The Tennant Creek Transitional Accommodation Project (TTAP) is a private sector solution that promotes the freedom of choice and responsibility that has for too long been denied to Indigenous Australians. In doing so it offers a ray of hope and an example for other attempts to ease Indigenous disadvantage.

TTAP was started in 2012 by local businesses—the El Dorado Motor Inn and Karen Sheldon Catering—in conjunction with the Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation. These groups were concerned about the myriad social problems facing the local indigenous community, particularly children. The program consists of housing provided by the El Dorado Motor Inn and employment training provided by Karen Sheldon Catering. The health education, child health, and cultural programs are provided by Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation.

Since its creation two years ago, more than one hundred people have participated in the project and there are thirty participants currently. The participants are mostly families and two thirds of those registered in the program are children. Program founder Rebecca Healy describes the participants as coming from ‘the worst environments imaginable’—typically, from three-bedroom houses with twenty inhabitants, rife with domestic violence and alcoholism.

The program is a runaway success. 80 per cent of residents are now employed or attend training, and all children currently attend school regularly. But the most stunning success of the project is its achievements in housing. In stark contrast to the housing provided by the government, this project provides accommodation that is clean, undamaged, uncrowded and free of alcohol and domestic violence. These factors have resulted in an extensive waiting list for a place in the program.

Initially this was caused by increased referrals to TTAP from various government and non-government agencies for people at risk, and also by Indigenous people simply turning up to take part. TTAP receives no government funding.

So what has driven the success of TTAP? After all, the government offers all the same services. Partly, it has been successful because TTAP is a private sector solution operating in a market environment. Participants have to pay rent to participate and—unlike with government housing—they don’t receive rent assistance. This makes the program more expensive than the alternatives on offer.

Consequently participants ‘buy-in’ to TTAP to a greater degree than government services as they are faced with the imperative of getting their money’s worth. This creates a virtuous cycle of improvement from both the provider and the participant.

A new and successful program in the Northern Territory is proving that engaging in the free market empowers people and allows them to take control of their lives explains Peter Gregory.
FREE MARKET SOLUTIONS TO INDIGENOUS POVERTY

Volume 67 | 1

CONTINUED

But success is mainly derived from the fact that TTAP imbues participants with self-agency by offering choice and the freedom to take responsibility. This is a freedom participants have embraced with open arms and is easily identifiable across all the areas TTAP works in. As with other places in the Northern Territory, government housing for Indigenous people around Tennant Creek is in disarray. General Manager of the Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation, Trevor Sanders, notes that the estimate contained in the most recent government census of four people per dwelling in Indigenous households around Tennant Creek is wildly inaccurate.

As mentioned above, Rebecca Healy estimates that most of the participants in TTAP come from households with twenty or more occupants at any one time. If the government can’t even count the number of Indigenous people living in a house, they can hardly be expected to solve the complex issue of Indigenous housing.

One of the major problems with Indigenous housing is property damage. Healy tells the story of huge numbers of ovens being destroyed in the Tennant Creek area because many Aboriginal people don’t know how to use them and, as a result, simply light fires in them to cook. Apart from being unsuitable for the occupancy, property damage in government housing occurs because no one is really personally responsible for the property. This problem has been overcome by TTAP.

Initially, TTAP was experiencing extensive property damage. As a result, two men from a residents’ charter were introduced making the occupant personally liable for any damage that took place. Property damage has virtually been eradicated. The government is unable or unwilling to invoke this culture of personal responsibility.

Furthermore, residents asked for, and were given, a steel fence and electric gate to surround their accommodation to keep out unwanted visitors who bring with them alcohol and violence. This is a prime example of the residents taking responsibility for their own safety by working with the organisation to improve their situation.

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In addition, alcohol and violence are banned from TTAP and participants who do not respect this have been removed from the program in the past.

Kaylene Johnson is 43 and lives at TTAP with her two children. She had been waiting for a house from the government for five years after her previous house was burnt down as a result of children playing with fireworks. She spent the intervening period living in town camps. She likes staying at TTAP because ‘it’s nice and quiet’ and says the steel fence and electric gate gives her a sense of security.

In reality, Indigenous housing is not really about housing at all. It’s about meeting the most fundamental of rights—the right to personal physical safety. The Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation attempts to meet the needs of health needs of people in Indigenous housing around Tennant Creek. Trevor Sanders describes it as ‘like having an ambulance at the bottom of a cliff’. In providing a living environment free of alcohol and violence, he believes TTAP ‘removes the cliff’.

The health challenges faced by Indigenous Australians are unique and some of the services provided by Anyinginyi to TTAP include basic hygiene education and treatment for scabies. These services are more effective at TTAP because they are delivered in a safe, clean environment that enables learning to take place. Sanders believes the safe and secure accommodation provided by TTAP is the foundation on which improved health outcomes are built.

TTAP’s other key achievement is in ensuring children attend school and that adults are either employed or in training—both of these are conditions of participation in the project. The children in TTAP attend local primary and secondary schools, whilst adults are trained across the road at Karen Sheldon Catering.

Whilst Sanders describes many government training services for Aboriginals as ‘completely irrelevant’, the training provided by TTAP often leads to employment in local fast food outlets, catering companies, or even the El Dorado Motor Inn itself. Once again, housing is the key to this success.

Wayna Knooth is in his 40s and is a participant of TTAP. He describes his previous work and living arrangements as being a ‘traveller, working here and there’ and ‘staying with people that I knew’. He previously slept in a swag outside a small house with fifteen occupants inside. As a result of his participation in TTAP, he now works in housekeeping and maintenance at the El Dorado Motor Inn and is enjoying the work.

TTAP is the brainchild of Rebecca Healy who owns and operates the El Dorado Motor Inn. Healy herself came from a troubled background in the remote town of Elliott. She left home at the age of twelve and intermittently lived on the street and in foster care for the next seven years, surrounded by alcohol, drugs and violence. She met a mentor at a refuge who inspired her to turn her life around.

Two years later she transitioned from being a client at the refuge to a member of staff and then became part of the management team. She bought her first house, became a mother of four, was accepted to study law at university, was a foster parent to disadvantaged children and was named Barnardos Australian Mother of the Year and Young Territorian of the Year. She was also the driving force behind the establishment of a youth mental health program in Tennant Creek and, when she was 25 years old, went on to become a Country Liberal Party candidate.

When she was a troubled teen, Healy was invited to a meeting of government service providers in her town to discuss the problem of the town’s out of control young people. It was put to her that perhaps her and her friends would refrain from wreaking havoc if the local council built a skate park.

Such was Healy’s astonishment at the stupidity of this suggestion that it compelled her to continue to attend such meetings to set the local council and government service providers straight. It was to be the beginnings of her attempts to re-cast the approach to social problems in the Northern Territory and would culminate in the creation of TTAP.

TTAP is a voluntary program that provides accommodation, education and health services far beyond what the government can provide. It does not cost taxpayers a cent. It can do this because it is a private organisation operating in a free market, meaning that the buy-in from participants and the performance of the organisation itself is greatly enhanced.

But there’s a broader dynamic at play beyond the project simply being an effective technical solution to the problems associated with indigenous dysfunction. TTAP works as a stepping stone for Indigenous integration into the economic life of the nation by enabling economic rights. It works because it promotes freedom. As Chairman of the Cape York Partnership, Noel Pearson, wrote in a recent Quarterly Essay:

The popular conception of choice…as an unfettered and careless freedom overlooks that freedom of choice, properly understood, is in truth all about personal responsibility. This is the connection between the liberal principle of choice and the conservative principle of responsibility. Indigenous Australians now want our equal liberty. We want the freedom to take responsibility. For too long, choices have been made on behalf of Indigenous people in this country. TTAP is a beacon not just because it is well run, the accommodation is clean and safe, and the training is effective. It is a beacon because it proves that all people—even those born into unimaginable disadvantage—can greatly benefit from the freedom of choice and responsibility.