



Your ref: A671316
Our ref: 2017/16797

Hon Nick Goiran MLC
Chairman
Select Committee into Elder Abuse
Parliament House
4 Harvest Terrace
WEST PERTH WA 6005

Dear Mr Goiran

Inquiry into Elder Abuse – Humbugging

Thank you for your letter dated 15 February 2018 requesting information on how 'humbugging' is being addressed by the Department of Communities (Communities).

Humbugging is a highly complex issue that is common in Aboriginal communities, due to the reciprocal rights and strong obligations between relatives. It is a process of sharing that is driven by a perceived right rather than unsolicited giving. In a contemporary context, humbugging is more frequently associated with unreasonable or excessive demands made by an individual's family. At best it is a form of bullying to which the less powerful party is the victim. At worst it is theft, fraud and a form of intimidation that leads to assault and violence.

While the terminology is common to Aboriginal society the behaviours can be found in many communities in WA. What is unique is the cultural obligation of Aboriginal Australians to their kin. It can apply to senior Aboriginal people in positions of authority who are coerced into inappropriately or unlawfully assisting others through family or other ties. For the elderly Aboriginal person, family obligation is at the core of their Aboriginality.

The causes of humbugging are multifaceted, with many government policies and non-government practices not sensitive to the cultural practices that may be at odds or even in conflict with the intent of the policy e.g. social housing, welfare, royalties payments and taxation returns.

The Commonwealth Government also has a role in responding to this issue as it looks to reform welfare practices in some Aboriginal communities, as evidenced by the introduction of compulsory income management (child protection), voluntary income management and, more recently the Cashless Debit Card. Communities implements these income management strategies which aim to focus clients' income support payments on necessities and limit access to discretionary cash. Challenges with welfare and other payments compound the pressures placed on older and other vulnerable people in Aboriginal communities, particularly where elders receive full access to payments and other members of the community have restricted access.

Communities does not target humbugging with any specific strategy, program or policy. If the Aboriginal elder is neither threatened with violence, nor is coerced, controlled or is fearful (as per the definition of 'family violence' in the *Restraining Orders Act 1997 (WA)*), or if humbugging does not cause harm or distress to an older person (as per the World Health Organization definition of elder abuse), then humbugging is not an issue that necessarily requires specific State Government strategies. Across its divisions (Strategy and Policy, Housing, Child Protection and Family Support, and Disability Services), Communities has various practices and procedures to address negative behaviours and reduce the risk factors for humbugging. Staff promote and uphold the right of people to live in a safe environment where their human rights are protected and they are free from abuse. This includes financial abuse or exploitation.

For example, if instances of abuse become known, through its Serious Incident and Person at Risk identification and reporting mechanisms, Disability Services provides a range of supports, which are implemented appropriate to the specific care and protection issue. This may mean encouraging and supporting individuals to access relevant legal and advocacy assistance, implementation of a care and protection plan, referral to appropriate authorities such as WA Police, Child Protection and Family Support or any other relevant statutory body. A dedicated People at Risk team works across the Disability Services division to facilitate and support such care and protection issues.

Disability Services also works closely with the Office of the Public Advocate and the State Administrative Tribunal regarding the personal and financial welfare of people with decision-making disabilities.

Housing undertakes the following range of operational activities that may assist in minimising humbugging:

- The My Tenancy My Home matrix is used to build rapport and stimulate conversations with public housing tenants, so that plans can be made to prevent a situation worsening.
- Housing Management Agreements enable the upgrade and building of new homes, resulting in the percentage of overcrowded households decreasing from 32.9 per cent in 2010–11 to 14.5 per cent in 2015–16.
- Liquor Restricted Property Declarations may assist to minimise humbugging by reducing the number of alcohol-affected people living at or visiting the home.
- Automatic Rent Deduction Scheme (in development) may mean that rent or housing money cannot be accessed by humbuggers.
- Aboriginal Employment Targets in the remote housing capital works program is increasing Aboriginal employment opportunities which may assist to reduce humbugging.

One of the recommendations of the 'Elder Abuse Community Action Plan for Victoria' (February 2018) is to improve housing options for perpetrators and victims. The following Housing initiatives may assist to minimise the harm and stress associated with overcrowding and humbugging by offering alternative accommodation solutions:

- Education and Employment Housing provides affordable, supported accommodation for Aboriginal people relocating from remote WA to take up employment, education or training opportunities in regional centres.
- Aboriginal short-stay facilities called Visitors Centres provide a vital service to people from remote communities visiting regional centres, providing some 10,000 bed nights in 2016–17. They are well accepted and substantially reduce rough sleeping, illegal camping, anti-social behaviour like humbugging and overcrowding of public housing.
- Support and Tenancy Education Program, to be renamed THRIVE from 1 July 2018, is a Communities-funded voluntary support program, which assists tenants experiencing difficulties (e.g. due to humbugging) in meeting their tenancy obligations.

With the recent Machinery of Government changes, Communities is better positioned to understand and develop appropriate responses to elder abuse in general and may explore the issue of humbugging in particular, if it is identified by Aboriginal people as an issue that needs addressing. The Department's active participation in the development of the National Plan to combat Elder Abuse will also set priorities for the implementation of agreed actions across the country.

I will provide more detail, if required, when I appear before the Committee on 9 April 2018.

Yours sincerely



Grahame Searle
Director General

6 April 2018