and local service providers, Indigenous organisations, current home-owners and the community, to understand the housing needs of people in the East Kimberley. Her understanding of state and local government building and planning legislation and policies was vital, as was her dedication in consulting the broad range of stakeholders necessary for a comprehensive plan.

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<sup>1</sup> 2011 Census; until the 2016 census data is released this remains the most up-to-date data for the region

<sup>2</sup> 2015 WA Dept of Education's School Performance data showed that children associated with the transitional housing program had a school attendance rate of 93%; compared with 67% for other Indigenous children across the Kimberley region (Wunan)

<sup>3</sup> 2016 Productivity Commission Report on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

<sup>4</sup> <http://wunan.org.au/chairmans-message>

Sarah also supported the Transitional Housing team develop an evidence base and key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure their success, and templates to assist with future funding proposals.

## Outcomes

The detailed TH2 business plan and corresponding funding proposals are a powerful evidence and advocacy base for Wunan to articulate its vision. They have been used to add to the growing momentum around expansion of the Transitional Housing Program. A Regional Service Reform roadmap released by the WA Government in July 2016 states a preference to build transitional housing, rather than public housing in regional towns and larger communities, and commits to backing the expansion of transitional housing in the East Kimberley. The North West Aboriginal Housing Fund is being established, with up to \$200 million to increase housing choices and support services.

In terms of capability build and skills transfer at Wunan, Sarah's work developing KPIs and data evidence for the Transitional Housing team helped them to track strong results in house ownership, school attendance and employment growth the following year. It also helped staff to develop critical thinking and strategic engagement plans with stakeholders including government.

As a government representative dedicated to Indigenous development, Sarah was keen to use her secondment to support the government to connect better with communities, and vice versa. Reflecting on this, she said: *"There is a general lack of understanding as to how decisions are made by government, and the speed with which decisions can be and are made. Part of my role was to assist the staff at Wunan to better understand government process so they have a more realistic notion of timelines and process"*. Sarah also felt that she added value by demonstrating *"positive interactions with government"* as something to expect and create, to achieve Indigenous development outcomes.

At the same time as increasing literacy in government processes, and supporting better engagement with them, Sarah was able to see how those processes appear 'from the other side'. *"I learnt first-hand the effect of government red tape on Indigenous organisations and staff and the frustration this causes"*, was her reflection, adding that experiencing life in an Indigenous community was also illuminating from a professional and personal perspective: *"I have worked in Indigenous Affairs for several years and have theoretical, policy understanding of the issues, but the secondment gave me an opportunity to witness it for myself. For example, I'm aware of the issues related to alcohol, the violence, impact on employment and impact on children, but had the opportunity to work on the night patrol bus and see for myself what happens every night of the week in Kununurra. I've also felt the despair local people experience when a family member dies unexpectedly and violently, and the grief they feel. These experiences have been confronting, but in a way which has helped me gain some perspective on the very fortunate life I lead in Canberra."*

Motivated by regional reforms including transitional housing and the cashless debit card trial spearheaded by Wunan, Sarah decided to step up her commitment post secondment. Having seen Indigenous leaders in the East Kimberley seeking to work in a different way with Government under the national Empowered Communities banner, she began a new role within PM&C's Indigenous Affairs. Sarah now works directly on Empowered Communities, which she describes as *"an Indigenous-led proposal, whose underlying principle is Indigenous people having a say in decisions which affect them, and having the same opportunities and choices as any other Australian."*

## Next steps

Wunan's target for doubling house ownership by 2025 is five new houses per year, and support for achieving this is growing alongside evidence of the links between housing and improved education, health and employment. This aligns with the region's Empowered Communities first priority of employment, specifically the creation of 100 new jobs for Indigenous people in Kununurra. Through capacity building and direct project assistance, future Jawun secondees will be based at the Empowered Communities Backbone organisation Binarri-Binyja Yarrowoo Aboriginal Corporation to work on implementation of this priority, amid the region's broader reform agenda of social change driven by Indigenous leadership and communities.