



Briefing Paper:

Warrigunya On-Country Housing Program for Aboriginal Men Leaving Prison

September 2026

About Warrigunya and our work

Warrigunya Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation ('Warrigunya') is an Aboriginal-led, not-for-profit organisation located in Gippsland with a commitment to reducing the incarceration and recidivism rates of Aboriginal men in Victoria, helping them turn their lives around and to reconnect to family, community and culture.

With \$3 million infrastructure funding from Homes Victoria, and philanthropic operational funding from Equity Trustees, the Warrigunya On-Country Housing Program (the Program) commenced in May 2025. This program provides a collaborative, holistic model of post-release support, alongside safe and stable housing for Aboriginal men exiting prison. Our aim is to support Aboriginal men to readjust to life outside prison, and to give them the best chance of becoming financially independent, culturally strong and of having no further engagement with the criminal justice system.

We provide Aboriginal men leaving Fulham Correctional Centre with low cost (one third of income) housing for 12 months at a dedicated, purpose-built facility in Gippsland, alongside wraparound supports, to ensure they leave the facility with long-term housing, enhanced family relationships, secure employment, or engagement in training or education.

This Program was designed by Aboriginal men based at Fulham Correctional Centre, and developed in consultation with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, service providers in the Gippsland region, and the local communities. We prioritise the principle of self-determination and it is deeply embedded in the design and delivery of the Program to best meet with the needs of Aboriginal men leaving prison.

Improving post-release outcomes for Aboriginal men in Gippsland

The imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is significantly higher than the rate of imprisonment for the general population in Victoria, and the gap continues to widen. It is well-recognised that the lack of affordable, safe and stable housing is a significant cause of offending and recidivism among the general population, with a disproportionate impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



In the Gippsland region, the rates of offending and recidivism among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are significant, and this is directly linked to the severe housing shortage, marked by the lack of affordable and social housing.

Warrigunya engaged in extensive research and consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, and Gippsland communities to support establishment of the Warrigunya On-Country Housing Program. This consultation process along with a parliamentary enquiry held at a similar time, identified Gippsland as an area of particular concern in Victoria.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in Gippsland regularly support Aboriginal men post-release who are experiencing homelessness. These men are significantly more likely to reoffend and return to prison. Throughout consultation with Aboriginal communities and organisations, feedback continually identified the need for supported transitional housing for Aboriginal men exiting prison that has a focus on healing to reduce and prevent recidivism and support stronger long-term outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

Our culturally safe approach to providing stable and supported housing

Warrigunya has established the first purpose-built facility in Victoria for Aboriginal men leaving prison, situated on a 20-acre property in Darriman, Gippsland (30 minutes south of Sale). Designed by a group of Aboriginal men in Fulham Correctional Centre, it provides stable housing for up to 12 months for four men in the first phase, increasing to seven men in the second phase, and eleven in the third.

We aim to provide residential tenancy alongside cultural healing, guidance and learning, as well as holistic support and wellbeing mentoring, in order to respond to a wide of needs unique to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men. **However, Warrigunya has not received any government funding to operate the Program and to provide this vital cultural and holistic support.** With philanthropic funding from Equity Trustees, Warrigunya has provided housing and support services to nine residents during our first year of operation, and to employ suitably experienced and qualified staff.

To participate in the Program, Aboriginal men must be at a point in their lives where they are ready to change their patterns. They need to be committed to residing at Warrigunya for 12 months and engaging in intensive support that will recognise, respect and build on individual strengths. Opportunities to participate in sensitive, holistic programs that help heal, build resilience, confidence and skills will be available. Support for the transition to longer-term housing will commence on program acceptance.



The Program has four critical elements.

1. **Provide a transitional cultural home:** On country in Darriman, Aboriginal men will live in stable, structured, supportive and culturally safe accommodation that enables them to focus on their personal goals and create a future without engagement with the criminal justice system.
2. **Provide holistic support and wellbeing mentoring:** Self-determined, tailored and supported plans will assist residents to achieve their goals, facilitate and coordinate access to wrap-around support services, support skills development, engagement with training, employment and community participation, and build community networks and family relationships important for the residents to achieve their aspirations. The residents can also receive counselling to address ongoing issues, such as anger management, violent behaviour, depression, emotional trauma, history of abuse, intimate partner relationships or parenting skills.
3. **Provide cultural guidance and healing:** Connection to culture and strengthening pride in identity is a key element of the program. Aboriginal Elders will share their knowledge of culture and protocols and deliver workshops to increase residents' knowledge and skills of Aboriginal culture, art and design.
4. **Provide work and pre-employment skills:** The 20-acre property at Darriman offers numerous options for skill enhancement and preparation for employment and/or education and training:
 - A fully equipped workshop available for the residents to create artworks or develop their woodworking skills. The residents are offered opportunities to sell or exhibit their products. It also contains a small gym.
 - The development of a social enterprise collecting, packaging and selling firewood.
 - Planting and growing trees, vegetables and other food options on the vast property.
 - Managing the proposed rearing of cattle on the property, as well as chooks and other animals.

To ensure the program is integrated within the local community and receives appropriate referrals, we have established relationships with a range of local services, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, including Fulham Correctional Centre, Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation, VACCA, Vinnies, Dardi Munwurro, Anglicare, VACRO, ACSO, Uniting, GLaWAC, Family Law Pathways Network, Workways Australia, Thread Together and TAFE Skillshare.



A timeline of our achievements over the past six years

Our achievements over the past six years demonstrate Warrigunya's strong commitment to delivering best-practice, culturally safe, transitional housing and support. Key milestones include:

- January 2020: Initial discussions identified the service gap and led to development of the Proposal for Supported Housing for Aboriginal Men at Risk of Recidivism or Incarceration in Gippsland.
- July 2020: ACSO submitted a Homes Victoria grant application to construct the facility.
- February 2021: Warrigunya was incorporated as a not-for-profit organisation.
- April 2021: Homes Victoria allocated \$3 million for construction, administered by ACSO on Warrigunya's behalf. As no operational funding was attached, Warrigunya commenced seeking government and philanthropic support.
- August 2021: Warrigunya obtained DGR1 status.
- September 2022: Wariga Molla Consultants, funded by the Department of Fairness, Families and Housing, completed extensive community consultation and a background report on the service model.
- October 2023: An Advisory Group was established, with VACRO facilitating detailed service design.
- November 2023: Construction of the first wing (residential area) was completed, with work commencing on the office and public amenities.
- May 2024: Equity Trustees provided funding to establish and operate the program for its first year.
- June 2024: Construction of the office and public amenities was completed.
- September 2024: The completed facility was formally handed over to Warrigunya to operate, with no further involvement from Homes Victoria.
- February 2025: Official opening held, attended by more than 100 community members and stakeholders.
- May 2025: Warrigunya obtained a Rooming House licence and commenced operations, accepting its first referrals.
- May to December 2025: Welcomed visits to our site from Dardi Munwurro, Fulham Prison, VACRO, ACSO, Ramahyuck, Youwinna Wurnalung, Worn Gundidj, Sale Men's Shed, The Hope Centre, Dhelk Dja, Sunrise Rotary, Collaborative Evaluation Unit of Fed Uni, TAFE, ACIP, The Torch, Bunnings, Empathy not Sympathy Program, Alinta, Community First Development and many more. The kettle is always on at Warrigunya!
- October 2025: Warrigunya was fully operational, with three residents and five staff in place.
- December 2025: Awarded 3.5-year contract to be first ACCO in Victoria to deliver the REAL (Reconnection, Employment and Learning) program to Aboriginal men in and following release from Fulham Correctional Centre.
- June 2026: Warrigunya celebrates first year of operation and the installation of a solar system and batteries (DEECA Neighbourhood Program).



- June 2026: Funding from the final round of the Aboriginal Community Infrastructure - a modular unit of 3 bedrooms with ensuites which will allow us to house 7 men in total and a total of 11 once the second wing of our build is complete.

Achievements during first year of operation:

- Our key achievement lies in savings to the Corrections System and ongoing potential savings due to personal changes in the habits of men with a long association with the system. We saved the government \$434,376 in prison costs alone. Being our first year we have had an average occupancy rate of 50%. If all 4 units were full for the 12 months the saving to the prison system would be \$772,224.
- 9 Aboriginal men housed and supported
- Delivery of 5 Art Workshops and a week-long exhibition for NAIDOC 2025 by our Art Mentor Ray Young
- Setting up:
 - the gym
 - vegetable gardens
 - fencing to rear section of our 20-acre block for stock
- Employment of 7 Aboriginal staff (6 with lived experience) and payment of \$127,000 in casual wages going directly to Aboriginal families
- 24/7 support staff on site which came to a cost of \$424,000 for the year – equating to the cost of incarceration of 4 men
- All residents entered into a Rooming House Agreement and developed a rental history rating (beneficial for the future)
- All residents were offered Art classes and one resident, who had never tried art was very talented, even selling some art while at Warrigunya
- All residents received Health checks, we work closely with local ACCHO Ramahyuck
- All residents learned how to use a tractor and slasher & ride on mower
- 2 Residents were successful in gaining their drivers licences
- 2 residents reconnected positively with family
- 3 residents participated in putting up Christmas decorations in the main street of Yarram and delivering hampers
- 3 residents gained employment
- 3 residents went the longest they had ever gone abstaining from drugs following release from prison
- 4 residents attended Men's Behaviour Change Sessions (external)
- 6 residents attended Drug & Alcohol Counselling (external)
- All residents developed plans and thought about taking a new direction in life



- All residents were offered a safe and welcoming home and in turn willingly gave back to Warrigunya in some way
- All residents connected with our Elders – Uncle Alan Coe and Auntie Tracey Giddings who have gone the extra mile for years to build this for their people.
- Only 2 residents returned to prison

Where is Warrigunya Heading in October 2026?

As at 12 October 2026 we are facing the imminent decision to close our supported accommodation for Aboriginal men leaving prison because we do not have any willingness by government departments to fund us – nothing and no willingness to even help us find a way.

Warrigunya has consistently lobbied state and federal government since 2020 asking for some level of operational funding. We were hoping for a co-ordinated approach with co-operation between departments to supply the amount to maintain operations with 24/7 staffing on site at all times for the support of the residents.

Instead of a co-operative approach the departments, particularly DJCS, DFFH and NIAA have treated us like a 'hot potato' and shoved us from one department to another insisting our holistic centre was 'not their responsibility'.

We have secured Federal funding through DEWR to deliver the REAL program in Fulham Correctional Centre for the next three years. This funding will equate to one staff member. Apart from this we have \$20,000 pledged by philanthropy for the next 2 years. That's it.

Government departments have shown little regard for this community led initiative and instead of assisting us have, at times, actively blocked our attempts to access funding.

That is the sad reality, on the ground, of trying to Close the Gap.

Merryn Stevenson, Executive Officer

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