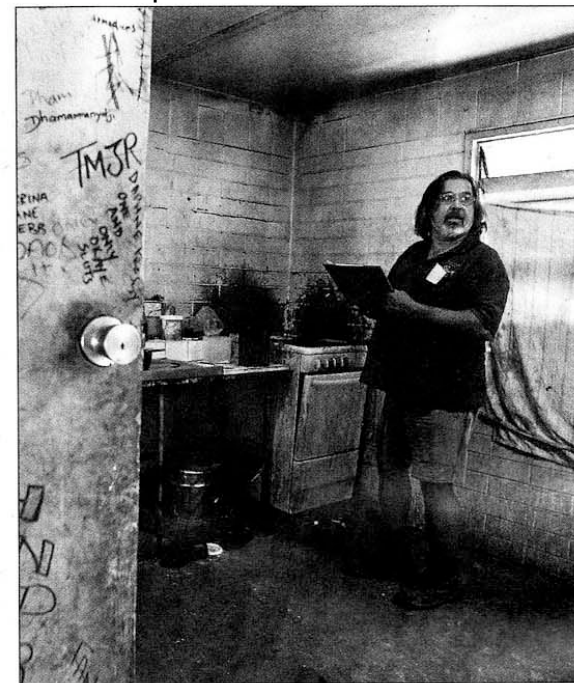


## Housing in the centre, **Alice Springs Town Camp houses**; one national Indigenous housing story Thanks to the Sydney Morning Herald article 22/08/07 by Gibson and Jopson



Better than many ... Christine Spencer, her daughter Tiara Lee Lockyer, 2½, and Fiona the kangaroo in their house at the Hidden Valley camp.



Safety check ... Oscar Ah Mat inspects another house. Photos: Glenn Campbell

# Stretched to get beyond the basics of maintenance

Joel Gibson  
and Debra Jopson

OSCAR AH MAT rolls into the Hidden Valley camp at 1.30pm on a Wednesday, crushing empty beer cans under his tyres, dodging dogs and pulling up at the door of No. 11, Nigel Lockyer's place.

It is one of four or five homes Ah Mat will visit this day as a property maintenance officer for Tangentyere Council, which manages 204 mostly decrepit houses in the 19 run-down town camps around Alice Springs.

Tangentyere rates only 33 of its houses as "satisfactory". It has just \$460,000 from a grant through the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement to maintain the dwellings - an average of just \$2200 a year for each one.

Lockyer's house is one of the better ones. A community liaison officer for Yeperenye primary school in Alice Springs, he has four bedrooms for his family of six, curtains, carpets and a menagerie of animals including a kangaroo named Fiona. This visit finds only an oven that hasn't worked for a month and a leaking hot water service.

Next door, at a 25-year-old cinder-block building that is home to four children and four adults, the walls are covered in two decades of graffiti, the floors are concrete and the windows are painted over or boarded up.

"They didn't have any curtains," Ah Mat explains.

The Federal Government's National Indigenous Housing Guide lists nine "healthy living practices" for housing organisations to tick off.

Tangentyere Council's funding "doesn't really stretch beyond the first three points", says its housing and environmental health manager, David Donald. He and his three maintenance officers focus on ensuring that the houses are not electrical deathtraps and ensuring their washing, laundry and waste removal systems work.

Occasionally they get as far as point five - "ability to store, prepare and cook food" - but almost never to points six through nine, which deal with overcrowding, disease, animals, temperature and trauma.

Urban critics may worry about pictures of broken windows, graffiti and peeling paint, but aesthetic appearance does not even make the nine-point list.

"We consider ourselves primarily

as a health organisation," Donald says. "That's how we differ from mainstream housing authorities who focus on maintaining the asset. We focus on the people in the asset."

Although some homes are damaged by partying visitors, most were run-down by sheer overuse, Donald says. With visitors swelling camp numbers to 3000, the average house holds 15 people.

Last year, the Federal Government's Fixing Houses for Better Health program found the town camps' houses rated the same as 4000 other houses it had surveyed in the Northern Territory and elsewhere. Tangentyere spent an average of \$7000 per dwelling on new waterproof light switches, baby baths, door locks and hot water services for each house - all

priority health measures. But even after the program, only 2 per cent passed the safety fire test and just 11 per cent passed the "ability to store, prepare and cook food" test.

Ah Mat is one of eight Tangentyere housing department workers employed using an annual management grant of \$380,000 from the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. But one worker is set to go in September when \$50,000 top-up income disappears with the Federal Government's ditching of Community Development Employment Projects.

During his quarterly surveys of each house, checking taps, power points and hot water temperature, Ah Mat sees it all. "It couldn't get much worse," says the Darwin-born teetotaler, who also works with

at-risk children at the Anglicare Centre in Alice Springs.

Lockyer agrees. He moved back to the town camp where he was born because visiting relatives had threatened to stab his ageing mother. "It's nice and quiet now but when the visitors come in from out of town we have ambulances and police going past here every Thursday, Friday, Saturday night. They drink and they fight and they don't know how to fight with fists. It's knives, boomerangs, star pickets, whatever."

But Donald predicts that residents' health will slip if they are made public Territory Housing tenants under the Federal Government's plan to take over the camps. "There will be mass evictions and we will be back to 30 years ago. There will be fringe camps on fringe camps," he said.

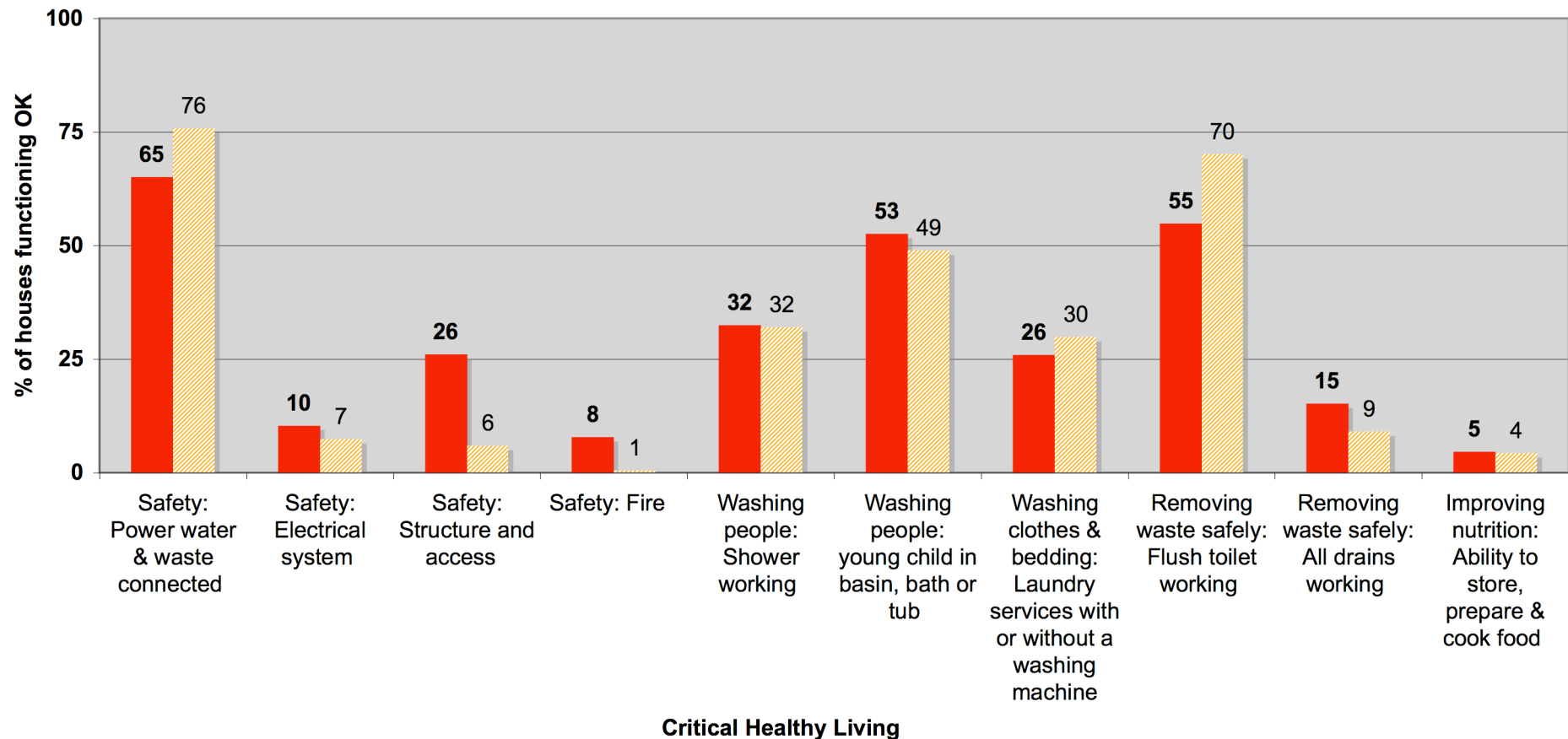
**Tangentyere Council Inc**

**Healthabitat Pty Ltd**

## Housing in the centre, **Alice Springs Town Camp houses;** one national Indigenous housing story

- At the commencement of the project, before any fix work was commenced under the federally funded Fixing Houses for Better Health program, the 187 houses were generally in poor condition, but performed better than the national average in 6 of the 10 critical safety and health criteria and being equal to a 7th (working shower).
  - After fix works were completed the final results of the FHBH program showed the Tangentyere managed houses outperforming the national average in 8 of the critical safety and health criteria.
  - This excellent result, which should be used as a starting point for increased local maintenance work, was made possible by Tangentyere housing staff and management, local Indigenous survey / fix team members, the FHBH project manager PM&D architects, locally engaged trades and funding from both the NT and Federal government specifically targeted to safety and health issues.
- For more information on the Fixing Houses for Better Health program, methods, safety and health priorities and testing system visit [www.healthabitat.com](http://www.healthabitat.com)

# **Tangentyere Council managed Alice Springs Town Camp houses (2006) and all national Fixing Houses for Better Health and Housing for Health projects (2007): comparison before fix work is commenced**

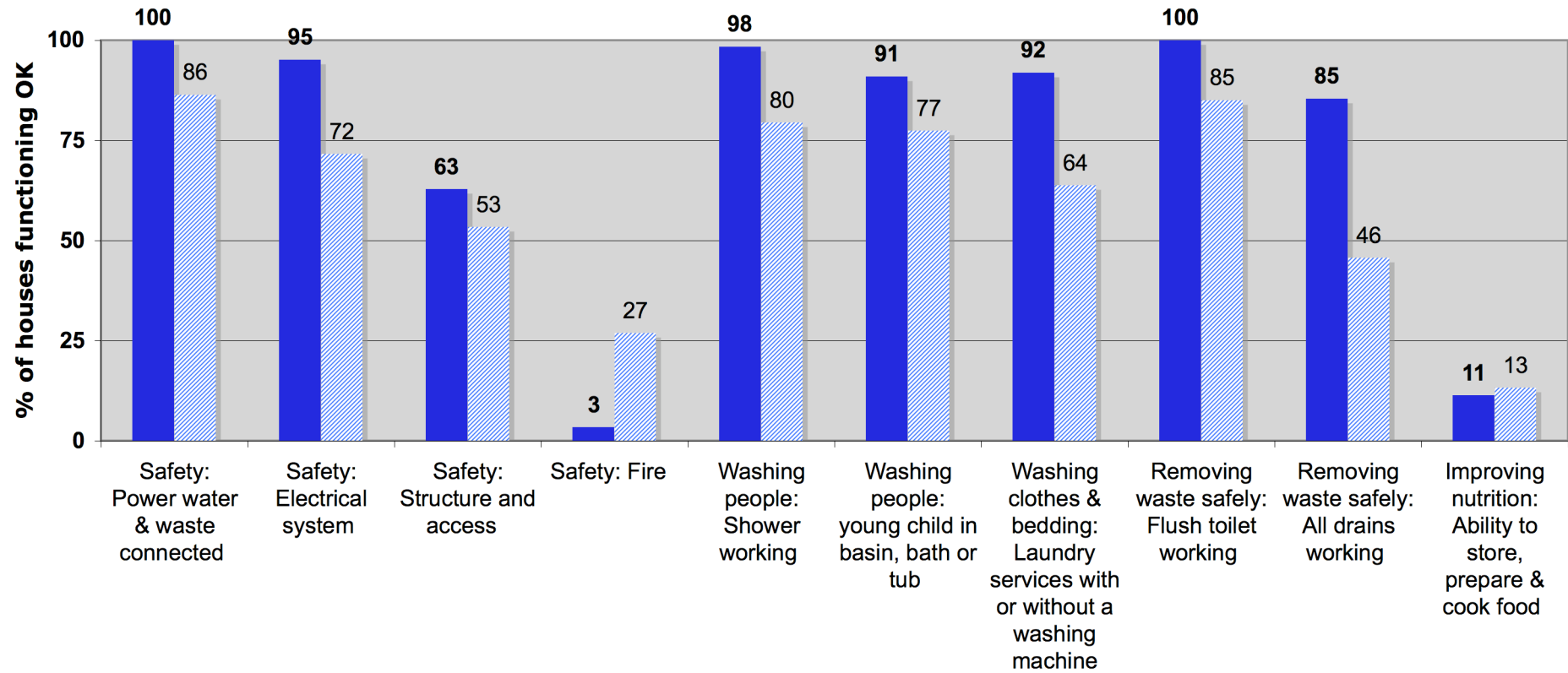


■ Tangentyere Council All town Camps Alice Springs combined 187 houses surveyed before fix work had commenced.

▨ National results as at 28/08/07 representing 5085 houses in 136 projects before fix work had commenced.



## Tangentyere Council managed Alice Springs Town Camp houses and all national Fixing Houses for Better Health and Housing for Health projects comparison after fix work is completed 2007



### Critical Healthy Living Practices

■ Tangentyere Council All town Camps Alice Springs combined 178 houses surveyed and fixed. Total fix budget (labour and materials) for the Alice Springs town Camps was \$5128 average per house

▨ National results as at 28/08/07 representing 3860 houses in 116 projects. National budgets vary from \$3500 - \$7600 average per house