



Taressa Mongta, a Surry Hills tenant, and Merinda Dutton, Aboriginal Legal Officer at the Tenants' Union of NSW.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOME

Merinda Dutton – Aboriginal Legal Officer, Tenants' Union of NSW

This is a special edition of *Tenant News*. It's all about the issues affecting Aboriginal tenants in NSW. We look at the importance of 'home' and having stable housing and explore the impact that this has on overall wellbeing.

We have produced this edition of *Tenant News* to coincide with the Koori Rugby League Knock Out. We know that the Knock Out is an important time of the year for our mob to catch-up with family and old friends as well

as to support our favourite teams!

Inside, you'll find stories and photos of Aboriginal tenants from around Sydney. These stories help to show what home means to that person. We're also proud to unveil a deadly artwork by Pauline Syron-Coxon about tenancy on page 3.

We also take a look at a 'Day in the Life' of an Aboriginal Tenants' Advocate and get an insight into the key challenges and highlights of working with and

advocating on behalf of Aboriginal people in relation to housing.

We are also very excited to be launching a new set of Aboriginal Tenants Rights Factsheets that address common issues facing tenants.

Hopefully you find this magazine useful and informative. And remember: tenants have rights! If you need help, get in touch with your local Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service. See the back page for contact details. 🏠

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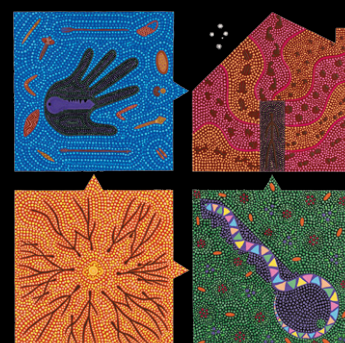
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 **TENANTS' UNION**
OF NEW SOUTH WALES



HOME IS EVERYTHING TO ME

Taressa Mongta – Surry Hills tenant

I grew up on the Northern foreshores of Botany Bay at the La Perouse Aboriginal Reserve AKA 'Lappa Mish' in the 1970s and 1980's.

It was great growing up there. The sea was our backyard – 6 beaches, National Park Lands. We had plenty of space and freedom. Everyone (mainly us girls and a couple a boys) had a horse. In the words of Mr Greg Blaxland "there were that many horses, in the end they were tying them up with string!"

Girls wore their hair long and free or in pony tails. Boys had surfboards and went out fishing and diving often and played a mean game of football and the communities men sat in fish camps and fished seasonally.

It was a close knit vibrant community. Even the dogs were free (registration wasn't compulsory and may I say we had more than one!).

My first work opportunity came as a laundry assistant at the Prince Henry Hospital. It was great. I started early and knocked-off in time to head straight to the beach. I was then called in by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) to sit the Public Service exam. I was successful and chose employment in the CES.

I have been living mainly in the inner city for the past 17 years or so. Firstly in Redfern and now in Surry Hills.

I have a 3 bedroom home which isn't big enough for us now as I have had an additional 3 children and we number 5 to 6, sometimes more when family come through to visit.

"I love living here now because I am close to everything including the pulse of Aboriginal life (the Tent Embassy at the Block and various thought leaders) and services we can access that our people fought for."

But, I love living here now because I am close to everything including the pulse of Aboriginal life (Tent Embassy at the Block and various thought leaders) and services we can access that our people fought for. Also, there is support for the kids such as afterschool and vacation care nearby. There are active church communities, which I utilise. Also, I know my neighbours. They hail from overseas and they are very good neighbours.

Before that and before I had my kids and obtained housing I was living with extended family and shifting from house to house, I did a lot of couch surfing and spent time in hostels and refuges, I lived an itinerant life of sorts while I pursued education. It all stopped when the children came along.

My 4 children are aged between 9 and 15. They are growing up differently in high density inner city living. I am sad they will miss the settling influence and instruction of Aunties and Uncles who would share responsibility for them. But we (the community and our family)

make community where we are now – as we can.

Stephen Fields from the Greater Sydney Tenants Advice Service (GSATS) in Redfern has been helping me out with a tenancy issue that I am having, regarding damage my kids allegedly caused around property. He has been great in tackling my issues holistically. That's important because some days we can get knocked around by life a bit. And it's important to be sensitive enough to offer support when we are impacted by 'sorry business' and overwhelmed by the conundrum of living in a city and maintaining and enacting responsibilities for Kin and Country.

I have recommenced work on a project started some 20 years ago called 'Djalaringi' (which means 'something that belongs to us'). It is a play about the story of La Perouse, the 1988 Long March AKA 'the March for Survival', the Great Depression, the Koori Knock-Out, the Church and the Sea. I want to consolidate the work done by so many and hope it will be a catalyst for solidarity and unity to stand up to give our people dignity.

I wrote the following with the advice and assistance of other community members back in 1994, forever capturing our peoples desire to maintain our role in the Long March of 1988:

"The experience of the Long March found our community smothered by an immense sense of history, a very strange feeling that we may possibly experience only once in our lifetimes. We waited many days for our families from the coast and country areas and for tribal people to arrive. We knew very well that the gubbas would celebrate their



Taressa Mongta outside her place in Surry Hills

great achievements and pioneering spirit on this day. Sadness and anger, staunch pride and resolution mingled together and when our people finally arrived many tears did flow. But, we were so happy to see each other and our children held tight to the black arms and hands of tribal people who we did not really know as if they were holding on to life itself."

Having a stable home means for me-peace of mind. My home is everything to me, its protection, comfort and a stable base for my kids. It shields me against the world. From home I can venture out and begin to create and contribute back to my community. If I didn't have this home I wouldn't be able to achieve half as much as I do.

I want to finish this project I've been working on; it's been my life's work.

Because I believe it is important to all of us as 1988 was a Landmark occasion in our Nation's history. And I am grateful all the time for my home and community; they are the base camp so I can climb my mountain. I feel sorry for people living rough and I know that means the great majority of us.

So many of our people are overcrowded and/or reluctant to go through the bureaucracy required and they despair like I did, but hang in there, it is worth it! It feels horrible sometimes to be unsettled and homeless. But, with help and if you can maintain study or training or employment you'll get by. It's most important we maintain our focus to get housing and we need the help of services like the Greater Sydney Tenants Advice service and staff like Stephen and his colleagues and tenants. 🏠

"So many of our people are overcrowded and/or reluctant to go through the bureaucracy required and they despair like I did, but hang in there, it is worth it!"

Photos of Taressa, Merinda, Annette and Venus (on this page, the front cover, page 7 and 12), by Lee Stefan.

MAKING TRACKS, COMING HOME

TENANCY-INSPIRED PAINTING BY ABORIGINAL ARTIST PAULINE SYRON-COXON



Aboriginal Artist Pauline Syron-Coxon created this deadly painting about tenancy issues. Pauline used to be a Tenant Advocate. The Tenants' Union of NSW commissioned her to paint anything that inspired her about tenancy. We are so happy with the painting and the powerful messages it contains! Thanks Pauline. If you would like to learn more about Pauline, please visit her website: paulinesyroncoxon.com

This painting has been inspired by the logo of the Tenants' Union of NSW but with a Koori design and symbolism. The four squares are Community, Key to Success, Lending a Hand and Making Tracks to Your Tenancy, Coming Home.

I used Australian Aboriginal generic symbols such as the camp ground for community, the rainbow serpent and the bush foods.

The tools I used are all commonly used by Aboriginal communities. The tracks and the animals I choose are also found throughout NSW.

I did not wish to use symbols, foods or tracks that were particularly from my country Worimi and Biripi Country, as I really wanted to connect to all Aboriginal communities.

I felt that it was culturally appropriate to use universal symbols such as the Rainbow Serpent and the Southern Cross as they are easy recognisable symbols that all Australians connect with including the Aboriginal community.

I wanted the painting to visually tell a story and that all cultures would be able to interpret. I also wanted the painting to be visually appealing and interesting, so it drew the viewer into the message.

I present the final painting with great excitement!

COMMUNITY

The painting begins with Community (bottom left). This image has as its centre a camp site, with different family structures and individuals represented. Looking at the people there are adults with children, single adults with children and adults without children.

The community is looking for home and they are in need of a tenancy. The Campsite in the centre is representing their tenancy but they all are unable to reach it at the moment. The community has to reach out for support.

KEY TO SUCCESS

This image (bottom right) is one of the directions that the community may go to obtain their tenancy.

The Rainbow Serpent is an Aboriginal dreamtime story icon that represents creation. The rainbow serpent is within the key to a successful tenancy with the support of abundance and resources.

The bush tucker represents this abundance, with purple Bush plums, Red Lilly Pilly's and orange Yams. A healthy community has a healthy tenancy that can be sustained.

LENDING A HAND

This image (top left) represents another direction that the community may wish to go.

By giving advice and advocacy, the Network of Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Services is able to lend a hand. The tools surrounding the helping hand are from the bottom and going in a clockwise direction: Hunting Spear, Woomera, Shield, Boomerang, Stone Axe, Digging Stick, Fishing Spear, Dilly Bag, Colomon, Grinding Stone and Bowl, Non-Return Boomerang, Nulla Nulla, and Clap Sticks.

By utilising the tools, the community will find the keys to their tenancy in the palm of their hand. The community only has to reach out to access the tools.

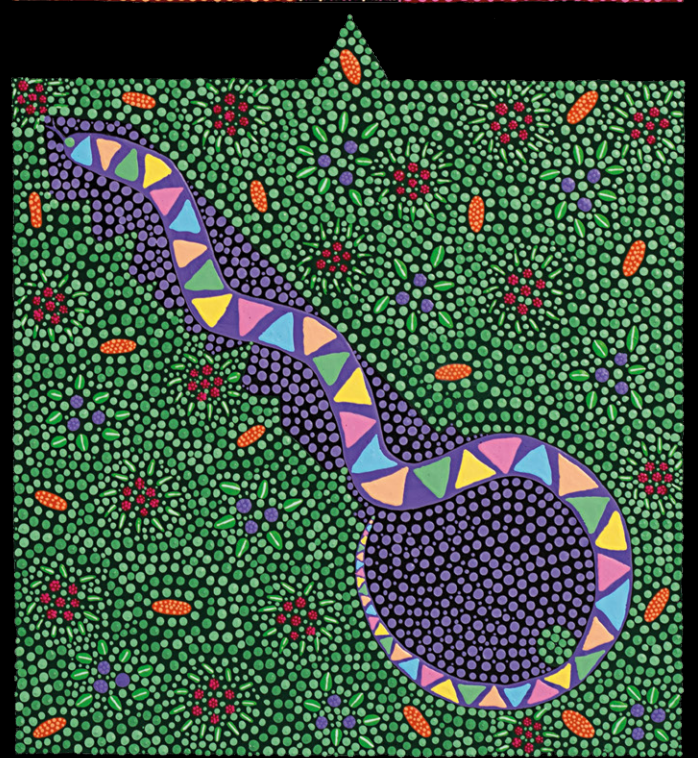
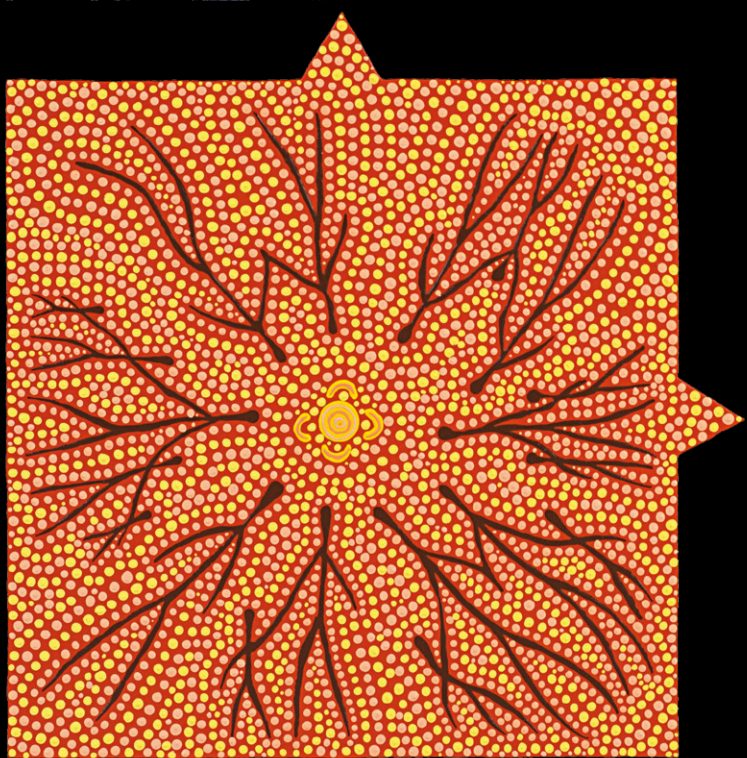
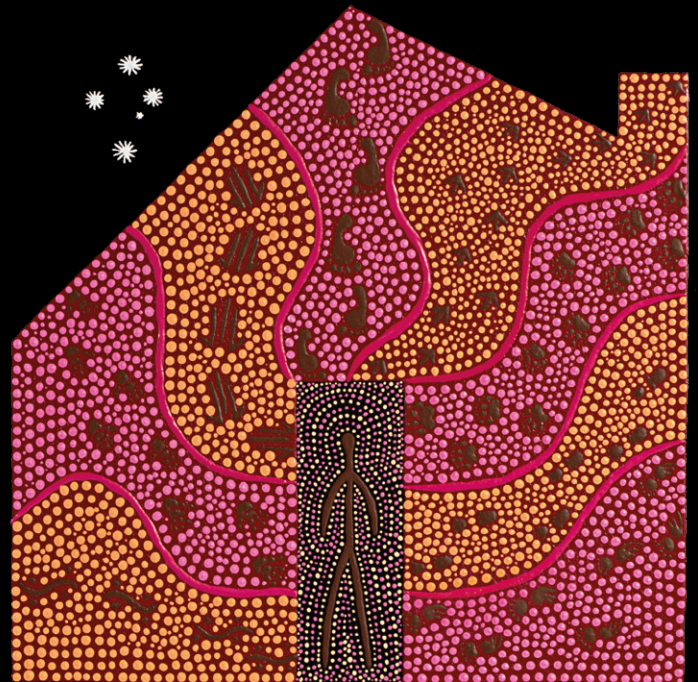
MAKING TRACKS TO YOUR TENANCY, COMING HOME.

This image (top right) is the final destination for the community to arrive, and that is coming home.

The tracks surrounding the house are all on their journey to the entry of their tenancy. Starting on the left hand side and going in a clockwise direction you will notice the tracks of a Lizard, Koala, Kangaroo, Man, Emu, Dingo, Platypus and Echidna. All are equal and represent the totems of our ancestors and the diversity of our community today.

The Southern Cross is a symbol of our great southern land and traditionally was used to navigate the land.

A tenant stands illuminated with light in the door way, they have made tracks to their tenancy and are coming home. 🏠



*Tenancy-inspired painting by Aboriginal Artist Pauline Syron-Coxon.
Clockwise from bottom left panel: Community; Lending a Hand;
Making Tracks to your Tenancy, Coming Home; Key to Success.*

PLUMBING HEALTH CHECKS

BETTER PLUMBING MEANS BETTER HEALTH

It is a sad reality that many rural and remote Aboriginal communities still face health risks caused by poor quality plumbing which includes a lack of adequate sanitation, and poor access to clean and safe water.

NSW Fair Trading (NSWFT) has launched a pilot program that provides plumbing health checks for Aboriginal Housing providers and their tenants living in rural and remote locations in NSW. The program has so far been

run in Lightning Ridge, Walgett, and Bourke.

The program involves volunteers from the Master Plumbers Association (MPA) as well as apprentices from Master Plumbers Apprentices Ltd (MPAL).

The program aims to give Aboriginal tenants a better understanding of and capacity to ensure proper operation of plumbing and drainage.

The program also helps communities to identify basic signs that indicate system failure, blocked drains and leaking water mains. Education on how to prevent scalding from hot water systems is also part of the program.

Access to skilled and affordable plumbers in rural and remote communities can be difficult. To overcome some of these problems, Fair Trading engaged two Aboriginal apprentices to undertake minor rectification work in as many homes as possible.

Speaking to the *First Nations Telegraph*, Aboriginal apprentice Scott Hoskins (pictured) said that he has found the program incredibly satisfying.

"The week away was very eye opening and made me feel my choice of the plumbing trade as a career was justified."

"The week away was very eye opening and made me feel my choice of the plumbing trade as a career was justified," he said.

Apprentice Michael Moore also said he had learnt a lot and Bourke was very different working environment compared to Sydney, where he normally works.

It is also hoped that the program will help minimise potentially expensive repairs and reduce environmental impacts. 🏠



Aboriginal apprentices Scott Hoskins & Michael Moore (left), with other members of the Plumbing Health Checks team in Bourke: Peggy Conridge (NSWFT), Kieran Shipp (NSWFT), Brett Cunningham (NSWFT), and Paul Naylor (MPA).

A PLACE OF MY OWN

Annette Murphy – Doonside tenant

I am originally from Walgett, Northern NSW. In Walgett everyone knows me as 'Daughter'. I would like to move back to Walgett, but my children and grandchildren are in Sydney, so I will probably stay here.

I have lived in Sydney since I was about 19 years old. I have been living in my current home in Doonside for about 4 years. I rent through the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO).

My home is everything. It's about having your own space, and independence. I have 4 children and 7 grandchildren. One of my daughters, Venus, lives not far away from me. But we can only handle each other in small doses, so I need to have a place of my own! My grandchildren come over on the weekends.

It's also important that I'm close to the shops so that I can get there in my scooter.

I have a physical disability so some aspects of the property make it difficult for me, particularly with my wheelchair. There is a steep driveway and I have fallen down it a couple of times and hurt my ankle.

Thankfully the AHO has installed a disabled bathroom and it is the best room in the house!

A few years ago, I had some issues with my tenancy. AHO were taking money out of my account for an extra person who housing thought had been living there but had not. Because of this, I had to live on \$80 per fortnight.

Stephen Fields from the Greater Sydney Aboriginal Tenants Service (GSATS) has been helping me with my matter. While my dispute was being dealt with, I was stupid and I stopped paying rent. I ended up getting a refund, but it would've been bigger if I hadn't stopped paying rent.

I felt comfortable working with Stephen, as I knew him because we both come from Walgett and he was able to help me.

Sometimes I feel that government departments have this mentality that all Black people are dumb but that isn't the case. One of the people who worked at the AHO made comments to me that I should just be grateful for what I had. I put a complaint into the Ombudsman about the way that a senior manager had spoken to me in the AHO and am waiting to hear back. 🏠

"Sometimes I feel that government departments have this mentality that all Black people are dumb but that isn't the case."



Annette Murphy (right) and her daughter Venus (left)

REDFERN ABORIGINAL TENT EMBASSY

COMPETING VISIONS FIND COMMON GROUND



THE ABORIGINAL HOUSING COMPANY AND THE BLOCK: SOME HISTORY

The Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) was started in 1972 as part of the growing Aboriginal rights movement. Its mission was, and is, to provide affordable accommodation for Aboriginal communities in Sydney.

The Block in Redfern is an important, well known piece of land for Aboriginal Australia. The Block is where the AHC first started building its housing and where the tensions between the mainstream legal system and the older Aboriginal law are always near the surface.

The Block is recognisable by a large area of green grass with a giant Aboriginal Flag on the side of the gym that borders its southern edge. Most of the houses were demolished in the lead up to the 2000 Olympics. Events are still often held at the Block by the Aboriginal communities of the area.

Years of State government intervention had frustrated repeated attempts by the AHC to redevelop the land. Frank Sartor, the former State Planning Minister was famously quoted in 2004 as saying in response to plans to rebuild 62 low income houses, "No Government, Labor, Liberal or Calathumpian... will ever support what they [AHC] are proposing."

A decade later, Sartor is in government no more, and the AHC had a new plan to redevelop the block in conjunction with property developer Deicorp. Under this

new plan, the AHC aimed to fund its social housing mission by first developing parts of Eveleigh St for commercial purposes.

THE BEGINNING OF THE REDFERN ABORIGINAL TENT EMBASSY

Not everyone in the local Aboriginal community was convinced by the AHC's plan. On National Sorry Day 2014, a large demonstration led by a founding member of the AHC, Aunty Jenny Munro, marched onto the grassy area of the Block, just down from the AHC offices and began erecting some tents. This became known as the Redfern Aboriginal Tent Embassy.

Aunty Jenny stated, "Our community have been concerned for a very long time about the development plans."

For almost 18 months after those first tents were pitched there was a continuous occupation at the Block by the Embassy. Relations

between the Embassy and AHC were sometimes acrimonious. AHC issued an eviction notice and erected eviction signs in February of this year.

The Redfern Tent Embassy's major concern was that the original purpose of the AHC was being lost and commercial interests were taking precedent. Many did not believe Aboriginal housing would follow the building of commercial projects on the site. Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion noted recently: "Jenny Munro has expressed concern about the high risk that the Aboriginal housing will not be built and I accept those concerns."

The dispute on how the land should be used has slowly been making its way through the mainstream court system. Finally, the NSW Supreme Court made a decision last month to uphold property law and give the AHC the right to evict the Redfern Aboriginal Tent Embassy from the Block.





LAST-MINUTE RESOLUTION

Amazingly, a last-minute resolution was reached. The Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Nigel Scullion became more involved in making an agreement between the parties, and even put some money where his mouth was. \$5 million has been promised to assist the AHC in securing loans to fund the construction of 62 properties for Aboriginal housing. Importantly this money came with the requirement that the housing be built before, or at the same time as, any commercial developments.

Finally, at the end of August 2015, 15 months after the Embassy started, the AHC agreed to an arrangement that would see them use the Federal money and construct Aboriginal Housing at the same time as the commercial development.

Solicitor for the tent embassy, Lisa De Luca, noted in an interview with the ABC that, "Before the embassy was set up there was no finance for this development, either commercial or Aboriginal housing, and Aboriginal housing didn't look like it would ever be built. Now there's a deal before the Aboriginal Housing Company being offered on


the basis that they build Aboriginal housing first or at the same time as the commercial property, so it's a wonderful result."

AHC Chairperson Ms Alisi Tutuila said, "We have always wanted to build affordable homes on the Block as soon as possible... We hope that the Commonwealth grant will assist AHC to secure funding for the balance of the Pemulwuy Project."

Embassy supporters held one last big bonfire gathering and then packed up the site. Auntie Jenny Munro stated: "We've had some serious open-heart surgery there at the Block, but I think we can say after this that the black heart of the city is still beating."

"I'm old school. My teachers taught me the principles of our resistance – we never ceded our land to anyone. The embassy has demonstrated that for our people, resistance is the only way to go."

"For all the communities around the country facing closure, don't talk sovereignty, assert your sovereignty. Put up an embassy and demand the funding for your basic rights. We will fight with you every step of the way."

Photos in this article (except the one of Auntie Jenny below), are by Glenn Lockitch. Check out his website to see a great selection of photos from the human rights and environmental issues he's covered: glennlockitchphotography.net. 

"We've had some serious open-heart surgery there at The Block, but I think we can say after this that the black heart of the city is still beating."

Auntie Jenny Munro, at the Tenants Advice Services meeting



HOME AND HEALTH

THE THREAT OF RELOCATION CAN CAUSE STRESS AND HARDSHIP

Carol Carter is an Aboriginal woman living in public housing in Bankstown in Sydney. In September 2014, Carol received a letter from the Department of Housing in relation to relocating her to another house because of redevelopment happening at the place she currently lives. Carol has lived at her current home for over 14 years. Carol has been receiving help from her local Aboriginal Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service.

How did you feel when you received that letter?

It felt like my gut had been ripped out

So you have some health issues what are they?

I have a rare condition called Guillain Barre Syndrome. If I stress out my body freaks out and I can drop things. My peripheral nerves have been damaged where I have no motor nerves or sensory nerves. Everything feels like velvet to me. I can feel the difference between sharp and blunt and hot and cold but everything else is velvet. I can't peel oranges or anything round but everything else I can cut up and peel but I have to be careful. That's why this house has been modified for me, the oven is up and the bench tops are low and the doorways are wide to allow me to fit my wheelchair through. They have made it easy to get things from the bench top and eat at the table.

How has Lorelle Corderoy from the Greater Sydney Aboriginal Tenants Service (GSATS) been helping you?

Lorelle has been a big help in advocating for me. She has made sure that she attends meetings with Housing, the relocation officer and Occupational Therapists. They contact Lorelle before they contact me, and only Lorelle can allow them to call me.

Ok and does that take some stress off you?

Absolutely, yes, yes. It's such a big help. I couldn't eat or sleep because Tyson my companion cat of 17 years got renal failure and then passed away on Christmas day last year.

So that makes the relocation even harder?

Yes, they want to put 18 units in this street but the homeowners have gone against the idea because the sewage is already really bad in the street. I have already called the guy twice this year and they said it would take 24 hours. So I called Lorelle and said I can't wait that long as I have to go to the toilet and it's about to overflow and I can't go to a public toilet due to my condition. So that has been a big help as she rang housing and they had someone here within 4 hours. Also, the neighbours and I have a little veggie garden around the side and I like to feed the bird and that's a big thing for me as it means I don't stress as much. And the neighbours are like friends and family around here. They help you out when you need it. When Tyson passed away I couldn't lift the body off the couch and the neighbours came over and helped and the neighbours have always said that if I ever need help to just ask. I don't want to move, as you never know the people you are likely to get.

Just having that stress about where you are going to be moved is not good for your health?

Yeah well that's it. When my sister came down because of Tyson's death, the relocation officer called and I had her on speakerphone. And she said that if you decline the house you will have to move to the flats in Padstow. I said no so she said that she would just terminate the tenancy and I would be thrown out on the street. I put in a complaint letter and also with Lorelle's

assistance that relocation officer is not with us anymore and we have a new one

Have you been treated better with the new one?

She has been OK, but I am wary with people who smile and are too kind as I don't want to let my guard down. People have to understand that I'm 66 years old and it's hard for me to move on because I have nothing at this point.

So you don't have friends or family close by?

No family or friends, the only friends that I have live in this street. It's like I have been taken and put in another country where I don't know anyone. That's how I feel about the relocation.

They just call themselves human services but it isn't human. The old lady across the road she got moved after 25 years, I said that I would see her soon and she responded with if I'm still alive. She had given up because no one was fighting for her. It was only Lorelle and I who stand up for her. Why are they punishing us? I have worked for 30 years and it isn't my fault I can't work any longer, I was given the wrong medication.

With the modifications that you have in the house now, does that mean that you can do everything by yourself without assistance?

Yes without assistance yes, they re-did the kitchen so I could reach it. They re-did the oven and a lazy Susan and knocked a wall out so I could go from the lounge room to the kitchen. They put in a new colour bond fence.

Did they offer you a new property?

Yes they did and it was filthy, had no toilet seat and excrement everywhere. The place had cockroaches everywhere. They

Carol Carter, Bankstown tenant, with Lorelle Corderoy, Tenant Advocate



“You can’t just come and move people out of their homes. It’s not fair.”

didn’t even clean it before they showed me. I couldn’t fit into the bathroom as the bath was small and on the wrong side. I’m too old to adapt my body to new changes and I’m scared.

Did they say that they were going to make modifications in the new property or what did they tell you about it?

They said that they were going to put the bedroom in the lounge room and change the door from the entrance and move the power box from the back to the front in case there was a blackout. They were going to change the small kitchen into a dining room but I can’t have the chair in there. The plumber said that he didn’t know about the plumbing but I need the assistant to be able to get behind me when I transfer to the bath.

At that point I put in a complaint as I felt they were treating me with

contempt and as a proud Aboriginal woman I’m not having my pride and my integrity belted around like that. I felt like because I’m an Aboriginal woman they thought I would just take it. But I don’t have to take it and they can’t treat me like a second-class citizen.

So do you feel like Lorelle has helped you to stand up for your rights?

Yes the support has been great and also Paddy Gibson and we have spoken to the *Koori Mail* and had posters made up. The Labor candidate Cameron Murphy said, “If I get in you won’t be moving,” but the other candidate got in.

Which other services do you have helping you, like getting groceries?

I don’t have any other services. I have a relationship with the local butcher and fresh fruit and vegie place where I can call them and they will deliver the stuff and I pay when they get here. If they move

me out of the area I would not be able to access those connections. I don’t like the fact that they just want to displace me after all this time and just ship me off to a strange place.

So would you recommend Lorelle to other people who would need help?

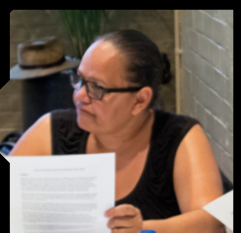
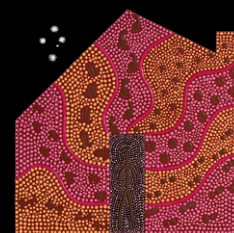
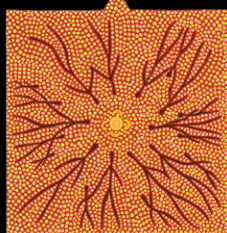
Yes I would! But I also think that you should do all you can and then go and say, “this is what I have done so far.”

Are you going to keep fighting?

You better believe it. Don’t take my kindness for weakness because you won’t get a second chance. I rang Linda Bernie and she wanted to come and see the environment. She said that she would send off a letter to the Minister of Housing and now we’re waiting for a response. You can’t just come and move people out of their homes. It’s not fair. 🏠

WHO YA GONNA CALL?

FOR FREE TENANCY HELP, CALL YOUR LOCAL TENANTS ADVICE SERVICE



Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services give free tenancy advice to all tenants throughout NSW. There are 19 services across NSW; 4 of those are Aboriginal Services.

Do you need advice? Call your local service (numbers on the back cover), or visit tenants.org.au.

Our services are funded using money from the Rental Bond Board Interest Account.

Tenants' bonds earn \$60 million interest each year. This is tenants' money. But less than 1% gets returned to tenants at the end of their tenancies. Only 8% goes to Tenants' Services. Meanwhile 68% goes to NSW government agencies and 10% goes into surplus.

We ask you to support our campaign for more of this money to go to tenants and the services they need! Sign the petition at yourbond.org or Facebook [morbangforyourbond](https://www.facebook.com/morbangforyourbond). Or fill in one of our More Bang For Your Bond postcards. Thanks!



Pictured on this page are some of the great people in the Aboriginal Tenants Advice and Advocacy Network: Cheryl Corbett, Mark Griffiths, Rhonda Gray, Merinda Dutton, Jim Allen, John Mewburn, Terry Kapeen, Donna Connors, Martin Bligh, Ruth Simon, Stephen Fields, Robyn Dundas, and Linda Simon.



Brett Webb, Aboriginal Tenant Advocate

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF BRETT WEBB: ABORIGINAL TENANT ADVOCATE

How long have you been an Aboriginal Tenant Advocate?

I've been working at the Northern Aboriginal Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service for 17 years now.

What area does the Northern Aboriginal Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service cover?

The service covers the area from Wyong all the way up to Tweed Heads then northwest to Boggabilla and down to Narrabri and all the way down to Muswellbrook.

Wow that is a long time, when did you feel that you really came into your own as a tenant advocate?

After about 8 years I became comfortable predicting the outcome of cases but in my line of work there is never a "sure thing." It depends on the ever-changing Residential Tenancy Act, also different tribunal members can make different decisions.

Tell me a little about your position and what you do on a day-to-day basis?

There are a number of different roles that I perform on a daily basis, mostly I advise clients over the phone about their individual

tenancy issues. I also perform duty advocacy, where we go to the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NCAT) and represent Aboriginal tenants.

What keeps you motivated to go to work each day?

The people that you work with and the support you get from the network of tenancy services across NSW. I'm also motivated by the satisfaction that you get from helping Aboriginal people keep their homes.

What are the challenges in your job?

When there are changes to the law and you have to adapt to a new or updated Act, it means you have to do extra research and training. Sometimes you get a new tenancy issue or work on a particularly tricky case that takes up a lot more time than simpler tenancy issues.

Another issue is where tenants are unaware and unconfident to pursue their own tenants' rights and this can make my job more challenging. It really is true that the more a tenant does to help their situation the better the outcome they will get.

Do you have a recent story that you would like to share?

I dealt with a 'noise and nuisance' matter, where there was an undercurrent of racism towards an Indigenous tenant. We worked in conjunction with Legal Aid, to review and then appeal the Tribunal's decision. The tenant was appointed a barrister to do the internal appeal and in the end the tenant achieved a successful outcome.

Do you have any hobbies outside of your work?

I am a big fan of going to watch the local footy and supporting the young Indigenous players. I also enjoy hanging out with the family and especially supporting my kids and making sure everything is going all right with their schooling.

You help a lot of people maintain their homes, what does your home mean to you?

To me it's not just about the house itself but the security that it brings with it. A home is somewhere you feel secure and having a home base helps to gain good health, education and employment for families.

LEGAL AID NSW HELPING ABORIGINAL WOMEN AT SILVERWATER WOMEN'S CORRECTIONAL CENTRE

"House jumping makes me depressed... then [I end up] back in prison because of a relapse," a former inmate at Silverwater prison explained.

It sums up the dilemma so many people face when they leave custody: They have nowhere to live, and that makes it much harder to stay focused on not ending up back in prison.

Aboriginal women are the group most affected, and that's the reason Legal Aid NSW started offering free legal advice to women at Silverwater, the main women's correctional centre in NSW.

In the last financial year, Legal Aid lawyers helped 167 female inmates there with their legal problems.

Housing was quickly identified as the major issue. One client said: "Without housing every day is uncertain. You are unstable. It is hard to live day by day."

Another summed up her situation this way: "This time when I get out, I will stay at mum's, but only for one night. After that, I will be staying in parks or hotels. I need a house where my children can live in. My children have been with my aunty while I am homeless or in custody."

Indigenous women in custody are particularly vulnerable, highly disadvantaged and may be escaping domestic violence. For Aboriginal women who may also have caring responsibilities and are at risk of further violence, there is added pressure to find stable housing. Each year many of them are in urgent need of housing upon release from custody. Many of them face the risk of being homeless. They are usually unaware of their rights as social housing tenants and what to do if their name drops off the social housing list. Many are also prevented from getting housing because of something that has happened in the past, like a rent debt.



Since 2013, Legal Aid has been providing weekly legal advice clinics to Aboriginal women at Silverwater Correctional Centre to help them gain or retain housing.

Without this assistance these women would most likely be excluded from social housing, possibly for the rest of their lives.

The main issue for lawyers seeing clients at Silverwater is to help women who are still current social housing tenants to retain their property while in custody, and to help others clear negative classifications and debts (whether because they were evicted or there was damage to the property).

A large number of these clients have previously applied for social housing, but had their housing applications closed because they failed to respond to letters from Housing NSW while they were in gaol or homeless.

In such cases, lawyers can apply to get those applications reopened, and these applications have been mostly successful.

One woman had been on a wait list for 10 years, went into custody and did not receive correspondence from Housing NSW and was therefore dropped off the wait list. Because of the involvement of a Legal Aid lawyer, she is now back on

the housing list and will hopefully be offered a property soon after she is released.

Lawyers have also been able to help these women with other legal issues including fines debt, Centrelink debts, consumer issues and victims support. Legal Aid NSW is proud the service has achieved positive outcomes for many women, both while in custody and after they have been released.

The Legal Aid project is led by Jemima McCaughan. "We have been able to help so many women solve their housing problems and this has given them a better chance to stay out of prison in the future. This service is a great benefit for the women concerned, for their families and for community as a whole."

Legal advice on housing, fines, debt, consumer issues and many other matters is available free of charge to all members of the community through your local Legal Aid office. Visit legalaid.nsw.gov.au to find your closest service, or ring LawAccess on 1300 888 529. For Aboriginal people, a direct phone service is available at Legal Aid by calling 9219 5057. 🏠

The Tenants Union has also worked in partnership with Legal Aid NSW on this project. We have developed a training program on tenancy issues for Aboriginal women leaving custody to be delivered to custodial staff and prisoner outreach services. The first course was delivered to welfare staff at Silverwater Correctional Facility in June. The Tenants' Union also contributed information on tenancy to an updated edition of *Planning Your Release*, produced by Corrective Services NSW and the Community Restorative Centre for women about to leave custody. Tenants' Union solicitors are available 5 days per week for transfer of calls from people in custody via Law Access and the Prisoners Legal Service.

THE TENANT WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

Gemma McKinnon – tenant in the Blue Mountains and HDR fellow at the UNSW Faculty of Law. Gemma is also a former Aboriginal Legal Officer at the Tenants' Union of NSW

I wear many hats: mother, friend, student, teacher, researcher, tenant, wife, country music enthusiast... Each of these, compartmentalised, functions as a well-oiled machine. However, as hundreds of self-help books and blogs seem to indicate, these hats tend to influence each other from time to time. Turns out it was inevitable that children who draw on walls and require bedrooms, would influence my previously smooth-running operation as a tenant.

No longer can I enjoy the trials and tribulations of the share house, or rock-and-roll lifestyle of a studio in Kings Cross furnished with nothing but a mattress on the floor. (These set-ups were the only ones that sat within my budgetary constraints.) Last year I moved out of Sydney so that my kids could have a backyard to play in and I could park my car in my own driveway, rather than 6 blocks away, down the only alley in the area where the parking spots aren't time restricted.

Of course, some families can do this in Sydney - just not families on a single income with four children. Priced out of the Sydney rental market, I now spend four hours every workday sitting on a train. I don't actually mind the commute, except for that fact that it's time that I'd rather be spending with my family. It gives me time to organise my life, to tackle the important issues. For example, I have time to go over my periodic house inspection checklist. Some of you might recognise this as the list of spring-cleaning tasks that

"Housing is the human right I have to work the hardest to maintain in my everyday life."

homeowners never have to do. Vacuum window rails and exhaust fan – check! Scrub driveway – check! Spray and wipe letterbox – check!

Perhaps I wouldn't have to be so obsessive if I hadn't heard every nightmare landlord story ever told, and if I didn't know how easy it is for them to have us all evicted. One of my other hats involves spending my days working on research into how NSW tenancy laws conflict with human rights. I also spent the last three years of my life assisting tenants whose landlords had no sympathy for the fact that, for all intents and purposes, eviction equalled homelessness. As a result, I'm always prepared for the worst. I'm the tenant who knew too much!

Housing is the human right I have to work the hardest to maintain in my everyday life. This is despite the fact that I'm an Indigenous woman who managed to maintain employment through four pregnancies. I'm a discriminator's dream! It would be funny if it wasn't so sad. The fact of the matter is that I'm not the only one in this position. Millions of tenants live with the possibility of eviction constantly hanging over their heads. Most, if not all, tenants will know what that threat feels like. The apprehension of going to the letter box, the pre-inspection stress, and feeling like you're looking after someone else's house.



*Gemma McKinnon,
Blue Mountains tenant*

The law gives us the right to peace, comfort, privacy and quiet enjoyment, but for the tenant who knows too much, those moments are few and far between. Despite ignorance being bliss for a while, it doesn't lend itself to long-term rental success. I'm willing to do what I need to, to maintain housing for my family.

There's an upside to being priced out of the city though. Life among nature, away from the noise and congestion of Sydney has proved beneficial for me. My renditions of My Tennessee Mountain Home are common – although not necessarily appreciated by the rest of the family! I work from home a lot and maintain a much better work/life balance. Perhaps fittingly, the life I've been forced into through the workings of the NSW housing system, might just be the perfect environment for me to write the thesis that gives that system the shake-up it needs. 🏠

STAY IN TOUCH

The Tenants' Union of NSW is a membership-based co-operative and a community legal centre specialising in NSW residential tenancies law. We're also the resourcing body for Tenants Advice & Advocacy Services. The Tenants' Union has represented the interests of all tenants in NSW since 1976. We have a proven track record of improving tenancy laws and providing legal assistance and training.

We encourage you to support us in our work for safe, secure and affordable housing. Together we can achieve more. Please fill in this form, tick the appropriate boxes and return to the address below.

Name:

Organisation:
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- ☐ Send me *Tenant News*.
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- ☐ Send me additional copies of *Tenant News* to give to others.

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- ☐ I would like to participate in the TU's volunteer program.

JOIN (You don't need to join to get advice or subscribe.)

I apply for membership of the Tenants' Union of NSW Cooperative Ltd as an: ☐ individual tenant ☐ individual (non-tenant)
☐ tenant organisation ☐ organisation (non-tenant)

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Web: tenantsunion.org.au



TENANTS' UNION
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Call for free tenancy advice:



Aboriginal Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services

Greater Sydney	9698 0873
Western NSW	6884 0969
Southern NSW	1800 672 185
Northern NSW	1800 248 913



Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services

Eastern Sydney	9386 9147
Inner Sydney	9698 5975
Inner West Sydney	9559 2899
Northern Sydney	8198 8650
Southern Sydney	9787 4679
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Free Tenants Rights Factsheets are available on the Tenants NSW website

www.tenants.org.au

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