

# Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Policy

## Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. AIM .....	2
3. PRINCIPLES .....	2
3.1. Access to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers and/or advocates .....	2
3.2. Appropriate Communication .....	3
3.3. Cultural Awareness Training .....	3
3.4. The importance of localised knowledge .....	3
3.5. Understanding social and historical factors .....	3
3.6. Engagement and Participation .....	4
3.7. Inclusive Systems and Policies .....	4
4. RELATED LEGISLATION, INDUSTRY FRAMEWORKS AND STANDARDS, ACHVL POLICY AND PROCEDURES .....	4
4.1. Standards .....	4
4.2. Legislation .....	5
4.3. Residential Tenancy Acts .....	5
4.4. Codes, frameworks and agreements .....	5
4.5. ACHVL related policies and processes .....	6
5. MONITORING AND REVIEW .....	<b>ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.</b>

## 1. Introduction

Aboriginal Community Housing (VIC) Limited (ACHVL) is a leading provider of social and affordable housing solutions and services in Australia. It is committed to our peoples' culture being the core of our work and in ensuring respect for and inclusivity of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, contractors, customers and visitors as they interact with our services and all those who may be affected by our operations.

ACHVL celebrates the survival and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures across Australia's many traditional lands and language groups. ACHVL also recognises the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to determine their own future and to live in accordance with their own cultural values and customs. Together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ACHVL is committed to securing and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' diversity and cultures.

ACHVL recognises the valuable contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and looks forward to working together in partnership, with mutual respect and on an equal footing.

## 2. Aim

The aim of this policy is to ensure the ongoing cultural competence of ACHVL and developing and maintaining a culturally inviting environment for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, contractors, customers and visitors in our organisation. The following principles will be of assistance in maintaining the standards of competence throughout our operations across Australia as ACHVL adopts a leading practice approach to culturally competent service delivery and ensure culturally inviting environments for our employees, contractors, clients and visitors.

## 3. Principles

These principles guide the overall mechanisms that ACHVL employs to create and maintain a leading practice approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These standards enable the organisation to be confident it is providing a nationally consistent approach within each jurisdiction, regarding the ways in which ACHVL work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and proactively contribute towards the journey of reconciliation whilst providing an environment that is culturally inviting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In addition, ACHVL ensures that its organisation is compliant with National, and State based regulations, industry standards, contractual obligations, legislation and organisational policies and procedures in relation to acknowledging respect, equality and equity as it pertains to all that exist with the national diversity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who access our organisation.

Principles of Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples include but are not limited to:

- Access to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers, community Elders, local forums and/or advocates
- Appropriate communication tools and resources list
- Cultural Awareness training locally including strategies capturing local cultural resources and forward planning into operational practice
- The importance of localised knowledge
- Understanding the impact of social and historical factors, including widespread loss of cultural knowledge, inherited trauma and an ongoing legacy of social exclusion
- Engagement and participation
- Inclusive systems and policies

### 3.1. Access to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers and/or advocates

ACHVL understands that there are many occasions when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prefer and/or request to work or speak with a member of their community. ACHVL aims to employ, train and mentor Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people from communities in which we work. ACHVL will ensure that every operation across its business is able to provide access to an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander worker or advocate.

ACHVL operations without a nominated local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander representative/s are required to develop and maintain a database of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocacy services that would be able to assist people in any of these areas and will assist in the referral process if required.

ACHVL will work supportively with advocates in any such circumstances to ensure its employees, customers, contractors or visitors are able to engage with us and that this requirement is never an obstacle to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working with or for ACHVL.

### **3.2. Appropriate Communication**

ACHVL acknowledges that English is a second language for many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people across Australia and that English literacy rates for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples are below the average of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. When able, ACHVL will utilise each community's language greetings and other words of key languages within its written correspondence. ACHVL employees and contractors will focus on sound verbal communication in all areas and utilise written correspondence as a confirmation tool.

ACHVL will always use clear and simple language, in its communication with its customers, employees, contractors and visitors. ACHVL understands that communication is a "two-way street" and will always seek to ensure that communications are understood, and that people know they always have a right to ask ACHVL to continue explaining until they are confident, they have understood.

ACHVL will always respond in a timely manner to all enquiries to ensure feedback and information is provided in line with operational practices.

ACHVL staff will always be able to arrange to have in-person meetings with people to discuss any issues or communications as it acknowledges that written communication, while important for confirmation and evidence, is not always successful in appropriately delivering the required information and message.

### **3.3. Cultural Awareness Training**

ACHVL is aware that many people do not necessarily come to the organisation with a developed knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their histories, their beliefs and their cultures, especially localised community awareness. It is a mandate of ACHVL that all employees and contractors that work with or on behalf of ACHVL undergo Cultural Awareness Training, including localised Cultural awareness training. It is a minimum requirement that all employees and contractors to complete the ACHVL Cultural Awareness E-Learning program upon induction to the organisation. Permanent employees of ACHVL are required to participate in and complete localised face-to-face cultural awareness training at least every two years from the community that they are working with or the country they are working on. Training is to be provided by a recognised training provider that encompasses localised cultural knowledge and protocol in each operational area.

### **3.4. The importance of localised knowledge**

ACHVL acknowledges that Australia is home to more than 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups and nations and understands that the traditional custodians of country and waters across the nation maintain their own customs and practices, as well as their own histories. ACHVL acknowledges the importance of localised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge within the areas it works across Australia and values the connections it makes with local people, corporations and organisations and actively works to further develop these relationships to ensure its operations are well informed and relevant to the local community.

ACHVL works with all its service delivery teams to ensure they develop and maintain a database of strong networks with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and people to deliver a leading practice service.

### **3.5. Understanding social and historical factors**

ACHVL acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia have been the target of myriad discriminatory practices and failed government policy for over 200 years and up to the present day. ACHVL acknowledges the resilience and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their survival throughout these failures of government and social practices. The impact of these practices and policies however on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been profound. The legacy and inter-generational wounding occasioned, sees Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia today leading the statistics in both juvenile and adult incarceration, infant mortality and life expectancy, suicide, school attendance and educational attainment, unemployment and poor socio-economic status.

ACHVL understands that many of the gaps between non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are wide and the challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are many and often complex. ACHVL will endeavour to maintain a culturally safe environment for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at all times and will work with people towards solutions and achievable outcomes. ACHVL will employ ongoing training initiatives and actively promote awareness by incorporating culturally appropriate practice into its operational processes and policy development that is mindful of such factors that may affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. ACHVL understands the importance of being invited by the local custodians and to consistently consult with appropriate leaders within each individual community.

### **3.6. Engagement and Participation**

ACHVL will always seek and encourage the engagement and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in its operations and development of its service delivery, in all areas of the organisation. ACHVL is committed to ensuring its organisation is culturally competent and it understands that the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is essential to this. Ninety five percent (95%) of ACHVL's employees are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. ACHVL resources and supports its staff by providing peer support, training and mentoring.

ACHVL employees provide feedback and input on the development of its services, review and development of policies and procedures, innovative ways in which to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness across the organisation. ACHVL employees focus on relationships, building partners as ACHVL continues to build stronger connections in local communities and with customers.

A Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Handbook has been developed for ACHVL by the group and is to be implemented in all ACHVL operations across Australia in conjunction with this policy.

ACHVL values Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff in a wide variety of roles across the company, and seeks to employ, retain and promote Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff. With the support of the human resources department, managers proactively identify recruitment opportunities, and develop retention and promotion strategies for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.

### **3.7. Inclusive Systems and Policies**

ACHVL is committed to consistently working towards leading practice as it pertains to being a culturally competent organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. ACHVL is aware that to be both a competent and safe organisation, its systems and policies must seek to be inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their voices and being respectful to their histories and their customs.

ACHVL mandates that all formal meetings, events and conferences held at its locations open with an 'Acknowledgement to Country', as described in the ACHVL Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Handbook. All offices are to display an 'Acknowledgement to Country' plaque, together with an ATSIS Map of Australia, to acknowledge the many first nations within the one we live and work on today.

ACHVL is contributing to the journey of reconciliation with its own Reconciliation Action Plan and is working with Reconciliation Australia to achieve its designated actions on this journey. The work in this space will continue to promote the inclusivity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations in our business systems and processes and remains a priority for ACHVL.

## **4. Related legislation, industry frameworks and standards, ACHVL policy and procedures**

### **4.1. Standards**

National Community Housing Standards: Standard 1.2; Establishing and Maintaining Tenancies; Section 3 – Tenants Rights and Participation
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Department of Human Services Standards: Section 1 - Empowerment
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Related legislation, industry frameworks and standards, ACHVL policy and procedures (cont.)

#### **4.2. Legislation**

Housing Act. 1983 (VIC)
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Equal Opportunity Act (VIC) 2010
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Australian Human Rights Commission Act (COM) 1986
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Racial Discrimination Act (COM) 1975
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#### **4.3. Residential Tenancy Acts**

Residential Tenancies Act. 1997 (VIC)
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#### **4.4. Codes, frameworks and agreements**

Reconciliation Australia
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The National Affordable Housing Agreement
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OOH, Homelessness Assistance Program Guidelines and Conditions Funding 2006-2009 (VIC)
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Consumer Charter for Community Managed Housing and Homelessness Services
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National Regulatory Code
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Victorian Regulatory Framework
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The Human Rights and Responsibilities Charter Act 2006 (VIC)
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Related legislation, industry frameworks and standards, ACHVL policy and procedures (cont.)

**4.5. ACHVL related policies and processes**

ACHVL Housing and Homelessness Policies and Procedures
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ACHVL Tenancy Manual
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