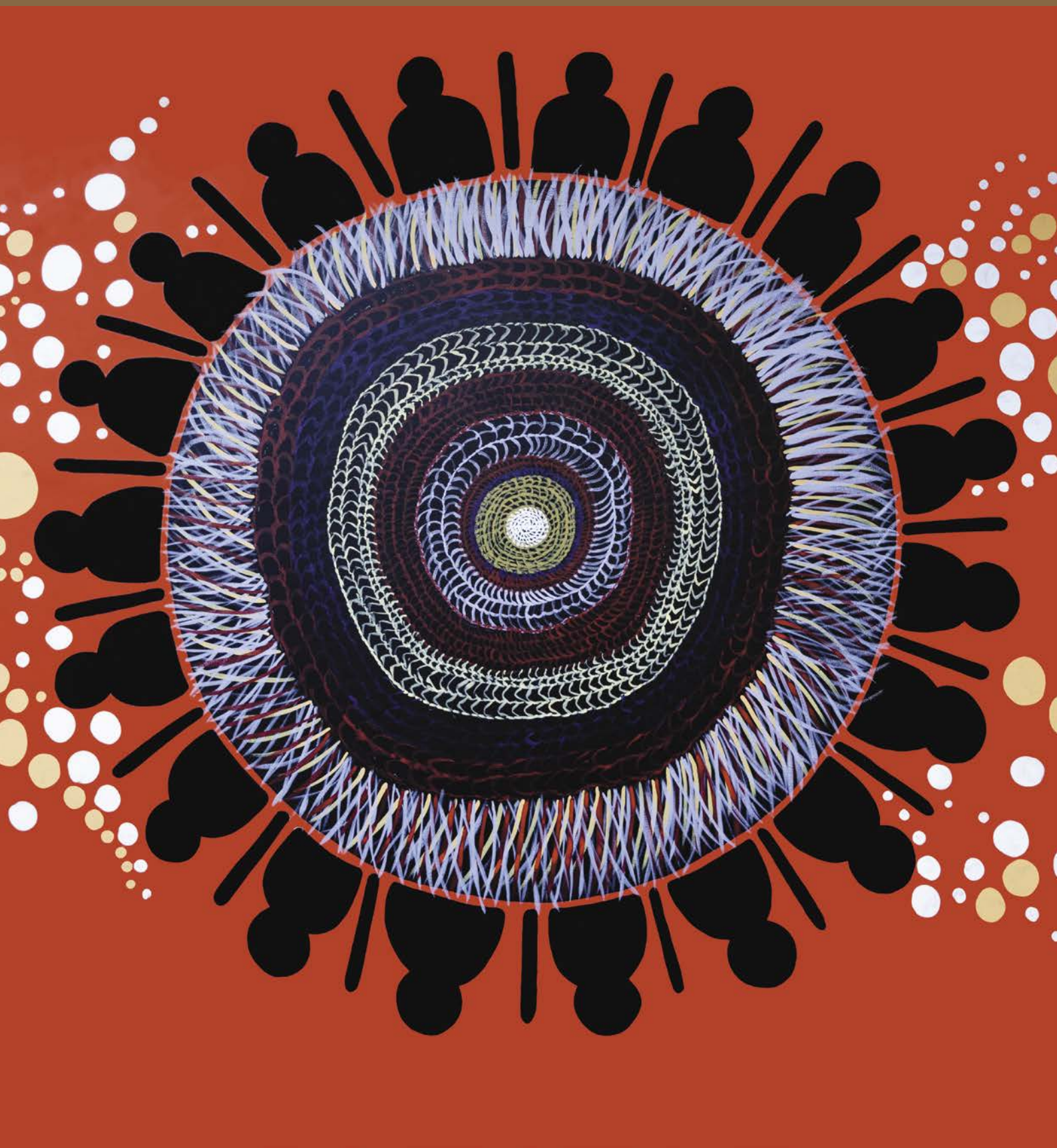
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Council to Homeless Persons

Responding to Homelessness in the Northern Territory



Contents

Parity
Australia's national homelessness publication

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Contributions to *Parity* are welcome. Each issue of *Parity* has a central focus or theme. However, prospective contributors should not feel restricted by this as *Parity* seeks to discuss the whole range of issues connected with homelessness and the provision of housing and services to people experiencing homelessness. Where necessary, contributions will be edited. Where possible this will be done in consultation with the contributor. Contributions can be emailed to ***parity@chp.org.au*** in Microsoft Word or rtf format. If this option is not possible, contributions can be mailed to CHP at the above address.

Proposed 2024 Parity Publication Schedule

July:	Homeless Single Men: The Forgotten Homeless
August:	Local Government and Homelessness
September:	The NDIS, Disability Housing and Homelessness
October:	After the Voice: First Nations Responses to Homelessness
November:	Histories of Homelessness

Cover art
Mural by Denise Quall. Denise is a Larrakia woman and descendant of the Dangalaba Kulumbiringin Clan who has lived in Darwin her entire life. Her dreaming is the Danagalaba — the saltwater crocodile, and totem is Nagandji Nagandji (the Brahminy Kite — Sea Eagle). Denise has developed her practice into a business 'Minbani Art' and was honoured to have won the Darwin 2023 Naidoc Artist of the Year. The recognition comes after Winning Gold for 'The Best Entrance Art' in the Australian Street Art Awards.

The views and opinions expressed in *Parity* are not necessarily those of CHP.

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Foreword

Selena Uibo, Minister for Remote Housing and Homelessness
and Ngaree Ah Kit, Minister for Urban Housing





People experience homelessness for many different reasons. They might be a victim survivor of domestic or family violence. They may have lost their job or experienced a relationship breakdown. In the Northern Territory (NT), they may have travelled hundreds of kilometres from remote communities into major town centres or be living in overcrowded homes in remote communities.

Whatever the reason, there's never a simple solution. What we believe is that everyone deserves to have a safe and secure roof over their head and a place to call home.

If we are to break the cycle of homelessness, we must understand the many issues at play, including the unique challenges we face in the NT, and be willing to tackle those underlying causes. We must also be willing to do this in partnership with communities.

The unique challenges we face delivering housing and homelessness services impact both urban and remote settings. Homelessness and housing insecurity impact thousands of lives across the Territory. That is why our government is addressing the challenges to improve housing outcomes. We are progressively seeing successful results in this space, thanks to our determined efforts, significant financial investment, and strong partnerships, especially with Aboriginal peak organisations.

Through our collaboration with the NT homelessness sector, Aboriginal Land Councils, Aboriginal Housing NT, CHIA NT and the Australian Government, we are delivering initiatives aimed at transforming the housing and homelessness landscape.

Overcrowding and outdated housing infrastructure are significant issues for our remote Aboriginal communities. We are investing a record $4 billion over the next decade in a joint funding agreement with the Australian Government to deliver up to 2,700 new homes. This funding will see around 10,000 people moving into their very own home for the first time, as well as highlighting the Northern Territory Government commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The key impact of the new program will be to reduce the percentage of overcrowding in remote Territory communities by half, from 53 per cent to 25 per cent of homes, while improving living conditions and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities through improved access to appropriately sized, safe and adequate housing.

The Social Housing Accelerator Payment, a one-off $50 million contribution, will facilitate construction of up to 100 new social housing homes across urban centres. This includes $37.5 million for the Northern Territory Government to build up to 75 homes and $12.5 million for Community Housing Providers to construct around 25 homes. The initiative is part of our broader Northern Territory Community Housing Growth Strategy 2022-32, which is revolutionising housing delivery through targeted, sector-led services and investment.

To support this strategy, we have allocated $22.3 million to underpin sector growth across urban and remote areas. We are also transferring up to 40 per cent of our urban public housing to community housing providers to enhance tenant outcomes, neighbourhood amenities and asset management. Notably, our government has recently transferred 251 dwellings in Darwin to Mission Australia Housing Northern Territory and 250 dwellings in Palmerston to Venture Housing, with management commencing in 2024. Additionally, we are negotiating with two Aboriginal Community Housing Providers to transfer 200 dwellings in Palmerston and Alice Springs, further supporting the growth of Aboriginal Community Housing Providers.



Men erecting metal huts at Borroloola, 1980

Library and Archives NT ph0377/0224

Under the Australian Government's National Housing Accord 2022, we aim to deliver 1,492 new social and affordable housing dwellings over the next five years. One of the flagship projects under this accord is the Shiers Street redevelopment, which will be the first large-scale Build-to-Rent model in the Territory. This project will be launched in partnership, with the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities soon to commence stage two of the procurement process to identify a leading community housing provider for this redevelopment.

In June, we signed the financial terms of the new National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness (NASHH) with the Australian Government. This new agreement, effective from July 2024, will provide the Northern Territory with $55 million annually over five years for social housing and homelessness services, representing a significant increase of $33 million per year. This includes $42.8 million per year to support specialist homelessness services, a sevenfold increase from previous funding. In addition to this, the NT has secured a $25 million sign-on bonus for essential urban infrastructure. These initiatives underscore our unwavering commitment to improving housing and homelessness services across the NT.

In the Territory, the stark reality is that our homelessness rate is 12 times higher than the national average. Our government is proud of its long-standing advocacy for needs-based funding that contributes to better outcomes and the Territory's unique service delivery needs. Our ongoing advocacy has now produced results.

We have commenced work on a new Northern Territory Homelessness Strategy, representing the next steps in this important work, and hope to release this later this year, with services to deliver on the strategy to commence from 1 July 2025.

This work goes beyond government. Breaking the cycle of homelessness in the NT, and minimising the number of Territorians sleeping rough, requires many different people and organisations working together.

We would like to thank all those from across the sector in the Territory for their hard work and dedication to improving housing outcomes for our communities. We look forward to reading about the new ideas and insight all contributors have placed in this edition and hope that, through these articles, a clearer collaborative path can be found to reduce the rate of homelessness in the NT.

We will continue our dedication and commitment to provide safety, support and a brighter future for Territorians who need it most.

Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory

Skye Thompson



I am so pleased to be part of this first Northern Territory-focused issue of *Parity*.

Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT) is the community-controlled peak body for Aboriginal housing in the Northern Territory (NT). It was conceived a decade ago by Aboriginal elders and leaders who were seeing more and more of our people struggle with rundown or crowded housing, or nowhere safe to call home, and no way to change their circumstances. In 2015 our founding members resolved to regain control over Aboriginal housing. We incorporated in 2019 and in 2022 I was appointed as the inaugural Chief Executive Officer.

We have a big job to do — you may have seen the stats. There are 12 times more homeless people in the NT than elsewhere in Australia, and almost all are Aboriginal. Our need for more housing is extreme and urgent. But the landscape is also complex — geographically, culturally and politically — so we need to take care. We want every decision to improve things into the future.

To be sure we go the right way, our work is guided by a board of representatives from each of our 16 member organisations: Aboriginal-controlled corporations providing community housing or essential services to hundreds of homelands around the Territory. We work in partnership with the land councils and with government agencies to improve the system of Aboriginal housing and, ultimately, to return it to Aboriginal control. We make the best decisions about our own housing. And the more we manage each part of housing — design and construction; tenancy management and support; maintenance and repairs — the better at it we become.

For Aboriginal people, home is more than shelter. Home is the connection we have with our ancestral estates, the lands and waters that hold our stories and our songs, our languages and our identities. Country connects us with our families and our ancestors. It's where our children grow strong, healthy and confident in their futures, and it's where we return to be buried.

Homelessness also looks and feels different for us. My friend Deb Buckskin says: *'How can I be homeless on my own country? It makes no sense.'* And she's right. But if there are a dozen people sharing a family member's house because they haven't got one of their own, that's homelessness. And if you have to leave your ancestral lands — maybe there's no house to raise your children or no school, or maybe your spouse is in hospital in Darwin — that's homelessness too.

This magazine is a trove of Territory intel, insights and stories, deepening our understanding and connecting us all to each other. I can't wait to see it in print.



Mud brick-making, Yuendumu, 1958 *National Archives of Australia A1200, L28248*

Editorial

Deborah Di Natale, Chief Executive Officer, Council to Homeless Persons



This is the first edition of *Parity* devoted to analysis and discussion of the response to homelessness in the Northern Territory (NT). There have been at least three other attempts to put together an NT edition over the years and I am so glad we have finally been able to make this a reality — joining previous editions of *Parity* devoted to homelessness responses in other states and territories.

The announcement in March this year, of Federal Government funding for a ten-year $4 billion commitment to housing in remote Aboriginal communities in the NT, is welcome. It will hopefully make a real difference to diminish the worst effects of endemic overcrowding in these communities.

This funding, however, must be seen as a down-payment on the resources needed to make a long-term difference to the levels of housing disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people in the NT. Furthermore, this housing must be designed and developed by local ATSI communities so that it meets their cultural needs. The history of housing failure in the NT is replete with example after example of inadequate and inappropriate housing models that failed to involve or take into consideration the input of the very people it was supposed to house and support.

The statistical dimensions of homelessness in the NT are frequently referred to throughout this edition. The most obvious of these facts is that the level of homelessness in the NT is at least 12 times greater than elsewhere in Australia and, most importantly, that the vast majority of those experiencing homelessness are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

It is for this reason that the discussion of homelessness and the response to it in the NT must begin with recognition and acknowledgement of the consequences of the historical and ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from their lands, and their subsequent experience of exclusion, marginalisation, exploitation, discrimination and racism.

Ultimately, a truly meaningful and appropriate response to the homelessness and housing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the NT (and elsewhere) has to begin with the adoption and implementation of the principles and practices of self-determination. Only when ATSI led services develop and implement the policies, facilities and forms of housing that meets their needs and requirements, rather than have them imposed by other entities, will there be an opportunity for justice, fairness and an informed, effective response to end homelessness.



Mount Catt homeland model-making, 1984 *Paul-Haar*

Acknowledgements

The Council to Homeless Persons would like to acknowledge and thank the Northern Territory Government for their sponsorship support for this edition. They had the courage and the conviction to go where other previous governments feared to tread.

We also acknowledge the support, commitment and engagement of the wider homelessness, housing and welfare sectors in supporting and sponsoring this edition — in particular, NT Shelter, The Salvation Army, Anglicare NT, Venture Housing, CHIA NT, Aboriginal Housing NT, The City of Darwin, Menzies School of Heath Research, NTCOSS, Charles Darwin Northern Institute, The YWCA, and Mission Australia.

CHP would also like to extend our special thanks to NT Shelter's Chief Executive Officer Peter McMillan for helping to get the edition off the ground, and to Guest Editor Annie Taylor, NT Shelter's Head of Operations for all her work at all stages of the development and preparation of the edition. Finally, many thanks to Carol Atkinson, CHIA NT Coordinator for all her support and assistance in the preparation of the edition.

Introduction

Peter McMillan, Chief Executive Officer, NT Shelter



NT Shelter is the peak body for affordable housing and homelessness in the Northern Territory (NT). Our vision is appropriate, affordable, and accessible housing for all Territorians.

Almost six per cent of the NT population experiences homelessness.[1] The NT is distinct to other jurisdictions not only in respect to our disproportionate level of homelessness, but also in the type of homelessness experienced here — severe crowding accounts for 76 per cent of homelessness.[2] Almost all (98 per cent) Territorians who live in severely crowded dwellings are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.[3] Overall, 87 per cent of the NT's homeless population are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.[4] At a national level, First Nations people account for 20 per cent of Australia's homeless population.[5] Stable and secure housing is a critical aspect of health and wellbeing and underpins outcomes in respect of education, employment, and participation in the economy. In particular, the provision and maintenance of safe, affordable and appropriate housing is vital if we are to respond to the disadvantage and marginalisation of First Nations people.

The scale of Aboriginal homelessness in the NT is unacceptable. We recognise that, to realise our vision of appropriate, affordable, and accessible housing for all people of the NT, it is essential that there is engagement with and local decision making by Aboriginal controlled organisations and communities. NT Shelter works side-by-side with Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT), recognising our respective strengths through our Memorandum of Understanding and being mindful of how we best use our collective knowledge and resources.

This edition of *Parity* is significant in that it is the first to be focused on the NT, a jurisdiction that experiences 12 times the national rate of homelessness.[6]

The NT has historically been disadvantaged. Although we welcome the recent announcement of a sevenfold increase in homelessness funding for the NT under the National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness, the fact remains that the impacts of the previous funding model are severe.

The distribution of funds based on population has meant that Territorians receive fewer opportunities for better outcomes than their interstate counterparts. In the NT, there is insufficient funding for our urban centres and there are vast remote geographies without any programs to support people with an experience of homelessness. Programs that have proven successful in other jurisdictions simply do not exist here.

The prevention of homelessness, now more widely accepted as the path forward, has yet to become a key focus in the NT with crisis absorbing most resources.

It is not only in relation to housing for First Nations people that the NT performs poorly. Data published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Australian



Darwin street art

Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that, across most priority cohorts identified by the now former National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, the NT has higher rates of homelessness than the rest of Australia.[7,8]

The number of Territorians aged 55 and over experiencing homelessness has increased 13.4 per cent since 2016 (compared to a four per cent increase nationally).[9] Children and young people under 25 years of age represent almost 50 per cent on the NT's homeless population.[10] Nationally, they are 37.4 per cent of the homeless population.[11]

While the NT has been poor with respect to the quantum of funding received by the Commonwealth for homelessness, we are rich with expertise and this addition of *Parity* showcases this. Responding to Homelessness in the Northern Territory explores homelessness amongst the above-mentioned cohorts in addition to women and children affected by domestic and family violence, Territorians with disabilities and those exiting from correctional institutions.

Through art, photography, articles, interviews, case studies and quotes, the voices of local and Territory governments, the sector, and those with a lived experience of homelessness are platformed in this edition thanks to the work of Council to Homeless Persons. It is my hope that they are heard across the Territory and throughout Australia.

Endnotes

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10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.



Chapter 1:
Housing and Homelessness in the Northern Territory

Northern Territory Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness

Skye Thompson, Chief Executive Officer, Aboriginal Housing NT (AHNT)



'…without good living conditions and without very simple fundamental things like access to water, the ability to wash, the ability to wash children, the ability to get rid of waste, the ability to actually live in a house that's safe. Without those very fundamental things, then to try and improve health is really impossible.' [1]

Severe overcrowding often reveals invisible homelessness in Aboriginal homelands and communities in the Northern Territory (NT). The levels of homelessness, due to unavailable housing that is safe and secure, means families often have no choice but to tolerate overcrowding and unacceptable housing conditions. In many Aboriginal homelands and communities, that has become the norm.[2]

And there are hidden financial burdens and psychological stresses, not to mention the strain on family life, that come with this reality for many families facing this silent housing crisis.

For example, families bear the financial and psychological burden of exorbitant power charges in the Territory with regular power disconnections existing on pre-paid meters in remote locations.

Many individuals and families tolerate these situations without complaint, even though they are entitled to make a complaint to a regulatory body.

To add to the burden, lack of services in the traditional languages of the people, and the lack of easy to access options for families to look at alternatives to power to significantly reduce their electricity costs, adds to the housing crisis.

Housing and overcrowding are social determinants of health. They are the non-medical factors that influence and affect health outcomes[3] and the daily living conditions in which people are born into, live, and age. In those conditions, people will often seek an escape to bear the realities of daily life.

Medical treatments alone will not address the health consequences of overcrowding and poor housing conditions. Prevention strategies like reducing overcrowding and homelessness are key to improving health outcomes.

It can't be one or the other, between either medical intervention or preventative housing strategies. If we are deadly serious about improving health outcomes and saving lives — it has to be both.

In fact, the NT breaks all the records when it comes to housing, homelessness and the resulting health outcomes. But these are not easy issues to discuss openly.

For many Aboriginal people in the NT, who experienced the Federal and NT Government Intervention of 2007,[4] or heard the stories from Elders, there remain lingering concerns about disclosing information in a public forum, or to an authority for one purpose, and seeing it mis-used by another agency for another purpose.

To understand our present housing crisis, it's important to know that Aboriginal community control of housing was taken away during the Intervention.

The Intervention saw housing removed from Aboriginal community-control and handed over to the Commonwealth and NT Governments, where it remains today. As part of the Intervention, the Commonwealth Government introduced[5] legislation to carry out three major land reforms in the NT: five-year leases of Aboriginal lands, statutory rights over Aboriginal lands, and the power to acquire town camp land.[6]

Funding for new housing and housing maintenance was contingent on Aboriginal communities signing over township lands to the Commonwealth under long term leases. The Commonwealth Government took compulsory five-year leases over 73[7] Aboriginal communities[8] in the NT. These leases were mostly replaced with long-term leases of 40 to 99 years.[9]

By way of briefly acknowledging the complexities, the communities and town camps and community living areas leased during the Intervention are separate from the homelands. The latter number around 500 or 600 across the Top End and Central Australia.

Moving forward, Commonwealth Government funding goes directly to the NT Government to deliver



Yanyula town camp, Borroloola, 1981

Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au

on the Commonwealth's housing promise and to enter into genuine partnership with Aboriginal people.[10]

The building of new housing is significant and a cause for celebration. Every house built is a step towards reducing overcrowding. Because, from the moment of birth, many Aboriginal children in the Territory will have spent their entire adolescence and young adulthood, living in overcrowded houses.

Although there is undeniable value for families growing up being together to share culture and knowledge, almost everyone yearns for a place of their own.[11]

Overcrowding, homelessness and poorly maintained housing have significant impacts on health, including on infectious disease, early childhood development, and mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

The 2021 Census data shows that our jurisdiction has the highest rate of homelessness in Australia.[12] With more than 76 per cent in severely overcrowded living conditions, Aboriginal people make up 87 per cent of the recorded people who are homeless in the NT. Concerningly, Aboriginal children and youth make up a high number of the homeless, so too do women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Overcrowding Brings Serious Health Consequences

Overcrowding is one of the biggest challenges to health and wellbeing. It is a significant barrier to improved health and educational and employment outcomes for families. It has consequences for child health and development, nutrition and educational outcomes. People in decaying housing conditions live constantly with a significant level of risk of acquiring infections resulting from non-functioning or inappropriate housing hardware.[13]

Poor Nutrition and Otitis Media

Overcrowding contributes to poor nutrition and otitis media in children and directly impacts a child's ability to attend school, it affects their ability to concentrate, hear or understand and feel a part of the world around them. The consequences for a child are profound and long lasting. Studies, in line with anecdotal evidence, shows nutrition can often be compromised for children, women and elderly, in overcrowded living conditions. It affects later adult health.[14]

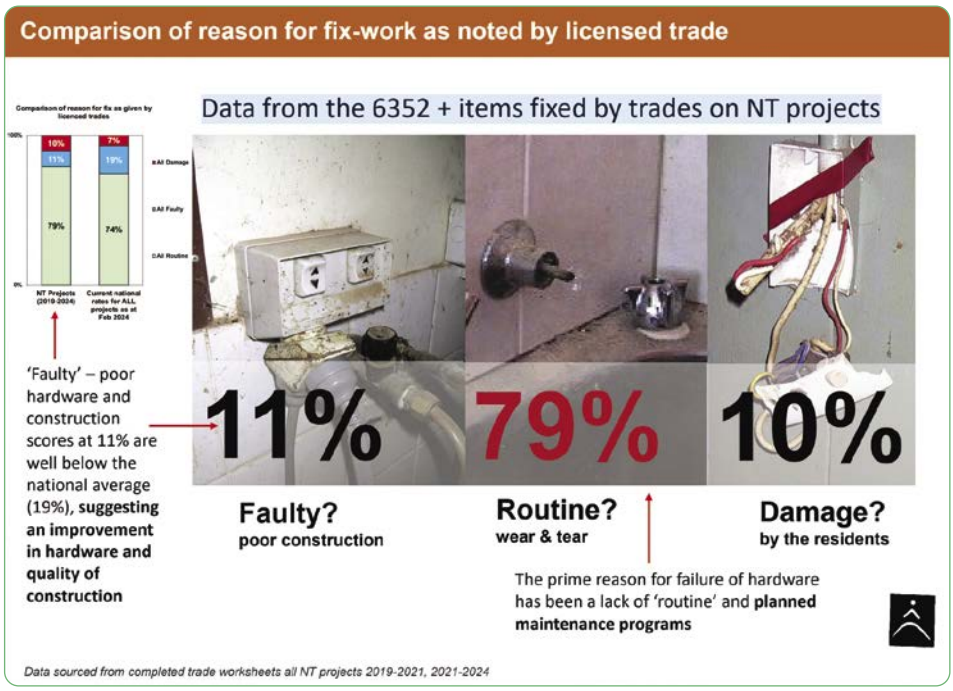


Image Credit: Housing for Homes Project.

Otitis media refers to inflammation and infection of the middle ear. It is a preventable and treatable disease for children in Australia. But in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal children suffer the highest prevalence of any jurisdictions in Australia.[15]

It is reportedly close to 10 times higher than the four per cent identified by The World Health Organisation, as the benchmark for a serious public health problem that requires urgent attention.[16]

What are the risk factors for otitis media? Living in overcrowded housing, poor housing conditions, malnutrition, exposure to tobacco smoke, social disadvantage and limited access to services.

Ear and hearing health services are inadequate in Aboriginal communities,[17] which means this is not an issue that can be left to health professionals and health services to address alone. We urge for more preventative work that reduces overcrowding, improves people's homes and living conditions, and upgrades poorly maintained essential infrastructure.[18]

Skin infections — Group A Strep — Rheumatic Heart Disease

Some childhood skin infections can lead to more devastating health outcomes for children, with lifelong implications.

Impetigo or school sores, and scabies are diseases of overcrowding.

The spread of what people commonly refer to as Strep Throat, otherwise known as bacterium *Streptococcus pyogenes*, group A streptococcusis is magnified by people's living conditions.[19, 20] For example, serious health conditions like acute rheumatic fever (ARF) and rheumatic heart disease (RHD), the latter caused by permanent damage to the heart valves after one or more episodes of ARF, are associated with the Group A Strep bacteria.

The NT breaks the record with the highest rate of prevalence of rheumatic heart disease in Australia, and one of the highest rates in the world.[21]

The prevalence rate of RHD among First Nations people in the Northern Territory was 3,005 per 100,000 people…, compared with 736 per 100,000 in Queensland (1,823), 725 per 100,000 in Western Australia (801), and 497 in South Australia (232).[22]

The Territory's History with Housing Maintenance and Repairs

The history of NT housing maintenance and repairs throughout many communities, community living areas, and homelands, by those charged with responsibilities as landlord and government agencies is one of inaction and lack of record keeping at almost every turn. This is most tragically highlighted, recently in 2021, in the Darwin Coroner's Court after the death of a much-loved child, an 11-year-old boy in West Arnhema in Gunbalanya, one of the 73 Government leased communities.

In the words of NT Coroner Judge Greg Cavanagh, his report states that this young child died after being electrocuted by an unearthed roof, *'caused by faulty Power and Water Corporation connection to residence, no earthing of electrical connection and metal roof, no maintenance or inspection over 25 years.'* [23]

NT WorkSafe issued Improvement Notices to Power and Water Corporation. The tragedy brought the media spotlight for the first time to the looming electrical safety issues in remote communities that needed urgent attention.[24, 25]

The lack of any regular maintenance and repairs work is also highlighted in the Santa Theresa community court case against the NT Government.[26]

In recent years, the Northern Territory's Families, Communities and Territories has made significant effort to reform the government's housing maintenance approach contracting the Healthy Habitat mob responsible for the Housing for Health program,[27] to deliver the program to communities and town camps.

Based on the evaluation by Menzies, there's still much for government departments to get right with the implementation of the program, for the benefit of people living in communities and town camps. But we applaud the effort to try, and we encourage agencies to work together in genuine collaboration to address the critical need for regular inspection, maintenance and repairs across remote communities and town camps.[28] It makes all the difference to our people.

Our hope is that the homelands can begin to be included in the Healthy Homes program for maintenance and repairs, given the recent Commonwealth funding announcements.

One of the myths about Aboriginal housing repairs is that most of the damage done is caused by the tenants and residents themselves.

The Housing for Health teams, working in communities and town camps, identified that out of more than 6,000 housing repair and maintenance jobs, 79 per cent was due to routine wear and tear. Damage by housing residents accounted for 10 per cent of the jobs.

Finally, it is important that local Aboriginal voices are at the decision-making table with governments whenever there are decisions that relate to our lives, where we live, how we live and who we live with.

We encourage more transparency of information on the implementation and decision making, and the many different agencies involved. But our participation shouldn't end at the decision-making table.

At the recent Aboriginal Housing and Homelands conference held in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) this year, there were local presentations with fresh thinking and innovation around energy use in the home, using solar power instead of the existing status quo of expensive power bills. One of the case studies showed how they were able to reduce the financial burden of the power bill for families. It created opportunities for economic empowerment. Could that kind of success be replicated across other Aboriginal communities, homelands and town camps?

We encourage the Territory Government to seek genuine Aboriginal-led design and construction and implementation of housing and involve hearing the wishes of the people you are building homes for.

We encourage the Territory Government to involve more Indigenous businesses in the construction and supply of services for the agreements made in our names for our people.

If governments are serious about significantly reducing overcrowding and homelessness, there has to be the highest levels of teamwork, collaboration and critical thinking within a whole of government approach that includes the Aboriginal community-controlled sector as genuine partners. Aboriginal people can only do our part if we're genuinely encouraged inside the tent, invited to the table, and included in the different stages of the lifecycle of projects and our holistic perspectives, our ideas and feedback welcomed and valued. That opens a way to partner together effectively with governments to improve the living conditions of our people, and make more homes that are safe, secure and maintained regularly. All of that contributes to improved health and wellbeing on people's own ancestral lands. That's all we're asking for.

We want to see more government effort to involve Aboriginal voices and businesses in the design, construction and implementation of housing in the NT.

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Addressing Overcrowding in Remote Aboriginal Communities

The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities

In the heart of Australia, remote Indigenous communities face a profound challenge: homelessness.

However, when you are far from the nearest town, homelessness looks very different to other parts of the country.

For Pauline Ryan and her grandchildren, living in Kalkarindji, a remote Aboriginal community 464km southwest of Katherine in the Northern Territory, (NT) homelessness was not just about sleeping rough; it was about sleeping without enough space.

Out in the bush, you won't find people sleeping rough at rail and bus terminals or shopping centres. Homelessness out here is living in overcrowded conditions with families raising children in one bedroom while up to 20 other family members try to live in the remaining rooms of the house.

The Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) identifies overcrowded households by setting bedroom requirements. Households needing more bedrooms are considered overcrowded, potentially leading to homelessness. Adequate housing prevents this.

Tackling homelessness in remote Aboriginal communities is more than just building housing, it's building communities. It's about creating jobs, providing education and making sure local people have a say in how their communities operate.

The 'Australian dream' of owning a home is out of reach for many in these communities. Land belongs to Traditional Owners and is leased back by the NT Government, which builds homes for people to rent as public housing. Owning a home isn't an option here, even if you win the lottery or work incredibly hard.

Local decision-making is key to solving these problems. Housing reference groups play a crucial role, ensuring that decisions are made with the input and needs of the community in mind.



Pauline and her grandchildren at the handover to her new home

This approach aligns with national Closing the Gap commitments, which aim to reduce disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the broader Australian population. By involving local communities in housing decisions, we are not only addressing immediate needs but also working towards the broader goals of equity and self-determination set out in the Closing the Gap framework. This collaborative effort is vital for creating sustainable and culturally appropriate housing solutions and employment opportunities that truly benefit the residents living in these communities.

Take James Gengi, for example. James is a local from Ramingining, a remote community over 550kms east of Darwin. Since July 2022, he has been diligently crafting cabinetry for newly constructed homes in his community. Working on key projects like HomeBuild (construction of new homes), Room to Breathe (refurbishment and extension of existing homes with additional bedrooms and/or bathrooms), and Government Employee Housing (housing for key government workers in remote communities).

James's journey is inspiring. Hired as an apprentice by Deltareef, he is also pursuing a Certificate II in Construction through Charles Darwin University. What makes his story unique is how Deltareef and the university have come together to bring the classroom to him. Instead of having to leave his community to travel to Darwin for his education, James receives his training onsite in Ramingining. This arrangement not only supports his professional growth but also keeps him connected to his roots.



'Kingstrand' houses in Barunga, 1977. Kingstrand houses were cheap metal huts — without any ceiling or lining for insulation — that the Australian Government supplied to Aboriginal communities in Central and Top End locations from 1957. *Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au*

Through his apprenticeship, James has also earned certifications for operating heavy machinery such as a bobcat, telehandler, loader, and excavator, all thanks to the training provided by Deltareef. His achievements are a testament to what can be accomplished when opportunities are accessible locally. For Aboriginal people, staying connected to their community and Country is essential, and it should never come at the cost of their quality of life.

The need for sustainable housing solutions in remote Indigenous communities is urgent, and it's a key focus for the NT Government. Aboriginal people, despite being only a small fraction of the overall population nationally, and a third of the population in the Northern Territory, are disproportionately affected by homelessness. Nationally, they make up 23 per cent of the homeless population. In the NT, this number soars to 87 per cent, reflecting a crisis that demands immediate attention. On Census night in 2021, the stark reality was laid bare: the NT had 564 homeless people per 10,000 residents, compared to the national average of 48 per 10,000. Investing in remote communities is essential to address these alarming statistics. The NT Government has already made significant progress in enhancing housing and improving lives in these areas through sustained efforts.

Despite the mammoth efforts, housing conditions and homelessness from overcrowding continues to be a huge burden and a growing issue for our remote Indigenous communities. The Australian Government recently committed to extending its funding partnership with the NT Government for remote housing with a joint funding commitment of $4 billion over the next decade, recognising the continuing need for support in this space. This funding will enable the construction of up to 270 new homes annually, with a cumulative total of up to 2,700 new homes over ten years.

The commitment to remote housing is evident through the government's historic joint investment of $2.2 billion, the largest in the territory's history delivered through the *Our Communities. Our Futures. Our Homes* framework. This investment has resulted in the construction of over 3,800 new and extended homes across remote communities to date. The investment has also enabled the delivery of essential services to support an increase in homes in remote areas that were not previously equipped with the things most urban centres take for granted. Things like roads, lighting, pathways, stormwater drains and other essential services. Such developments have not only provided essential housing but also fostered a sense of community and stability among residents.

In Kalkarindji, one of the 73 communities to benefit from the remote housing works program, a substantial 111 additional bedrooms have been added to local homes. This has allowed families like Pauline Ryans' to move from severely overcrowded homes to more suitable living spaces. The community has seen the completion of 28 new builds and 11 home extensions. The positive impact is evident in the joy and relief on residents' faces as they receive the keys to their new and upgraded homes.

Residents like Pauline, from remote communities across the Territory, make this work incredibly rewarding. In June 2023, Pauline received her new home. That same week marked the end of her life-long career at the local school where she had dedicated her life to working in the canteen and feeding the school children. Knowing Pauline was going to enjoy retirement in a comfortable space was a huge relief.

Joint Territory and Federal Government funding for NT homelands has also been reinstated through the Homelands Housing

and Infrastructure Program (HHIP). The program focuses on refurbishing homes, enhancing essential services and supporting infrastructure projects. This collaborative financial arrangement shows commitment to providing culturally appropriate and durable housing solutions for the residents of homelands and demonstrates government's recognition of homelands as important cultural locations for Aboriginal people. Over the next 3 years an additional $120 million will be allocated by the Australian Government to continue the vital work of the Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Program (HHIP) — this is in addition to the $120 million investment by the Northern Territory Government.

A fundamental element in the NT Government's approach to deploying housing works in remote communities and homelands is centred on community collaboration. By partnering closely with local communities, Land Councils and Aboriginal Housing NT, the government ensures that housing projects are culturally appropriate and tailored to the specific needs of each area. This method has improved housing conditions and empowered communities, fostering a sense of ownership and pride among residents. Whenever possible, Aboriginal-owned businesses are contracted for these projects, providing employment opportunities for community members.



Impressive Results

The impact of the remote housing program is highlighted by its impressive results:

- **Over 3,400 new bedrooms built and an additional 1,096 new living spaces constructed.** This monumental achievement addresses overcrowding and provides residents with safe, comfortable living spaces.

- **Significant Investment by the Australian Government in Homelands of $100 million.** The reintroduction of federal funding facilitated the rapid establishment of essential infrastructure in NT homelands.

- **Community engagement enhanced through over 800 local decision-making consultations.** The program's emphasis on local decision-making and collaboration with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations has strengthened community ties and ensured culturally sensitive project delivery.

- **Enhanced Living Conditions.** Numerous remote communities now benefit from upgraded housing and improved living standards, fostering healthier and more stable communities overall.

- **Economic boost including 45.3 per cent of works conducted by Aboriginal owned enterprises.**

The program has created job opportunities within remote communities, contributing to local economies and empowering residents.

The success of the remote housing program in the Territory is a testament to the government's dedication to improving the lives of its residents. Through continued strategic investments, community collaboration, and adaptive strategies the NT Government has set a benchmark in delivering effective and sustainable housing solutions in remote areas.
As the program progresses, it promises to continue driving positive change and enhancing the wellbeing of communities across the NT.

Why Are We Still Here? Yolŋu Voices From the Larrakia Longgrass

Rose Laynbalaynba, Court interpreter, Darwin Aboriginal Interpreter Service,
Michael Christie, Charles Darwin University,
John Greatorex, Mäpuru Independent School,
Michaela Spencer, Charles Darwin University

In 2004, Ḻawurrpa and Garŋgulkuy, two Yolŋu researchers from the Yalu' Marŋgithinyaraw Centre at Galiwin'ku conducted research into the needs and conditions of homeless Yolŋu in Darwin.[1] At the time, there had been considerable discussion in the media about itinerants. The two researchers were concerned about their relatives who were 'long-grassers'; that is, people who by choice or circumstance were sleeping in the fresh air, under the stars. In that research, it became clear that most Yolŋu who were homeless on Larrakia land were continuing to live a viable Yolŋu life, and had their own reasons for not being on their own land, or in the larger Yolŋu settlements.

Now 20 years later, we again consider the voices of homeless Yolŋu in relation to current conditions in Darwin and in the remote Yolŋu townships of Milingimbi, Galiwin'ku, Yirrkala, Ramingining, and Gapuwiyak. Yolŋu long-grassers are generally linked to one of those townships, but most often their traditional estates are spread throughout the vast areas of north east Arnhem Land. It continues to be the case that long-grassers come together in groups which reflect their communities of origin, and their traditional kin networks. They follow the networks of kinship to implement the traditional responsibilities of care and concern.

Twenty years ago, keeping in touch with Yolŋu family was difficult and frustrating, and losing touch with loved ones in the long grass was a source of ongoing distress. Today, with almost universal mobile phone use, everyone in Darwin can remain pretty much in constant contact with their kinfolk in Arnhem Land, and among themelves, accessing important social capital for keeping them safe. There are now more Yolŋu families settled in Darwin and Palmerston, thus more space is available to accommodate visitors. The government and nongovernment services providing transport and accommodation support for Yolŋu and their relatives who are involved with the hospital, dialysis units, or criminal justice system are seen to have improved. Access to Centrelink funding has improved. We hear less of people feeling that they are 'stuck' in Darwin. They are here for a reason. Yolŋu long-grassers are always conscious of the fact that they are on the land of the Larrakia traditional owners. The Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation's *Healthy Engagement and Assistance in the Long Grass*[2] project is much respected and Yolŋu especially appreciate their Return to Country program.

The long-grassers who drink alcohol continue to be very visible to the public, and thus continues the perception that this is overwhelmingly the most important reason why Yolŋu long-grassers stay in Darwin. The problem drinkers today are in a minority among the long-grassers. They are often accompanied by close relatives who are non-drinkers, who have been appointed by their families to care for their relatives, partners and children, and work hard to keep them safe. Yolŋu who have been drinking heavily while living in the long grass understand that if they return to Arnhem Land they will not have access to professional services to assist them in dealing with the effects of alcohol withdrawal and/or other alcohol-related illnesses. '*That keeps us here.*'

At the time of the original research, when health services were unable to provide accommodation to the relatives of patients, the relatives often chose to sleep out in spaces adjacent to the Royal Darwin Hospital in Casuarina or the Renal Unit in Nightcliff. This is no longer happening as much as it used to. While there are more housing options available for temporary Yolŋu visitors to Darwin, they are never sufficient, and important cultural avoidance practices — particularly between brothers and their sisters and their mothers-in-law — often make it difficult for men to stay alongside their extended family. There remain long waiting lists for public housing and government workers police overcrowding. And besides, for many, 'the open air, the breezes, watching the stars, listening to the sea, smelling the smoke' gives them a happier and more authentic Yolŋu lifestyle than relatives staying in crowded, poorly maintained houses with little breeze and fenced yards in proximity to unrelated neighbours, in Darwin or, for that matter, on any of the Yolŋu townships.

We are often told by Yolŋu long-grassers that Yolŋu life on Larrakia land is healthier and more authentic than Yolŋu life of Yolŋu land. Given that 'country' is the key underpinning of Yolŋu (and all Aboriginal) politics and identity, this is indeed a big claim. It has always been the case that members of Yolŋu clan groups or kin networks who have been marginalised from the politics of their home towns, and who have little possibility of a sustainable life on their own clan lands, are more likely to end up in Darwin. In fact, particular clan groups with poor access to ancestral homelands have always tended to be overrepresented among the Darwin homeless. (It should be remembered that only a small minority of Yolŋu in



Corrugated iron huts, Umbakumba, Groote Eylandt, 1976 *Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au*

remote townships are actually traditional owners of the land where the towns were set up as missions or government settlements.)

A few Yolŋu clan and family groups have good access to their homelands and to reasonable accommodation. They are much less likely to be homeless in Darwin. Recent government funding announced for major repairs and infrastructure in homeland centres allocates very little for housing and entails restrictive implementation conditions.[3] Meanwhile, many Yolŋu in the townships and in Darwin speak longingly of their ancestral estates, the work of caring for them, the spiritual nurturing the places provide, and the huge potential for employment in land and sea management, tourism, and the production of art and ceremony which is properly supervised and properly in place.

The centralisation of remote Aboriginal populations into larger centres, in response to government policies at all levels, is seen as the root cause of dysfunction in the major settlements. This centralisation and its social effects lead inevitably to the marginalisation and breakdown of traditional governance.

What prevents the elders from their traditional governance? Very often the allocation of housing in the centralised towns leads to the splitting up of small clusters of homes occupied by branches of extended families. Children are all mixed up in larger townships. In the overcrowded towns, they are getting their languages wrong, the elders don't have the quiet space to teach and encourage the correct use of old language (*gurruŋay*) or to teach the highly significant details in art and performance which signify the crucial difference among the many different land-holding groups and their totems. This form of discipline (*raypirri'*), lovingly dispensed by only the correct elders relevant to each individual, is difficult in a large crowded town, and almost impossible in the long grass where children and their grandparents are seldom together.

Large ceremonies in large townships bring more difficult discussions and sometimes elbowing around who should be the ceremonial leaders (*djirrikay* and *ḏalkarra*) and who must attend and perform various roles. Smaller groups on country provide opportunities for close-knit networks of kin, leading to healthy lifestyles and diet, good environmental management, and vibrant spiritual and ceremonial lives.

In large townships, it is often difficult, it seems, for government and non-government workers to engage the right elders in negotiating their work. The traditional owners must be at the forefront of negotiations about what happens to their land, and clan elders must be at the forefront of negotiations around their young people. When a public servant, police officer, or teacher, or social worker or lawyer deals directly with a young offender without working closely with their parents or elders, traditional governance is undermined and the young person loses trust.

When traditional governance is undermined, people can treat each other roughly and without respect. When this happens, delicate ceremonial negotiations, say for a funeral, may not be completed properly and people can quarrel over sacred business. Sickness or death is then accompanied by suspicion of sorcery (*galka'*). For many years Yolŋu who have been accused of sorcery, or are afraid of sorcery or of being enlisted to perform it, have found refuge in the Darwin long grass where the threat of *galka'* is much reduced.

Many senior Yolŋu work hard to mediate solutions to disputes — often without the support or recognition of governments. When mediation practices are successful, we often see groups of long-grassers slowly returning home.

On Larrakia land, where groups of Yolŋu are in self-selected networks, and where the Larrakia Night Patrol workers understand how to engage Yolŋu authority and defuse difficulties, things are often much easier for the smaller marginalised Yolŋu groups than they would be back in Arnhem Land.

Yolŋu who live in peace on their various homelands, as well as those who are living in Darwin, often worry about the difficult, confused and overcrowded lives of their relatives in the relatively dysfunctional Yolŋu townships. When good traditional governance is restored in those places, and endorsed and engaged by government departments, and when overcrowding is addressed, many Yolŋu long-grassers return home to country.

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Establishment and Success of Batten Road Homelessness Service Darwin

The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities

The services offered at Batten Road go beyond just providing people with a roof of their heads. Residents receive meals, health services, access to legal aid, counselling, and case management. The focus is on homelessness prevention, early intervention, and breaking the cycle of long-term homelessness. The facility also holds surge capacity, used for emergencies such as quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic, and plays a crucial role in the Greater Darwin wet weather respite service offered to support evacuees during severe weather events.

A notable aspect of Batten Road is its commitment to personalised care. Each resident works with case managers and service providers to develop a tailored support plan. This individualised approach ensures that the unique needs and circumstances of each person are addressed, increasing the likelihood of successful outcomes.

A recent engagement survey found that most current short-stay residents had been staying at Batten Road between one and two weeks, with 64 per cent residing with family and 36 per cent residing with a partner. All guests confidently expressed they would return to Batten Road if they needed somewhere to stay. A common theme among those interviewed was an appreciation for the staff.

When families are grappling with housing insecurity and homelessness, it can become hard to maintain the things that keep children happy, healthy and socially included. The wraparound supports at Batten Road highlight how these models instil a sense of community and continuity. For example, school aged children are provided with daily bus services to attend their local schools, while they are also given a packed lunch as they exit the facility each morning. In partnership with Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation and Mission Australia, the Batten Road facility provides comprehensive case coordination services and 'through care' for people living or accessing services at the facility. Through collaboration with Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services (CAAPS), TeamHealth, and 54 Reasons, support is provided to individuals dealing with alcohol and other drugs, mental health challenges, and child and family development issues. Mission Australia, with government and non-government service providers, delivers youth-focused recreational programs.

Batten Road's comprehensive, compassionate and people-centred approach is making a real difference, and continuing the fight to end homelessness in Darwin and the Northern Territory.



Artwork courtesy of the Studio Off the Street program

Build It and They Will Come: Housing supply is only one side of the coin. Where is the funding for tenancy sustainment?

Clive Rosewarne, Strategic Projects Manager, Community Housing Central Australia

A feature of homelessness in the Northern Territory (NT) is overcrowding of houses. The rates of homelessness in the NT exceed those of other jurisdictions[1] and overcrowding rates are also disproportionately higher.[2] These are most severe in remote communities. However, urban population drift to Alice Springs, due to the decline in service provision, reduced employment options and rising cost of living in remote communities, is increasing overcrowding here to unprecedented levels.[3]

The many well documented social impacts of overcrowding include:

- the likelihood that children spend considerable time on the streets
- disruption to attendance at school
- lack of privacy and student study spaces
- victim survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence living in proximity to abusers or relatives of abusers
- lack of culturally appropriate distancing between genders and age cohorts
- food insecurity
- fuel poverty with interrupted access to electricity
- financial insecurity
- negative health impacts due to transmission of disease and psychological distress.[4]

High volumes of people using housing infrastructure greatly increases wear and tear, which has led to housing design that is industrial and minimalist in character. Despite this hard-edged design approach, housing stock in the NT is in a repair cycle crisis. Repairs and maintenance funding is under-budgeted every year, and extra funds have to be allocated.[5] Houses are left 'under repair' adding to the 'days vacant to occupy' in NT public housing, currently averaging 165 days.[6]

It is not surprising in a tight budget environment that so many empty houses are waiting to be repaired. These delays further fuel the housing shortage where families are waiting for up to eight years for NT public housing due to the lack of supply.

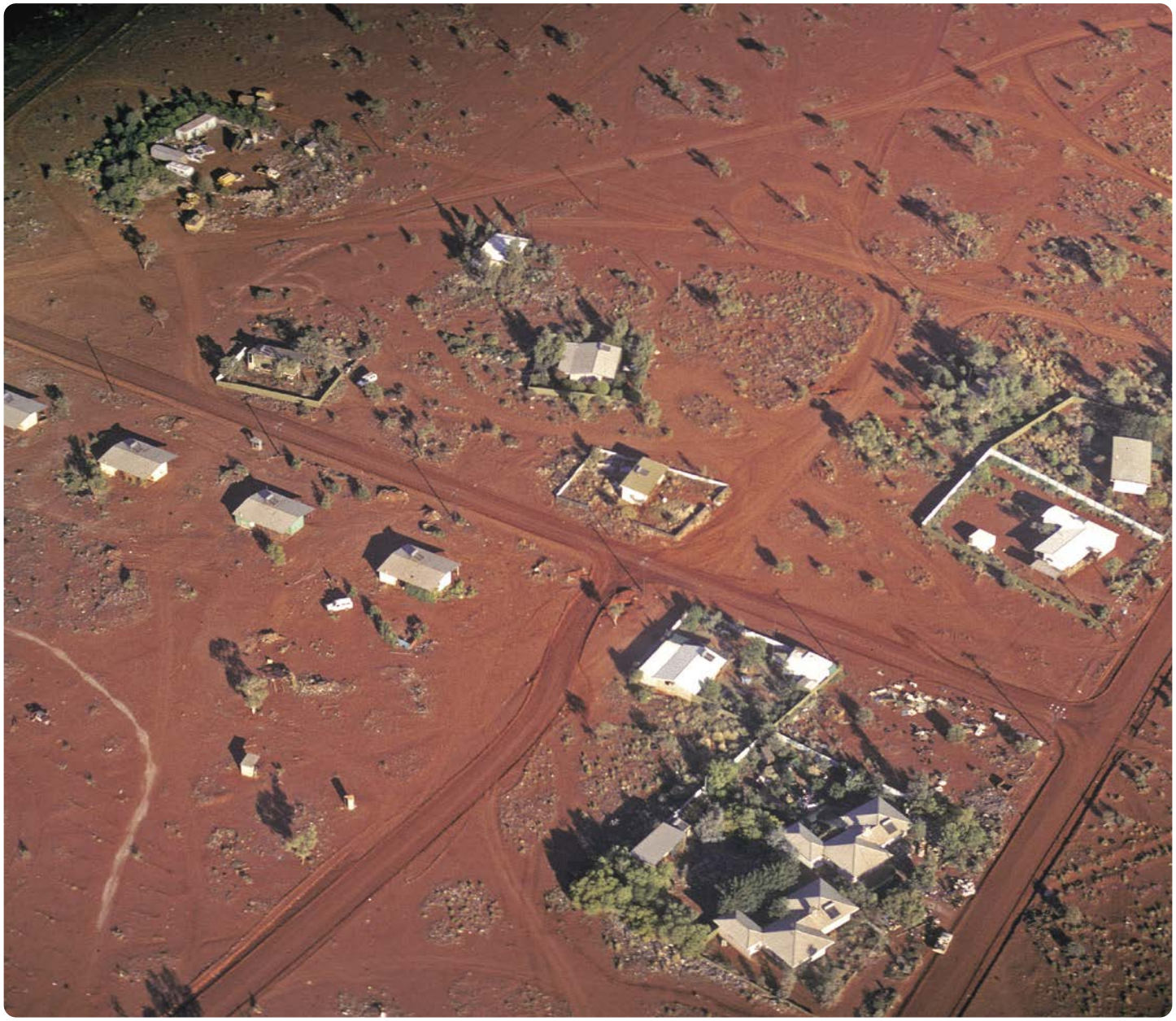
When tenants' houses are in constant 'churn' from 'visitors' and overcrowded, their capacity to manage key tenancy responsibilities under the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999 (NT)*[7] become compromised. This leads to:

- **Rent arrears:** too many people demanding money and requiring to be supported puts pressure on family members to provide economic support to visiting relatives. This leads to tenants defaulting on their rent payments.
- **Breakages:** through infrastructure collapse and damage. When these are not reported either because they are not noticed, or to avoid the perpetrators being identified, the cost of repairs becomes the tenant's responsibility.
- **Nuisance:** houses become noisy houses which cause disruption to neighboring properties.
- **Failed inspections:** if those using the house do not care about its condition, or have other social or personal issues, including but not limited to high levels of alcohol use or other substance abuse, this may lead to unhygienic living conditions. This often results in tenants not meeting their responsibilities to maintain the premises in a reasonable condition.

There are two overarching issues of concern with current NT housing funding from a social housing[8] provider standpoint. One is supply and the other is underfunding for tenancy sustainability.

The new Commonwealth remote housing agreement estimates building 2,700 houses in remote communities and homelands over ten years. However, this does not address the pressing need for more social housing in a 'Town like Alice'.

There has been a 20 per cent reduction in the number of public housing properties in the NT in the last 20 years.[9] This has not been countered by the development of social housing. The current NT Government program to build the capacity of the Community Housing Sector (CHS) involves the transfer of public housing in locations such as Darwin and Alice Springs to the CHS[10] — it doesn't create new properties. The significant federal funding investment to deliver new social housing is applauded, however the numbers projected for Alice Springs only scrape the surface. The NT Government announcement of 90 new affordable housing properties for key workers as part of the Regional Accommodation program supporting private market investment is welcomed. However, these will be for middle/higher income earning key workers, not those requiring social



Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au

housing[11] in a growing population with high levels of reliance upon social security payments.

The recent HomeBuild NT program has created 62 new houses (42 of these replaced existing stock), leading to a net gain of 150 new bedrooms. The KPI for this program was the number of bedrooms built. When an existing property was demolished (due to age and condition of the property), in 85 per cent of cases the new houses were larger properties with more bedrooms, this included the construction of five- and six-bedroom properties. This reduced construction costs (per bedroom) by adding more rooms per property constructed. In our experience the creation of larger houses, especially five and six-bedroom properties, only exacerbates the problem of overcrowding in these households. No single bedroom units suitable for older residents, and only a handful of two-bedroom properties suitable for small families, were constructed.

The current planned new builds of affordable and remote houses will be a drop in the ocean[12] compared to the estimated NT-wide demand of 19,000 new houses by 2030.[13]

While any increase in housing stock is appreciated, the current rate of construction will create more overcrowded houses.

Chronic overcrowding, poverty and social disempowerment — issues created through years of policy failure — have created a situation where many tenants do not have the requisite tenancy skills to

Funding factor and multiplier	***Amount***
Baseline funding per tenancy/property	$A
Tenancy complexity factor (x4) Property Condition factor (x1.5) Remote cost factor (x1.2)	
Required funding factor for delivery of sustainable tenancies in Alice Springs	$(6.7)A

Table 1. Proposed Social Housing Funding Formula for the CHS in the NT

sustain their tenancies. Community Housing Central Australia (CHCA) has argued that the funding for social housing providers needs to be substantially increased, at least in the short to medium terms, to help tenants and tenancy providers address and overcome these legacy issues. This cannot be funded from rents, capped at 25 per cent of the already low income of tenants. It is widely recognised elsewhere in Australia that a subsidy is required.

In the current NT Government housing transfers, the CHS is being expected to deliver social housing to some of the most complex tenancies, based on a funding model that is grossly inadequate and unrealistic without access to an operational subsidy.

Baseline modelling for social housing in the NT is premised upon an essentially reverse engineered funding formula. In the 'Paxon' Report,[14] the amount of income generated by rents and Commonwealth Rent Assistance is taken as the given income side of the formula. All costs are then tailored to fit this income, resulting in an expected $1,750 'free cash flow' or profit.[15] This approach recognises the relatively high costs of 'vacate' works but fails to adequately account for the higher costs of tenancy management due to the complexity of the tenancies and associated pressures discussed earlier. The model also underestimates the higher remote area service delivery costs for Alice Springs,[16] and underestimates insurance and ongoing repair and maintenance costs due to the aged nature of the housing stock.

The tenancy and property management components are costed at $1,195[17] per property/tenancy. This is the major flaw in the model. Given the complex nature of the tenancies that CHCA deals with, across all our portfolios of social (and affordable) housing, this modelling is inadequate. A more realistic costing, that would have built in tenancy sustainment goals, would include a higher ratio of Community Housing Officers to tenancies and the provision of dedicated tenancy support workers. Based upon CHCA's costings, this equates to $4,835 per property in one of our transfer portfolios, which is not inconsistent with the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities complex tenancy costing of $3,000 to $4,000.

A new tenancy and property management funding model should be developed to address the high level of complex tenancy needs in the NT remote and regional housing population, the higher costs associated with poorly maintained and aged housing stock, and the higher remote area service delivery costs.

Table 1 shows an indicative funding formula that recognises and gives a relative weighting to these factors. CHCA is keen to partner with housing providers, the Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA), Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT), housing economists and other interested parties to further develop this model. We believe this would be a valuable tool for our sector when negotiating government funding agreements providing a more realistic economic model.

Following strong advocacy from the NT Government and peaks such as NT Shelter, we welcome the recent Federal Budget seven-fold increase in homelessness funding. While CHCA applauds attempts to address overcrowding in remote areas by constructing more properties, we believe there remains an under-investment in social and emergency housing in the Alice Springs urban community. As a tenancy manager, we remain very concerned at the apparent indifference towards adequately funding tenancy support, as part of a suite of tenancy management actions required to sustain tenancy outcomes.

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First Nations Homelessness in a Darwin Cyclone

Michael Christie, Ground Up, Charles Darwin University
and Michaela Spencer, Ground Up, Charles Darwin University

In 2015, Ground Up researchers at Charles Darwin University interviewed 47 Darwin 'long-grassers' at eight different sites. The research was part of a larger project commissioned by the Northern Territory Natural Disaster Resilience Program, through which the Northern Territory Emergency Services (NTES) develop plans in collaboration with other agencies for disaster resilience, management and preparedness.[1] We spoke with Larrakia, Tiwi, Yolŋu and Desert people living in Darwin and Palmerston who, in the wet season, frequently experience severe and extreme weather events. These conversations explored their experiences of bad weather and cyclones in order to identify areas and determinants of vulnerability from their own perspectives.

The research was guided and facilitated by researchers from the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, the Bagot community, and the Raki' Mala Indigenous Consultants. Long-grassers are considered by NTES to be a vulnerable population and, while catered for within existing regional and Territory based Emergency Management Plans, they had not previously been consulted about their experiences of emergency events. Some long-grasser camps have persisted for many years, occupied almost continuously by representatives of small extended clan groups hailing from particular remote settlements. When there's trouble back home, the long grass population swells and. during ceremony time, shrinks.

Ground Up research always begins with taking seriously the knowledge and authority of Aboriginal elders.[2] Listening to them in their outdoor encampments, they told stories of emergency events they had experienced in the past and explained how they had managed to stay safe during these times — working together with friends and family, as well as with government agencies and service providers.

We, and others commissioning the research, found that people living in the long grass were more prepared for adverse weather than we had anticipated. They made clear that their environmental awareness — a whole life lived largely out of doors with an intense interest in winds and weather — informed them when a cyclone was on its way, long before the news arrived on their phones, or they were told by family or friendly staff at the shops. They were also clear about the difference between cyclone 'watch and act' and emergency warning.

It was easy to see how younger people and newcomers learnt strategies for responses to extreme weather as the older and more experienced people told stories of what happened in this or that cyclonic event. Some of the storytellers had been in Darwin's long grass for many years and intended to remain.

When it was looking like a cyclone emergency would be declared, each group expected a visit from the police or a non-government organisation (NGO). They were confident they would be properly cared for.

Of all the possible ways of being informed about impending events and procedures — whether by phone or police visits, for example — groups preferred to be visited in person by a representative of an organisation, such as the Larrakia Nation, police, or Red Cross, and preferably a First Nations person.

Front-line staff are in a position to help negotiate what should happen for the young, the sick and the elderly, and importantly they have the authority and connections to make sure it happens properly. They were also often aware that, even in the long grass, recognised systems of leadership and authority are in place and of benefit when groups are working with services and each other to stay safe.

Everyone we spoke to knew of the nearest and best options for sheltering in a cyclone, and there were shared opinions of the various merits of varying possible official and unofficial shelters.

People on Casuarina Beach, for example, were often there because of proximity to relatives in hospital, and were clear that the hospital was always open, cool, had 24-hour television and Indigenous workers who kept them informed. On Mindil Beach, we were told the solidly constructed public toilets were useful in a severe storm, for men in one side, women in the other. If worse comes to worst, they would head up the hill to Darwin High School.

The official public facilities, like the huge underground parking space at the Casuarina Shopping Centre, were less popular because the long-grassers had to share space with suburban shelterers who were generally unwelcoming and often unfriendly.

The wariness of the general non-Aboriginal public explains the enthusiasm and trust associated with the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation and their frontline workers who the long-grassers say they have grown to trust



and collaborate with them more and more over the years.

Other shelter options cited were the various Aboriginal hostels which are either cyclone-proof or have a bus which takes them to a shelter as a group.

Inside the shelters there seems to be something of a festive atmosphere with food, coffee, warm, dry blankets and 'cyclone kits', and a chance to meet up with friends and relatives from other long grass sites.

There were also others not unexpectedly, who continued to show a dogged determination to stay put and not go to any shelter, trusting God to look after them better than any government or its various agencies. This may be the same dogged determination which has maintained them as independent long-grassers over the years and maybe also allowed them to maintain some of the best, most convenient real estate in the Darwin long grass.

The various groups of long-grassers agreed that they were happiest when their responses to a weather emergency was mediated and managed by the Larrakia Nation Night Patrol. The Night Patrol understands the groups of long-grassers as extended families with a few hangers on. They have learnt to work with each group as a group with existing networks of commitments and responsibilities, rather than as a jumble of individuals. They understand that Aboriginal kinship networks and authority are always at work in the long grass groups and that, when these networks are understood and respected, good solutions are negotiated and implemented. The Night Patrol is not big enough to be able to visit all the groups in an emergency. When they are not available it is always good to find Indigenous NGO workers, volunteers or police officers at the shelters or in the communications and transport to shelters.

Where we did hear about vulnerabilities, these seemed not to be in response to a cyclone or other severe weather event itself, but rather the effect of changes in policy. At the time of the research, there was a movement towards emergency management approaches in which individuals and 'householders' would be responsible for their own safety and transport. Such a shift had the potential to affect long-grassers who were long familiar with practices of staying safe when Night Patrol and other services were around to pick them up if needs be.[3]

Overall, the long-grassers were confident they know what to do in a cyclone and that services would be available to assist them. They know how to contact the police and are confident to do so. When they deal with any of the services, whether before, during or after a cyclone, the long-grassers prefer to work under the direction of First Nations workers, including volunteers, who seem to know intuitively to deal first with senior people, speak gently and respectfully, be patient and understand the Aboriginal dynamics of each group.

Endnotes

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Improving Tenant Protections

Bradley Serry, Solicitor, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA)

The Northern Territory (NT) has the unfortunate, unofficial designation as the Australian jurisdiction with the weakest tenant protections. Proof can be found in the lack of a central bond authority, broad scope for landlords to increase rent, and the absence of minimum standards for landlords to abide by.

All of this, combined with relatively high rental prices and low vacancies, conspires to make the NT a challenging place to rent. The lack of political will to address this is startling, given the high proportion of renters in the NT. Causes of the high rental rate include 'southern blow-ins', or those who move from interstate to the NT for short periods before returning home, and the absence of alternative options in remote communities where almost the entire population might rely on public housing.

None of this is news for those working in the field, and previous editions of this publication have documented the plight of NT renters (see for example, *Parity*, vol. 36, no. 4, pages 28–30 and 30–33). So, rather than tread on this well-worn ground, I would like to focus this article on the link between the NT's poor rental protections and the elevated risk of homelessness, with specific reference to the lack of minimum standards that apply to rental properties.

What is the current state of NT legislation?

Residential rental properties in the NT are governed by the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999 (NT)* (NT Act). The NT Act imposes some basic obligations upon landlords, for example that premises be 'habitable', 'safe', 'reasonably clean' and 'reasonably secure'. None of these terms are defined in the NT Act. Landlords can also be ordered by the NT Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NTCAT) to undertake 'emergency repairs'. This term is defined, and includes items like gas leaks, roof leaks, flooding and faults or damage that make the premises unsafe.

What are minimum standards in rental properties?

Minimum standards in rental properties define the floor of what is acceptable in rented residential premises. In Victoria, for example, the *Residential Tenancies Regulations 2021 (Vic)* extensively defines the minimum standards that rental providers must meet, covering areas such as locks, windows, toilets, lighting, ventilation and a suite of other amenities that many of us might take for granted.

What is the difference between minimum standards and emergency repairs?

While there is overlap between minimum standards and emergency repairs, they are separate concepts. This can be seen in the fact that the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997 (Vic)* (Victorian Act) addresses both minimum standards and urgent repairs. The term 'urgent repairs' in the Victorian Act can be seen as interchangeable with 'emergency repairs' as it appears in the NT Act. Both terms are defined in strikingly similarly ways. In both cases, if a rented property needs urgent/emergency repairs, the legislation creates a pathway for a tenant to ensure that remedial works are carried out swiftly.



Boys outside a mosquito house — fire underneath, Maningrida, 1959 *Library and Archives NT ph0127/0256*

Minimum standards serve a different function. They exist to ensure that all rental properties meet basic requirements, well beyond what we might consider warrant urgent or emergency repairs. A property that does not meet minimum standards would not necessarily be subject to an urgent Tribunal hearing and a subsequent order to carry out repairs. For example, one of the Victorian minimum standards is that 'any oven in rented premises must be in good working order'. Plainly, it would be inappropriate if the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal were forced to hear an urgent application about an oven that does not switch on.

Why are minimum standards useful?

A benefit of defined minimum standards is that they provide a clear guide as to the basic acceptable level that a rental property must meet to comply with the relevant legislation. Requiring landlords to adhere to undefined terms such as ensuring that premises are 'habitable' can lead to confusing and subjective results. Minimum standards function to fill in the gaps that vague language creates, such that both sides to a bargain have a clearer understanding of what they can demand and expect.

From the perspective of a housing advocate, minimum standards can also help to correct the information and power imbalance that invariably inclines in the landlord's favour. In the NT, this issue is particularly acute in remote communities where renters face inordinate delays when seeking repairs, unless they can prove that their issue requires 'emergency repair'. The situation facing remote tenants is often compounded by severe overcrowding, which can exacerbate the poor condition of housing stock, thus setting off a deleterious cycle.

What minimum standards should the NT adopt?

The upside of falling behind other jurisdictions on critical social policy is that NT drafters do not need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to modernising our legislation. Both Victoria and Queensland provide sound examples that the NT could mirror. Notably though, the Victorian minimum standards require a 'fixed heater in good working order', which is unlikely to be a priority for many NT residents, particularly those in the Top End. However, ensuring that rented premises have minimum standards regarding cooling, and perhaps energy efficiency, would be apt.

The NT's high proportion of Aboriginal people in public housing, especially in remote communities, invites further consideration to ensure that properties can accommodate cultural requirements. For example, Yolŋu people in Arnhem Land operate according to a complex kinship structure that can include 'poison relationships'. These communities are also often itinerant and travel between towns to stay with family. The NT government would be wise to consider consulting Aboriginal community leaders about how minimum standards could be drafted to reflect and support cultural practices that are less prevalent in other jurisdictions.

Overcrowding is also a persistent problem in the NT. It is not uncommon for over a dozen people in remote houses to share two bedrooms. The sole real solution to this problem is to build a lot more houses (and on this point, the major funding agreement between the NT and Federal governments announced in March 2024 is welcome news). However, a minimum standard could help in the meantime by defining the appropriate amount of people to inhabit a place, depending on the size and number of bedrooms.

The recent High Court decision of *Young v Chief Executive Officer (Housing)*[1] further demonstrates why the NT should adopt minimum standards. In Young, a tenant sought compensation for 'distress and disappointment' caused from living in a rented house with no back door for 68 months. The NTCAT found that a back door is not a 'security device' for the purposes of keeping a rental property 'reasonably secure' and on this basis denied the application for compensation. This was overturned by the NT Supreme Court, but that decision was set aside by the NT Court of Appeal. The High Court ultimately allowed the appeal and ordered the landlord (the NT government) to compensate the tenant.

If minimum standards were in force, it is unclear whether the substantive outcome in Young would have been different. However, the long and arduous route that case took is likely to have been avoided, if only the vague notion of 'reasonably secure' was expanded upon, and the tenant could have relied upon a concrete set of minimum standards to enforce their rights. Young shows what can happen when basic rental protections are not properly defined.

How does the lack of minimum standards affect homelessness?

Without minimum standards, NT landlords can rent out their residential premises in a poorer condition than properties elsewhere in Australia. With the demand for housing in the NT stubbornly high, renters are left with few options. This leaves the door ajar for unscrupulous private landlords to take advantage. It also allows the NT Government to avoid fixing the appalling state of public housing in remote communities. As demonstrated in Young, unless a rental property needs 'urgent repair', remote tenants must exhibit uncommon patience before repair works are carried out. Minimum standards can strengthen tenant rights when seeking repairs. Data on this point is sparse but, anecdotally, a consequence of the dreadful state of remote public housing is that people stop living in their own houses and gradually move in with other family living in the same community. This exacerbates the overcrowding problem and can create more precarious living situations. The link between the poor condition of rented premises, weak tenant protections and homelessness clearly emerges.

Minimum standards are not a panacea to the housing and renting woes in the NT. But they are a ready-made tool that would help many renters and people at risk of homelessness. It is well past time that the NT introduced minimum standards for residential rental premises. This would protect renters and provide welcome clarity to the many Territorians who live on either side of rental agreements.

Housing Partnerships Key to Safety and Security for Domestic and Family Violence Victim Survivors

The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities

When a homelessness support agency referred Tallulah* and her young children to the YWCA Australia Housing Support Program, she was given more than just a roof over her head — she was given a safety net.

For a long time, she had been living in transitional accommodation but struggled to find a permanent home due to a lack of safe and affordable housing options. Then, during her 12-month tenancy with YWCA, Tallulah endured severe violence at the hands of her ex-partner.

Her housing program acted fast, connecting her with the YWCA Domestic and Family Violence Centre and Keeping Women Safe in Their Homes program. In collaboration, the services provided Tallulah with tenancy support, advocacy, help with the kids and transport, safety planning and referrals for legal assistance, police support and safe emergency accommodation.

Even after Tallulah's YWCA tenancy ended and she was allocated public housing, the service continued to provide outreach support for five months so that she and her family could settle, safely, into their new, secure home. The Keeping Women Safe in Their Homes program conducted a property assessment and installed screening on the fence for privacy and sensor lights.

That is the power of housing partnerships that recognise that when victim-survivors are fleeing family, domestic and sexual violence are so vulnerable to the falling into homelessness without a network of support.

Domestic and family violence (DFV) is the leading cause of homelessness in Australia. According to 2022–23 specialist homelessness data, women fleeing these circumstances account for a third of all people seeking support.

Eliminating the drivers of homelessness is crucial to curbing this crisis. We need to understand how and why people become homeless,



New concrete block houses in Laramba, 2023

Northern Territory Department of Planning, Infrastructure and Land

and support those experiencing homelessness, so that they find permanent, long-term, safe and secure housing solutions free of harm.

The Northern Territory (NT) has disproportionately high rates of reported domestic and family violence (DFV), with assault and homicide rates the highest in Australia. In the NT, the homicide rate related to DFV is 7 times higher than the national average, according to recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data. The statistics tell us that that DFV-related assault in the NT continues to skyrocket, increasing by 27 per cent in 2019–20 and 12 per cent in 2020–21 — three times higher than the national average. While the NT Government has invested in key practical and sector-informed measures to tackle the scourge of domestic, family and sexual violence, to ensure victim survivors remain safe and housed, there is a long road ahead. With an estimated 33,000 women in the NT, or 46 per cent, having experienced violence since the age of 15, and 22,300, or 13 per cent, experiencing violence, emotional or economic abuse by a cohabitating partner since the age of 15, this crisis couldn't be any starker. A stable home is critical for victim survivors of violence to rebuild a life free from violence. In an ideal world, victim survivors would stay in their homes and perpetrators would need to leave. The reality, however, is that many victim survivors need to leave their home to find safety.

Across the NT, a quiet yet impactful change is taking place, bringing hope and stability to victim survivors as they experience some of their most vulnerable and traumatic of circumstances. Community Housing Ltd (CHL) and Aboriginal Community Housing Ltd (ACHL), in collaboration with Dawn House case managers, are leading this effort. Together, they have created a lifeline for victim survivors, providing private rental accommodation through government-funded programs that have already seen remarkable success.

In just 12 months since its inception, the program has welcomed 18 participants with inspiring results including zero evictions and three successful transitions into long term housing. These transitions are significant as they reflect a positive rental record with CHL. In two cases, this support has enabled individuals to transition to public housing, and in another case, into an unsupported private rental — this is an important step towards independence and stability.

Among the tenants are stories that highlight immense resilience and transformation. For example, after years of living in emergency accommodation in Darwin, a woman who was finally provided stable accommodation was, after just six months, able to enrol her children in school while she secured her first-ever part-time job. This says everything about how safe, stable housing is key to turning peoples' lives around.

Safe, suitable housing is also central to keeping families together and strong. One tenant, after securing stable housing through the program, was reunited with her very young children. In another case, a woman was denied rental housing and forced to live in her car because of the rental history accumulated by the person who had perpetrated violence against her, despite having a full-time job.

The program has demonstrated how stability provides an opportunity to address a range of physical and mental health issues that often remain untreated while people try to avoid homelessness and violence. The program's success highlights the profound difference that stable housing can make in the lives of victim survivors of domestic and family violence. It provides not just a roof, but a foundation upon which they can rebuild their lives, gain employment, reunite with family, and move towards a future of self-sufficiency and hope.

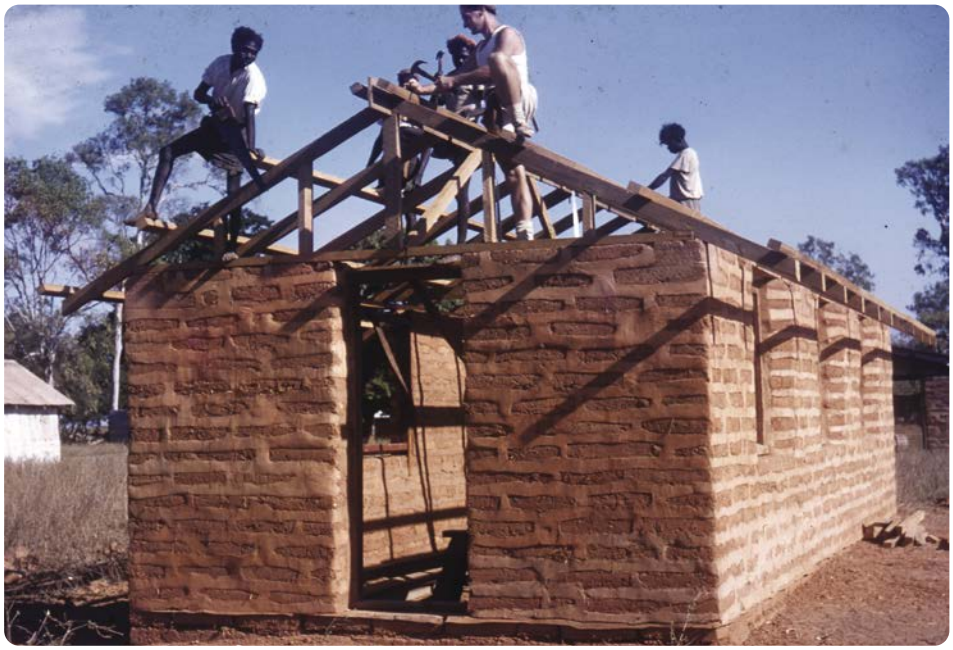
The ongoing support from CHL, and Dawn House case managers is crucial in continuing to provide these life-changing opportunities. The program's success serves as a testament to the importance of stable, supportive housing and the positive ripple effects it can create in the broader community. Through these collaborative efforts, victim survivors of domestic and family violence are finding not only shelter, but a path to reclaiming their lives and building a better future for themselves and their families.

Time and time again, housing partnerships with community organisations have showed us the way forward in understanding and tackling the relationship between domestic, family and sexual violence and homelessness — offering a chance for a new beginning.

Speaking to her case manager upon exiting the YWCA Australia Housing Support Program, Tallulah said she didn't know how to thank them for everything.

"I have no idea how me and the kids would've got this far in life if it wasn't for the Y," she said.

* Not her real name. Identifying details have been changed or omitted from this case study to protect anonymity.



Adobe house construction at Milingimbi, 1954 *Library and Archives NT ph0049/0712*

The Intersection of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence and Homelessness

Christine Moore, Lawyer, Central Australian Women's Legal Service Inc and Domestic Violence Legal Service (South)

The Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS) is a community legal centre that specialises in women's legal issues. CAWLS provides services across Central Australia and the Barkly in the Northern Territory (NT), with offices in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. Our mission is to promote a legal system that is safe, supportive, non-discriminatory, and responsive to the needs of women accessing justice. CAWLS delivers legal advice, information, complex and ongoing casework, and community legal education to women, particularly on family law, child protection and family violence matters.

CAWLS operates a daily drop-in Domestic Violence Legal Service (DVLS) and a Domestic Violence Unit and Health Justice Partnership (HJP). Through the DVLS and HJP, CAWLS provides a holistic integrated service to women who have experienced or are experiencing domestic, family or sexual violence (DFSV). CAWLS works collaboratively with other professionals to prioritise safety planning and risk management and deliver an integrated, trauma-informed service. Women who attend CAWLS domestic violence drop-in service are linked to client support services for assistance with interconnected non-legal issues, court support and safety planning. CAWLS also provides a DFV financial counselling service.

CAWLS operates a comprehensive community legal education program, in addition to providing ongoing training and support to frontline workers through our HJP. CAWLS regularly visits Ti Tree, Santa Teresa, Mutijulu, Elliot and Ali Curung as well as Alice Springs Town Camps.

Aboriginal women comprise of 76 per cent of CAWLS clients for the whole service;



Warlpiri women and children outside a metal house made from corrugated iron offcuts. Yuendumu, 1976 *Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au*

this increases to 86 per cent within our domestic, family and sexual violence legal service. In 2022 and 2023, Aboriginal women made up roughly 92 per cent of our clients facing tenancy issues. Nearly 80 per cent of our tenancy clients were also experiencing or had experienced DFSV in the same timeframe.

CAWLS experienced a 21 per cent increase in housing matters in 2022–2023 and a further increase of 30 per cent in 2023–24. 100 per cent of housing clients at CAWLS have a domestic violence indicator which means that they are victims of domestic, family and sexual violence. CAWLS receives many referrals from other organisations around town for women wanting assistance with housing. The need is great and has placed pressure on the service to continue this vital ongoing support. CAWLS currently receives no government funding for social workers.

There are many ways a woman can present at the service daily, and housing matters can present differently every time, from maintenance issues at their Territory Housing property damage to private rental properties caused by a domestic violence incident and the need for assistance with housing applications, transfers and matters before the NT Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NTCAT) where they have received a notice of eviction, as well as many matters assisting with debt. Debt in NT government housing and community housing is growing at an alarming rate, putting strain on families. The flow on effect is that women are then presenting for food vouchers to support their family in difficult times. This adds further to the already capacity workload for lawyers.

Many of the women who present to our service have children and are managing the dynamics or relationships involving DFSV, on top of waiting for public housing, where the waitlist in Central Australia and the Barkly Region is between six and 10 years. While waiting, these women often find themselves couch surfing between family members' homes for years, often in overcrowded houses. This lack of stability makes them more vulnerable to further incidents of domestic violence and increases the risk of additional legal matters such as child protection involvement. These women primarily come to us in a crisis situation, however, there is not enough suitable interim housing for women escaping domestic and family violence.

The current $4 billion injection of funds from the Commonwealth and NT governments is a step forward. However, it will need further commitment and long-term management for NT to support the community. It is a start to a problem that is at the base of many systemic issues. Housing is a fundamental need; without a stable, secure home it is nearly impossible to address health issues like diabetes and mental health, societal issues like truancy and child protection, and financial issues ranging from the cost of takeout food to difficulty working while homeless. These are issues we have seen discussed in the media regarding Alice Springs recently which, in large part, can be traced to the consistent underfunding of housing in the NT.

An example of the work CAWLS completes for clients is liaising with the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities requesting immediate action as part of a client's safety plan. In one case, within three business days, NT Housing actioned the replacement of windows, doors, locks and fixed the taps. CAWLS assisted advocacy for security upgrades and completed the additional documentation on behalf of the client requesting sensor lights, high fence, security screens, etc. The majority of matters at CAWLS are presenting in crisis linked to DFSV. There is an urgency with most matters daily and lawyers are always having to balance competing urgent interests.

A Case Study

Tracy presented to our office for assistance with a Domestic Violence Order (DVO) application and mentioned that she had recently received an NTCAT filing notice for eviction.

She had been with her partner for years, sharing young children and a joint tenancy in public housing. She had recently decided to leave him after a domestic violence incident that led to his incarceration. There had been a significant history of physical violence in the relationship, but the eviction paperwork brought to light the financial abuse that she had been experiencing unknowingly.

While she worked part time, as well as being the primary caregiver to their children, he worked periodically, collecting Centrelink at times, but relying on her to make up the difference in household bills as well as spending money for him. She understood that they were both making payments towards rent as direct deductions from either Centrelink or wages.

Over the course of their nearly decade-long tenancy, she had made regular payments while he made no contributions for years at a time. A couple of years in, she began making arrears payments on top of her regular rent contributions but, as he did not contribute, they fell further into debt.

By the time of the eviction process, they had nearly $10,000 in arrears. The rental ledger demonstrated that she had paid more than 60 per cent of the rent, while he had paid only about 20 per cent. With her arrears contributions she had paid down an additional $6,000 debt that he had accrued with his non-payments.

CAWLS was able to negotiate to have the debt taken out of our client's name due to the significant history of domestic violence, and her clear attempts to remedy the situation to the best of her ability and knowledge over the years. The tenancy was reassessed with her income alone as consideration for future rent charges and she was able to maintain the tenancy with her children.

Public Housing and CHPs

The planned transfer of tenancies from Territory Families Housing and Communities (TFHC) to Community Housing Providers (CHPs) from July 2024 in Central Australia raises

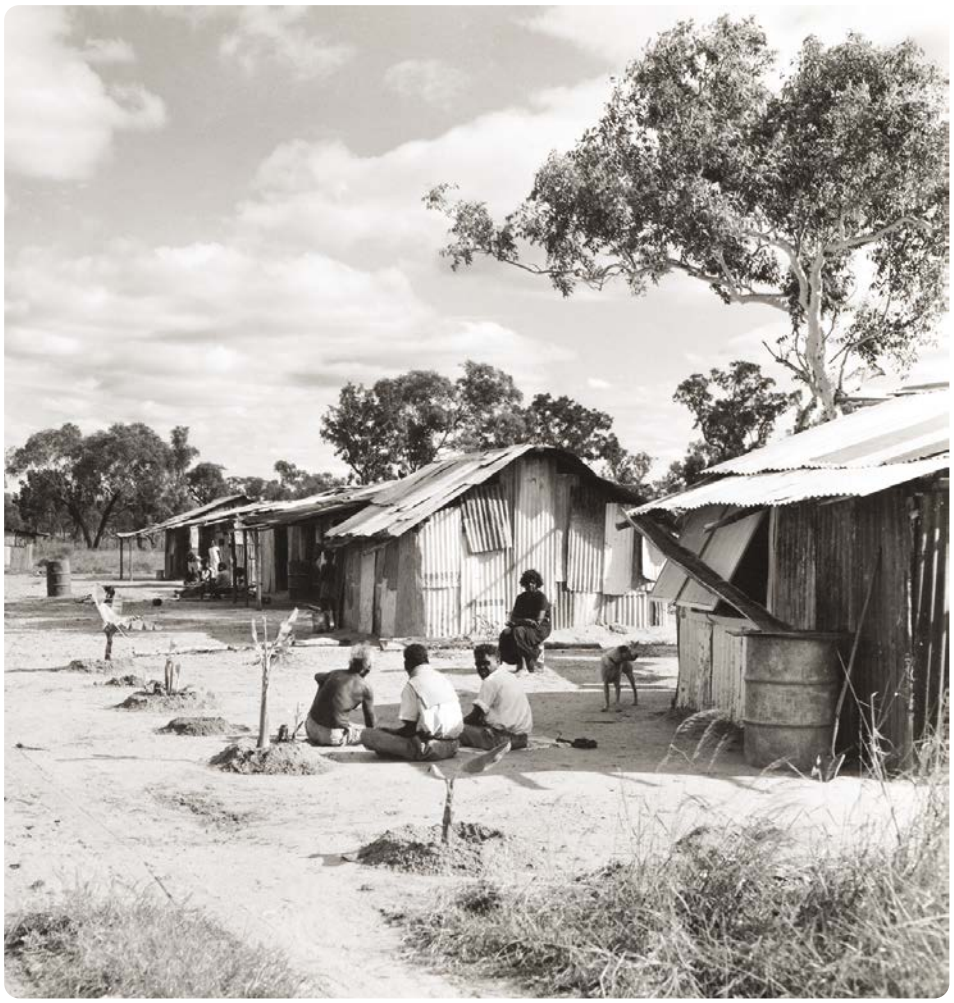
concerns of placing vulnerable people into a more vulnerable position. TFHC and CHPs alike regularly fail to comply with the *Residential Tenancies Act* (RTA), sometimes for funding reasons. CAWLS has observed a lack of education for tenants about their rights and when to seek help. This can be detrimental to them maintaining housing.

We have also seen a significant increase in recent months in CHP tenancy matters progressing very quickly to NTCAT. Where TFHC has additional resources such as Public Housing Officers, they are able to provide some additional support for tenants facing issues such as antisocial behaviour. As the public housing option, they are a safety net for those who will not qualify for the private market. These supports are not available through CHPs in most cases. In our experience, when TFHC does move to a termination of tenancy, there is a willingness to go to conference and work towards productive solutions beyond eviction.

What should be priority is wraparound supports. Being unhoused is often a result of multiple problems facing a person. Many people are being set up to fail when the supports offered effectively stop at how to pay rent or how to look after a property. Being housed can free up capacity a new tenant has to be able to access the other supports they need, such as mental or physical health care, education, or employment services. For many, long-term homelessness means that these other issues have compounded in their lives. A Housing First model would offer somewhere stable to live, as well as easy access to doctors, social workers, and other key service providers. This would require long term funding, but would be the most effective way of creating future generations with the ability to maintain stable housing. This type of approach has been taken in Finland, where long-term homelessness has fallen dramatically as a result.

Bond

The NT is the only jurisdiction in Australia without a bond registration process. There is no clear overseeing body for tenancy in the NT. The *Residential Tenancies Act* applies to private rentals and public housing, but social housing and transitional housing provided by some charities fall outside of the coverage of the Act. Consumer Affairs plays a role but vulnerable tenants do not know this and its website can be confusing to navigate.



Tin housing, Beswick 1960

National Archives of Australia C1748, Aborigines/L35417

There were some amendments made to the Act in early 2024, including some which address tenants who are survivors of DFSV. One of the key changes allows survivors to remove themselves from a lease, allowing them to leave a home where they might be at further risk, whether or not they share the lease with the perpetrator. This termination severs their liability for the tenancy immediately after proper notice is given.

This is excellent in terms of allowing survivors to remove themselves from immediate danger without penalty of lease breaks or ongoing rent payments. CAWLS assists our clients to apply for grants, like the Escaping Violence Payment, which provides financial assistance to set themselves up after leaving a relationship with DFSV.

The ongoing issue is that there are tight rental markets in Central Australia and survivors, often women, will be left homeless while the perpetrators will be left with the remainder of the tenancy.

Conclusion

The 2024 Federal Budget increased the funding for housing and homelessness in the NT from $5.9 million to $42.8 million. We welcome this much needed increase in funding; with 12 times the national rate of homelessness the NT has been underfunded for too long. Our biggest concern with the increase in funding is how it will be spent, and what accountability will be attached to it. While new housing needs to be built, there needs to be adequate funding allocated to the services that provide the much-needed wrap-around supports. As a community legal service provider, which provides support to many people experiencing homelessness or on the ongoing legal issues related to housing, we believe we should also receive increased funding to support the clients that will continue to need our assistance.

Systems in Crisis: Intersected Drivers of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence and Homelessness in the Northern Territory

Harley Dannatt, Dominic Illidge and Zara O'Sullivan,
Legal Aid NT / Domestic Violence Legal Service

In the simplification of complex social challenges for mainstream discourse, a binary approach can seem attractive. Homeless = bad. Housed = good. At risk of domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) = unsafe. Intervention by DFSV services = safe.

Similarly, the segmentation of 'issues' reflecting the disciplines of social support suggests an unnatural neatness. Money problem? Go to financial counsellor. Sick? Go to health provider. Those working in the sector, and moreover those living it, know such simplification rings false and practising within 'silos' often does more harm than good. Real life is just more complicated. Sometimes health problems have legal answers and vice versa. DFSV safety might need a housing solution. It is well established that 'linked up', collaborative and intersecting service models are imperative.[1] This article explores where homelessness and DFSV intersect in the context of the Top End of the Northern Territory (NT). It's a context that very quickly brings forth the description, 'crisis': the personal and traumatic crises of individuals and the deep and complex crises of the systems seeking to help. Both DFSV and homelessness are frequently blamed on the actions and choices of those suffering, and simplified for mass consumption. But as we look closer, the constants across both are the implications, barriers and frustrations of seeking help for crisis from a system in crisis. This article uses the term 'people affected by DFSV', and gendered terminology in recognition of the fact that women are disproportionately the people most affected by DFSV.

Some bare-bones statistics quickly outline what we are dealing with. Homelessness is 12 times the national average in the NT and 30 times the national average in the Katherine region.[2] Domestic and family violence homicide is seven times the national average (per capita), assaults are three times, and sexual assault is 12 times — and these numbers are increasing.[3] Further, these statistics are based on what is well established as chronically underreported data. And what of the overlap? A recent emergency department observation study found that 30 per cent of patients presenting to Royal Darwin Hospital with DFSV injuries were homeless.[4] These are simple statistics with much more analysis needed — but enough to suggest that we are not talking about two different crises

In the Top End, in particular around the service hubs of Darwin and Katherine, many people experiencing homelessness sleep in the open, with varying lengths of permanence, intention and titles (both self-given and imposed) ranging from 'long-grassing', 'bush camp' or, problematically, 'itinerants'. There have long been (politically charged) attempts to homogenise this group with assertions that 'it's a lifestyle choice,' minimising the crisis.[5] This erroneous concept of choice aside, the real drivers all point back to failing systems. Attending medical appointments in major hospitals, release from prison, access to alcohol rehabilitation and alcohol itself, and escape from community trouble (including DFSV) all point back to centralised servicing for the vast NT in hubs with far from enough affordable short-term accommodation. In turn, Aboriginal people experience poor health outcomes, over-representation in prisons, DFSV and alcohol and other drug dependency resulting from constructed Western societal systems that have discriminated since their design, *driving* higher numbers into these hubs for these reasons. The result is a myriad of different reasons, choices, plans gone wrong and forced circumstances, but what is consistent is that having a 'choice' to access housing out of the long grass is extremely limited.

Generally, to gauge the need for housing we look at social housing wait times; as publicly listed, they are currently an optimistic six to 10 years (Katherine) and four to 10 (Darwin) with potentially shorter times for priority cases.[6] In reality, wait times are far longer, particularly for people who move in and out of town or with changing circumstances. Consistency of address, circumstance, support needs and services is the best way to progress an application — and what people in a crisis rarely have. Further policy-based barriers, such as departmental policy to periodically seek confirmation of housing need through *a posted letter*, disproportionately affects those of no fixed address.[7]

Bush camp living adds an element of vulnerability to people affected by DFSV, including a lack of practical safety features like a charged and working phone or computer or being able to call out to or wave down help are examples. This is a further and often forgotten point of the *difficulty and hardship* of homeless living. Whilst 'cost of living crisis' is understood to impact mainstream families, the extreme strain on couples maintaining a relationship while living in poverty is often overlooked. Such desperate circumstances can most definitely lead to violence where it may otherwise not have.

Most worryingly, many women who would be left alone in a bush camp if a perpetrator is taken into custody

see *reporting* DFSV as a threat to the safety of their living arrangement.

The system's answer to this is for the woman to access crisis accommodation — and many do. In fact, so many women do, that the few available centres are regularly full.[8]

In Darwin and Katherine, there are few emergency shelter options with the centres stretching resources, from beds to couches, to house as many as possible — but inevitably there's a limit. Further, some safe houses are unable to accept children or, if it can, it may be unable to accept teenage boys. There also can be strict rules surrounding behaviour, particularly drug and alcohol consumption, that can also preclude a woman from accessing accommodation if those have been identified as issues in the past even if they are not current concerns. But more than these factors, the prevailing issue affecting access is *need*. What might and should be urgent need must be relegated to even greater need. Bush camp sleepers can sometimes face suspicion from services that they are actually seeking housing help and not escaping from DFSV. With limited places, these factors ultimately combine to mean only a small subset of those experiencing DFSV are able to access safe and secure accommodation, and for them this provides only a temporary reprieve.

In some cases, if a safe house does not have the capacity, emergency funding may be available to stay in a hotel or hostel temporarily. This presents a number of issues, including whether such locations are safe, particularly in a small regional town with shared facilities. The Top End tourist season impacts the availability of this type of emergency response: 'dry season price hikes' for accommodation limit how much emergency accommodation funding will buy or books out accommodation altogether. Even if a person can access such accommodation, their time spent there makes a microscopic dent in the years' long wait list for public housing, and inevitably that person will return to homelessness long before they are securely housed. Suddenly issues like what time of year you are affected by DFSV, how old your kids are, if you were referred by police or known to be a rough sleeper tie into the possibility of safety.

These systems failures impact people experiencing violence whilst in a home too. If a person seeks to leave accommodation, they are faced with the same conditions for emergency accommodation as described above. Recent improvements to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999 (NT)* have made removal of a DFSV perpetrator more streamlined and accessible by tribunal, however the severe and long-term implications of homelessness for the removed person, (that is, that they will be homeless for a long time), are often cited by the person affected by DFSV as a reason for not taking this step. Again, the systemic failings distort the lens of decision making.

Assessing and understanding the complexities of any DFSV requires some nuance and a trauma informed and culturally safe approach. Recent changes to the *Domestic and Family Violence Act (NT)* mean that there is more emphasis on ensuring the person most in need of protection is the person who is protected by the Domestic Violence Order (DVO). Recently data led training for NT Police has been rolled out, seeking to improve such assessments and decision-making processes. But still, precarious, unusual and marginal living arrangements add complexity to police decision making in DFSV crisis situations and increase the risk of misidentification of DFSV perpetrators. The potential for this to occur and for the primary victim to be on the receiving end of criminal charges is a further inhibitor to seeking protection from police. Further, not having a safe and separate place to convey all persons in a DFSV situation (such as from a bush camp or crowded house) increases the chance of police seeking DVOs against all parties. This goes on to have increased complication and potential criminal outcomes for victim survivors of DFSV.

Conclusion

The confluence of homelessness and DFSV has in fact been well understood and detailed in both NT and Commonwealth DFSV strategies. DFSV is widely reported as the leading driver of homelessness. An extensive coronial inquest is currently underway in the NT, leaving no stone unturned. Communities such as Katherine are developing place based and integrated health justice approaches.[9] Even so, it remains to be seen as to how significant new funding in NT housing and expected funding for DFSV sector will deliver change.[10] Described above are but a few examples of the many, ongoing, complex intersections of but two 'issues'. Perhaps the attraction of the simple approach is that it suggests simple changes are all that is needed, and not deep, interconnected systems and reforms alongside a reshaping of inclusion policies and societal attitudes to gendered violence and differing levels of 'acceptable' hardship to be felt by different racial groups.

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Tackling Gendered Violence and Homelessness in the Northern Territory through Gender-Responsive Solutions

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The dual crises of gendered violence and housing insecurity and homelessness present an urgent challenge for policy makers, services providers, researchers, opinion makers, sector leaders and advocates across Australia. Domestic and family violence (DFV) is the number one driver of homelessness for women and accounts for 45 per cent of all women seeking assistance from homelessness services nationally. The situation for women and children fleeing DFV in the Northern Territory (NT) is particularly alarming and sector responses are hampered by historic underinvestment in social and affordable housing supply and an increase in demand for specialist homelessness and DFV services.

As we've seen at rallies and marches across the country demanding an end to gendered violence, we can't have a conversation about gendered violence without talking about housing security. It is unacceptable that women, gender diverse people, and their families are faced with the choice between violence and a safe, secure home. At YWCA Australia (YWCA), we understand the crucial role gender responsive solutions play in arresting and reversing these challenges and in building a healthier housing system for all. We advocate for tailored and targeted supports that address DFV, housing insecurity and homelessness, ensuring all women, gender diverse people, and their families have a safe, secure, and affordable place to call home.

The Challenge

The NT has the highest rates of DFV in Australia. Forty-five per cent of all women seeking homelessness assistance in the NT cite DFV as the cause.[1] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are particularly at risk, experiencing DFV at three times the rate of non-Indigenous women and homelessness at six times the rate. First Nations women make up 87 per cent of clients who identify as women receiving homelessness services in the NT.[2]

In 2022–23, homelessness services supported over 3,000 women and children who had experienced DFV in the NT.[3] Over 1,300 of these women and children continued to experience homelessness even after seeking assistance, highlighting a lack of safe, secure, and affordable housing options for women and children fleeing DFV.

Over the past decade, the number of women and children exiting support services into housing precarity in the NT has also surged. This number more than doubled from 130 in 2012–13 to 338 in 2022–23.[4] The rise in the data shows that existing support systems are struggling to keep pace with the growing demand.

This data represents the lives of women, gender diverse people, and their families impacted by DFV and housing insecurity. It highlights the urgent need to tackle the root causes and gendered drivers that contribute to DFV and ensure safe, secure, and affordable housing options are available for women escaping this violence.

State of Play

Current responses to DFV fail to include adequate housing and homelessness supports for those fleeing abuse. This puts women and children at even greater risk. To truly tackle these issues, governments must work hand-in-hand with specialist organisations like YWCA that understand the gendered drivers of these intersecting challenges and design programs that deliver better outcomes for women experiencing DFV and housing insecurity.

There have been recent positive developments in addressing housing challenges in the NT. Both the Federal and NT governments have made funding commitments in their respective 2024–25 budgets. The Commonwealth has announced a contribution of $278 million over five years for social housing and homelessness services, with increases allocated to specialist homelessness services and more for crisis and transitional accommodation. The NT Government also announced

$12 million for affordable housing initiatives, including YWCA's Housing For Women project in Darwin CBD. It's acknowledged that these initiatives are underpinned by the suite of federal housing commitments to deliver more housing supply, including the Housing Australia Future Fund and the National Housing Accord.While these are welcome steps, there are clear areas where further action is needed. The Federal Budget failed to deliver investment measures across key pillars in the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032*, particularly as there was no new funding for frontline specialist DVF services — a crucial gap given current pressures on the sector.

There is also concern regarding the absence of targeted investment specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children experiencing domestic violence. Given the higher rates of gendered and racial violence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and gender diverse peoples, we must see a stronger response at the federal and state/territory levels.

Lastly, the lack of indexation tied to funding agreements has presented an additional challenge to an already stretched sector. This challenge is particularly acute in the NT, where funding increases have been minimal since 2019. As the demand for specialist homelessness and DFV services increases, funding has remained largely stagnant, resulting in a critical funding gap and a failure to meet the increasing demand from women and children experiencing DFV in need of support.

Through strategic investments in gender responsive housing, homelessness and DFV supports, we can not only address local housing shortages but also create a more gender equal housing future for women and gender diverse people across the NT.

Where to From Here?

The pathway forward requires collaboration and commitment from policymakers, service providers, and community leaders. To address the DFV and homelessness crisis in the NT, we need the following solutions:

- A significant and sustained increase in investment in social and affordable housing, with dedicated allocations across all new social and affordable housing for victim survivors of DFV, women, gender diverse people, and their families.

- Dedicated and long-term funding to organisations that design and deliver gender responsive housing and homelessness solutions. These are the experts in tailored and specialised supports for the communities in which they work and that means better outcomes for those who engage their services.

- Funding tied to affordable housing solutions to support women and gender diverse people out of crisis and transitional accommodation, and into long term homes.

- Culturally informed and fit-for-purpose housing solutions are critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, gender diverse people, and





A camp of tiny timber-framed huts, Alice Springs, 1937. Today, this is the location of Anthelk-Ewlpaye (Charles Creek & Kunoth) town camp.

National Archives of Australia A1, 1938/403 photo 63

their families. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and gender diverse people must lead the design of solutions that meet their specific needs and cultural contexts. Access to safe and secure housing is a fundamental human right, yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and gender diverse peoples are faced with significant barriers in accessing housing solutions. The barriers faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women when accessing housing and services are complex and are rooted in the legacy of colonialism.

- Indexation applied to all community services is essential to solving the challenges explored herein. Substantial funding boosts, coupled with indexation for DFV and homelessness services, are necessary to meet the current rise in demand and to deliver effective support to those in need. These services provide critical lifelines for women and children escaping violence and facing housing insecurity.

- Establish a peak DFV organisation to represent the needs of victim survivors of DFV in the NT. Such an organisation would provide a unified voice and coordinated strategy, enhancing the sector's ability to advocate for necessary resources and policy changes.

- Establish lived experience advisory mechanisms to government. These mechanisms ensure that government reforms are informed by the real-world experiences of those who have faced homelessness and DFV. Incorporating lived experiences into policymaking leads to more effective and compassionate solutions, directly addressing the challenges faced by more vulnerable populations.

The causes and drivers of homelessness for women and gender diverse people are recognised and addressed as part of the NT Government's forthcoming strategy to deliver increased homelessness services to align with outcomes in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

By focusing on these current gaps, we can create more gender responsive policy and investment frameworks to tackle gendered violence and housing insecurity and homelessness, thereby securing better outcomes for women, gender diverse people and their families into the future.

About YWCA Australia

YWCA is a national not-for-profit organisation that has specialised in supporting women for over 140 years. With just under 200 employees across 17 locations, YWCA provides housing, support services and leadership pathways that enable women, gender diverse people and their families to find stability and feel safe and secure, so they can build the future they want. We are experts in gender-responsive housing and homelessness solutions and our work and services across Australia are informed by women and gender diverse people with lived experience.

In the NT, YWCA provides affordable housing and programs and services supporting women and gender diverse people including lived-experience leadership training, emergency accommodation, transitional housing and case management supports. We also provide immediate crisis accommodation for young people at risk of homelessness. As one of the only specialist domestic and family violence services in Darwin with integrated homelessness supports, YWCA improves housing outcomes for young Territorian women, gender diverse people, and their families.

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A Homelands Policy for the Northern Territory

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The Northern Territory (NT) 'needs a homelands policy'. In recent years it has become increasingly common to hear this refrain from governments, land councils, peak bodies, homelands service providers, and homelands residents alike. So too, that 'homelands are a policy void'. Such statements are made despite the publication of specific NT Government policies, including 2009's *Working Future Outstations/Homeland Policy*, 2015's *Homelands Policy: A Shared Responsibility*, and the 2020 *Review of the Homelands Policy*.

In the NT, there are 18 gazetted towns, 73 prescribed remote Indigenous communities, and approximately 600 homelands (also known as outstations). There are 394 'funded' homelands, or homelands that receive services through the NT Government Homelands Program, occupied by approximately 6,000 to 8,000 residents.[1] Other estimates have the homelands population closer to 10,000 people.[2]

For remote communities, there is of course no singular policy. Remote communities are governed by a complex documentary infrastructure comprised of federation funding agreements, jurisdictional strategies, government frameworks endorsed by sectoral stakeholders, program guidelines, implementation plans, service contracts, and so on. As the policies above attest, homelands, too, are no governmental aporia, and are similarly objectified by processes of infrastructural and service provisioning and its regulation. So, what do people mean when they claim the NT needs a homelands policy? What is missing, or what might fill the void?



Women walking past semi-elevated houses in Numbulwar, 1998

Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au



A man walks across the foreground of a set of small huts at Kahlin Compound, Darwin, 1930. Kahlin Compound was set up in 1913 to house and control Aboriginal people from across the Territory. In 1938 the residents moved to Bagot. *Library and Archives NT ph0375/0080*

In 2022, the announcement by the Federal Government of $100 million in funding for homelands was welcomed by NT stakeholders. This was the first significant Federal Government investment in homelands since 2012, when $200 million was allocated at the rate of $20 million per annum under the Stronger Futures program, cashed out by the NT Government in 2015. Until the 2022 announcement, homelands investment had been limited to the NT Government's Homelands Program, valued at just under $40 million per annum, alongside intermittent and inconsistent investment via the Aboriginals Benefit Account, and other minor streams. Converted into the Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Program (HHIP), the $100 million from the Federal Government has been allocated to housing and essential services upgrade projects at selected NT homelands, with smaller fire and electrical safety, water, and sanitation sub-programs providing some broader regional attention.

In March 2024, the Federal Government announced a further $120 million for homelands over the next three years.[3] While this funding has been welcomed, it remains less than what is required to rectify the long-term under-funding and neglect of homelands. An audit undertaken in 2022 estimated a much higher quantum required to provide minimum standard of living requirements to homelands houses, factoring in associated essential and municipal services costs. Nor does funding awarded under a federation funding agreement clarify larger policy questions regarding liabilities to meet that shortfall.

The HHIP will not provide new homelands housing. While there is significant demand for new homelands' housing and community expansion, there is also a reasonable argument that this funding be prioritised to improve the standard of existing assets to directly benefit residents already living on homelands. However, the non-provision of new housing has continued an historical policy position — held by both levels of government — to not fund new houses on homelands.

This position was most recently evident in the back-and-forth between former NT Minister for Remote Housing, Chansey Paech, and former Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt. In a September 2021 letter to Minister Wyatt, Minister Paech noted *'the urgent need for new housing'* at homelands and suggested that either the *National Agreement for Remote Housing Northern Territory* be amended to include new housing for homelands or a new national agreement for homelands be established. A spokesperson for Minister Wyatt responded that *'state and territory governments are responsible for housing'*. In NT parliament, Paech claimed that *'*[t]*he responsibility for new houses on homelands still sits with the Australian government'*, while a spokesperson for Minister Wyatt responded that the *'NT government remains responsible for housing, including on homelands'*.[4]

When stakeholders suggest that the NT does not have a homelands policy, the need to clarify the Federal and NT governments' specific responsibilities for housing provision is central.

This is not a new dispute. At the establishment of self-government in the NT in 1978, the Commonwealth transferred powers with exceptions related to Aboriginal affairs.[5] An exchange of letters between Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Fred Chaney and the NT Chief Minister Paul Everingham clarified that the Commonwealth would maintain responsibility for homelands, while the NT Government would assume responsibility for remote communities (while providing

some services to both). Everingham was unhappy and sought not to differentiate between homelands and larger communities:

'Homeland centres on Aboriginal land are invariably closely associated with one of the main centres for which the NT Government has been given these additional functional responsibilities … I believe that the only proper approach is for us not to distinguish between groups in this new transfer of powers'.[6]

This situation of dispersed and disputed responsibility for homelands continued throughout the 1980s. The 1987 'Blanchard Report' identified that, because homelands were governed by federal, state, and territory policies, the *'diversity of support agencies has resulted in some confusion due largely to the lack of clarity of responsibilities and the extent of support they will direct to the homelands movement over and above other functional responsibilities'*.[7]

Nonetheless, at the time the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs did have a policy objective for homelands, aiming *'*[t]*o enable Aboriginals, who wish to do so, to establish and maintain small communities on their own land, or on land to which they have a right of occupation, where they are free to follow a lifestyle of their choice'*.[8] However, much of the infrastructural amenity that might enable this was expected to be met by the NT Government. In turn, the NT Government expressed frustration over the non-specification of services it was expected to provide at homelands.

Such ambiguities existed through the period following the dissolution of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 1990, which distributed funds to homelands resource agencies according to its Homelands Policy, until its abolition in 2004. From that point, the Community Housing and Infrastructure Program (CHIP) was administered by the Federal Government and a moratorium was placed on CHIP funding in respect of any new housing and infrastructure on outstations and homelands.[9]

Following the commencement of the NT Intervention, a 2007 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) established between the Federal and NT governments outlined new federal funding for construction, repairs, and upgrades of housing in 73 remote communities under the subsequently announced Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program. This funding was contingent on the basis that the NT Government *'take over responsibility for the delivery of services to outstations'* and it proscribed the use of federal funding for constructing houses on homelands.[10]

That is, until the 2007 MoU, the Federal Government was chiefly responsible for funding housing and infrastructure on homelands, and by its own design. Since the NT Government inheritance of those responsibilities, consecutive policies have signaled the prioritisation of infrastructure investment at remote communities and no intention to expand or build new houses at homelands.

The characterisation of homelands as a policy void represents, first and foremost, a frustration with governments failing to clarify their responsibilities to homelands, rather than continuing this decades-long stand-off. More specifically, there is a latent demand here for the Federal Government to explicitly recognise an obligation to meet the housing needs of homelands residents.

Homelands residents have the right to safe, secure, and habitable housing. As a signatory to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*, the Federal Government should recognise that denying people the means to live on homelands also denies their right to self-determination. Similarly, as the author of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, the Federal Government continues to have obligations for amenities on ALRA land. Most broadly, the right to housing is a reasonable expectation of Australian citizenship, and one that has been recognised for Aboriginal people under the Closing the Gap Agreement, with specific targets set. Homelands residents point out that it is not reasonable for governments to cite land tenure arrangements at homelands as an impediment to infrastructure provision; land tenure was not an impediment to governments building houses at homelands prior to the 2007 MoU.

New funding for homelands is welcome. But support cannot continue to take the form of intermittent, short-term announcements. Homelands should be acknowledged for their significance to Aboriginal culture, country, history, and wellbeing,[11] and as an important component of the NT's social housing system. Such acknowledgement must take the form of both the Federal and NT governments committing to their ongoing obligations to homelands, including by supporting the provision of new housing.

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'Cool Living': Poorly performing houses are driving crowding; a form of homelessness

Bobbie Bayley, Dogspike Design and Architecture

Poorly performing houses are driving crowding in First Nations remote Northern Territory (NT) communities. The impacts of climate change will exacerbate the effects of what already doesn't work well. Healthabitat's data-driven approach to fixing houses for better health has informed '*Cool Living*', a project which establishes a data-driven process for improving the thermal performance of existing Aboriginal housing in the NT, Zone 3.[1]

Crowding as Homelessness, Climate Change and Poor-Performing Houses

Alongside improved repairs and maintenance programs, improving thermal performance through data-driven, targeted and specific modifications — as set out by *Cool Living* — on legacy housing stock will not only improve health, but also alleviate crowding and hence homelessness.

Crowding is a form of 'homelessness',[2] as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and disproportionately affects young people[3] and people living in remote areas — 74.6 per cent of the Aboriginal population in the NT live in remote or very remote areas.[4]

Climate change is a clear and present threat to further exacerbating the inequities faced by vulnerable populations.[5] With climate change, increased variable weather events[6] and more hot days a year will become more common, requiring houses and air conditioners to work harder. Extreme and sustained heat is a well-documented cause of immediate and long-term health impacts, poor mental health and domestic irritation, requiring susceptible populations to reconsider their routines, where they live and travel.[7]

When days are hotter and people are more uncomfortable, energy insecurity is a significant problem faced by communities. Data shows that active cooling (cooling that needs power — for example, mechanical cooling and fans) of the existing housing stock is limited in the heat mitigation it can provide, and observations from 3,300 houses in 28 communities show energy disconnections are regular (there is a significant link between temperature and increased disconnections). Households in the 'hot dry' zone increased electricity use on days between 30–40°C, to an average increase of 16–19kWh/day. When temperatures rose to between 35–40°C, chances of disconnection increased from 1:17 on moderate days (average temps 20°C–25°C) to 1:11.[8]

The current focus for alleviating crowding relies heavily on the construction of new housing and ad hoc adding of bedrooms to the existing housing stock. However, people still live in legacy housing stock, which is sub-par and does not receive ongoing preventative maintenance, repair or retro-fitting programs to bring them it up to current standards, especially those related to thermal comfort.[9] Maintenance programs have historically been rolled out reactively with the onus on the tenants to flag issues and develop coping strategies to make houses more functional or to cope with crowding. In a crowded house, maintenance (particularly on Health Hardware)[10] is required more regularly as the house gets significantly more use — for every two additional people added to a household, operating and maintenance costs increase by 10 per cent.[11]

The new housing stock being added to communities, because they sit outside of Building Control Areas, are not required to comply with National Construction Code (NCC) construction requirements and thermal performance targets unless outlined by grant or contract conditions.[12]

New houses offer part of the solution to alleviate crowding; however, with the rollout of climatically inappropriate and poorly sited house typologies alongside neglected sub-par existing house stock, the potential benefit is questionable. A better solution is a data-backed level of house function and thermal performance with maintenance programs that apply to existing and new appropriately designed and sited houses that address the objective data collected. Means testing, through objective data.

The Reality of Thermal Performance in NT Legacy Housing

Central Australia is a cooling-dominant climate, where historically cooling is needed approximately 50 per cent (six months) of the year. Heating is needed for around 33 per cent (four months) of the year, and the shoulder season needs either heating or cooling 17 per cent of the year (two months).[13] While both winter and summer extremes are linked to house design and specification decisions, the cooling-dominant climate combined with high levels of solar radiation is key.

When temperatures soar, the house or air-conditioned community centre is the refuge. Many family units will huddle into bedrooms day and night where there is a working air-conditioner.[14] For some, there might not be enough space inside, or outside may be cooler such

that extension cords perforate the building fabric to run fans, lights and cooking equipment to support displaced tenants, outside living or visitors. The myriad holes in windows, doors, ceilings and walls, is detrimental to the building's thermal performance in turn: the house effectively becomes a leaky tent.[15] For some people, their houses will only cost them their paycheques in order to make them liveable; for others, their house will cost them their lives; others will have to walk away from their Country, family and identity.[16]

People's stories, anecdotes and observed ground truths from the author's time spent in community housing reveal the reality of how poor climate-appropriate design can lead to crowding and hence, homelessness:

- The concrete block bedroom wall faces west with no shading. Heat radiates into the room all night so the family of six, with four kids under 10, have to go sleep elsewhere. Displaced.

- There are no shade trees in the houseyard. The ground radiates heat all night, so the long-term visitors go and sleep somewhere cooler with no toilet, tap or shower facilities. Displaced.

- The yard doesn't have any taps, or an outside kitchen, so the visitors open and close the door to the air-conditioned living room all day to use the kitchen tap for drinking and face washing. It is a 40-degree day outside and there are 12 people huddled under the one living room air-conditioning vent to stay cool. Say goodbye to a cool house.

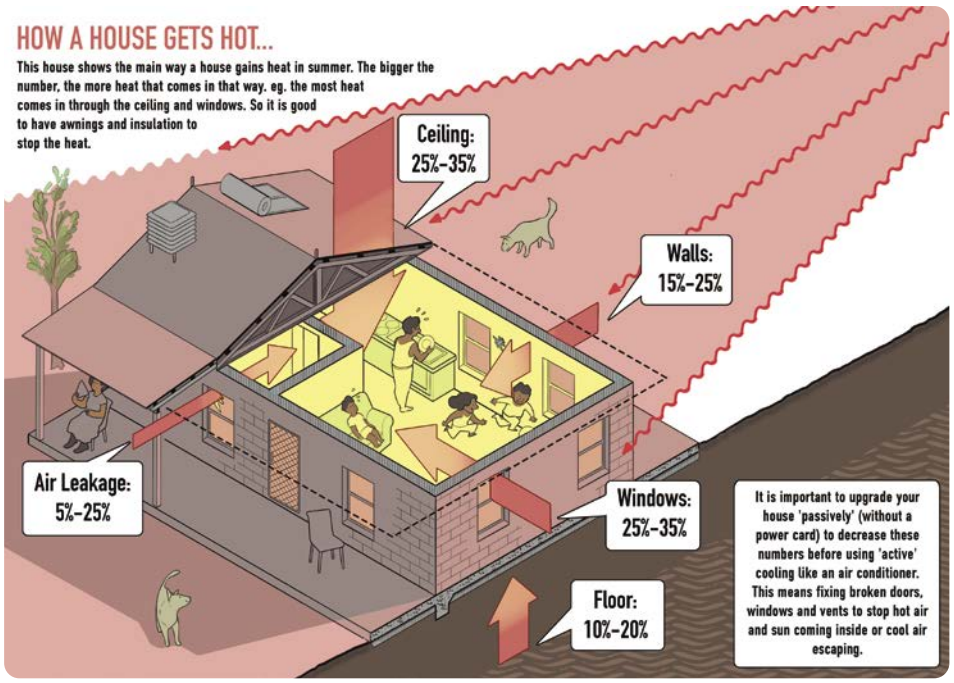


Figure 1: 'How a House Gets Hot' Tenant education drawing produced by author in collaboration with artist Bill Hope.

- The window won't open anymore because of dust and dirt build-up in the track; the screwed security screens to the outside make it hard to clean out. The tenants can't open the window to get the cool night breeze. It's a hot night, a frustrated guest forces it open and it breaks. Can't seal the room anymore.

- When the evaporative air-conditioner is on, and the cassette on the ceiling is not sealed properly to the ceiling sheet at the time of construction, hot air from the non-insulated ceiling comes down around this gap and the cold air gets sucked out. The bedroom with four teenager cousins is unbearable. So much for effective active cooling.

- When the power is disconnected and the air-conditioner and fans can't be used on a 40°C day, there is nowhere for the household (three family groups) to go other than a neighbour's house, which already has six people. The store doesn't let anyone sit inside. The art centre is just for the artists. The community centre is closed and locked up. Not many options.

Through these anecdotes, it becomes clear that crowding from poor climate-appropriate design can lead to homelessness with a breadth of consequences for individuals, families and communities.

Better Performing Houses to Alleviate Crowding

Healthabitat's proactive and evidence-based approach to enhance living conditions and to improve the health of residents through a targeted approach to fixing is internationally considered best practice.[17]



Figures 2/3/4: Exterior power points, yard taps and strong fences are key details for better performing housing. Drawings produced by author

Rigorous data collected on the ground drives decisions against the pre-established research-backed priority list, known as The Nine Healthy Living Practices (HLP). Healthabitat is conscious of the increasing threat of climate change and hence the importance of thermal comfort. 'Controlling the temperature of the living environment' currently sits at HLP 8 , it is likely that it will need to shuffle up the list in the immediate future.

Cool Living builds off Healthabitat's increasing concern for climate change, HLP no. 8 and Healthabitat's methodology as an approach to establish a data-driven process for improving the thermal performance of existing Aboriginal housing in the NT, Zone 3. (18) Using a list of passive cooling modifications, *Cool Living* establishes a bottom-up and top-down framework that not only reduces the burden of poor housing on the tenant's hip pocket, but also increases community autonomy over housing to ensure optimal health, family function and well-being.

Typical house typologies found across NT Aboriginal communities at all orientations are modelled and generated in NaTHERS software. Modifications across the eight key modification areas (established from building science research and a broad literature review) are modelled and their impact on the house cooling load is documented. The list of approximately 40 possible modifications is then prioritised to show the biggest bang for buck in thermal performance — the modification with the most impact is what should be done first; the modification with the least impact should be considered last. These modifications are broad: some are simple enough to encourage a DIY approach; some are complex and require NT Housing's involvement — draught-proofing, gap-sealing, installing outdoor power points, yard taps and shade trees, installing verandas and window awnings to correct orientations and insulation to walls, floors, ceilings and roofs.



Darwin street art

The impact of modifications on the house cooling load is then converted to dollars/Kilowatt-hour/year ($/kWh/yr) to get a dollar figure for how much the modifications could save the tenant per year.

This process encourages passive (without electricity) upgrades over active upgrades. There is proof that passive approaches work:[19] energy insecurity and energy poverty issues are rife, and new houses are not always the best solution. *Cool Living*'s data-driven priority work-list offers options for house modifications when money becomes available and could work with the current End of Financial Year throw-money-at-the-wall approach to modifications, allowing these resources to be used more effectively.

Alongside improved repairs and maintenance programs, improving thermal performance through the data-driven, targeted and specific modifications on legacy housing stock, as set out by *Cool Living*, will not only improve health, but also alleviate crowding and hence homelessness.

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Homeful Homelands

Dr Catherine Styles, a non-Indigenous support worker
at Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT) Aboriginal Corporation

With or without decent housing, homelands are always already home. It's in the name and it's in the concept and no government policy will change that. But policies can support or suppress the quality of life on homelands and, over the last 20 years, governments have disrupted and discouraged Aboriginal people's efforts to make homelands their home.

This is a story for non-Indigenous people, to expand our understanding of homelands and homelessness. It relays the message from Aboriginal people that lack of housing and infrastructure in the homelands is a central problem for Aboriginal Territorians, from which many other problems emanate. (And actually, all those are problems for all of us.) It is also an optimistic story, because government policy is adapting, and Aboriginal-led solutions are emerging. If we would allow it, there's a future in which homelands flourish.

1. Homelands

In 2005, as Minister for Indigenous Australians, Amanda Vanstone referred to homelands as 'cultural museums', shamefully misconstruing what homelands are and what they mean to Aboriginal people. Yingiya Guyula[1] uses an arresting phrase that zooms to the heart of it:

> *Our connection to country is an umbilical cord.*

In other words, country nourishes, like a womb. To be disconnected from your homeland is to be starved of vital energy. The relationship is also mutual; without the beings who belong there, country also suffers.

Vanstone's rhetorical relegation of homelands to history was ignorant but it was also political. She was foreshadowing broad-sweeping reforms to Commonwealth policies — and administration — that sought to entice homelands residents off homelands to settle in bigger population centres where it's cheaper to deliver services.

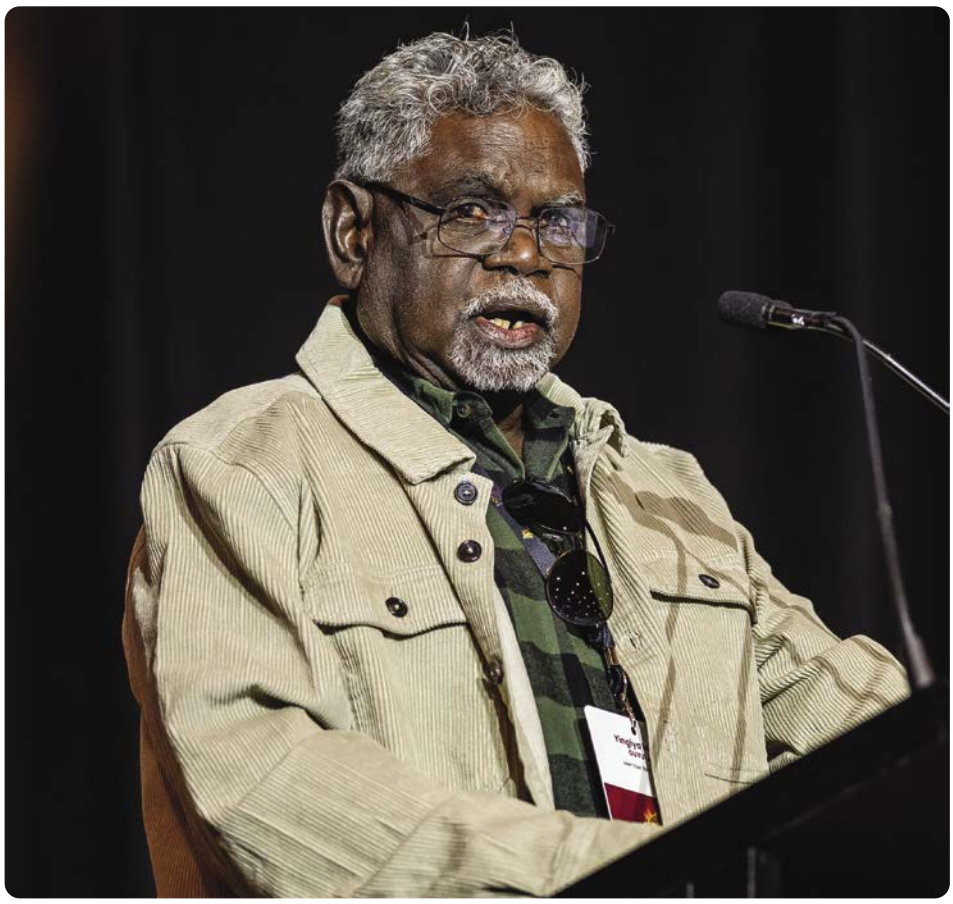
More was going on there than blind economic rationalism. In a 2018 account of these policies, Professor Jon Altman points out that government machinery is designed for and works with a very white Australian notion of home: stable populations. It's an important point. Governments are inevitably troubled by populations that are mobile; they are unruly, hard to monitor, hard to govern — hard to control.[2] Hold that thought during the following short history of homelands.

The movement began in the 1970s and accelerated after the Commonwealth passed the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. For the first time since colonisation, if Aboriginal people could prove their traditional association to land, they had an opportunity to claim the title, to be held by an Aboriginal land trust. In that way, small communities of close kin left government settlements, reserves, missions and non-Aboriginal townships to reoccupy traditional lands of social, cultural and economic significance. It wasn't about returning to the past. It was *'a forward-looking attempt to forge dynamic alternatives to lifestyles currently available in the larger settlements'*.[3]

The newly-formed Northern Territory Government enabled growth of the homelands movement when it introduced a system of Aboriginal community councils through the *Local Government Act 1978*. Once incorporated, a council could receive money for services and infrastructure including roads and housing.



Clearing the airstrip at Mumeka homeland, 1980.
National Archives: A8598, AK29/4/80/27.



Yingiya Guyula

In 1987, the Commonwealth policy objective was *'to enable Aboriginals* […] *to establish and maintain small communities* […] *where they are free to follow a lifestyle of their choice'*.[4] A homeland could receive money for building materials, water tanks, pumps, vehicles and radios as well as recurrent costs such as wages, fuel, repairs and maintenance. The NT Government also offered a bit of funding for housing and essential services.

Establishing and maintaining the infrastructure for homelands communities was largely DIY work for Aboriginal people. Families carried water in buckets, cleared airstrips and roads, dug toilets and built shelter by hand. It was hard work but with a renewed sense of freedom to determine the course of their lives, Aboriginal people were highly motivated.

While supporting housing and essential services (water, power, sanitation), there was also Commonwealth funding to support schools, health services and the development of enterprises and workforces. Under the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), in lieu of unemployment benefits people could work on productive activities on homelands including subsistence agriculture.

In other words, for the first few decades, governments supported homelands communities in their initiatives to develop infrastructure, services and sustainable livelihoods.

Over time the funding emphasis shifted from capital support to operational support, mostly through resource centres that service multiple homelands, some of which were established as local government bodies. The number of homelands grew to about 500, and as more groups sought to develop their homeland, costs ballooned. Then policies changed, and government funding all but dried up.

For Urapuntja Aboriginal Corporation, which looks after homelands in the Utopia region north-east of Alice Springs, the decision in 2008 to merge more than 50 remote Aboriginal community councils into eight 'supershires' was instantly disempowering. Urapuntja homelands are rare in that they were set up by people who were never fully dispossessed of their country; Joyce Jones[5] remembers them saying *'We're born with culture and knowledge. We need to support each other.'* For 25 years Urapuntja operated as a community council, working in very challenging remote conditions, on all the services and infrastructure needed to establish 16 separate homelands. There were never enough houses for everyone who wanted to stay and raise their children. Then Urapuntja lost control to the massive, distant Barkly Regional Council. Today, Urapuntja continues to perform many of the functions of a local government, but since 2008 it lacks the authority and resourcing to perform them well.

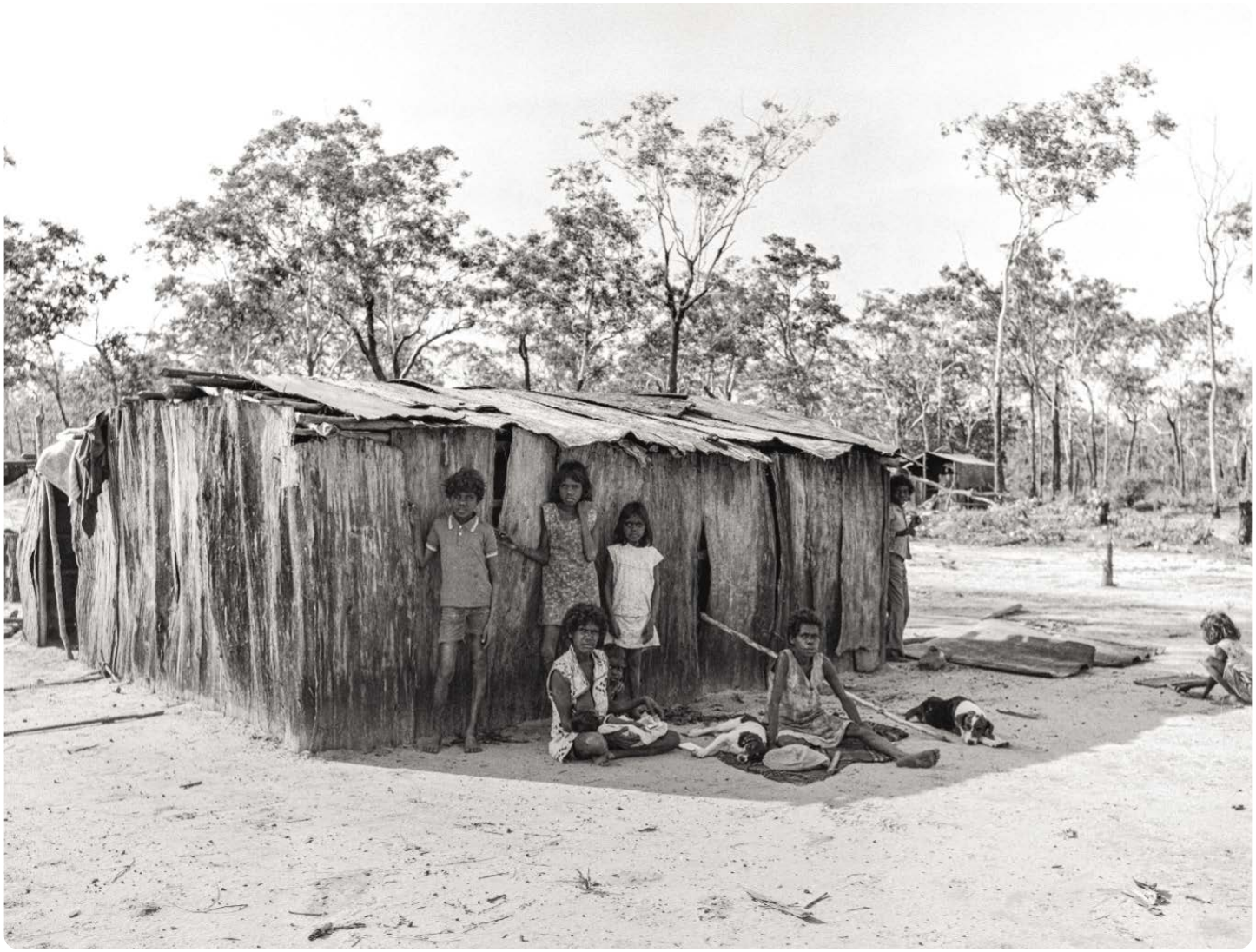
2. Homeless Homelands

In 2015 the Commonwealth persuaded the NT government to take responsibility for funding homelands, in exchange for a single transfer to the Territory of $155 million, which was nowhere near enough money to raise the standard of homelands. Since that time, there has been a relentless annual decline in Territory funding, and none for new housing on homelands.

The upshot of all this is predictable: homelands housing and infrastructure that was never great is now very bad. Small-scale Bushlight solar systems that from 2002 supplied reliable, affordable power are now defunct, so many homelands run on diesel generators. Power cables snake around and between houses because there are too few outlets. Drinking water systems are corroded to the point where the water smells very bad. Sewage spills out of underground septics. Metal roofs and walls have rust holes, pipes are held together by tape, and doors, windows, handles and flyscreens are broken or missing.[6] And there are far too few houses to accommodate those who want to live there permanently and those who stay for extended periods for work, family or cultural reasons.

Despite a fervent wish to live on country, the inadequacies of housing on homelands means that many people are forced back into larger communities.

Talk to Aboriginal people, or scratch the surface of the evidence, and it's clear that homelands make a better home than larger communities.[7]



Bark shelter at Mankorlod homeland, 1975.
National Archives: A8739, A7/10/75/27

Yingiya Guyula recently lamented the lack of housing and services in homelands and explained the knot of issues in larger communities:

> *Forcing people away from their homelands creates problems. It creates a feeling of uneasiness, where people's confidence is eroded: the confidence to govern, to make clear decisions, to teach and to discipline. We become like refugees.*
>
> *The mixture of clans in these big communities creates problems. Who is responsible for activities in that country? If children are running around at night, who is responsible? Elders are reluctant to step into that space because it's not their country and they don't have the authority to speak and take over. Land owners equally feel disempowered because these children are not from their country.*
>
> [Aboriginal] *people are experiencing physical and emotional and spiritual stress because they are disconnected from country. Mparntwe's distress has been highlighted in the media but this stress is happening everywhere. We should be talking about cultural safety, loss of culture, the underlying issues.*
>
> *When I talk about living on homelands, governments misunderstand. It's not because it's a pleasant place to live. It's because I want to change the direction we're going in, which is enormous cultural loss; avoidable deaths; trouble.*
>
> *There is housing in our homelands. It was there decades ago. We know it can be done.* […] *We need to reach agreements that reinforce the authority to our country and allow for policies that bring new housing and infrastructure where we are best situated to be successful.*

3. Homeful homelands

Aboriginal housing is never just about housing. It's also always about country and culture — and the symbiotic relationships through which Aboriginal people thrive. In 1987 the Federal Government's inquiry into homelands found that *'for relatively low cost, significant social and other benefits are emerging through the homelands movement'*.[8] Its report took issue with the NT Government preference for supporting larger communities over the more diverse and costly homelands movement, saying that the Territory needs a policy that reflects *'support for the movement in accordance with the wishes of Aboriginal people and the policies of self-determination'*.[9]

In other words, as well as providing decent financial support, governments need to recognise and respond to homelands as a system.

There are considerable benefits to supporting homelands



Young men at Gurrumuru homeland demonstrate the radio, 1980.

National Archives: A8598, AK29/4/80/14.

development: healthy people, healthy country and healthy culture, along with world-acclaimed art, cultural heritage and tourism. On the flip-side, homelands homelessness fuels ill-health, poor education, unemployment and poverty, as well as trouble in larger communities. All those things cause immense suffering but also cost the public purse dearly.

Latent in the 1987 policy of self-determination and now explicit in Closing the Gap rhetoric, is that governments must also allow Aboriginal people to lead the decision-making about Aboriginal housing and homelands. White people need to get over the anxiety we have about the unruliness of homelands. It's not up to us to control them. Governments can set parameters and professionals can advise but to find and bed down solutions that work in to the future, Aboriginal housing must be in Aboriginal hands.

As Yananymul Mununggurr[10] says: *'We're not just looking after country. We're doing our best in relation to education, tourism, growing the homelands. Housing is the one issue we need, to break the barrier.'*

Endnotes

1. Independent Member of the NT Legislative Assembly, Yingiya Mark Guyula is a Yolŋu man of the Djambarrpuyŋu clan and Djirrikaymirr (senior leader) amongst his people.
2. Professor Jon Altman argues that the policies that Senator Vanstone began amounted to cultural genocide. (Altman, 'Raphael Lemkin in Remote Australia: The Logic of Cultural Genocide and Homelands', *Oceania*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2018)
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6. None of these examples is exceptional. An audit of homelands infrastructure commissioned by the NT Government a couple of years ago has never been released.
7. In 1978 the (Commonwealth) Department of Aboriginal Affairs' Technical Advisory Group for Aboriginal Homelands inspected and reported on homelands on Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands and found that, relative to the old mission settlements, the strongest, Aboriginal-inspired community initiative was found on homelands. (*Alternative Interventions*, p. 22). Nine years later the Return to Country inquiry heard that *'the establishment of homeland centres during the last eight years has not only reduced the population of the central settlement but it has also made life in that settlement more peaceful'*. (*Return to Country*, p. 77)
8. *Return to Country*, p. 76.
9. Ibid. p. 87.
10. Yananymul Mununggurr is a director of AHNT and chair of Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation. She lives at Garrthalala homeland.

The Reality for Our Homeless People in Tennant Creek

John Fitz Jakamarra, Apurtu Group Aboriginal Corporation,
respected Warumungu elder and winner of the Fitzgerald Justice Award.

The number of structures surrounding Tennant Creek that are used as shelter for our homeless population is shameful, but they are necessary accommodation for our families who have nowhere else to go other than camp outside, in the bush.

These people who live in these buildings (photos attached), which are barely tin sheds or shacks, know that they cannot live in town with their family as it puts extra strain on their family members who already have to deal with massive overcrowding.

These structures were erected by the Warumungu Pabulu Housing Association (now Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation) over 40 years ago by me and a group of local Warumungu men. Forty years later and they are still standing, necessary but inadequate shelter for our homeless families in Tennant Creek.

It is shameful on the government that Aboriginal people must live in these third world conditions in what we are told is 'The Lucky Country'. One woman living in one of the structures has made the comment *'we are the forgotten ones'*.

One building accommodates four or five men of varying ages. Initially this shack was just a frame and the men put iron around the frame to form outside walls. A number of times I have assisted them to put the corrugated iron around to give shelter from the wind, rain and afford some privacy. These men are fortunate or lucky enough to live beside family who have running water, power and ablution facilities that they can access. I have also put an inground camp oven for one of the elderly men so that he can cook himself instead of using his family's kitchen which is constantly in use by other members of the family. This also helps for food security for families who share the expense with the whole household (house and shack) instead of buying food individually.

These men don't class themselves as homeless as they feel that they have a roof over their heads and are very close to family for support. The definition of homelessness is quite different with Aboriginal people compared to non-Aboriginal people as Aboriginal people's expectations of a home is literally a roof over their head and not necessarily four walls.

In the Community Living Area where this shack is located, there are three other buildings which each house upwards of nine people. Again, these buildings do not have power or water and the people living in them are not fortunate enough to have family close by to allow them access to these basic facilities unlike the men mentioned above.

Some community members have provided water and food to these community people living in these areas over the years to support them in these times of need.
I have also done some small repairs to these buildings with my own personal tools and equipment and sourced recycled furniture, for example, tables, chairs, lounges, BBQ plates, and warm blankets to give some small comfort to a very uncomfortable living arrangement. This furniture has been sourced from curb side rubbish, the local dump and donations from community members living in the township.

We must provide better services and support to these community members.



Tennant Creek tin shed

Roxanne Fitzgerald, ABC Journalist,

In conversation: Jimmy Frank Jupurrurla and Dr Simon Quilty, Wilya Janta (Standing Strong) Housing Collaboration

Introduction

Wilya Janta is an innovative Aboriginal not-for-profit cultural consultancy that promotes community agency in the design and construction of housing in Indigenous communities. Seeking to re-invent the remote housing design and construction lifecycle, Wilya Janta puts the tenant at the centre of the design process with the core aim of building culturally appropriate homes. Given the almost complete deficit in evaluation of remote housing in the NT we are also working with academic and research partners to ensure that learnings at all stages are incorporated into iterative improvements in design and construction as Wilya Janta catches fire and spreads.

The pilot homes that we are building in Tennant Creek have been designed by their future residents using processes developed through the journey, supported at each step by our architectural team at OFFICE in collaboration with Professor Paul Memmott who has worked in Jurnkkurakurr for 50 years, coupled with the expertise in remote housing brought by Troppo. The imminent construction of these two 'Explain Homes' will be the first ever display homes designed by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people and will celebrate Wilya Janta's first housing collaboration. The pilot will demonstrate and ensure these core cultural design principles. The results will be beautiful, functional, culturally safe, thermally efficient, off-grid, climate resilient housing that maintains a connection between the built environment, the community, and the natural surroundings.

With the success of the demonstration homes, Wilya Janta will engage in larger-scale housing initiatives and with government funders, replicating its consultative process to facilitate community vision of affordable, well-designed housing.

An Interview with Jimmy Frank Jupurrurla: *'We Need Homes Not Houses'*

Jimmy Frank: I am Jimmy Frank Jupurrurla, I'm a Warumungu Arrente man. I've got connection to Tennant Creek and Waramungu people from my father's side, and from my grand grandmother. Arrente is my mother's side.

Simon Quilty: We were talking about what it is to have a home and so, when you think about your grandparents, describe what a home was for them.

Jimmy Frank: Well, what my Old Fella always been told me, you know, we always live on our country where our grandfather and where our grandmother come from. You could probably be born oversea or something, but you always belong to the land where you belong to, and you always go back to your country and live on your country.

Simon Quilty: And that's what home is, isn't?

Jimmy Frank: That's what the home is for us mob. When we go back to home, we always have a special place where we go back to, you know, whether it's close to a sacred site or a main watering place. And the old people used to just have a big camping area there and then they use whatever materials around that area.

Simon Quilty: And the way they use those materials was based on ancient knowledge, right?

Jimmy Frank: Ancient knowledge, yep. They use what they can from around there, from trees to branches to rocks to caves.

Simon Quilty: And there were lots of really incredibly clever ways of using those materials so that it was a home and that your mob thrived in your wellbeing and in your culture.





Jimmy Frank: Yeah. Wellbeing would have been using things that were suitable to that environment or that weather that we're living in. Wet time would have been certain place, used what was there for wet time. And in the summer, live near where water is, what's suitable to that summer. Nice shady tree and bough shelter and where certain wind would blow in a certain way. We'd use our land and our environment.

Simon Quilty: So, for me, a home is a whitefella structure. It's got doors and walls and bedrooms and it reflects my ancestors and the way they've lived. That's just what I thought was normal. And so there's a really big difference between Wumpurrarni and Papulinyi 'homes'. But what happened in the 1930s with pastoral and mining, your mob got pushed off land and they were forced onto the cattle stations. Then in 1968 when equal wages came in, just before your older brother was born, people were forced off the cattle stations, kicked off because station owners wouldn't pay Wumpurarrni people who were forced to live on the edge of Tennant Creek.

The way that your daughter Nicole lives in these new government houses and, for the last 10 years, the way that houses have been built, when I go into those houses, I feel like this isn't a home. And so do you want to describe what you think those new houses — we won't call them homes — what they do to Nicole's culture and to her wellbeing.

Jimmy Frank: I'll probably come to that one there, but I'll go back right back to the station days, right back before white people came here. Old people used to live on country, and then they'll make something that fits to their country and their culture. And you know that maybe singing at night and sitting around the fire telling those stories to those kids around that fire, you know. Cooking roo or an echidna, being in that environment. But today's life, it's a challenge to us mob to practise our culture. No one really sat down and asked Wumpurrarni people how houses can be suitable to strengthen our culture. So now we got challenge every day in our lives, houses don't strength our culture.

Everything starts at home to me. I work at a cultural centre here, Nyinkka Nyunu Culture Centre, and I've realised that through our traditional dancing is our identity, it is our culture, but our identity doesn't start with our language or the colour of our skin. Everything starts at home, from that little kid, you know, that little kid, they've got to learn around cultural practices. How seeing their uncles or their big sisters or their grandparents around cultural avoidance.

Coming back to Nicole's house, you know that house been built two years ago. It's not suitable for those cultural practices like cultural avoidance, because it's been set up for whitefella way, like designed maybe just one little family to live in there.

It's very hard for my people to live in Tennant Creek today, because overcrowding is one of the issues. We always have lots of people coming in from bush around football or big rain weather. They have to come in because of the wet and stay in here, maybe they come in for fuel and sorry business. That cultural burden is broken when you only got one kitchen and one hallway, and you know those bedrooms and one toilet. So, when you got 45°C outside, they're all sitting inside in this aircon house. And those cultural avoidances are broken and that's what our kids are seeing. Then they know culture, it is there, but they think it's OK to broke it. So, culture is getting weak every day. But also, what I've noticed about our cultural avoidances, our cultural weakness are coming from houses. It's not only our language and the colour of a skin that's make us Aboriginal, but it is that how we live in the house, that structure that doesn't suits Wumpurrarni people.

I don't know what a Wumpurrarni house really looks like or what a house for us mob in today's society would look like. I never seen one.







But also, it's what sort of food is today for Wumpurrarni. You know, you go to Chinese food, you see an Asian food and you see Indian food, Greek food, you notice that. And for these houses we live in, you got to make something some place that is suitable for cooking Wumpurrarni sort of food. How you store that? But nothing, we can't even cook our food our way. Those little practises that doesn't work in the houses we get shoved into. It is very important for a four-year-old, three-year-old kid that is growing up and seeing those practices.

Simon Quilty: And so just that food way, like I have come to understand a lot about that, Wumpurrarni food really is from the bush, and it's got really deep culture in the way you prepare it. And that's something that you learn from your parents, but these houses that you live in today, they don't allow you to practise that, do they?

Jimmy Frank: No, nothing, not even. There's a law that you can't have a fire pit out back of your house. And when I was growing up, every camp that we went out making in our homeland and our country, there's always a rule where there was a cooking place, you know, and a cultural way. When you get a goanna or a roo, or even having a fireplace to sit down and tell those stories. For those kids growing up in these new houses, it's not like that. I don't see much houses in Tennant Creek today that have a fireplace or just a windbreak. We used to have windbreak at every house, every community, every camp that we used to visit, there was always a place where the windbreak would be. You wouldn't even have windbreak today in these new houses.

Simon Quilty: And so, I guess exploring the solutions that Wilya Janta is making through your mob's expert knowledge, do you want to explain what we are doing?

Jimmy Frank: I'm really proud of Wilya Janta. Us mob today, we're not really sure around what this new Wumpurrarni lifestyle is in a urban life today. Wilya Janta is taking a huge step that way and then implementing that and bringing that into this urban life. We got to do that now today to practise our culture and teach our culture. Wilya Janta, it's got its challenges, but it's really important that someone's actually doing this in our community. In Australia, Wilya Janta is showing how we can have homes that are culturally suitable. But at the moment we don't have a home, we have a house that damages us mob.

I went into Sydney first time and I went to a suburb and just was straight away, 'am I in China' you know? And I was like freaking out. Then I went to another suburb. Then I see people wearing those black clothes and all about their body, females are body covered, and then I hear a voice singing out with a bell, you know, I think what is that? Oh, that's a Muslim mob. And I'm thinking wow. How come this is in Australia in a city that belong to, you know, our Aboriginal country. But their mob, they're really strong and in their community, they can bring their culture into their homes. And why aren't we seeing something like that in our community for Wumpurrarni people? Now we are, Wilya Janta is doing it.

Aboriginal people — we need homes, not houses.





From Homelessness to Stability: Bob's Journey with the Salvation Army Supported Housing

Phillip Buatava, Program Manager, Supported Housing Program, Darwin and Katherine, Katherine Hub Program, The Salvation Army

Bob's journey started with tough times when he found himself without a home or support. Despite facing unimaginable challenges, Katherine Mental Health referred him to the Salvation Army Supported Housing Program. This program gave him the support he needed to rebuild his life. Initially he was living under the Katherine River Bridge. Bob showed determination by participating in regular community support hours and managing essential tasks like shopping and medical appointments.

Bob set his sights on applying for the Disability Support Payment (DSP). While this task was not within his Case Manager's direct responsibilities, they went the extra mile to assist him. They helped him gather the necessary documents from Katherine Mental Health s, scheduled appointments at Centrelink, and even accompanied him to ensure the DSP application was submitted correctly. In January 2024, Bob received life-altering news — his DSP application was approved, providing him with the financial stability he desperately needed.

Recognising the importance of stable housing for Bob's progress, the Case Manager worked with the NT housing department to secure a rental reference for Bob's housing application. In January 2024, the Case Manager suggested that Bob stay at Corroboree hostel and he agreed. With the financial stability provided by the DSP, Bob felt secure enough to afford the hostel, and he expressed his willingness to move in by February 2024.

Bob faced challenges along the way. To meet his basic needs, he visited the Doorways program for services like food, showers, and laundry facilities. He also encountered an administrative issue in a forensic court. Despite multiple interview cancellations, the Case Manager persevered and rearranged the interview schedule, ensuring Bob's voice was heard. Bob successfully attended the court session in November 2023, and the court decided to dismiss his case.

This positive outcome showcased the program's commitment to supporting individuals through every challenge they face.

Bob's journey from homelessness to stability and the successful resolution of his court matter are powerful testaments to the transformative impact of comprehensive support. His story is a shining example that, with the proper support, anyone can overcome adversity. The Salvation Army Supported Housing Program's proactive approach to addressing challenges, securing financial assistance, and facilitating housing transitions clearly demonstrates its effectiveness. Bob's story is not just about overcoming adversity but also a testament to the potential positive outcomes when individuals receive the proper support at critical junctures. We urge you to support initiatives like the Salvation Army Supported Housing program, which makes a real difference in the lives of people in Katherine.



Semi-elevated metal house with timber framing rooftop hot water, Gunbalanya, 1980

National Archives of Australia A8598, AK18/3/80/9

Community Housing Keeping Quality Affordable Housing in Perpetuity: The gift that keeps on giving

Carol Atkinson, CHIA NT Coordinator

The Community Housing Industry Association Northern Territory (CHIA NT) proudly represents an industry group that is tenacious, innovative, and committed to making a difference. CHIA NT was established in 2021 to support members to deliver much-needed social and economic impact through culturally diverse, responsive, and affordable housing[1] solutions in the Northern Territory (NT). Its leadership team and member base[2] offer decades of expertise, experience, and know-how.

In recognition of this expertise and the industry's essential and critical partnership in the delivery of housing services and housing supply solutions, the NT Government provided one-off funding[3] to assist CHIA NT members to develop an urban Industry Development Plan (IDP) or roadmap.[4]

In 2023, the NT Government provided an initial operational grant to enable CHIA NT to implement its IDP after it was launched. The roadmap demonstrates the sector's forward thinking, solution focused, understanding of the housing challenges faced in the NT, as well as the sector's commitment to playing a leading role to make a real difference.

The IDP aims to extend the sector's capacity and ensure the industry's ongoing voice and policy influence.[5] This is critical given the growing challenges influencing or impacting on the NT's housing and homelessness crisis, which include:

- A net decline in affordable[6,7] housing stock, not keeping pace with unmet need and population growth, and the pressure this exerts on the 5,219 applicants for urban social housing, which has a waitlist of six to 10 years, depending on location and dwelling type.[8]
- Exceptionally high rates of overcrowding and homelessness, with a rate that is 12 times that of any other jurisdiction, particularly impacting on First Nations peoples.
- The lack of a framework in the broader NT housing system which encapsulates Housing First and Ending Homelessness principles and practices, and which embeds Aboriginal cultural safety into its core.
- A transient population, which includes a higher proportion of renters than any other jurisdiction, with 47.6 per cent of NT households renting.[9]
- Record low rental vacancy rates since the COVID pandemic, leading to increased demand and pressures in the private rental market and an increase in households in severe and extreme housing stress.
- The need to attract and house much-needed key workers, who are the backbone of the NT economy and essential for thriving communities.
- The absolute and very real tyranny of distance across the Territory and subsequent impacts on costs and viability of essential services and businesses.
- Increased costs across the board — associated with the cost of living, cost of capital and construction, and availability of a skilled workforce.
- The challenges of delivering cost-effective housing to a relatively small population (254,000 people across the NT) that is widely dispersed over a considerable land mass, and need to ensure that new supply is fit for purpose, culturally appropriate, sustainable, energy efficient and able to withstand environmental challenges including cyclones, floods, and bushfires.
- A lack of scale, whilst working to achieve cost effective housing developments achieved through economies of scale.
- Low land values and high development costs which impact on project viability, particularly without government capital and/or subsidies being in the mix.
- Ageing public housing stock and related repairs and maintenance cost pressures, coupled with an asset profile that does not match current and future tenant housing needs.
- A public housing rent-setting framework that is no longer fit for purpose.

The multitude of factors, issues, and causes of the housing crisis across Australia are now much more commonly presented by mainstream media. In the NT, this housing crisis has been a long-term issue, as demonstrated in research evidence, enquiries, and reports on government services.

The above NT challenges are known and understood by CHIA NT members. The sector includes Aboriginal controlled community housing providers, locally grown community housing providers, social

and community service organisations, and some multi-jurisdictional community housing providers.

In the NT, Community Housing Providers (CHPs) need to be resourceful, innovative and have a 'can do' approach. The importance of recognising the Territory's unique geographical, social, cultural, and economic landscape, and its environment, strongly underpins the operating models, risk, and decision-making frameworks employed by NT CHPs. Providing safe, secure, culturally appropriate, affordable, and appropriate homes for people on very low, low, and moderate incomes in the NT comes with specific challenges and opportunities to innovate and adapt in the context of an emerging and growing industry that is breaking new ground. This is no mean feat.

CHPs in the NT, as with their interjurisdictional counterparts, are social purpose businesses — they deliver on their charitable purpose whilst needing to apply significant business and commercial acumen. Under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH) they must deliver against robust and extensive performance measures and meet NRSCH compliance requirements, which, depending on the Tier level of risk profile, usually occurs annually.

They apply their leadership to asset management and planning capabilities that go well beyond a repair and maintenance approach. Not only do they focus on design to manage over the life of the asset and ensure that asset management, cyclical/preventative maintenance and vacate works occur in a timely way, but they also plan for asset renewal to ensure long-term net growth. They do this within a complex and unique environment and provide tailored responses that are informed by an operating environment which is iterative and requires many support partnerships to sustain tenancies across both social and affordable housing tenancies.

In other words, CHIA NT and its members operate within the 'housing system'. They are acutely aware of the range of evidence-based solutions required to address systemic failures. They seek out strong, effective, and collegial partnerships between the community housing sector, governments at all levels, philanthropists, the private sector including developers, financiers, and community services. Such partnerships facilitate the delivery of significant housing reform and collectively achieve impact through creating social and affordable housing opportunities, including boosting supply and sustaining tenancies.



Makeshift shelter at Sandover River, 1982 *Library and Archives NT ph0377/0247*

In May 2022, the NT Government released its first ever Community Housing Growth Strategy 2022–2032[10] (Strategy), in which it recognised the need for the sector to be more closely linked to, and engaged with, their communities than public housing and one that can deliver services that are more responsive to their tenant's needs. The Strategy also recognises that the sector's approach to tenancy and asset management delivers services and builds higher quality and more cost-effective housing than traditional public housing models.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, a small number of CHPs have operated in NT urban centres. This number has been growing at a slow and steady pace in both capacity and size with the first provider becoming NRSCH registered in 2018. Some of this growth has been through a mixture of housing management contracts or small-scale property management transfers, with some providers using alternate funding sources and innovative measure to acquire or develop new and owned affordable housing.

As of May 2024, there are now 16 NRSCH registered CHPs in the NT. Eight local CHPs currently manage over 1,500 urban community housing properties, about 21 per cent of the total urban social housing assets. They provide housing to more than approximately 5,500 residents. Around 15 per cent of these properties are owned by CHPs.

Under the urban part of its Strategy, the Territory government has committed to transfer up to 40 per cent of all urban public housing assets, between 2022 to 2026, under long-term lease arrangements. Based on these plans and industry-led developments, the sector will manage approximately 2,000 homes by the end of 2024 calendar year, which is a significant increase in growth in the past three years. In its Strategy, the NT Government has also committed to further growth opportunities through the transition of social and affordable housing head leases to CHPs and to transfer land and housing assets to CHPs for development and renewal projects.

CHIA NT welcomes these opportunities but notes significant delays to date in the transfer process. As CHPs rely on leveraging revenue through owned and managed rental housing, such delays bring risk to the long-term viability and sustainability of a developing community housing sector, especially an industry that lacks scale. CHIA NT continues to work with government on more timely transfers into the future.

CHIA NT is also engaged and involved in the consultation and design of policies and responses to maximise an increase of affordable housing supply, under the National Housing Accord, the Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF) and the Social Housing Accelerator program (SHAP). Collectively these initiatives seek to realise an additional increase of 1,500, social and affordable homes, to be delivered by CHPs across NT urban centres over the next five years.

CHPs are well placed and skilled to continue working between government and the private marketplace to develop innovative social and affordable housing solutions. In terms of asset growth, CHIA NT values the role of government to enable all potential levers to grow affordable housing and, with it, to grow the sector's capability and capacity, ultimately to foster self-initiated long-term growth.

CHIA NT seeks a continued and extended commitment from government in relation to land and capital grant contributions that is ideally coupled with a commitment to dedicated targets for inclusionary zoning in the NT. CHIA NT looks forward to a positive decision from the NT Government in relation to the tender process for the community housing sector's 25 per cent 'share' of funding for the SHAP.[11] Measures like these will further the sector's ability to secure future Federal Government funding opportunities in future HAFF rounds and deliver a bigger bang for the buck in relation to housing yield.

In addition to the tenancy and place-making benefits, CHPs as social housing providers can generate additional funding into the housing system through attracting Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA), which is not available to public housing. It is critical for the NT to optimise and capture these demand side Commonwealth funds. In the 2023 Report of Government Services, the NT is not maximising its opportunities within this revenue stream. The report shows the NT only received $106 CRA per person, compared to $189 per person across Australia.[12]

Significantly, CHPs deliver affordable housing that is far more than bricks and mortar. They value customer service and have high tenant satisfaction. They ensure housing is well maintained, tenancies are sustainable, and service responses are fit for purpose. They focus on place-based community building and enhance neighbourhood vitality. They are accountable to their tenants, whilst also being transparent to the community they serve.[13] They are part of their community.

Secure and affordable housing delivered by CHPs provides tenants with a vital foundation from which they can live their best lives. It provides people with a place to build (or rebuild) their lives. In other words, housing security provides the platform for people to imagine a better life and enable plans to be made. It provides dignity and creates possibilities.[14]

For the NT economy, not only does investing in community housing lead to positive outcomes for individuals, but it also generates economic return through employment and expenditure in the NT economy, including construction and re-investment into services and/or more housing. In addition, when people are housed it also significantly reduces the other health, justice and out of home costs.[15]

CHIA NT is confident that, in 2030, when we drive though NT urban areas and regional centres, the community housing sector will be able to celebrate the fruits of our partnerships and collective efforts, through significantly more well designed, well located and energy efficient new social and affordable housing. To achieve this, it is time for all of us in the NT housing system to be bold, courageous and use all the levers and new funding opportunities at our disposal. We need to ensure community housing continues to be the gift that keeps on giving.

Endnotes

1. Affordable housing' is used as an umbrella term to refer to social and affordable housing for people on very low, low to medium incomes.
2. CHIA NT members are registered under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH), and registered public benevolent institutions through the ACNC or ORIC.
3. CHIA NT acknowledges the support of NT Shelter to auspice funding arrangements for both the development of the IDP and current grant funding. CHIA NT also acknowledges the significant strategic expertise and support from the CHIA NT Steering Committee, Regional Chair, Ms Karen Walsh, and Ms Wendy Hayhurst, national CHIA.
4. The launch of the CHIA NT Industry Development Plan was hosted by the Minister for Urban Housing, the Hon. Ngaree Ak Kit, on 4 November 2023. *https://www.communityhousing.com.au/chia-nt/*
5. The Northern Territory Government has also signalled intent to support the delivery of the NT Industry Development Plan (IDP) over the duration of its *Community Housing Growth Strategy* (p. 15).
6. Pascoe M 2024, 'Michael Pascoe on the Failures of Australian Policy', *The Saturday Paper*, *https://www.pressreader.com/australia/the-saturday-paper/20240518/281625310409188*
7. *State of the Housing System 2024*, National Housing Supply and Affordability Council, Australian Government
8. nt.gov.au, *Apply for Public Housing, https://nt.gov.au/property/social-housing/apply-for-housing/apply-for-public-housing/waiting-list*,updated 31 December 2023.
9. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Northern Territory Outback*, *https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/702*
10. Northern Territory Government 2022, *Northern Territory Community Housing Growth Strategy 2022–2032*, *https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1099170/tfhc-community-housing-growth-strategy-202232.pdf*
11. CHIA NT would ideally like to see all projects submitted by CHPs to be supported, even if the total goes over the allotted '25 per cent', as not only this will increase the capacity of sector into the future it will also, based on the sector's ability to access tax exemptions etc, typically yield more appropriate housing at a lower overall cost than is able to be achieved by government.
12. Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2024*, Australian Government, *https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2024/housing-and-homelessness* - table GA.6
13. Community Housing Industry Association, *Facts*, *https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CommunityHousing-Factsheet.pdf?x95179*
14. Carnemolla P and Skinner V 2021, 'Outcomes Associated with Providing Secure, Stable, and Permanent Housing for People Who Have Been Homeless: An International Scoping Review', *Journal of Planning Literature*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 508–525, *https://doi.org/10.1177/08854122211012911*
15. Zaretzky K, Flatau P, Clear A, Conroy E, Burns L and Spicer B 2013, *The Cost of Homelessness and the Net Benefit of Homelessness Programs: a National Study — Findings from the Baseline Client Survey, AHURI Final Report No. 205*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, *https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/*

Racing Couches Shines a Spotlight on Youth Homelessness

Megan Johnson, Development Officer Social Inclusion, Anglicare Northern Territory

Each year on Youth Homelessness Matters Day, hundreds of young people, families, community organisations and supporters gather in Darwin City to race couches for a cause. Anglicare NT and the City of Darwin organise the annual Couch Surfing event with support from our major sponsor, First Nations Broadcasting. The event raises awareness of youth homelessness, brings people together to talk about solutions, and celebrates young people's resilience.

Too many children and young people in Australia live in unsafe or overcrowded home environments, couch surf or sleep rough. In the Northern Territory there are over 3,000 young people aged 12 to 25 years who are homeless on any given night.[1] That's almost twelve times the national average.

Anglicare NT Chief Executive Officer Craig Kelly said: *'although it was exciting to hold the 12th annual Couch Surfing event this year, much still needs to be done at the national and local levels to end youth homelessness. All young people need a safe place to call home. Sleeping on the street, in overcrowded conditions or on someone's couch is not OK! We need real action, evidence-based solutions and needs-based funding now. With support, young people can feel safe, re-engage with education and employment and connect with family, friends and the wider community.'*

This year, teams of young people travelled from as far away as Katherine and Nhulunbuy to take part in the action-packed day.

Overall, more than 20 teams of young people competed in fast-paced race heats and more than 30 local organisations were on hand to provide information and advice in a non-judgemental space.

Couches decorated with beautiful artwork and important messages vied to take home the best-decorated award. With free food and drinks, music, speeches, prizes and lots of media present, Couch Surfing is a great day and important lever for awareness raising and advocacy efforts. Couch Surfing races will continue until solutions are in place.

Endnote

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021, *Population: Census, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-census/latest-release*



Rent Choice — An Innovative Affordable Housing Solution that Delivers Immediate Impact Across the Northern Territory

Ollie Sutherland, Project Manager, Innovation and Business Improvement, Venture Housing

The inability to access appropriate affordable housing for the Northern Territory's workforce continues to drive individual and business decisions that, unless arrested, could result in long-term and negative consequences for the Northern Territory (NT) economy, population, and sustainability of critical services. In the later stages of the pandemic, the NT faced a critical shortage of key workers to commence its recovery. Local businesses and essential services struggled to attract and retain staff to continue their operations. This was magnified in regional and remote locations such as Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, and where costs to deliver services and the cost of living are much higher.

At the time, the NT's rate of homelessness was 12 times greater than any other jurisdiction (and has shifted little since). Further, the NT has the largest proportion of renters than any other jurisdiction, close to 50 per cent. The incentives under the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) had started to drop off and the rental vacancy rate in Darwin was 0.8 per cent. Another system issue was the unmet and growing demand for public housing with wait times of up to 10 years. This confluence of policy and market factors influenced this lack of availability of and access to affordable housing and continued to be a barrier, further inhibiting business viability and growth in the Territory's essential workforce.

Venture recognised that acquisitions and housing developments require considerable time, planning and capital, and are confined to available land, so we sought to develop a solution that could deliver more immediate impact across multiple locations in the NT, while our work developing longer-term affordable housing solutions continued.

The Solution

Rent Choice was designed by Venture Housing to deliver maximum impact and flexibility through partnerships with private real estate and a $3 million investment from the NT Government to achieve the following objectives:

- reduce rental stress
- incentivise key workers to remain in, or relocate to the NT
- assist to stabilise the Territory workforce and the economy.

Rent Choice was one of a program of projects to address housing affordability for key workers; it enabled eligible key workers to source their own private rental housing and receive a rental subsidy of up to $12,000 over 12 months, paid directly to their licensed real estate agency each month. Although this rental subsidy scheme did not fix the housing supply problem, key workers were provided with a foot in the door to access and/or retain the rental properties that were available. It provided financial relief for key workers and their families and incentivised them to remain in their communities. By keeping key workers in local businesses and communities, the scheme helped to ensure those communities remained places where people wanted to live and work, with the infrastructure, services, leisure and lifestyle activities they needed to thrive.

Overcoming Challenges

As with any innovative and complex projects, there were many known and unknown challenges along the way — time constraints and limited resources being the most obvious.

By far the biggest challenge was that almost every deliverable for this project was in some way dependent on knowing how we would work together with real estate agencies to administer the subsidies and mitigate risk. We needed considerable input from Property Managers across the NT to understand their internal systems and processes and develop a one-size-fits-all solution. However, we hadn't had any significant previous engagement with individual agencies, particularly outside of Darwin, and many didn't yet know who we were.

As a Community Housing Provider and a licensed real estate agency, leveraging our existing membership with the Real Estate Institute Northern Territory (REINT) was a game changer. Trusted by the real estate industry, it facilitated a series of introductions and private consultation workshops with real estate agencies across the NT which gave us a foot in the door for further consultation and collaboration in various formats. These initial and relatively informal and open discussions allowed us to further refine our policy and guidelines and inform the development of systems and processes that would lead to agencies saying 'count me in' when the scheme went live.

Stakeholder Engagement and Participation

A comprehensive marketing and communication strategy and three simple principles, outlined below, helped us achieve strong working partnerships with 166 Property Managers from 69 real estate agencies across Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs.

This is a massive achievement for our small team.

1. Communication is everything

By offering a variety of accessible ways to communicate, and by making it clear that we respected and valued people's time, we were able to extract valuable ideas and questions that led to more efficient processes and greater participant outcomes. Active listening helped us to build trust, establish common ground and identify risks and barriers that could impact the success of the project. Demonstrating how we had used this feedback to address concerns and develop our processes further strengthened trust and confidence in what we were doing.

2. Establish a common ground

Shared experiences and values help establish a connection and buy in.

We used our experience as a licensed real estate agency to establish common ground when discussing why this initiative was important and understanding concerns with certain processes. Being able to speak the same language was really helpful.

At the time, COVID also provided common ground in the sense that we all felt a sense of gratitude to the key workers who had worked tirelessly to keep us safe. This scheme was an opportunity to value and acknowledge their work and support local businesses who had been doing it tough.

3. Make 'Yes' easy

Having listened to the real estate industry and discussed their priorities, we were able to identify key benefits to working together that informed our messaging.

Great care was taken to ensure that the administration of the scheme was not labour intensive for our real estate partners; we put the onus on the participant to supply information and removed unnecessary inputs, continually using feedback to improve and provide a positive experience.

We developed a bespoke system in Monday.com to administer the scheme, with innovative integrations and automations to maintain policy compliance and streamline processes and two-way communication.

Go Live

The funding for this project was announced on 1 December 2021 and, in just under four months, Venture had:

- designed and developed the policy and guidelines for the scheme
- promoted itself as a leading CHP in the Territory to build trust and engagement with stakeholders, especially real estate agencies
- completely reinvented its website and social media platforms
- designed, developed, tested and implemented a system to accept and process applications



- marketed the scheme with industry peaks
- partnered with real estate agencies from Darwin to Alice Springs to administer subsidy payments.

Applications went live on 28 March 2022, on schedule, and the first voucher was issued the same day.

Throughout the development and implementation of this scheme, we worked closely with the Northern Territory Government, Chamber of Commerce, industry peak bodies and real estate agencies. Their openness to try something new, and shared passion and commitment to the success of this scheme, supported the development of a streamlined process for administering the funds, mitigating risk and capturing valuable insights.



In mid-September 2022, after just over six months, Venture reached a full allocation of subsidies and paused applications. Following the submission of a request to extend the scheme, Venture was advised by the NT Government that, unfortunately, no additional funds could be provided at that time. Due to the nature of the scheme's eligibility review assessment requirements, funds gradually returned to the pool as participants who were no longer eligible exited the scheme. A revised campaign, Rent Choice Regional, commenced on 1 March 2023 to commit the remaining funds. Rent Choice Regional offered subsidies of up to $6,000 over six months and targeted key workers in NT regional areas of Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs for the first three months.

Outcomes and Impacts

651 housing outcomes were delivered in the first six months with a total of 819 outcomes delivered by the end of the scheme.

A survey of Rent Choice participants was completed in July 2022,

	Rent Choice	Rent Choice Regional
Maximum subsidy and duration	$12,000 over 12 months	$6,000 over 6 months
% of surveyed participants who reported they were seriously considered leaving the NT before receiving the subsidy	56.9%	81.3%
Reduction in Extreme Rental Stress	21.6% to Zero	18.8% to 12.5%
Reduction in High Rental Stress	64.7% to 3.9%	50% to 37.5%
Ease of application process out of 5 stars	4.77	4.81
% of surveyed participants who would recommend the scheme to their friends and family	100%	100%
% of surveyed participants who were homeless or at risk of homelessness prior to rent choice	11.3%	12.5%
% of participants recently moved to the NT	10%	10.4%
% of participants relocating to the NT for work	7%	3%
Industry group with highest % of participants	Health & Human Services 29.8%	Education & Childcare 19.3%
Industry group with the second highest % of participants	Hospitality 22%	Community and Social Services 19.3%
Household composition	Family 51%	
Couple 23%		
Single 26%	Family 55%	
Couple 16%		
Single 29%		
% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants	7.5%	5.8%

and Rent Choice Regional participants in March 2024. The system we developed enabled us to capture valuable demographics and insights to further demonstrate the impacts of the scheme.

Surveyed participants also reported the following outcomes:

- improved mental health and wellbeing
- families remain connected with their communities in the Territory
- continuation of tertiary education for key worker households
- increased availability of income to fund necessities such as food, bills and essential items.

The broader social and economic impacts can be seen through the participants own words:

'Rent Choice allowed me and my new family to stay where we love. I worked for the same company for 10 years and did not want to leave. Rent Choice gave me a well needed breath of fresh air and continues to do so. I can now focus on my new daughter and doing all I can for my family with a little weight of my shoulders. I can now pay off some more bills.'

'Because of Rent Choice we were able to save money for our future housing options and our cost of living for housing is low since we pay subsidised rent. We have enrolled our daughter for Kumon and dancing classes since we could save some money for her inclusion activities.'

'It has impacted my life in the most positive way, more than I could imagine. My boys are thriving here. This is reflected in their school reports as well as their social and sporting lives. They're bringing home better grades and more ribbons than they were when I was sharing, and I am so proud to be able to have them here without the stress of having an unknown person in their lives. The benefits from Rent Choice for me personally have been tremendous, not just financially, but in all aspects of life.'

What's Next…

Applications for the scheme closed on 31 August 2023, and the final subsidy payment was issued in April 2024. The data and feedback from participants showed the impact delivered in the NT over a short time frame, with a relatively small cost outlay, clearly demonstrating the need for further investment in such initiatives. On 22 April 2024, we received the news we wanted, when the Minister for Urban Housing, The Hon. Ngaree Ah Kit, announced that the Territory Labor Government would be supporting workers with the cost of living by extending the scheme through another $3 million investment in Budget 2024. Venture is currently working with the NT Government to broaden the eligibility criteria and make further improvements to the scheme in order to provide immediate relief to more Territorians experiencing rental stress. This will include support for tenants renting NRAS properties, as the incentives cease. Applications are set to open on 1 July 2024.



Supports Through Community Collaboration

Phillip Buatava, Program Manager, Supported Housing Program, Darwin and Katherine, Katherine Hub Program, The Salvation Army

DG's journey, a testament to the transformative power of collaboration, is also a beacon of resilience. As a 60-year-old Warlpiri man from Larjamanu, about 900 kilometres from Darwin. He has faced a multitude of challenges, from housing instability to health, mobility, and hearing issues. Yet, his unwavering resilience, coupled with the support he receives from the Wurli Wurlinjang Aboriginal Health Service's Katherine Individual Support Program (KISP), has been the driving force behind his journey.

The KISP, a unique initiative that unites various government and non-government entities, has been a lifeline for DG. The case-conferencing management group (CCMG), a shining example of how collective efforts can bring about significant change, has played a pivotal role in his journey.

In September 2023, the staff at The Hub noticed that DG needed help. They contacted the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provider and found out that his support package had run out early because he needed a lot of respite accommodation. The Hub Coordinator brought this up at the next CCMG meeting. DG's case manager asked for a review of his support package.

They investigated whether he could get Supported Independent Living (SIL) support, which would give him more help, including a place to live. They decided that SIL wasn't suitable for DG, but they did find that he needed more support than he was getting. So, they gave him a higher-level NDIS package.

Now, DG benefits from comprehensive support through his upgraded NDIS package, which includes assistance with mobility, health management, support coordination, and self-care. This enhanced support has made a significant difference to his well-being and quality of life.

Despite the setback of SIL not working out, DG's spirit remained unbroken. With the invaluable guidance of his dedicated Support Coordinator, he explored alternative solutions. Together, they discovered a property for him to rent, a place he can proudly now call home.

While he awaits the property, DG's daily visits to The Hub and his unwavering positive attitude are a testament to the importance of community support. His specific hand gesture, understood by everyone at The Hub as a question, 'Is it ready yet?', and the effective communication through body language and hand gestures when he loses his hearing aids, underscore the vital role of community support in DG's life.

Despite all his challenges, DG's story shows that working together and finding new solutions can lead to good results. His experience highlights the importance of getting the right support through collaboration, regular reviews and speaking up for what you need. It also shows how determined people like DG, with the right support, can overcome even the toughest situations. DG's story is a great example of the power of community collaboration and its ability to change lives for the better.

*Name de-identified to protect confidentiality.



Top camp at Yirrkala, 1956 *Library and Archives NT ph0049/0712*

Apmere-le Mape Anthurre Aneme — A Lot of People Staying in One House

Stephanie Van Son, Social and Emotional Wellbeing Counsellor,
Arelhe-kenhe Ayeye — Women's Leadership and Development Program

Introduction and Context

First Nations people make up 88 per cent of the homeless population in the Northern Territory (NT), for which overcrowding constitutes 80 per cent.[1] The lack of affordable and culturally appropriate housing in Central Australia contributes to the pervasive homelessness experienced by First Nations people and has been recognised both nationally and internationally.[2]

For First Nations people, the cultural obligations of reciprocity, mutuality and kinship responsibility mean that, despite the systemic issues which perpetuate homelessness, families continue to provide shelter and support to one another. For many First Nations people, housing multiple generations can be a source of happiness and strength, where resources and caring duties are shared, along with cultural knowledge and practices. Yet the homes that continue to be built in the NT do not reflect these cultural and familial needs.

Consequentially, those living in overcrowded houses experience decreased food security, have poorer health outcomes and get less sleep. Illuminated in the stories shared is the diminished sense of safety within the home, often due to exposure to violence and alcohol use or an inability to control visitors. The prevalence of overcrowding has long been understood as a symptom of the ongoing impact of colonisation, dispossession and intergenerational trauma[3] that First Nations people continue to actively resist.

The relationship between homelessness and social and economic participation is well known. What we observe in the NT is how severe overcrowding impacts the capacity for First Nations people to engage in employment opportunities.[4]

Children's Ground (CG) maintains a no barriers approach to employment for First Nations people. Staff can access culturally appropriate and flexible employment, with variable arrangements for working hours, leave and unpaid time off. CG understands the impact of overcrowding and homelessness and recognises the ongoing strength and resilience of First Nations people despite this.

At CG, staff members' employment remains secure even when they are unable to attend work due to domestic and personal hardship, cultural or caring obligations. Social and emotional wellbeing and individualised support is available to staff in the form of health promotion, counselling, and financial support, and often includes addressing housing concerns.

The provision of savings arrangements and weekly pay being split between a bank payment and gift cards seeks to address the financial challenges and food insecurity frequently experienced by some staff. In addition, food, washing machines and showers are also available at work, should these be difficult to access at home. Addressing some of these barriers to employment supports First Nations people to participate in meaningful employment which celebrates and validates individual strengths and abilities. While in the NT we are a long way from achieving the following, CG maintains that stable, affordable and culturally appropriate housing is essential to ensuring First Nations people can participate in employment, and have self-determination as well as cultural and political justice.

Learning From Lived Experience

Children's Ground (CG) is a First Nations led organisation privileging First Nations knowledge systems. The CG Approach addresses the key economic, social and cultural determinants needed for lasting change. Six staff members shared their experience of housing and homelessness in the Northern Territory. These stories highlight the unique experience of homelessness for First Nations people, created by the lack of available or affordable housing, inappropriate housing, poor living conditions, overcrowding and pervasive, intergenerational poverty. They also speak to the resilience and strength of First Nations peoples in maintaining employment, housing family, caring for their kin and upholding cultural and community obligations despite these challenges.

Jenny is a First Nations woman in her mid-40s.

I'm about to be homeless. It's hard to pay rent. You've got to be struggling, go to work and build as much payments as you can just to get back on your feet. If your kids are living out bush, when they come in, they need somewhere to stay. Some stay in a crowded house.

I'm struggling to look for places to help me. I fell behind on my rent, I'm worried that I'll be sleeping down the creek, on the streets, camping in family's backyards. I've never had a stable home. I've got eight years to wait for [social] *housing.*



Painting by Andrena Webb

Before, I was staying with my sister, until I got on my feet to look for my own place. My first unit I got through Anglicare. Me and my partner were there for three years, we were earning too much, so we needed to move. That's when we moved into our current place.

It's the first stable home I've ever had, until I'll be on the streets again. I have a partner that never helps to pay rent. We'll be living in the car.

Margaret is a First Nations woman in her mid-50s.

I was homeless. I lived in a tent in the caravan park a long way back. It was very hard. I was living there with my husband and kids. We went to Housing, got a three-bedroom house. I waited maybe seven years for that house. Then we moved, rented from Tangentyere. I had a lot of people staying with me, even in the backyard. They would come and go. One mob would go then another mob would show up with their blankets in their car and we'd have to cater for them.

Everybody's got a full house still today. It was hard, using one kitchen and one toilet with many people. People used to sleep outside, there was no room. When the rain comes everyone used to stack up like sardines in a tin.

Then I applied for a three-bedroom place through Housing; we had the house to ourselves. Not like my mum and dad's house, that

was full all the time with people sleeping in the backyard, the sleepout was always packed.

I moved into my current house four years ago, and I still have people following me around. I had nine kids and five adults in a one-bedroom house. I fought for my daughter to get a house in a town camp. It was really annoying having everyone in that house, I couldn't kick them out, they had nowhere to go.

Jacinta is a First Nations woman in her mid-40s.

Yes, I've been homeless. When I had my first child, I was struggling for a place to stay and have my own space. The house was so crowded with other family members and in-laws. There were too many people coming and staying, it was scary. Because you have a lot of drunks there, people just walk in and it's not really safe at all. And noise, and with the food, everyone eats it. I didn't have any help at all.

But you know I continued really strong, looking after my kids even though I was homeless. I felt strong, being a mother and looking for work. Even when I was on Centrelink, I was looking for a job to support my first child. I moved out bush. I had a second child. I found a job. I was working at the shop, at the cash register and stocking shelves. We moved around too much. It was really hard to get a house. Housing was so terrible and there wasn't enough funding to build more houses in that community. Just the same old little houses, families all living in overcrowded places.

I had put in an application for a house in town and it came up. Then I had some family problems in town and we had to move back to bush, we found ourselves homeless again. Then we had some relationship problems and I had to move with my kids, travelling around everywhere looking for a place to stay.

I feel comfortable right now, I applied for this house, had a good person to help me and I've got a home to stay. I'm working, I'm supporting my kids.

Angela is a First Nations woman and elder in her mid-60s.

I was living out bush and I got married. We came back to live in Alice Springs. I was stopping here, and I applied for a house in a town camp. I put in my application form and I'm just waiting, waiting... I rang up Affordable Housing, but they reckon I'm still on the waiting list and other people who only just signed up have got a house. I've been waiting nearly six years.

I'm staying with my daughter. It's crowded there, that house has only three bedrooms and it's full already. When it's crowded it's no good, there's a big mess all the time.

When I moved, I had three grandchildren plus my three sons and my two daughters. We stopped at a town camp first when my husband was still alive. He was on dialysis then and was getting weak. He had a kidney transplant from his young sister. Then he was alright. Then when he came back, he started drinking and went back on the kidney machine again. We were out bush. We couldn't go back to the house for cultural reasons because my husband passed away.

It's really hard to look for another house, you got to go through lots of paperwork. It's better to have your own house, you can do whatever you like, be your own boss for your own house. I want to live in [my] *Town camp. I want to live amongst the people, my people.*

Kath is a First Nations woman in her mid-40s.

It's been really disappointing [housing in Alice Springs] *because the lady who has helped us, she left, for family reasons. It was the first time in a couple of years that we actually got help, to move the cars from the yard, get a skip bin so the nephews could clean up the rubbish. You tell them about what needs to be done, and the next thing, they've left the job, and the next person says, we don't know where they've put the paperwork.*

The house is old, it's the only house in our Town camp that's never been renovated. [I live with my] *two sisters, my nephew, my other nephew and his partner, she's having a baby, and one more person.*

There's electrical issues. If it rains for two days, water gets into the electrical system and power goes off until it dries out. We told them about it a couple of years ago, nothing was done. The air conditioning wasn't working for a few months over summer. Then they got it fixed but it was just blowing hot air. Currently there's a hole in the pipe where the water goes to the air conditioner, and the water is just pouring out. Now the hot water's not working. We feel let down; we shouldn't be living like that.

Stephen is a First Nations man in his mid-40s.

I used to live out bush; because I got sick, now I have to be in town. I'm staying at anybody's place, sleeping in my car, in the people's lounge, me and my son, getting a bit sick of that you know. It's always overcrowded, and I don't drink but there's always grog in the house and noise. It's my son I'm worried about. I want my son to have a good sleep, but me too. If I've overstayed my welcome, I'll go to another place.

I had a housing application, they told me I have to wait for six years, I'll be dead by then. I have renal three times a week for five hours. I'm sick, I'll be dead by the time I get that house. Then they said they took me off the waiting list. I've been just trying to look for private or whatever, caravan parks just to stay, to get away from people so that my son can have a good sleep and when we do shopping, it'll last. Because when we do shopping, people are eating it. That food is for my son, I do everything for him, he's 14. We're in the lounge, when everyone is waking up and watching TV, we have to wake up too. We can't sleep until everyone's gone to sleep. I'm just sick of it, it's been too long.

Endnotes

1. Northern Territory, *Submission No. 62, to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs*, Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia (17 March 2020).
2. United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari (15 August 2006).
3. Darwin L, Vervoort S, Vollert E and Blustein S 2023, *Intergenerational Trauma and Mental Health*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *https://www.indigenousmhspc.gov.au/publications/trauma*
4. Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia, Parliament of Australia, *Northern Australia Workforce development: First Report (2023).*

Not Just Housing

Jayne Lloyd, Director, CatholicCareNT
and Kim Burns, General Manager, Quality Systems, CatholicCareNT

Introduction

Homelessness is a significant issue affecting many individuals and families in the Northern Territory (NT). CatholicCare NT recognises the urgent need for tailored housing solutions that address the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal Territorians from remote communities who relocate to Darwin. Through our visitor accommodation centre, we witness firsthand the daily struggles and injustices faced by Aboriginal people in securing appropriate housing upon relocation. To address this, CatholicCare NT has developed a plan to establish a social housing hub that prioritises cultural sensitivity, inclusivity, and safety.

In 2022, CatholicCare NT expanded its role to become a Tier 2 Community Housing Provider, a move spurred by over three decades of providing support services throughout the NT. Feedback from participants and staff across various programs underscored the fundamental importance of stable housing in addressing complex life challenges such as trauma, poverty, and unemployment — you need to have a home. While accommodation, a roof over someone's head, can be arranged for the lucky few, this does not provide the stability that is required to build a foundation that promotes healing and well-being. People thrive when they are part of the community, and this is what we are hoping to achieve through our housing hub.

Building Community

CatholicCare NT aims to offer a housing solution by creating a housing community specifically tailored to the needs of Aboriginal individuals who often encounter barriers to accessing housing. These obstacles include lengthy public housing waitlists, difficulties in the private rental market, lack of rental histories and inadequate accommodation options. Systemic issues of lack of supply, lack of investment, and discrimination all contribute to perpetuating the cycle of homelessness among Aboriginal Territorians.

The acquisition of a Visitor Accommodation service in 2022 provided us with the foundation to begin planning. The vision for repurposing the site, known as Crerar Road, has been slow to materialise due to the need for extensive maintenance and financial investment. Crerar Road is peaceful and tranquil, despite being less than 15kms from the city centre, and the land feels like community with its tall trees and shady corners that provide rest and reprieve for those visiting. Crerar Road, an alcohol-free space and with an onsite caretaker, provides a sense of safety and security.

With the Federal Government's announcement of the Housing Australia Future Fund, CatholicCare NT engaged local architects to develop a 'masterplan' that would provide a bespoke solution to housing needs of Aboriginal Territorians from remote communities who relocate to Darwin for health and other reasons. The development will be uniquely designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal people who typically cannot access housing. The design principles involve consideration for the natural environment, creating supportive space which promotes social connection, cultural activities, and access to nature through careful design consideration. Cultural Respect involves developing inclusive spaces, incorporating areas for spiritual and cultural activities that demonstrate respect for residents' beliefs and cultural needs. The site will promote safety by enabling access for residents to move freely on and off the site while maintaining a high level of safety and security. The precinct will be gated, monitored, and maintain its alcohol-free status. Application of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design principles will be important. Visitors are welcome and, with the creation of appropriate spaces for residents to meet with them, they will also have access to the adjacent visitor accommodation.

Intended Residents

The NT has the highest prevalence of homelessness of any state or territory in Australia and has significant issues with overcrowding which can lead to complex health and social issues. The demand for public housing far exceeds supply. Many NT public housing tenants are on low incomes and dependent on income support. In addition, many tenants have multiple and complex needs that require additional support services from government agencies and the non-government sector.

Based on NT Public Housing data (June 2023),[1] the greatest demand and longest waiting times in the Darwin region are for one-bedroom properties with a ratio of 96 applicants on the wait list for each. This compares to 13 applicants for each two-bedroom home and 19 applicants for each three-bedroom home. These statistics have not been matched with demographic data of public housing. Providing safe, secure, culturally respectful community housing will still not be enough to fully support the target group, many of whom have never had the opportunity to access long-term housing and some who have significant histories of trauma and complex health issues. Many also have undiagnosed disabilities and health concerns that require long-term, consistent support.



Community-built hut at Kalkarindji — bush poles, corrugated metal sheets and no nails, 1982. *Library and Archives NT ph0377/0272*

The precinct has been planned with the view that that victim survivors of domestic and family violence and people relocating to Darwin for health reasons will be a core resident group.

Domestic and family violence is the most significant safety issue facing Territorians. In Australia this year alone, 31 women have lost their lives due to gender-based violence — that's one woman every four days. The NT faces even more staggering rates, with domestic violence rates three times the national average. Families attempting to provide a 'new' life for their children require emotional and practical support that comes to them and requires no limits to accessibility.

A severe shortage of dialysis services in remote communities forces 80 per cent of Northern Territory dialysis patients, mostly Aboriginal, to relocate to urban centres like Darwin and Alice Springs for life-sustaining treatment. This relocation exacerbates the intersection of disadvantage, displacement, and illness for Indigenous Australians with end-stage kidney disease. In Darwin, these patients face housing precarity, leaving behind social housing in remote communities to join long urban waitlists. Some die before receiving housing, with wait times of six to eight years for a one-bedroom unit, contrasting starkly with the six-year survival rate on dialysis. Even with strong claims for priority housing, Indigenous renal patients endure wait times of three to four years on average, placing them at high risk of homelessness.[2]

The Community Housing 'Hub' that CatholicCare NT is hoping to develop at Crerar Road will provide a mix of different housing designs, consisting of some single accommodation and two, three and four-bedroom houses that allow for intergenerational living so that caring responsibilities can be supported, particularly in the case of people requiring long-term renal support. Renal patients have been accessing the short-term visitor accommodation at Crerar Road for several years, coming in from community when requiring treatment. However, some are unable to leave due to the lack of services in remote areas. CatholicCare NT hopes that, by developing some of the housing at Crerar Road, these people will be moved from visitor accommodation status into long-term community housing.

While the Public Housing data is of relevance and must be considered in the housing mix, the participant cohorts currently receiving support from CatholicCare NT are also of relevance in designing the Crerar Social Housing Project. Analysis of the CatholicCare NT participant data indicates that there will be high demand for long-term two- to three-bedroom homes to house single parent families and a smaller number of four- and five-bedroom homes to house NDIS participants and larger families with teenagers. The CatholicCare NT Housing Support Team (HSP) reports that larger homes (four to five bedroom) are in demand for families going through reunification that cannot take place until there is suitable housing to accommodate all children with consideration of their genders and ages.



Concrete block huts with corrugated iron roofing. Yuendumu, 1976 *Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au*

In addition, there is a need to address a lack of housing for individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The housing typologies includes a mix of blocks of one-bedroom homes for women without dependent children, young people, older people requiring health care (particularly renal care) and single men, a larger number of two to three-bedroom homes for women and children, families and a small number of four-bedroom dwellings for large family groups and people living with a disability and their carers.

CatholicCare NT considers it important to ensure that housing density on the site demonstrates 'value for money' (with a preference for medium to high density) while maintaining positive social, cultural, and environmental amenity. Our approach aligns with the principles of the NT Community Housing Growth Strategy 2022–32.[3]

Public Amenity

Creating a community entails more than merely providing houses — it involves establishing public spaces that foster connection, well-being, and cultural enrichment. We are committed to enhancing the quality of life for residents by offering access to a range of amenities and activities designed to promote holistic health and social cohesion.

We have adopted an ecological approach that incorporates and values the natural environment with ample green spaces and natural bushland to be maintained where possible. These areas will not only provide opportunities for physical activity and leisure but will also serve as gathering points for residents to socialise and build relationships. By prioritising green spaces and public amenities, we aim to cultivate a sense of belonging and pride in the community.

CatholicCare NT's relationship with NT Health will continue, ensuring visiting health professionals will be onsite. An on-site clinic has also been included in the Community Housing Masterplan. Furthermore, the integration of a clinic will ensure that residents have convenient access to healthcare services. This not only addresses practical needs but also promotes proactive health management and early intervention. By offering regular health screenings, consultations and preventative care programs, we strive to support the overall well-being of our residents and empower them to lead healthier lives. Spiritual and cultural activities will also play a central role in our community housing hub. Recognising the importance of cultural connection and identity, we are committed to providing spaces for communal activities such as workshops, Mass, or other activities.

Linkages with the Visitor Accommodation centre will provide opportunities for shared facilities such as laundry, kitchens, visitor management and administration.

CatholicCare NT currently operates five remote childcare centres. These spaces have become a nexus of assessment, referral and provision of support to parents and extended family. The childcare centre has become a gateway that swings both ways — parents can access support for themselves and their families, and professionals can provide educational sessions and health promotional activities whilst having a yarn over a meal. This model is also included in the Community Housing Masterplan; by providing childcare services within the precinct, families can experience respite and have time to attend to other needs. The provision of a centre would also support employment amongst residents and provide possible career pathways as employment opportunities arise in other centres.

Our vision of our community housing hub goes beyond the provision of just physical shelter — it embodies a holistic vision of community development. By investing in public spaces, community services, and cultural and spiritual activities, we aim to cultivate a thriving community where residents feel supported, connected, and empowered to lead fulfilling lives.

Conclusion

CatholicCare NT's vision for the Crerar Road Social Housing Precinct represents a significant step toward addressing homelessness in the NT. By combining cultural sensitivity, strategic planning, and a commitment to safety, this project aims to provide a dignified and supportive home for those who need it most.

Endnotes

1. NT Public Housing data (June 2023)
2. Puszka S 2023, 'The Circulation of Blood and Care: Value and Kidney Disease Amongst Yolŋu in Northern Australia', *Medical Anthropology*, vol.42, no.5, pp. 451–464, *https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01459740.2023.2213391*
3. Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities, *NT Community Housing Growth Strategy 2022–32*, *https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1099170/tfhc-community-housing-growth-strategy-202232.pdf*

The City of Darwin's Response to Homelessness

City of Darwin

The City of Darwin is a vibrant tropical city located on Larrakia Country, home to over one third of the Northern Territory's population. The municipality faces unique challenges as a regional centre within the broader context of high rates of homelessness and rough sleeping in the NT.

While the causes of homelessness and the complexity of social issues impacting vulnerable people are often outside the remit of local government, City of Darwin is committed to creating a safer, vibrant city through collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders and substantial financial investment.

City of Darwin commits significant resources to responding to the impacts of homelessness and the misuse of alcohol in our public spaces and has developed services and made investments through:

- Darwin Safer City Program
- Assertive Outreach Program
- Public Places Rangers
- Libraries, Community Wellbeing Program — Homeless Link Up
- Youth Services
- Closed Circuit TV (CCTV).

Darwin Safer City Program

A Public Intoxication Issues Forum was held in 2013 in partnership with the NT Government in response to high levels of community concern for public intoxication and alcohol harm within the municipality and in partnership with the National Local Government Drug and Alcohol Advisory Committee.

As a result, the Community Wellbeing Pilot Project was established and funded in 2014–15. The Safer Vibrant Darwin Plan 2016–2019 was then developed, with a key priority area being harm reduction for vulnerable population groups and permanent homelessness reduction.

The Community Wellbeing Pilot Project transitioned to the Darwin Safer City Program and is now embedded at City of Darwin and recognised as part of Council's core business, with an aim to share the response for harm minimisation across a range of stakeholders, recognising that responsibility is not 'held' by any one agency.

Assertive Outreach

The Assertive Outreach team work closely with a range of partner agencies using a strength-based approach, focusing on advocacy for vulnerable people. The service engages with people on a voluntary basis and has no regulatory powers. It aims to connect vulnerable people in public spaces to appropriate support services.

Most engagements involve people who are experiencing homelessness or sleeping rough and alcohol dependent. Many of these vulnerable people have complex health issues exacerbated by daily consumption of alcohol at harmful levels. Assertive Outreach Officers work Monday to Friday from 7am, moving through City of Darwin public places such as parks, reserves, and beachside areas.

The key aspects of our Assertive Outreach program include:

- First Nations Assertive Outreach Officers with strong cultural competency and links with the local community.
- First response, short intervention service which engages with vulnerable people.
- Referral to external agencies that can assist people across a range of services, including health and medical, accommodation, alcohol, and other drugs, legal, material aid, transport, and income support.
- Morning Public Order Patroller Leaders daily meeting with cross-government departments and organisations.
- Agile patrolling to respond to areas of high need.
- Municipality wide service.
- Regular provision of intelligence to police and emergency services, welfare and health providers and proactive work with community groups and stakeholders including local businesses.

Public Places Rangers

City of Darwin's Public Place ranger patrols are on the ground seven-days-a-week, with an additional investment made to commit to weekend patrols. The rangers are responsible for ensuring City of Darwin's by-laws are being adhered to. Rangers assist with a range of issues, including animals, facilities, trees and parks, waste, roads and paths, parking, untidy allotments, illegal camping, or general issues.

A Case Study

Working with Complexity: Rough Sleepers from Remote Communities in the Wet Weather

Name changed for confidential reasons.

Working with rough sleepers can be complex and sensitive. Having partnerships with organisations to support those who are displaced is essential. The Assertive Outreach team has developed trusted relationships across these partner organisations and, where possible, streamlined available pathways to alleviate any experience of shame and/or the fear of engagement with services. It is important to remember that not all people seek support or want engagement. It is important to be respectful of this and balance this with any anti-social behaviours that may present and with duty of care that services have for that person and the community as whole.

Upon attending a short-term accommodation facility, Lauren and Shannon (Assertive Outreach Team) were approached by the security team. They asked if they could assist them in communicating with a woman that had been dropped there by Land and Sea Rangers that morning, after being located walking around an inner suburb. She appeared to be disoriented and was unable to communicate. It was identified that the woman, Betty, had difficulty hearing and seeing and required an interpreter. Betty indicated that she had a bag and wanted to go for a drive to find it once the rain stopped. She further indicated that the people she had been with had taken money and had been drinking and fighting. An immediate support was accommodated by the partnering organisation based out of the facility, which provided some clothes. Betty also communicated that she was connected to an Art Centre and was hoping to get money from them.

Across a 30-minute timeframe, 11 calls were made by the Assertive Outreach team to various organisations, including Larrakia Nation, police and Anglicare NT Care Finder to obtain information, family contact and support needs.

The team were able to confirm that Betty was from a Central Australian remote community. The remote health clinic staff were unaware and surprised that Betty was in Darwin and were able to provide some key information about her care needs (moderate to severe hearing loss, glaucoma, onset dementia and renal failure, stage 3. Noted has a care plan; however, no official carer). Further findings revealed that Betty had missed a bus to Katherine along with three other passengers. It was unclear why they were travelling to Katherine as there were no apparent connections or clear benefits to travel there. Family members were identified, and it was discovered that a community member who was also travelling with Betty normally supported her with a unique sign language that they have developed to communicate. From this group, however, one had caught the bus and the others had left Betty on her own.

The Care Finder team advised that they would collect Betty and continue to attempt to provide support. This included taking Betty to the Royal Darwin Hospital to have her admitted under social admission. Attempts were made to engage an interpreter for Betty. However, none were available.

The Care Finder team, the Hospital Aboriginal Liaison Officer and the Assertive Outreach team continued making calls to obtain support from services and managed to engage some family who were also in Darwin. Betty had indicated she wanted to go home. The following morning, through the collective efforts of all the organisations, including MacDonnell Council, Larrakia Nation, Care Find, City of Darwin, NT Community and Mission Australia, arrangements were made for Betty to fly back to Alice Springs, with accommodation and food vouchers if required, and be transported back to community.

Collaboration

With the current influx of people sleeping rough across the Darwin Municipality (and further), City of Darwin collaborates on a Morning Public Order Patroller Leaders daily meeting and a monthly strategic meeting with City of Palmerston, Litchfield Council, the departments of Chief Minister and Cabinet, Infrastructure Planning and Logistics, and Education, Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, Licensing NT, Neptune Security Public Order Response Unit, Fire and Emergency Services (NTPFES) — NT Police (Palmerston and Darwin), NTPFES — Territory Community Safety Coordination Centre, and the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC) Youth Outreach Re-Engagement Team and Public Housing Safety and Transit Security.

This collaborative approach supports the Assertive Outreach Team and Public Places Rangers to assist people sleeping rough and target areas to provide outreach. Co-response patrols are coordinated through the daily meetings and can include any of the attendees depending on the focus, such as Youth, Housing or Public Space.

City of Darwin is also a member of the weekly Darwin, Palmerston and Litchfield Interagency Tasking and Coordination Group, which aims to provide a holistic and high-level strategic response to the contributing factors of anti-social behaviour, which is often homelessness and rough sleeping, with a particular focus on supporting vulnerable people and the minimisation of alcohol and substance related harm.[1]

The Going Home Project

The Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, CAAPs Aboriginal Corporation and Larrakia Nation established an Assertive Outreach Taskforce in 2022 based on the City of Darwin's Assertive Outreach model.

In October 2023, the Assertive Outreach Team and the Public Places Rangers worked with the Assertive Outreach Taskforce, the Thamarrurr Development Corporation and respected Wadeye community members to engage with West Daly residents sleeping rough in Darwin and encourage them to return home.

> *'Having familiar faces from 'home' out and about with our outreach and patrol teams*

makes a major difference when engaging with people but more importantly encouraging family to decide to return home.'

— Kevin Tilmouth (CM andC).

Discussions are continuing between the Department of Chief Minister and Cabinet and Elders and Traditional Owners from communities around having more visiting elders or trusted community members attend Darwin and surrounds, which City of Darwin will support through the Assertive Outreach and Public Places Rangers.

Libraries, Community Wellbeing Program — Homeless Link Up

The libraries across the Darwin municipality are often accessed as safe spaces for vulnerable people.

The Community Wellbeing Officer role was established in 2021 in response to the recognition that many individuals experiencing homelessness were frequenting libraries during the day, seeking assistance beyond what the library could offer. The role of the Community Wellbeing Officer is to build connections with external services that provide accommodations (such as YISSA), financial support (like the Salvation Army), or amenities like warm meals and showers (such as the Ozanam House Community Centre). Through warm referrals, the Community Wellbeing Officer enhances the likelihood of individuals accessing these services, thereby improving their overall wellbeing.

City of Darwin libraries also partner with NT Shelter to deliver Homeless Link Up, a free event for people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. This includes providing information on the importance of housing as a solution and educating communities on how they can make a difference. The event provides opportunity for engagement and connection to services.

The following services are provided free:

- BBQ, tea, coffee, and fruit
- haircuts
- wye checks and glasses
- birth certificates
- promotional stalls etc.
- Centrelink and Medicare services
- housing support services
- therapy dogs
- library tours
- food and clothing vouchers
- snack packs
- free books.

The Community Support and Advice Group was born out of Homeless Link-Up and takes place on the first Tuesday of every month at the Casuarina library. The primary needs of individuals experiencing homelessness were identified as securing Centrelink payments, finding permanent housing solutions, and obtaining essential documents such as birth certificates for further documentation and access to additional services. To address these needs efficiently, representatives from Services Australia, Territory Housing, and Births, Deaths and Marriages are invited to the library, streamlining access to services in a more welcoming environment.

Youth Services

City of Darwin's youth team provide secretariat support and regular sharing of youth sector content via a weekly e-newsletter to the Darwin Working with Youth Network (DARWWYN), providing an opportunity to connect young people who are at risk of homelessness, are experiencing homelessness or are being supported by organisations to address homelessness. This has included residents from the YWCA Casey House participating in City of Darwin's Secret Art exhibition and partnering with Anglicare NT to host the annual Couch Surfing event which celebrates the resilience of young people affected by homelessness on National Youth Homelessness Matters Day.

Closed Circuit TV (CCTV)

City of Darwin manages an extensive network of closed-circuit television (CCTV) and camera systems across the municipality, ensuring they are installed, maintained, and operated in accordance with Northern Territory law and that their use enhances public safety, community trust and confidence. CCTV and portable footage can be shared for information and public awareness where appropriate steps have been taken to ensure the protection of personal information.

The CCTV systems are used to promote a safer and more liveable environment, monitor City of Darwin assets and protect staff and the community.

CCTVs in the city centre provide additional tools for police to manage anti-social behaviour, as well as allowing the City of Darwin to collect data around vehicle and pedestrian movement in the city which can be used for planning services.

Conclusion

City of Darwin is proud to have developed responsive programs to assist vulnerable populations in our community, including those experiencing homelessness. Council is committed to continued collaborative efforts to facilitate and encourage a safer, healthier and more inclusive Darwin.

Endnote

1. Membership of this group includes City of Darwin, City of Palmerston, Litchfield Council, Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, Department of Education (Director, Engagement Programs, Performance and Reporting and School Operations), Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet (Regional Director), NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services (Assistant Commissioner Territory Community Safety, Director, Territory Community Safety Coordination Centre, Regional Manager Northern Territory Community Coordination Centre, Superintendent Darwin, Superintendent Palmerston, Superintendent Casuarina, CCTV and Program Support Officer), Department of Infrastructure Planning and Logistics (Manager Crown Land Management and Manager Transit Safety), Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (Executive Director, Child Protection and Community Youth Justice and Youth Outreach Re-Engagement Team), Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade (Principle Compliance Officer and Manager Licensing) and Department of Health (AOD Treatment Systems Coordinator).

Holistic Support to Tackle Homelessness

Farron Studt, Head of Development and Impact, Lutheran Care

Homes are just one part of the puzzle, with the solutions and support interconnected and multifaceted. Each element plays a significant role in the cycle of poverty and impacts individuals' overall well-being.

It's around 8.45am on a crisp autumn morning in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) on Arrernte country. As the business district starts to come to life, a few clients are already lining up outside the Lutheran Care office in Gregory Terrace. Some are making the short trip from where they staying in the dry riverbed of the Todd River, a stone's throw from the office and a place of cultural significance for the Arrernte people, particularly in warmer months. Others have walked 40 minutes from the Town Camps on Alice Springs' outskirts.

Some are combining visits. Travelling from a remote Aboriginal community for medical or court appointments, Sorry Business, banking, or family reasons, and staying in a hostel, motel, couch surfing, or in the riverbed. The intersection of housing and income stress is impossible to ignore. Even those with stable employment and housing are struggling with soaring living costs and suffering considerable stress and frustration. All who knock on Lutheran Care's doors are vulnerable and experiencing some form of hardship. When Lutheran Care opens its doors at 9am, Lutheran Care team members will sit down with these clients. Ask them to share their story. And listen.

When clients feel comfortable telling their story, homelessness and housing insecurity are so often part of the myriad of challenges they are facing. While Lutheran Care's Northern Territory (NT) team does not offer specialist homelessness service, many clients are experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity.

The most recent Census reports 13,104 people experience homelessness in the NT: the highest rate of any Australian jurisdiction, almost 12 times the national average. Indigenous people make up 87 per cent of the NT's homeless population.

'Whilst a client experiencing homelessness may come to us originally seeking food vouchers or financial advice, once they have made themselves known, we can find out more about their situation: what they need, where we can help, and where we can't, [to provide] an introduction to one of our partners *who can,'* says Susan Richards, Lutheran Care's Executive Manager of Community Services.

'Yes, we need more homes, more rentals, more social and community housing, and more emergency accommodation, and have a good look at affordability. But in saying that, more places to stay will not instantly 'cure' homelessness. It is more complex than that,' she added.

Housing insecurity can arise from a combination of income stress, family responsibilities or breakdowns, health issues, lack of affordable housing, as well as insufficient access to supportive services.

'Financial literacy and income stress are intertwined with homelessness. Without good financial awareness and an understanding about what they need, what is holding them back, and where to meet them, people will continue to fall into homelessness,' Ms Richards said.

Lutheran Care has operated in Alice Springs since 2009. Its NT service model provides immediate support to families and individuals in crisis (food vouchers, clothing, bedding, referrals), and ongoing support through the capacity-building Financial Wellbeing program. Clients are invited to yarn about their situation; if they choose to enter the program, they are supported one-on-one or in workshops to build the money management skills and confidence they need to improve their own lives in the longer term.

The organisation values working in partnership with colleagues at other agencies including Mission Australia, the Drug and Alcohol Service, Community Housing, the Mental Health Association, Bush Mob, Central Australia Women's Legal Service, NT Shelter and Central Australia Aboriginal Alcohol Program Unit — A list of collaborative partners that grows with each year.

Lutheran Care's Central Australia office not only supports people in Alice Springs, but provides outreach services to 28 remote Aboriginal communities. The team comprises both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and has a strong reputation of trust, grown largely through word of mouth. Zak has been a Financial Capability Worker with Lutheran Care for almost three years. Originally from Sudan, Zak is a former ANZ bank worker, who changed careers to use his skills in a more rewarding way. In Zak's experience, the key to helping people is first building trust and finding out the whole story.

'Someone will walk through that door with a lot of problems,' Zak shares.

'They can be upset because they are frustrated and need help. If you can get them to sit down with you and have a yarn, you build that rapport, then they open up and tell you their worries, troubles ...everything.'

'You might manage to help someone get a job, increase their income that sets them on a better path or help someone get a concession so they can afford their electricity bill.

'Sometimes, it's helping someone get some tucker with a food voucher. But the win for me is they then know that we have an open-door policy — we're here to listen without judgement and to offer help.'

While the reasons people experience homelessness or housing insecurity are complex and different for everyone, similar challenges Lutheran Care clients face include the inability to access or afford private rentals and a lack of affordable visitor accommodation in Alice Springs. In Alice Springs, as across the nation, there is fierce competition for limited social housing, compounded by rental stress that is also causing significant pressure.

'The waiting list in terms of housing is huge,' Zak says.

'We refer people and do what we can, but many sit on the waiting list for three to four years.'

Other barriers include family violence, intergenerational poverty, financial pressure or 'humbugging' from family members, substance abuse, physical or mental illness, trauma, and grief. The homelessness situation in communities is quite different to the situation in Alice Springs, Zak shares. Community members are more likely to take in someone who needs a bed, and will let them stay, even if the home is overcrowded.

'You wouldn't see people living on the streets, under a tree, in the community. They look after each other. They share. You might have seven people living in a three-bedroom house.'

As Zak and his colleagues well know, every story is different.

A woman recently came to Lutheran Care for Emergency Relief. She explained that she rents a property in Alice Springs for medical treatments and another in her home community, leading to significant financial difficulty.

In addition to the limits of housing availability, there are system barriers



Zak — a Financial Capability Worker with Lutheran Care

and challenges faced by many residing within application processes, tenures, and contracts. Navigating human service systems can be challenging and time consuming, especially for individuals facing income stress and food insecurity, as they may lack the time, resources, or knowledge to access available assistance.

'Unpredictable housing options and homelessness, particularly rough sleeping, can profoundly impact an individual's health and wellbeing, often leading to chronic health issues and decreased life expectancy,' says Ms Richards.

Life becomes about survival with little space to focus on connecting with work or friends; exploring the cycle of trauma and poverty; and their overall well-being. To address this, we need to continue listening to clients, responding to and providing root solutions to homelessness as a collective — the sector, the community and with government.

Earlier this year, Lutheran Care welcomed the announcement that the Federal and NT governments were allocating considerable funding for housing development in remote communities across the NT to reduce overcrowding. It hopes investment can be increased in social and community housing in Alice Springs, too.

'We've got to start building extra houses,' Zak says. *'And when you build the houses, you need activities and support to keep people around Alice Springs engaged and active,'* he adds.

One program making a difference to promote better lifestyle choices and nurture positive role models is Hoops 4 Wealth. This mentoring program was founded by Timmy Duggan OAM, the first Territorian to play in Australia's National Basketball League. Lutheran Care works alongside Timmy to deliver the program within the Alice Springs prison system and provide support post-release.

Similarly, Lutheran Care is part of collaborative work between government and non-government agencies across Alice Springs to begin the process of collectively resolving some of the challenges faced by youth in Central Australia by implementing a 'Foyer'. A Foyer is a proven program originating from France which aims to provide young people with a safe and supportive living environment combined with opportunities for personal development, education, and employment.

Lutheran Care understands that the intersection of homelessness prevention and the need for financial literacy should begin at a young age, working with young people to understand good money management as an essential contributor to overall wellbeing.

Lutheran Care is fortunate to have a strong relationship with government, and its partner agencies. Together, they will continue to listen to the community's needs and advocate on behalf of people facing homelessness and vulnerability based on these needs.

While housing is an important part of the puzzle, Lutheran Care and partners hold fast that addressing the interconnected issues of food, healthcare, employment support, and housing assistance requires a comprehensive approach that are crucial to help mitigate risks, while offering holistic support and pathways to long-term stability.

According to Ms Richards:
'When people feel valued and have their cultural, personal and wellbeing needs met, they can see themselves as worthwhile and imagine a good future for themselves. If we can then meet their essential needs, such as food and shelter, we believe we will see stronger and more cohesive connected communities, and better outcomes for vulnerable people living in Central Australia.'

Embedding Trauma Informed Practices into Homelessness Services

Jemma Wood, Director Community Services,
Sally Weir, Director Impact and Service Development,
Ann Buxton, Deputy Chief Executive Officer,
Megan Johnson, Development Officer Social Inclusion, Anglicare Northern Territory

This article will explore Anglicare NT's journey to embed trauma informed practice within the transitional accommodation and homelessness support services it provides across the Northern Territory. Motivation, the importance of partnerships, and steps taken are explored.

'Everything at Anglicare was good. Staff was very helpful. It has made a big difference in me and my partner's life.'

— Feedback from the 'Tell Us What You Think' participant survey, March 2024

Anglicare NT is a significant provider of community services and capacity building activities across urban, regional, and remote areas of the Northern Territory (NT). We work in partnership with communities and stakeholders to respond to the needs of Territorians and to seek solutions to unmet demand and systemic barriers. The organisation has provided homelessness services since 1991and now delivers a range of transitional accommodation, tenancy sustainability, homelessness support and early intervention services, and manages a niche community housing complex. In 2022–2023, of the 24,000 people assisted, over 1,000 were supported through our housing and homelessness services.

Anglicare NT started its trauma informed practice journey with the Australian Childhood Foundation (ACF) over 15 years ago. Our youth services were anchored in well-designed models and contemporary youth work practice, but we recognised the presence of childhood trauma, severe adversity and increasing case complexity that staff were responding to.

For many, developmental trauma had not been addressed and the compounding experience of being homeless was significant. With effective assessment, engagement, and intervention a young person can reset. Gently walking with young people to meet their needs and to nurture and develop strategies that help them move on from dysregulated arousal responses is important work.

'It is critical for workers to have a strong understanding of developmental trauma and what people need to engage, grow and develop new experiences. These practices include developing safety, creating routine, predictability, stability, and building trust and opportunities to develop strong relationships.'

— Jemma Wood, Director, Community Services

Trauma informed practice is a well-established feature of our child youth and families program stream. The focus has now shifted to strengthening trauma informed practices within our adult and family housing and homelessness services. We recognise the complex interface between trauma, severe adversity and the drivers of homelessness including domestic/family and sexual violence, financial pressures, relationship changes, experiences of out of home care and/or incarceration, and the lack of affordable housing.

'Providing housing services is not just about properties it is about people. That's why we need a trauma informed lens as it helps us understand the impact of trauma and ways to more effectively support people to work through challenges and to sustain tenancies once housing has been secured.'

— Megan Johnson, Development Officer Social Inclusion

We know organisational scaffolding, internal support and good communication are important when introducing change. Here are some key steps we have taken to date:

- Secured Board and Executive support to embed trauma informed practice as a central platform and formalised commitments to trauma informed practice in our 2022–25 Strategic Plan. This decision augments the earlier introduction of strength-based approaches.
- Strengthened links with ACF through a partnership agreement, made the ACF Safe Guarding Children module core training for all staff, volunteers, and board directors.
- Codesigned with ACF a Trauma Informed Practice Framework tailored to organisational needs.
- Contracted ACF to provide specialist resourcing for several child youth and family focused services. Over the years, arrangements have changed with the ebb and flow of funding but we sustain ACF input wherever possible to augment our internal capacity building efforts.
- Supported several staff to complete the ACF Graduate Certificate in Developmental Trauma. These staff have become 'champions' and contribute insights to client work, mentoring, case reviews and supervision. They will also work with management and the Senior Training and Skills Development Officer to implement the Orientation to Trauma Informed Practice for new staff.

- Held Annual Forums for key program streams; these enable managers and key staff to share information, challenges and solutions and help embed contemporary practices. This year we bought together our Housing and Homelessness program stream for in-service training, a review of key issues and a look at what else we need to do to improve outcomes.

- Finding practical ways to value lived experience is important; at Garaworra (a transitional accommodation complex of around 80 people) we know it is essential that staff 'fit in' and quickly build rapport. So, when recruiting we include a resident on the selection panel. This shifts the dial in relationships and provides valuable learning opportunities for all involved.

- Updated all housing and homelessness related documents (policies and procedures) to integrate trauma informed considerations into everything from templates to operational guidelines. Over time these foundational resources used day to day by staff help shift language, strengthen reflective practice, and embed trauma informed approaches.

Walking the talk is essential. We must honour our commitments to embed not only trauma informed practice, but strengths-based approaches and importantly cultural safety into the work we do with people, partner organisations and communities. These efforts must transcend what we do with others and resonate with how we treat each other and run the organisation. Several mechanisms help monitor progress: these include our annual *'Tell Us What You Think'* participant survey, the biennial Staff Climate Survey, and implementation of a comprehensive Partnership Evaluation tool.

'Anglicare NT is committed to working in person centred, strengths-based and culturally informed ways. This means we embrace people's rights, strengths and capabilities and seek to effectively respond to the impact of trauma and severe adversity. Our services must be nonjudgmental, inclusive and effective. We have made progress but recognise we have more work to do'

— Ann Buxton, Deputy CEO.

Trauma Informed Practice in Action Case Study — Sammy (name changed)

Sammy was in statutory care until 14 and was referred to Anglicare NTs Youth Accommodation Support Options Pathway Program (YASHOPP) in Darwin when she was 16. For the previous two years, Sammy spent time in a residential rehab, the Youth Inpatient Mental Health Unit and a Youth Refuge. She had a reduced capacity to regulate her behaviour and sharing space with other young people was a trigger. Sammy had experienced so much trauma but importantly continued to engage.

Our team started with the basics and Sammy 'told her story her way'. At intake a holistic assessment was undertaken that mapped Sammy's challenges and strengths, and she was accepted into the transitional accommodation program (shared units). Our processes are intentionally relational — we want people to control their information from the start and to tell their story in their words. This helps us understand needs, wants and goals and we learn about their world view. Connection is established and the door stays open.

Throughout this journey Sammy demonstrated hopefulness about the opportunity to sustain accommodation, gain some stability and start to rebuild her life. She committed to participating in all aspects of the program. Interagency collaboration was strong, and a plan devised to enable Sammy to stay in rehab until a vacancy arose. Sammy was assisted to access mental health services and was quickly diagnosed with several disorders requiring treatment.

As preparation for moving into a non-24/7 shared living option the Team supported Sammy to learn about household dynamics, how to navigate conflict and to manage differing expectations around living standards. Sammy learned to access Centrelink for financial support in between paid jobs and there was a big focus on Safety Planning for when she felt like her mental health was deteriorating. Once accommodated, Sammy engaged well in the living skills component; she started gardening to grow her own food, established positive contact with a supportive 'Aunty', activated her safety plan when needed and engaged with a sport to help establish routines and develop new skills and connections.

Each young person's pathway to stabilisation and independence is unique. When we get the support and approach right it helps young people with a trauma history to take more control; to realise past trauma does not define their future; to know that cultural identity matters and creates opportunities for young people to experience the benefits of making informed changes. After a two-year journey 2024 sees Sammy living independently with a partner and no longer needing support from services.

Showing Respect and Being Practical Supports Engagement (Case Study)

On the Gove Peninsula our Tuesday morning Breakfast Club provides a welcoming environment, friendly faces, a hot meal and laundry service for up to 25 participants each week. This small-scale place-based initiative focuses on individuals and families experiencing homelessness who sleep rough (or in tents) on local beaches or stay around the Nhulunbuy Township area when it is wet. The Breakfast Club embodies a practical trauma informed response; it provides connection, a place of respite and safety and supports links to heath, mental health, aged care, financial counselling, and government services.

It is also a chance for young people from #U-Turn, a Back on Track, youth justice early intervention program, to develop skills and give back to their community by helping prepare meals. The Breakfast Club has become a 'go to' place for providers trying to find someone; during the COVID-19 pandemic it enabled access to vaccinations and helped with monitoring the health and wellbeing of a vulnerable population group. People get to know each other, share their story and culture, and have improved access to services.

Studio Off the Street: Illuminating Hope in Darwin's Heart

Jamie-Leigh Barnard, Regional Manager — Northern Territory, Community Services Doorways, The Salvation Army Southern Territory

In the bustling heart of Darwin, lies a beacon of creativity and community spirit: Studio Off the Street. This initiative, dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement, shines as a beacon of hope for those facing homelessness, offering more than just an artistic space — it opens doors to brighter futures.

The inception of Studio Off the Street dates to 2018, sparked by the simple needs of Gary Konway, an Aboriginal man from West Arnhem Land. After years of homelessness in Darwin, he approached the Salvation Army seeking canvas, paint, and a peaceful place to create. This marked the start of an extraordinary transformation. Battling the hardships of street life and alcohol dependence, Gary discovered solace and purpose in art, setting the cornerstone for Studio Off the Street.

Guided by facilitators Jamie-Leigh Barnard and Dino dos Santos, Gary's journey became an emblem of hope. Through painting, he not only revived his artistic talent but also reconnected with essential support services and his own identity.



With newfound stability and sobriety, Gary aimed to reconnect with his community after a 30-year absence. The program's facilitators supported his return to his ancestral home, where he now thrives, immersed in painting and a sober lifestyle.

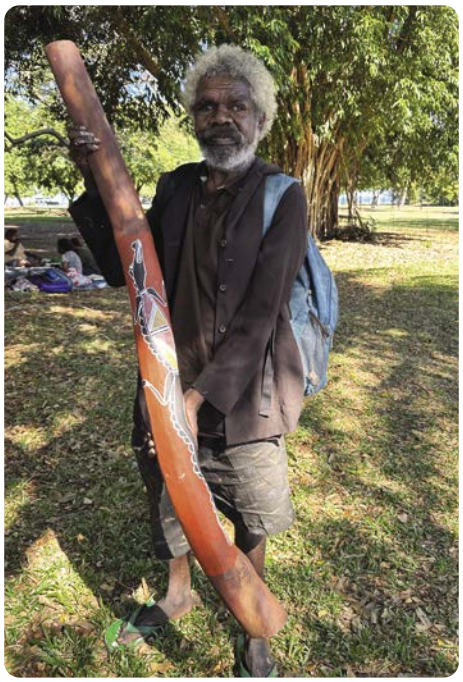
Yet, Studio Off the Street's story is more than one man's tale. It's a testament to the power of community and art in addressing homelessness. The program's innovative approach provides a safe, inviting space for participants to develop their artistry, promoting inclusion and self-reliance. By operating in public spaces, Studio Off the Street reimagines the traditional shelter model, empowering participants to take charge of their environments and futures.

Cultural engagement plays a crucial role in the mental, emotional, and social wellbeing of Indigenous people. It fosters purpose, boosts self-esteem through cultural connection, and cultivates pride in heritage, language, and traditions. This cultural immersion counters historical wrongs and stereotypes, equipping Indigenous communities with the fortitude to overcome challenges. In difficult times, cultural practices serve as anchors, enhancing personal agency and hope.

Under the stewardship of the Salvation Army Doorways program, Studio Off the Street has blossomed into a dynamic art program, embracing individuals from diverse backgrounds. More than supplying art materials, it forms a lifeline, helping participants reconnect with their cultural heritage, find stable housing, and access vital healthcare.







The program's steady growth, with regular attendance by at least 30 people each week, highlights the urgent need for such creative, community-driven solutions to homelessness, supporting individuals on their journey to a more optimistic future.

As Studio Off the Street continues to expand its reach and impact, its facilitators dream big for its future. They seek additional funding to enrich the program, aiming to support a wider array of individuals across the Northern Territory. Efforts are underway to bring the program to remote communities, where the need for support and creative outlets is equally pressing. With its growing influence, Studio Off the Street is committed to transforming lives and communities across the region, one artistic masterpiece at a time.





Education in the Face of Adversity — A Northern Territory Approach

Katrina Sadowski, Director Engagement Programs, Performance and Reporting, Department of Education

A quality education empowers our children and young people. It unlocks their full potential and provides opportunities to help them succeed in life.

The Northern Territory (NT) Department of Education is on a journey to become the most improving education system in Australia and is committed to a strong and equitable public education system where every child has the opportunity to engage, grow and achieve. We all have a role to play in setting up young Territorians for successful life pathways, from building the foundations for learning across their early years, through to their transitions beyond schooling. The Department of Education is responsive and targets support for priority children and young people to enable these foundations and transitions.

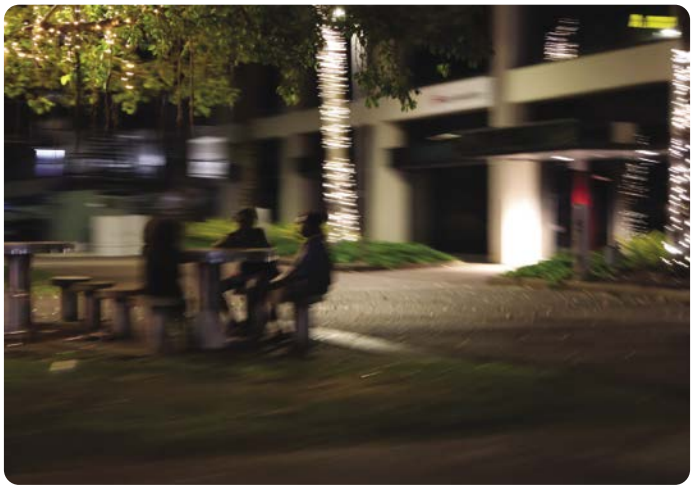
To support all children and young people to access education, including priority students, the Department of Education employs Student Engagement Advisors who are responsible for the coordination of services to parents and school aged students who are disengaged from schooling, with the aim of re-engagement into education, training, or employment. Key engagement initiatives include prioritisation of education case coordination support for young people residing at Casy House. Casy House is a youth crisis refuge for young people between 15 and 18 years of age who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Case coordination includes facilitating enrolment, engagement planning, education adjustments, modified timetables and school transport access.

The Department of Education also develops and implements programs aimed at supporting children and their families to access education who are experiencing homelessness, and those who have come into town from remote communities for a period of time. In Alice Springs, the Kids in Town Engaged in School program commenced operating in 2012. The primary focus of the program is to provide families visiting Alice Springs an opportunity for their children to attend school and continue their learning whilst away from their home community.

In Darwin, the Department of Education commenced delivering an education service in 2021 to children and young people residing at Yilli Indigenous Short Stay Accommodation (YiSSA). Originally only established in 2020 by Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation as a response to COVID-19, YiSSA is a short-stay accommodation program offering accommodation for visitors from remote communities who find themselves homeless. The YiSSA education program supports access to mainstream schools and aims to address the educational needs of young people experiencing geographical transiency for health, immediate social dysfunction, employment, social or other reasons.

Key program components include individualised learning plans for students to ensure they receive the necessary support to progress academically. A full day at school for students participating in the program includes daily yarn time, discussions in language and afternoon participation in mainstream classes. Key to the program is a two-way learning approach to preserve culture. This is enabled through actively promoting and enabling home languages and cultural traditions, family participation to enhance cultural understanding and strengthening the connection between education and cultural identity. The classroom environment is also familiar to that of remote schools, providing a comforting and culturally responsive setting, routine, structure, and holistic support to ensure positive schooling experiences.

The Department of Education will continue to strengthen its service provision to all children and young people through the implementation of the priorities outlined in the *Education NT Strategy 2021–2025* and the *NT Education Engagement Strategy 2022–2031*. These priorities are informed by best practice and evidence and importantly, they a respond to the voices of our children and students, the aspirations and experiences of families and communities and the expertise of our leaders and educators.



Roughsleeping — Darwin CBD Kaley Scott-McLennan

‘They Can’t Go Back Home’: Young People and Homelessness in Mparntwe (Alice Springs)

Annie Taylor, Head of Operations, NT Shelter

‘Five bedroom [houses] *or four or three and you can still have 20 people in a house, coming in from out bush. Everyone trying to stay in one house — it’s really a struggle, it counts as homelessness. To be in that position, it’s stressful, it’s hard. To even sleep you need your own space, your own house, and be more free. You need more support, you need help, help with the housing…from government.’*

— Elijah, 21

People under 25 make up almost half (46 per cent) of the Northern Territory’s (NT) homeless population.[1] On the night of Census 2021, over 6,000 children and young people were homeless; the majority living in severely crowded dwellings.[2] This is more than double the population of some of the NT’s urban centres. The rate of youth homelessness in the NT is 12 times the Australian average.[3]

On any given day in the NT, specialist homelessness services (SHS) support over 2,400 clients:[4] 265 are young people presenting alone and 525 are children in families.[5] If we consider that the average Australian domestic passenger plane has capacity for 180 travellers, this is four and a half planeloads of young people and children being supported by homelessness services every day. Between June 2022 and June 2023, the rate of young people presenting alone to NT homelessness services was more than three times the national average.[6]

In 2023, NT Shelter and the Office of the Children’s Commissioner Northern Territory (OCC NT) collaborated on a project aimed at developing a call to action by young people and for young people on their housing and shelter needs in Mparntwe. Underpinning the project was a joint desire to support the young people of the town tell their stories and share their ideas about their own housing and shelter needs.



Artwork created by the young people who attend Tangentyere’s Brown Street program supported by Tangentyere Artists.

In October 2022, as Project Leads, James Cameron (OCC NT) and I spoke with approximately 150 young people. Some had experienced or were experiencing homelessness, some were or had been at risk of homelessness, some were accessing drop-in centres late at night; others, whilst they didn't have a direct experience of homelessness, were well-acquainted with its ubiquity in Mparntwe. The vast majority (82.2 per cent) of the young people we spoke to believed that they're more at risk of homelessness simply because they live in Mparntwe.

'I think Alice Springs and the Northern Territory-wide compared to the rest of Australia, I think youth are more at risk of becoming homeless or being homeless. There's a lot of domestic violence in the Northern Territory… there's not much the youth can do and so it's just they basically get handed a bad hand in life and they just have to deal with it and try and move on, but I definitely think that the youth homelessness rate is higher in the Northern Territory compared to the rest of Australia.'

— Henry, 14

'…their houses are too crowded and too unstable to even breathe in. They are exposed to domestic abuse, and you can't get that space where you can get space to yourself.'

— Lily, 15

Just under six per cent of the Mparntwe population aged 12 to 24 were experiencing homelessness on Census night.[7]

'It [living in crowded houses] *makes it harder; you gotta share with lots of people. If you share with lots of families, things will run out quicker, like food.'*

— Brayden, 14

So why is it so bad in Mparntwe? For the young people we spoke to, violence, alcohol and other drugs, and poverty topped the list of reasons they identified as behind higher level of risk. This reflects the facts; the NT has seven times the national rate of domestic and family violence (DFV) related homicide and three times the national rate of DFV-related assault.[8] The NT also has the highest alcohol consumption per capita, 173 per cent greater than the national average.[9]

'Adults -> cost of housing -> stress -> anger (at kids) -> kids not feeling safe.'

— Harrison, 14

It is estimated that over three million Australians are living in poverty after their housing costs are accounted for.[10] While the NT has the second highest median weekly earnings in main job by state or territory, vast income disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the rest of the population mask the reality of the deep levels of poverty that exist in the NT where nearly 45 per cent of all Indigenous households are located below the poverty line. [11]

'If you're Aboriginal it makes it harder to get a house/job.'

— Levi, 13



We asked young people what they thought would reduce youth homelessness in Mparntwe and 45.7 per cent of responses identified housing and accommodation-related supports; 26 per cent specifically identified youth-specific accommodation. What this looked like varied. For some it was short-term shelter; others highlighted that, while accommodation was important, it is also crucial to consider what other supports young people who experience homelessness need, including social, mental health, financial, and integration supports.

'Somewhere where they can go, sleep or they need something like food or just somewhere to stay. They can go there and just chill out. Somewhere to relax and just think.'

— Bridget, 17

We know youth-specific accommodation is central to decreasing youth homelessness; housing solutions for young people must be tailored to their unique needs.[12] Despite this, there is only one youth-specific SHS in Mparntwe, effectively servicing a region that in land mass is 42 per cent of the NT and home to an estimated 14,000 people aged 24 and under.[13]

More housing, affordable housing, and investment in existing housing were strong themes identified in consultations when young people were asked what would help alleviate youth homelessness in Mparntwe.

'Give people proper houses, flats or something. The houses now, too much people, full up. There's just not enough at the moment and the houses that are there I don't think they are good. We need more houses and people to come fix them.'

— Angus, age unknown

'Proper houses' were described by different young people as housing that is affordable, well-maintained, comfortable, secure, and not crowded. People aged 0 to 24 make up 52 per cent of Territorians living in crowded dwellings and 53 per cent of Territorians living in severely crowded dwellings.[14]

'Our screen door's been broken for maybe two years and we don't have a back screen door for maybe four, maybe five years. That's how we live at home.'

— Chloe, 18

More safe places and programs for young people, more money and material necessities, support and education for caregivers, more services, and education on existing services were other solutions provided.

'Rubbish around gives you shame. You feel like cleaning it up but no stuff to clean it. I feel shame sometimes cause people, you know, make mess in the house. For school it's hard to concentrate and when you have, you know, enemies, stuff like that, it's hard to think. When something happens the other day, you know the night, when drunken people came, you'll be waking up late.'

— Zachariah, age unknown

The NT is well acquainted with the concept of shame. It might be the notion of 'shame job', used jokingly (usually) in many of the group consultations James and I were involved in for this project. However, there is also the shame expressed by young people like Zachariah, sharing their experiences of living in crowded homes, or the shame many people I've spoken to who work in the social services sector have come to live with, knowing that the Territory is winning almost every race to the bottom when it comes to social indicators.

Despite year-on-year increased presentations to homelessness services at a pace far greater than the national trajectory and a rate of homelessness that sits at 12 times the national average, proven models of accommodation simply do not exist in the NT; we are the only jurisdiction without a Common Ground or Youth Foyer facility and, despite its success, the NT does not have enough social housing to support the Housing First Model.

So where to from here? How do we stem the tide, or the planes, of young people experiencing homelessness in the Territory? There is an array of evidence from Australia and other



countries with similarly high youth homelessness statistics on what works, from structural and systems prevention and early intervention to Youth Foyers. On the advice of the young participants, this project makes a number of Mparntwe-specific recommendations. But first, in order to elicit the specialised response and resourcing needed, we must call out the fact that youth homelessness in the NT is a crisis and that it is a national shame.

We must recognise the fact that a majority of the young people experiencing homelessness in the NT are Aboriginal and we must quarantine adequate funding for Aboriginal community-controlled services to consider what Aboriginal young people need and deliver it. Given Australia's sordid history of systematically removing children from their families, it is these specialised services, not mainstream services, that are best placed to offer the appropriate supports.

We must also recognise that what works on the coast, or even elsewhere in the Northern Territory, won't necessarily work in The Centre, nor will a single model solve the problem. The young people of Mparntwe deserve a range of adequately resourced homelessness services and housing programs that can respond to their diverse needs.

The words of the young people who participated in this project inform a way forward for the NT; their ideas are central to making a sustainable change to the high and increasing levels youth homelessness. The full report, including a child-friendly version and a video featuring the voices and words of young people, is available on the NT Shelter website: *ntshelter.org.au/latest-reports*.

* The names of the young people who participated in this project have been changed.

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Northern Territory Correctional Services Welcomes New Therapeutic Approach for Prisoners

Department of the Attorney-General and Justice

A new trauma-informed, therapeutic approach to rehabilitate female prisoners and improve their outcomes will be rolled out across two new correctional centres in the Northern Territory (NT).

NT Correctional Services (NTCS) have commenced engaging with female prisoners, and will soon be consulting with other key stakeholders to inform the development and design of programs.

A proportion of the Territory's prisoner population has been identified as having experienced high rates of trauma, which can contribute to behaviours that lead to involvement in the criminal justice system.

The introduction of an approach tailored to the NT context is key to breaking the offending cycle, which can help reduce the incarceration rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This tailored and therapeutic approach forms part of NTCS's four-year reform strategy, Forward Together, which focuses on enhancing service delivery, operations, and planning and performance to meet rising prisoner numbers. A master infrastructure plan has been developed under the strategy that includes converting and upgrading two existing facilities in Darwin and Alice Springs to create two new women's correctional centres, which will operate a health-focussed system for female prisoners.

At the heart of the system is the therapeutic approach, which addresses the needs of women in the justice system by integrating female-specific educational and health-based needs. Female prisoners will receive vocational education and training, as well as culturally responsive, clinical treatment through a range of programs that increase an individual's health and wellbeing to successfully transition back to the broader community.

Providing evidence-based, culturally-responsive programs in correctional centres means people are equipped to make informed and safer choices upon release.

NTCS Deputy Commissioner Dr Yolonda Adams is leading the therapeutic model and working to ensure the programs are tailored to Aboriginal people who are over-represented in the Territory's correctional centres.

'We will provide female prisoners in our care with a range of programs, which are designed to improve social and emotional wellbeing and health outcomes relevant to our unique population and context,' Dr Adams said.

'Through tailored programs, we can target the core issues of reoffending so women across the remand, sentenced and pre-release sectors of our criminal justice system are given the appropriate support to break the reoffending cycle.'

NTCS is currently repurposing the Paperbark and Stringybark facilities, which will house female prisoners. The new facilities are expected to be completed in late 2024.



Men and children amid huts made from messmate stringybark, possibly 1942 — possibly constructed by the Army. Location maybe Tiwi? *Library and Archives NT ph0510/0354*

Hidden and Silent: Homelessness Among Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women in Garramilla (Darwin), Northern Territory

Carol Atkinson, PhD Candidate, Charles Darwin University*

There is limited evidence that focuses on homelessness among women broadly, let alone the ongoing social injustice and inequity that continues to be incurred by older Aboriginal women who are homeless in the Northern Territory (NT). My research located in Garramilla (Darwin)[1] will start to address this gap. The research identifies the strength and resilience of older Aboriginal women who are homeless, including their ability to navigate multiple complexities and worlds.[2] The research questions policy settings and service responses.

This paper examines the need to understand the experiences of older Aboriginal women outside of the more typical presentation in relation to domestic and family violence. Without this perspective, nuanced responses to meet their specific needs are unachievable,[3] and systemic and structural issues associated with homelessness including dispossession, racism, and poverty will not be addressed.

The evidence suggests that homelessness among older women across Australia has increased. In mainstream research, older women give many reasons for becoming homeless, which may or may not be applicable to the experiences of Aboriginal women.[4,5,6] Between 2021 and 2022 in the NT, presentations to specialist homelessness services (SHS) showed an increase of 16 per cent by older people. Eighty-seven per cent of presentations in 2022–23 were from Aboriginal people. Two-thirds of the presentations were from women[7] and the primary reason given for seeking assistance was domestic family violence (DFV), a well-documented connection.[8] A note of caution, however, is that this data combines presentations from both SHS and domestic and family violence services which could mask other reasons for presentations by older women specifically to specialist homelessness services alone.

In addition, mainstream research about older women who are homeless typically does not reference or discuss homelessness specifically among older Aboriginal women. They tend to be largely hidden. Why this should matter becomes evident in an interview conducted with Jenny,** as outlined below.[9]

Jenny is a 68-year-old Aboriginal woman who is homeless. From her mother's side Jenny comes from a community outside of Katherine and grew up in Garramilla. Her mother was part of the Stolen Generation. She has been working interstate and returned to Garramilla around three years ago to care for her three grandchildren, aged 8, 12 and 15 years, while her son is in prison and their mother is unwell. Her husband passed a few years ago. Jenny said she cannot stay with her daughter-in-law who is herself either living in homelessness crisis accommodation or sleeping rough.[10]

Jenny wants to stay in Darwin and is on the public housing waitlist. She is waiting for an allocation of public housing from the NT Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities. Being both older, and homeless, Jenny is on the priority waitlist. This means that her waiting period is likely to be 6 to 8 years for a one-bedroom dwelling.[11]

While she waits, Jenny says that she has been living, on and off, with her sister in an overcrowded two-bedroom public housing unit in Greater Darwin. She is worried that the department will find out and tell her to leave. Because of this risk, Jenny says that she moves between family members, who are also living in overcrowded households, or she sleeps rough. She lives this way with her grandchildren. Jenny described her need to care for her grandchildren. She also wants them to go to school.[12]

Jenny is not a registered kinship carer; as an informal carer she does not receive any carer benefits. Although Jenny contributes to the household costs, money is still stretched. She used to work full-time but cannot do this while balancing time for her grandchildren and managing her health needs. Jenny said that she does not drink alcohol or gamble and has not been impacted by domestic violence.

Because Jenny has not held a lease in her name, she has no tenancy references and has been told that she needs to go into a transitional housing program to demonstrate that she has the right skills to maintain a tenancy. This is despite describing her work history, knowing how to budget, and helping her sister to manage her tenancy.[13] *At the time of her interview, Jenny said that there were no vacancies in the program. She was worried that she won't be able to take her grandchildren with her, particularly her older grandson. She has previously tried to get a house in the private rental market but could not afford it. She also said she did not expect to get the house anyway and gestured to the colour of her skin.*

Jenny is not alone in her experiences of homelessness and having to deal with poverty, racism, and discrimination.[14] Drawing from this interview, Jenny's story illustrates the reality of 'demand sharing' in Aboriginal families,[15,16] whereby housing is conceptualised as a



Stone house with louvre windows and a deep verandah, Hermannsburg, 1980

National Archives of Australia A8598, AK26/3/80/12

shared resource with an ongoing involvement of family, often as co-residents at varying times and for varying periods of time in response to mobility within families.[17, 18]

Ongoing policy restrictions continue to discourage and preferentially contain movement through tenancy management and household restrictions, including the number of people who can live in the dwelling.[19] For Jenny, and others, the stakes are high. Jenny was aware that if her sister gets caught with too many people in her property, or if she visits them for longer than two weeks without approval, her sister's tenancy is at risk.[20] If it is terminated for such a breach, the policy means that she will become ineligible *'to live in or apply for public housing for a period of two-years'*.[21]

The question of why this should matter is significant. Jenny's life is indeed complex, and her responsibilities extend well beyond her biological children and grandchildren. Jenny and her sister are steering a positive future for their grandchildren. They, like so many other Aboriginal grandmothers, are agents of change.[22] They care, nurture and support their grandchildren across many domains and settings,[23] including cultural continuity.[24, 25] Access to appropriate housing will support Jenny but will also reduce the likelihood of her children and grandchildren becoming homeless in adulthood.[26]

Essentially, Jenny and her sister are simultaneously trying to prevent homelessness whilst continuing to manage a series of crisis situations arising from being homeless. Their role in homelessness prevention, however, remains hidden in a system that implicitly focuses on a western-individualistic family structure, or on older women who are needing to downsize, or have lost access to, their family home, or on older people who are socially isolated from their families.[27, 28]

As shown, Jenny is far from socially isolated amongst her family group. She is however, required to navigate a system that compounds her challenges. Jenny, like many other older Aboriginal women in the NT, is also managing significant health and social risks associated with being homeless.[29] It is hardly surprising then that NT Aboriginal women like Jenny have a life expectancy that is 13 years lower than for non-Aboriginal women.[30] To stay silent about the experience of homelessness on older Aboriginal women in the NT is unjust[31] and further perpetuates institutional and systemic bias.[32]

In summary, older Aboriginal women continue to suffer a housing crisis regardless of their extensive sphere of influence and the considerable demands placed on them within their Aboriginal family group. From the research interviews with older Aboriginal women, it appears that they are doing so in silence. It was suggested by the women that support is needed to address the policy obstacles presented. Further analysis is needed on this but, for now, it is important to recognise that a DFV response, whilst important for many women, is not an appropriate response for Jenny and others. It is time for Jenny and other older Aboriginal women to have access to culturally nuanced responses that place them front and center of program design and delivery.[33] What this looks like is yet unclear but will be considered further during this research.

* This PhD research is being undertaken through the Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University with principal supervision from Associate Professor Payi Linda Ford, who identifies as Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu, from Kurrindju, on the Finniss River, in the Northern Territory. The research is also undertaken in partnership with Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation, with support from Aboriginal Housing, Northern Territory.

** A pseudonym is being used in this story. Jenny's story is one of 12 semi-structured interviews conducted to date. This account is based on notes taken immediately after the interview. None of the 12-interviews with Aboriginal women in Garramilla has identified domestic or family violence as the key driver for the women becoming homeless.

Endnotes for this article can be found at: *www.chp.org.au/parity*

The Only Guaranteed Aboriginal Housing is…

Patrick Horton, Independent Researcher

Introduction

Many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (NT) live at the centre of an orchestrated bureaucratic catastrophe which radically diminishes the lives and ways of life of Aboriginal families, communities and societies.
This brief article illustrates one aspect of that point, offering the simple premise that, for many Aboriginal people in the NT, the only form of secure accommodation is in a prison. This point is informed by interdisciplinary scholarship and by fieldwork carried out for my PhD in anthropology which explored the ways police and imprisonment impact families, communities and societies in the NT. The issues I address are chronic and systemic — that is, featuring across the Australian continent and particularly its Top End — so I write here in general rather than specific terms.

A brief gesture to a theoretical perspective: Patrick Wolfe's work on 'the logic of elimination'[1] is particularly relevant to the desperate infrastructural crises which face many Aboriginal people in the NT. Briefly, Wolfe argued that settler colonial societies like Australia are founded on the dual principals of elimination and replacement — native populations are removed, displaced and eliminated in various ways, and replaced by settler societies.

Colonised populations globally experience symptoms of state abandonment,[2,3] and indifference to their suffering, inequality and death.[4] In Australia, Indigenous populations are rendered categorically surplus to the requirements of a settler society governed by social, political and economic principles of liberalism dictating which forms of life matter and which do not.[5] I think that many or most of the headline-grabbing issues that Indigenous people face every day on this continent can be understood in these terms.

I suggest that this guarantee of prison over accommodation is not so much symptomatic of a 'broken' criminal legal system or a simply inadequate housing service delivery system but represents chronic and systemic failures to provide basic requirements for humans to sustain life, livelihoods and ways of life. Rather than accidents or hiccups, these features are systematically maintained by successive Territory and Federal governments and across various policy regimes. The consequences are, as anybody reading this probably already knows, disastrous: the conditions of life in government housing — where thousands of Aboriginal people live their entire lives — are debilitating according to all measurable metrics, many of which continue to worsen; and Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory are among the most imprisoned demographic on the planet.

The situation as I have come to see it is not so much a 'pipeline', as scholars and activists in the United States frame the school-and prison-system relationship faced by Black communities, but an infinite loop delivering generations of Aboriginal individuals, families, and societies through perpetual, intersecting crises of infrastructure and service delivery. The result, as Joy James puts it, is *'discarding the unassimilable in an external inferno of non-existence'*.[6] The following case studies articulate aspects of this experience, written in the second-person, in part to glaze over peripheral details and get to the point with limited space.

Case Studies

Stopping in Town

Your homeland is several hundred kilometres from the prison, so upon release you go stay with a close relative who lives in public housing ten minutes from the prison. The place is already packed to the brim, and after a couple of days sleeping on the floor you regroup with other kin who





Houses under construction by the local work force, Mount Doreen, 1979

are long-grassing somewhere close nearby. You spend a few days pursuing that lifestyle and run out of money to get back home. Eventually, inevitably, you fall under the gaze of the police. Your return to custody is swift.

Visiting Kin

You drive with a carload of family to a regional centre where everything is sold at retail rather than community store price. The plan is to go shopping and stay with extended family a couple days before taking the several-hour drive back home. It turns out another group of relations also have the same plan, so your original group of four joins that party of five at the family home of eight. Their housing is supplied by a non-government organisation (NGO) rather than the government, but the experience is functionally the same — ultimately, at some point, some white people are going to turn up with a clipboard and find grounds to evict. They come on the second morning: the whole house flurries into a silent panic, kids are shooshed and hid under blankets, giggling teenagers flee over the back fence, grown-ups rehearse lines about having 'just dropped in for a cuppa' rather than having stayed the night. The family has already received their final warning; this is their last chance.

Back Home

You return from a court-mandated respite back to your ancestral homeland. Your family has always lived here, long before the outstation was established, defunded and left to slowly decay. You're staying, 'temporarily', with your parents in the home where you grew up: a two-bedroom shack with an outdoor kitchen and no dedicated bathroom. Your whole world has revolved around this place, but life here is becoming more impossible: in the kitchen, where there's no way to keep dogs out or off the bench, the water from the single tap flows in different colours, flavours, consistencies, and content of heavy metals; the bathroom is shared between three other equally-overcrowded households, so it's always either engaged, filthy or inoperative; the two bedrooms often sleep eight or more people each, with more under the tin roof outside or in tents in the yard. The kids contract skin and fungal infections and other preventable, less detectable, more lethal, health conditions. Your teenager laments having to stay here, condemning the lousy, decaying infrastructure and complaining that 'they don't make white people live like this'.

Discussion

These accounts gesture to the radically inadequate conditions of housing experienced by many Aboriginal people in the NT, which is already the subject of a substantial body of scholarship[7] and media coverage.[8,9] These conditions are forecast to deteriorate even further with the intensification of the climate crisis and associated scarcities like those of potable water and habitable land.[10] It is apparent that, even if the people in these settlements are technically housed, the reality for many Aboriginal



Library and Archives NT ph0377/0234

people is that there is no enduring, secure, habitable accommodation upon which to build or live a life.

Compare these brief case studies to the infrastructure made available, quite forcibly, within a police watchhouse or a prison. Depending on your location, age, gender, ability, health and the rate at which your case is being dragged through the courts, you might find yourself at any one of the NT's sites of penal containment. In prison you can eat three meals a day, plus snacks and commissary items if you have funds; sleep in a dedicated bed (even if that bed is a mattress on the floor of a hallway or reception area); work out or maybe kill time with friends and family (when staffing crises don't enforce perpetual lockdowns); attend courses that purport to train (for jobs that never avail outside the prison) or rehabilitate (if they are operating and if you meet particular criteria); and enjoy the confines of a very secure facility (apart from risk of suicide, injury or death). Although they 'border on unlawful', the conditions of these 'grossly' overcrowded prisons[11] have become utterly normalised.

Typically, these sites were already the product of millions of dollars in government expenditure (policy formulation and bureau-political deliberation, consultants, architect and construction firms, etc.) before they even opened to members of the public. The operational costs for NT Corrections are massive, from prison guards and local and international security contractors to the bureaucrats and public servants who make it all administratively possible — not to mention the policing system and the criminal legal apparatus which bring them there.

These expenditures keep a substantial population of the NT's good citizens employed, contributing to a society, economy and political equilibrium that continue to push Indigenous demographics to the margins. At the same time, the NT's penal regime continues to aspire to expansion: from the new, 'culturally appropriate' child prison on the outskirts of Darwin and renovations to the Alice Springs equivalent, to proposals to shift the ballooning women's prison to the new and improved site at Don Dale. Currently, the NT's incarcerated population sits at around 2,200 but, when it comes to intensifying carceral powers, the imaginations of policymakers and bureaucrats are apparently boundless.

The idea of penal incarceration, it is generally maintained, is to contain people who did wrong, and by virtue of that containment to transform them into people who do wrong no longer. The NT's recidivism rates are one glaring example of the 'utopian thinking' of this logic.[12] The reality is that these sites of containment function mainly to 'warehouse' categories of human surplus to the settler economy and social space.[13] Elsewhere,[14] I have asserted that for Aboriginal societies this regime has genocidal effects. A key component of this process is the state of deprivation endured by Aboriginal people who may never even set foot in a courtroom or prison.

Evidently, this is not a policy piece. All this discussion is aimed at is the desperate dearth of infrastructure and services that maintain and perpetuate the impoverished, barely sustainable and in many ways lethal conditions of life that are stock standard for many of a particular colonised demographic in this part of the world. I would, however, point out that while budgets for policing and prisons continue to swell, the provision of basic human needs outside of those systems continues to deteriorate.

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Creating Generational Change: Overcoming Youth Homelessness in the Northern Territory

The Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities

The younger a person is when they first experience homelessness, the more likely it is to become a persistent crisis they face in their lives.

Youth homelessness in the Northern Territory (NT) is a critical issue, affecting young people aged 12 to 24 who lack stable housing, such as living on the streets, in shelters, temporarily with friends, or in overcrowded conditions. The NT has some of the highest rates of youth homelessness in the country, driven by unique challenges, and while the primary causes are complex, they are generally related to family breakdowns, domestic, family and sexual violence, economic hardship and mental health.

The region's vast distances and limited access to services further exacerbate the issue. Support services like crisis accommodation, transitional housing and outreach programs are vital in providing both immediate relief and long-term solutions to help young people achieve stability and independence.

Addressing these challenges demands a coordinated effort from government bodies, non-profit organisations, and community-based programs. Government-funded initiatives such as YWCA Australia's CASY House and Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Services (ASYASS) are playing a pivotal role in making a substantial impact.

YWCA Australia's CASY House is making a significant impact as the only youth crisis accommodation facility in Darwin for young people aged 15 to 18. Serving as a critical lifeline, it supports those at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Funded by the NT Government, the eight-bed emergency accommodation facility ensures that young people have a safe place to sleep and nourishing meals to eat. The support extends beyond basic needs, with the



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dedicated team at CASY House offering a comprehensive range of services, from education, employment, and training to family and relationship counselling, and help with managing alcohol and other drug use.

All young people at CASY House receive support to build and improve their independent living skills through a structured program. They are provided guidance in budgeting, cooking, cleaning, and self-advocacy — essential skills for establishing independence and building confidence for the future. The facility also assists residents to transition into secure and safe medium-term accommodation when appropriate.

The program provides a safe and welcoming residential environment for up to eight young people at a time in a purpose-built facility. Case management support includes planning and actions to assist their transition out of crisis, enabling constructive activities that lead to long-term goal achievement. CASY House collaborates with other YWCA Darwin supported youth accommodations and external youth service providers to facilitate client access and remain informed about developments in the youth sector.

The support does not end after leaving accommodation. Young people continue to receive outreach support from case managers. Staff also provide in-house mentoring opportunities for practical living skills. The emphasis is on collaboration — working together on tasks like meal preparation and maintaining a clean, healthy living environment. CASY House staff also keep clients informed about community events, volunteering, and paid employment opportunities, actively encouraging their participation.

CASY House not only provides immediate relief but also empowers young people to overcome their challenges and achieve lasting success. It advocates for and assists young people to negotiate personal and systemic barriers to achieving their income, education, health, and wellbeing objectives. Recognising diversity in all its forms, CASY House promotes the rights of all service users to equity and freedom from all types of discrimination.

Through its comprehensive and compassionate approach, CASY House exemplifies the critical role targeted support services play in addressing youth homelessness. It not only provides immediate relief but also empowers young people to overcome their challenges and achieve lasting success, contributing significantly to the overall well-being and stability of the broader Darwin community.

Similarly, Ampe Akweke Place is a vital community resource in Alice Springs, dedicated to providing safe and supportive housing for young mothers and their children. Established to address the critical need for secure accommodation, the program focuses on fostering independence and ensuring the well-being of its residents. Ampe Akweke Place serves young women aged 13 to 23 who are pregnant or have a baby under two years old, offering both outreach support and residential support for those with no suitable and safe place to stay.

This five-bed facility is run by Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Services (ASYASS), an organisation committed to empowering young families and offering them a stable environment. Young women can stay in the safe house for up to three months, during which residential support workers provide parenting education, health support, and case management. By providing tailored support and access to safe housing options, Ampe Akweke Place aims to help mothers raise strong, healthy children while navigating the challenges of parenthood. The program ensures that the health needs of the mothers and their children are met and strives to create a foundation of independence and stability for these young families.

Olivia*, a determined 23-year-old mother, turned to Ampe Akweke Place in September 2023, facing intense housing stress, overcrowding, and health risks for herself and her one-year-old. Pregnant with her second child and without family support in Alice Springs, Olivia struggled in an unstable environment. The support she found at Ampe Akweke Place offered her refuge and a path to stability, helping her navigate the challenges of raising a young family.

Initially, Olivia lacked antenatal care, food security, hygiene facilities, and family support. Ampe Akweke Place partnered with Alukura Women's Health Service to provide pregnancy support and health checks. With ASYASS staff help, Olivia attended appointments and met her child's health needs. ASYASS provided essential supplies like nappies, hygiene products, clothes, food, and toys. Olivia received daily support and mentoring, learning vital self-care and childcare skills. Emotional support addressed her concerns, and she secured financial support and identification documents for her newborn.

Despite challenges, Olivia's strength shone through. She aimed for an independent life for her family. By December 2023, with targeted case management, Olivia, her partner, and their children moved into a two-bedroom unit in Alice Springs. Continued case management helps them acquire skills for future private rental accommodation. Olivia's story highlights how safe and secure housing, coupled with support for her wellbeing, meant that against great odds she was able to build a stable and happy environment for her children.

Youth homelessness in the NT is a critical issue that requires a strategic, compassionate and flexible response. Government-supported initiatives, such as YWCA Australia's CASY House and Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Services (ASYASS), provide crucial relief and long-term support. CASY House offers crisis accommodation and services to help young people develop independent living skills and secure stable housing. Ampe Akweke Place, supports young mothers like Olivia in achieving stability and self-reliance. These programs empower youth to overcome challenges and build brighter futures, enhancing community well-being.

* Not her real name. Identifying details have been changed or omitted from this case study to protect anonymity.

Bridging the Gap for Homelessness Youth Outside of Current Alice Springs Services Provision

Ojisi Charlie, Chief Executive Officer, Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Services (ASYASS)

Homelessness in Alice Springs is at all-time high. According to the 2023 NT Shelter report, the rate of young people, aged between 12 and 24, experiencing homelessness in the Northern Territory (NT) is almost 12 times the Australian average.[1]

In addition, the report states:

> *'...young people in Alice Springs (Mparntwe) believe that they are more at risk of homelessness than young people elsewhere due to above average levels of domestic and family violence and alcohol and other drug abuse. Young people see poor mental health outcomes as the primary impact of not having somewhere safe to stay.'*[2]

The crisis of youth on the streets has become a major focus of many community and government services, whereby many young people, who are mostly marginalised and disenfranchised, find it safer to be out on the streets with peers than being subject to community, domestic or family violence, including sexual violence and substance use, in their own homes. Many young people face homelessness due to family breakdowns. Many also lack food security and live in overcrowded conditions.

The *1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child in Australia*[3] requires that all children and young people are treated fairly and are not discriminated against because of their age. This document protects the rights and best interests of young people and children to live safely, be cared for and have a home or place of shelter, to live and grow up healthy and to acquire an education. Likewise, the Northern Territory Children's Commissioner (NTCC) focuses on the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and carries a mission to ensure the rights and best interests of children and young people are safeguarded and promoted (*www.occ.nt.gov.au*).[4]

Below the age of 14 years, current available homelessness services in Alice Springs do not offer youth and young women the opportunity to seek safe refuge from the aforementioned.

ASYASS provides several tailored and targeted homelessness service programs to young people; Ampe Akweke — Mums and Bubs, Outreach service to young mothers, Crisis Refuge for Youth emergency support and Youth Housing. The mission statement seeks to create a community where young people are treated equitably and have appropriate access to goods and services that will allow then to live safely and comfortably as valued and respected members of our society.

The age criteria set by ASYASS for housing these young people is ages 13 to 17 years for the Crisis Refuge program and 14 to 23 for Ampe Akweke. This latter program accommodates women who are either pregnant or have a child under two, are at risk of housing crisis, may lack access to after birth care, or are at risk from the perpetration of violence as previously mentioned.

Women's Safety Services of Central Australia (WOSSCA)[5] provides safe crisis accommodation and outreach support in response to and for the prevention of gendered violence for women and children who are experiencing domestic, family, and sexual violence. WOSSCA does cater for youth under 15 years age, but these are young girls who fit the criteria of immediately requiring safe refuge from violence. Should the young woman not meet the criteria, they remain at risk for safety and shelter.

ASYASS highlights the need to bridge a gap in the availability of emergency or safe refuge accommodation in Alice Springs.



Houses in Wampana camp, Lajamanu, 1976

A Case Study

Several years back, when no other organisation offered refuge, ASYASS was able to provide support to a young pregnant girl of 12 years old, living in domestic violence and at risk of homelessness and safety, despite being under the age criteria set by the Ampe Akweke program.

If this young girl was not provided support to enable her to engage in the Ampe Akweke program, she would have faced the trauma of homelessness. She would have been placed at risk of further perpetration of domestic violence during both her pregnancy and upon giving birth. Most importantly, she was faced with a time of great uncertainty and great risk to her safety and mental, emotional, and physical health, and faced lack of support in becoming a mother when she was still a child herself. Furthermore, she would not have had opportunity to develop the necessary skills to build her parental capacity and to begin confidently raising a strong and healthy baby.

Key learnings from this young person's life tell us that, where other service providers were not able to provide support due to their selection criteria, ASYASS demonstrated the capacity and resources to provide support to treat a young individual fairly, to not be discriminated against because of their age and protected the rights and best interests of that young child. In short, working the principles of the OCC and the Convention on the Rights of Children for children in the NT.

This evidences the need for the ability and flexibility to offer clients aged under 14 years the opportunity to enter a particular service program and to be provided with professional ongoing strengths based and client-centred support to build their resilience and capacity into adulthood.

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Reducing Homelessness and Incarceration in the Northern Territory

Kirsten Wilson, Advocacy and Campaign Coordinator, The Justice Reform Initiative, with Rocket Bretherton

The Justice Reform Initiative (JRI) was established in September 2020 with a goal to reduce Australia's harmful and costly reliance on incarceration. The JRI seeks to reduce incarceration in Australia by 50 per cent by 2030. It also aims to build a community in which disadvantage is no longer met with a default criminal justice system response. Addressing the social drivers of incarceration, including homelessness, is critical to this work. In order to reduce incarceration, we need to look at the evidence about what works to reduce all criminal justice system contact. Ensuring safe, stable and affordable accommodation is central to the project of decarceration.

The Northern Territory (NT) has a rate of incarceration that is higher than anywhere else in Australia. The national rate of adult incarceration is 200.9 people per 100,000.[1] The rate of incarceration in the NT is five times higher, at 1,026.7 people per 100,000.[2] This represents one person incarcerated for every 100 people in the Territory.

The inter-relationship between housing insecurity and imprisonment and re-imprisonment is well established.[3] The NT has the second highest recidivism rate in the country, at 74.4 per cent.[4] In order to shift this revolving door and abhorrently high recidivism rate, we need to be doing something different and housing plays a key role in that.

Many adults entering prison had previous experiences of homelessness, with more than two in five (43 per cent) homeless in the four weeks before prison.[5] Almost one-third (30 per cent) of surveyed women in prisons were in short-term or emergency accommodation in the four weeks before prison.[6]

Post-release housing assistance can be an effective measure in addressing the imprisonment–homelessness cycle. Rates of re-imprisonment have shown to be less for people leaving prison with complex needs but who receive public housing compared with those who receive private rent assistance only.[7]

For the Justice Reform Initiative's Rocket Bretherton, her access to bail was directly impacted through experiencing homelessness. *'I couldn't get (bail), they said I was a flight risk because I had nowhere to stay'*.[8] Despite having lived in the NT for over two decades, Rocket says her ability to access bail was impacted by not having stable accommodation. Rocket spoke of the challenges, when she was initially arrested, in being able to get in contact with friends to check if it was ok to have their address listed on her bail application, as it can take months to get phone numbers added to a call list in prison. She felt she was being set up to fail in a system that lacked humanity and compassion.

If Rocket had been able to access bail, alongside support and accommodation, things may well have looked very different. There is significant research showing that well-run bail support programs can reduce reoffending, increase compliance with bail conditions,[9] and improve a range of other social and health wellbeing measures relevant to the drivers of criminal justice system contact.[10] There are also significant cost savings when compared to an absence of bail support.[11]

It is not however just at the point of bail and court that the importance of safe and secure housing is felt. Post-release is one of the most critical areas of need.



Every time Rocket left prison, she didn't have access to safe and stable accommodation. *'The only way to get a house is to get back on the drugs'*.[12] The anxiety would start building weeks before her final date of release. On those nights in prison, she wouldn't sleep, lying awake night after night worrying what she would do when she got out. Although Rocket often had somewhere to stay before she was locked up, everything she owned would be gone upon release. She describes how *'police raid your house, and they never lock back*



up',[13] leaving it as a free for all for anyone to take what they want.

Each time she walked out the prison gates she was starting from scratch, being dumped on her release day with the clothes on her back (that she often didn't fit into anymore), access to a half pay from Centrelink. She more often than not turned back to taking and selling drugs, because with that there was relationship, connection and money. All of which were necessary to find some sort of shelter until she could get back on her feet.

Access to stable accommodation is critical for successful reintegration into the community and people exiting custody can be highly vulnerable to not having adequate and stable accommodation.[14] On 30 June 2022, there were 40,590 prisoners in Australian prisons, a six per cent increase from 30 June 2021.[15] Almost half (48 per cent) of prison dischargees expected to be homeless once released, with 45 per cent planning to sleep in short-term or emergency accommodation and 2.8 per cent expected to sleep rough on release from prison.[16] In order to transition back into society, stable accommodation is a key factor in reducing the NT's recidivism rate.[17]

Rocket speaks passionately about advocating for change to support others on their journey away from the constant revolving door of crime and incarceration. She argues that, while in prison, there needs to be much more emphasis on supporting and preparing people for their reintegration back into society. Exiting prison with safe and stable accommodation, even for a short period of time, would provide a significant buffer and reduce the need for people to return to a life of crime in order to get by.

What needs to change/ Recommendations[18]

The Justice Reform Initiative recommends the following to reduce the involvement of homeless people with the criminal justice system, and ultimately to reduce the numbers of homeless people who end up in NT prisons:

1. The NT Government provide resources to significantly increase the availability of social housing and supportive housing, including housing that is targeted specifically to people who have experienced criminal justice system involvement.

2. That the NT Government review and amend bail legislation to ensure that bail provisions do not operate to make it more likely that a homeless person is denied bail on the basis of their accommodation status. In particular:

3. Ensure that bail conditions, particularly those relating to residency, curfew and non-association, are not excessively onerous.

4. Include a specific provision in all bail legislation that a person may not be remanded for an offence that is unlikely to result in a sentence of imprisonment.

5. That the NT Government adequately resource appropriate bail support services including accommodation support, to ensure greater access to supported accommodation for people seeking bail.

6. That all courts develop appropriate specialist initiatives to ensure that people experiencing homelessness have their needs addressed in mainstream courts in a way that recognises their circumstances and is focused on preventing their continued interaction with the justice system. These initiatives and processes should seek to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness and should include therapeutic elements where appropriate.

7. The NT Government must ensure that every person released from prison or remand has stable, safe accommodation on their release.

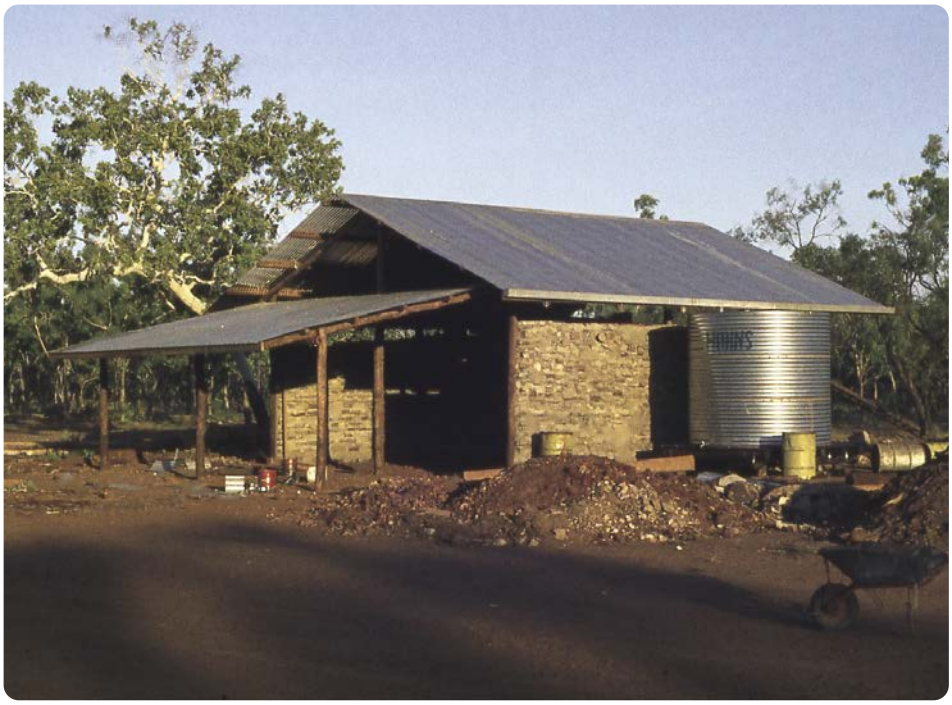
8. That the NT Government provide additional transitional housing for people leaving custodial settings, as well as ensuring access to housing support workers and integrated legal support before and after release to assist people to access and maintain stable, long-term housing.

9. Prior to a person's release from prison, a thorough pre-release assessment is needed to identify all potential barriers to employment and securing accommodation, and to inform the development of a transition plan. This transition plan should be developed with community-led re-entry and throughcare providers, employment service providers and other services working with the person about to be released.

10. Improve post-release support for people in prison with no planned release date (for example, prisoners on remand) and those on short sentences, including access to immediate support in meeting basic needs for remand prisoners and those on short sentences who are released from prison or court.

The Justice Reform Initiative is working with parliamentarians from all sides of politics, policy makers, people with experience of the justice system, and people of goodwill across the country to embrace evidence-based policy to reduce crime, reduce recidivism, and build safer communities.

This work is focused on shifting the public conversation and public policy away from building more prisons as the primary response of the criminal justice system and moving instead to proven evidence-based approaches that break the cycle of incarceration. This includes calling for significant shifts to funding structures so that people who are too often criminalised and 'managed' in prison settings, instead have access to supports, housing, and opportunities in the communities in which they live.



In 1984, residents of Mount Catt homeland imagined, modelled and then built their first house using bush poles, local stone and antbed mortar. The only significant cost was the metal for the roof and tank – and their labour. The house is still lived in today, and still cool inside when it's hot out.

Photo by Paul Haar haarchitecture.com.au

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Disability Accommodation Facilities

The Department of Chief Minister and Cabinet

Two new speciality disability accommodation facilities were recently unveiled in the Northern Territory (NT).

Located in the Darwin suburbs of Tiwi and Leanyer, each home will accommodate up to three residents and one overnight support worker while enabling the employment of more than nine full-time disability support workers.

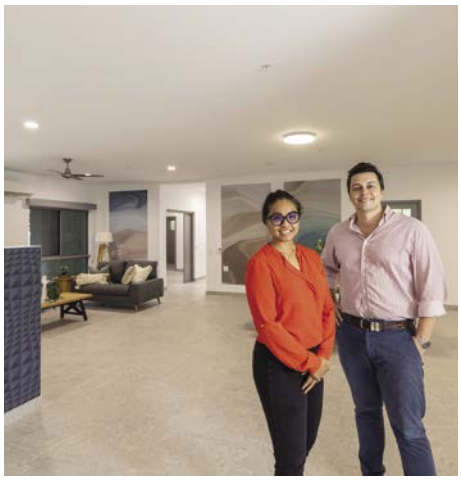
The $3 million project was made possible with the assistance of the NT's Local Jobs Fund with NT business Accommodating Futures Pty Ltd awarded two Priority Sector Collaborative Grants for the project — $28,500 for the feasibility study and business case, and a further $1 million to later assist with construction costs. The company provided the land and the balance of the costs.

Tailored to meet the needs of Territorians living with disability, the facilities provide high Physical Support, Fully Accessible and Improved Liveability classes of accommodation.

Through tenancy contracts, approved residents will utilise the homes with a live-in carer if required.

The project paves the way for similar specialist disability accommodation across the Territory, with their feasibility study showing a high demand for such facilities.

Local builder Lachlan Michell used 100 per cent local services during construction of the project, including 13 subcontractors and 26 suppliers.



Ashford Lamaya Architects' Irma Lamaya and Accommodating Futures Director Lachlan Michell



The entrance to the property allows for wheelchair and ambulance access



Each bedroom is connected to a large ensuite



Oversized hallway access and doors to all rooms



The pool provides wheelchair access for residents



The mobile kitchen bench allows for more space if required

The Disability Advocacy Service

Merrilee Cox, Manager, Disability Advocacy Service*

Based on age-standardised rates, Indigenous Australians were 1.9 times as likely to have disability as non-Indigenous Australians, according to the 2018 SDAC data.[1]

The Northern Territory (NT) Government estimates that 20,500[2] people have a disability in the NT, though it acknowledges this is likely to be an underestimate due to underrepresentation of Aboriginal people[3] in Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) surveys.

Contributors to the very high rate of disability include the alarming and increasing rate of Type 2 diabetes,[4] Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), birth trauma and the impacts of overcrowding. Up to 50 per cent of Aboriginal children in remote communities are estimated to have hearing loss, and there are very high rates of developmental disability.

In December 2023,[5] 5,949 people were accessing the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), however the housing models available within the scheme are not well suited to either a remote or cultural context. Many people live a very mobile lifestyle, having to travel vast distances and be away from their families and cultural connections to get the care they need. While the health services are well organised to respond to their acute needs, housing services are not and many people find themselves stranded with nowhere to live and in poor physical health. Many people with impairments associated with health conditions will struggle to access the NDIS and there are also limited rehabilitation or home-based supports available.

On the ground, the Housing Officers do not appear to have training in working with people with a disability, and the immensity of need appears to have desensitised them to the plight of people on the waiting list. They actively discourage people on the waiting list from making contact more than once every six months because, as they told one of our clients, *'if everyone came in once a month then we wouldn't be able to do our job'*.



Alice Springs from Anzac Hill

The case studies below are but two examples of the situation faced by people with a disability in the NT seeking housing and support:

Case Study 1

Today I lodged a priority housing application for a young man with extremely severe lung and heart disease. He has recently moved to Alice Springs from a very remote community to be closer to the hospital due to his needs for acute health care. He is staying in a very precarious arrangement and it is essential to find him somewhere to live that will be better for his ongoing health.

The woman on the counter at Territory Housing wanted me to know it will be at least eight years before he is housed, but we both know this client will never be housed by Territory Housing because his life expectancy is not that long. A single male doesn't have a chance of inching up the priority list. It is heart-breaking and unnecessarily time-consuming, but we have to lodge that application so that we can apply for other avenues.

In the case study below, the fact that the person has a significant disability became a reason not to provide housing

Case Study 2

'Brenda' was living in a public housing unit in a very remote community when her health took a downturn in early 2021. Up to that point she had never had any tenancy difficulties and had always paid her rent. Due to complications with her diabetes she had to travel to Alice Springs for prolonged medical care, amputation of one of her legs, and post-operative rehabilitation.

While she was away getting treatment her house was broken

into and significant damage was done, making it unliveable.

During this time, NT Housing determined that Brenda and her husband had abandoned their property. As there are ongoing health challenges for Brenda, she made the decision to relocate to Alice Springs to be closer to the health services she needs. She contacted NT Housing to ask for their assistance. Brenda and her partner then went to a regional NT Housing office and signed a statutory declaration to relinquish the property.

It is unclear why advice was not provided at that time by NT Housing that an application for transfer to Alice Springs on medical grounds would have been more appropriate. Departmental staff did not seem to have explored why Brenda wished to move, and failed to observe her health issues.

As a result, Brenda became homeless, living in the yards of friends and family in Alice Springs. Following advocacy from her NDIS support coordinator, NT Housing agreed to change the paperwork to a transfer on medical grounds to Alice Springs.

This very ill woman then spent the next two years living in a tent without electricity or running water as her health continued to fail. Brenda's Support Coordinator continued to advocate for her but was advised that there were no suitable properties available to her.

Despite repeated advice to Territory Housing that Brenda was living in unhygienic circumstances, no steps were taken to engage with her to find out what her health needs were or to explore other options. Brenda herself visited the Territory Housing office but was treated dismissively. She was told she needed to apply for transitional housing but no active assistance was offered or provided.

At one point Housing Officers visited the property where she was camping and issued her with a notice to move on.

Brenda engaged legal assistance in 2023 and, with active legal intervention, she was housed.



Tania and Shirey in garden

Responding to Need

Almost daily at DAS we are approached by people in desperate circumstances. It is hard to believe, but there is no crisis or emergency housing here in Alice Springs for single adults at all. We have the highest rates of homelessness and disability in the country and nowhere for people to go. The hospital lawns can be the default discharge destination, while we scramble about trying to finding a solution.

NT Shelter facilitates the monthly Housing Reference Group which is one helpful means of trying to problem solve or identify possibilities, but we are in desperate need of an approach to housing allocation that is matched to the needs of the community.

Territory Housing has committed to Universal Design principles, but it needs to go further. We should be expecting that a significant proportion of tenants over time will be likely to lose a limb, or experience other mobility or health related challenges, and factor this into design and costings.

We need to recognise the high rotation of people coming through town for health-related reasons and the lack of post-care housing options available to them. Creative options for single people or couples, where family violence is not present, are also required.

We need a process of identifying priority that is more transparent and nuanced, so that the risks associated with being unhoused can be more clearly communicated, and that the needs of people with a disability are considered seriously.

* About DAS: Disability Advocacy Service was established nearly 30 years ago to promote and protect the rights and interests of people with a disability. It receives funds through both the Federal and Territory governments to support its work in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and surrounding areas.

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Poverty, Energy Hardship and Homelessness in the Northern Territory

Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS)

Poverty: The Underlying Issue

Homelessness and the reasons for someone living in homelessness can be complex and multifaceted. However, at the core of the issue is poverty. Finances and an inability to afford safe, secure housing is a driving issue behind homelessness.

The impacts of poverty and inequity are particularly stark in the Northern Territory (NT). Of the poverty rates in Australia, people living in remote or very remote localities experience much higher levels of poverty than those living in urban centres. This is compounded by the fact that costs for basic goods are significantly higher in remote areas; recent work estimates 39 per cent higher than in urban centres.[1]

Income support payments are deeply inadequate to cover the cost of housing, rendering as inadequate what should be a social safety net to prevent homelessness. Over 23,000 people across the NT are currently receiving JobSeeker or Youth Allowance.[2] That's 23,000 Territorians living on around $55 a day. In all regions of the Territory, someone on these payments would be put into deep housing stress if renting in the private sector (see Figure 1).

The wait times for public housing are estimated to be four to six years in Darwin, and 8 to 10 years in Alice Springs, including for those deemed a priority. In 2023, only 278 houses were allocated in the NT, while total applications numbered over 5,000.[4] Without adequate social and affordable housing options, people are forced into the deeply unaffordable and unprotected private rental sector and into homelessness.

Increasing the supply of social and affordable housing, providing better protections for renters and regulation of private rental costs, well-funded homelessness support services; these are among the many essential responses to homelessness in the NT. But we cannot talk about addressing homelessness without also addressing poverty.

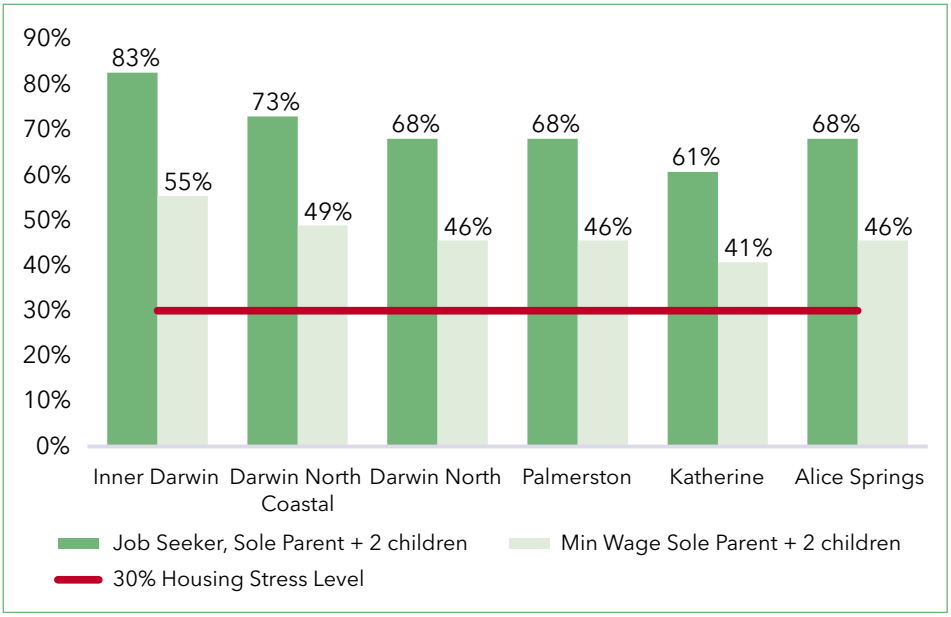


Figure 1: Proportion of income required for median private rent for a three-bedroom house by income group (sole parent), December 2023.[3]

Energy Hardship and Homelessness

Despite having some of the lowest power prices in the country, energy hardship is widespread in the NT. It's hot here, really hot. And it's only going to get hotter, thanks to climate change. Cyclones are predicted to be less frequent, but higher intensity and less predictable. Rainfall patterns are already changing. Some parts of the NT have short but very cold winters, and a lot of the NT has extremely high humidity.

Our housing is not built for these conditions — the NT has the lowest energy efficiency requirements in Australia and does not have a plan to improve the energy performance of existing housing stock. Poor energy performance means dwellings heat up more quickly and stay hot for longer. The same goes for cold in the parts of the NT that experience winter — homes that are impossible to heat. No insulation or internal sealing, drafty doors and windows are standard. Inefficient appliances add to the problem.

Low income and otherwise disadvantaged Territorians don't have the resources to do renovations or replace energy guzzling appliances. Renters don't have the authority to do so even if they could afford to. Public housing policies don't help: in the Top End, where it's hot all year long and humid for at least half the year, dwellings are fitted out with ceiling fans and, for some, a box air conditioner. If a tenant finds the resources to install energy efficient air conditioning, they are required to remove it before handing the keys back.



Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au

So, what do people do? Energy rationing — where people limit the use of their electricity to reduce their power bills — is a common response to energy hardship. Disconnection from electricity supply is all too common in the NT and, in many instances, takes the form of 'involuntary self-disconnection', which happens when households using prepayment meters cannot afford to top up. In 2022–23 there was an average of 8,658 instances of 'involuntary self-disconnection' per month across the NT. The average duration of each instance was 355 minutes, or almost six hours.[5] Another response is forgoing other essentials — like food, hot water, medical expenses or rent. Sometimes the only option is to go somewhere else, and that somewhere else may be to an already overcrowded house or into homelessness.

Lots of things would help: reforming the NT Concession Scheme, changing how pre-payment meters work and ensuring energy retailer hardship programs are widely available and easy to access.

There is a direct line between electricity hardship and homelessness. We know we need more dwellings in the NT. We also need to ensure that new and existing dwellings use the least possible energy, to keep them at a healthy and comfortable temperature, and that every Territorian has access to safe, reliable affordable energy.

This will only be achieved through regulation. We need the Government to implement minimum energy standards in rental accommodation. Let's get on and do it — it won't solve homelessness in the NT, but it will cut off one direct route into homelessness.

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Opinion 1

Peter McMillan

Chief Executive Officer, NT Shelter



When I came to the Northern Territory (NT) to take on the role of Chief Executive Officer at NT Shelter in 2017, I completely underestimated the challenges that our member organisations and their staff were up against. Exorbitant rates of homelessness and severe house crowding, the overwhelming lack of social and affordable housing, insufficient staff to meet levels of demand from clients, and the condition of many homes across the Territory. Frankly, I was shocked.

Coming from 'down south', it is nigh impossible to comprehend and grasp the state of housing and homelessness in the NT unless you have seen it up front and personal. For me, that was my first trip to Alice Springs and a visit to the local women's shelter. I was stunned and incredibly saddened by what I saw and the stories I heard. At least there has since been much needed investment in that facility. Many others are not yet so fortunate.

I remember feeling angry and despairing at the plight of the many women fleeing their homes due to crimes of violence being perpetrated on them by intimate male partners, of the need for victim survivors to find somewhere temporary and safe to escape the danger and the complete lack of stable housing options available.

That trip has stayed with me. It symbolised and crystalised the gap between NT Shelter's vision and the reality of conditions on the ground. There was a mountain to climb to secure safe and affordable housing for all people in the NT.

While our vision though is compelling, clear and tangible, there was an obvious tension between where we want to get and where we currently sit. The more communities I was able to see and the more people I spoke to, the more palpable that tension.

I have met such incredible and committed people working in our sector. People who work in extremely challenging circumstances to provide support to vulnerable people living in arguably some of the worst housing conditions in Australia. Supporting people with multiple and complex needs in organisations with budgets that are tiny in comparison to the demand for their services.

For example, I once asked a frontline counsellor in Tennant Creek if she provided outreach services to local communities. As much as she would have liked to, the funding would not stretch that far. She was completely overwhelmed with clients as it was.

We often celebrate our paramedics and our firefighters and police, those brave first responders to a crisis. For me, our frontline staff in the specialist homelessness services sector are our first responders. They are at the coalface, they deal with people experiencing personal crises every day, and they work tirelessly in a system that is overstretched and inadequately funded. Yet they are resilient, tenacious and dedicated individuals who make a real difference to people's lives. At NT Shelter, it has been our privilege to represent them and their organisations in our advocacy to government.

It takes time to settle into any role and NT Shelter was no exception. Little did I know about the complex connections between housing conditions and health outcomes. Nor did I have an understanding of the highly correlated links between homelessness and mental health, educational attainment, interactions with the justice system, employment, drug and alcohol addiction and various other domains.

Despite my lack of housing expertise upon coming to the Territory, I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of evidenced-based, high quality, professional research available in relation to housing and homelessness. The work of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) comes immediately to mind, as does the medical and housing related research at the Menzies School of Health Research. For a housing advocate, with a little digging, there is plenty of gold to be found.

The AHURI National Housing Conference came to Darwin in 2019 and this was formative for me. Having been granted the opportunity to participate on a panel discussion examining the linkages between housing and health from the context of the NT, this was a period of steep learning. I was aghast at what I found. Compelling evidence in medical research showing the linkages between poor housing conditions and acute rheumatic fever, crusted on scabies, trachoma, and the disproportionately high rates of gastrointestinal tract infections and other respiratory illnesses with children in overcrowded housing. Likewise, the high rates of emergency department hospital presentations attributable to homelessness.

At that conference, we heard about friends of Menzies researchers who died from rheumatic heart disease, preventable deaths of people living in severely overcrowded homes from diseases of poverty. We learned of deaths that occur in Aboriginal communities but virtually nowhere else, of communities with some of the highest recorded rates of disease.

This was another stake in the ground for me. Overcrowding and poor housing conditions are literally killing our First Nations people. It sounds dramatic but it's true.

At around the same time, I also learnt about the many Aboriginal people and their families who had to relocate to our urban centres for end of life, stage 5 kidney disease treatment. Some were living in the long grass because there was no suitable housing available.

That has been and remains the crux of the problem in the NT. We have far too many people with high needs who need housing, yet a paltry amount of social and affordable housing available. Over the past two years alone, wait lists for urban public housing have increased by 25 per cent. Meanwhile, the reduction in social housing across Australia through asset sales, repurposing and demolition has been well documented.

I wanted to understand more about historic investment in housing and homelessness from both the Commonwealth and NT governments. I began taking a more active interest in the data. I was open minded about what I might find and I found quite a few things that were surprising.

For those who have even a passing interest in advocacy, I'm happy to offer this. Roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty by digging into the data. I was delighted by what I was able to find. For example, over 20 years' worth of data in the annual Report on Government Services (RoGS) which held a treasure trove of metrics around recurrent expenditures, capital expenditures, occupancy and vacancy rates, maintenance spend, vacancy turn-around times, allocations, wait list times, housing stock etc. The data available was considerable, but I had never seen it utilised in a purposeful manner. As an advocate, this means analysing the data to uncover and use those insights to tell a story that will assist others make decisions that improve outcomes.

I was also blown away by the lack of funding for the NT relative to other jurisdictions. I was surprised, though, by the actual per person spend made by the NT on housing and homelessness — $857 per person over the past five years was far greater than any other jurisdiction. Victoria, for example, put in just $112 of its own money on a per capita basis on housing.

For me, this was an important revelation. So, I dug deeper to look at National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) contributions. Not only were we receiving a paltry 1.3 per cent of NHHA funding for a jurisdiction with 11 times the rate of homelessness, we were putting in a lot more money of our own compared to what we received.

For every dollar that New South Wales received under the NHHA, it spent 65 cents. Queensland a mere 50 cents. The NT, on the other hand, typically spent $2.64. It became evident that the NT needed NHHA funds far more than other jurisdictions.

Back in 2018 I was naïve. I went to the ALP conference to try and lobby on the sidelines to build support for needs-based funding. It was a start, but I didn't get very far. I was still learning.

Yet as the years passed and I learnt more, we had a chance at NT Shelter to put in submissions to the Productivity Commission Review of the NHHA, the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness, and the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. By now we were ready. We had our evidence and our advocacy had been fine-tuned after several years of trying to garner support from across the political spectrum.

As unveiled in the 2024 Federal Budget, we have now received a sevenfold increase in homelessness funding for the NT from $5.9 million in 2023–24 to $42.8 million in 2024–25. It is a tremendous win for our frontline homelessness services and the people they assist. I acknowledge the hard work of my colleagues in the NT Government who have joined calls for funding based on where it is needed most. I also commend the Federal Government for having heard our collective calls and acted decisively.

Together, we now have an opportunity to fund the programs and services to help more Territorians experiencing homelessness and prevent more from falling into homelessness in the first place. It is an exciting time for those of us who have waited a very long time for this outcome. Hopefully our circumstances will be at least somewhat less overwhelming than they have been. I trust it will make a real difference.

After seven years I feel it is the right time to leave NT Shelter at the end of this year. I remain optimistic that we can all, together, end homelessness and provide all Territorians with safe, affordable and appropriate housing. I wish you all every success in achieving that very end.

Liam Grealy

Senior Research Fellow, Healthy Homes Monitoring and Evaluation, Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Project Monitoring and Evaluation, Wellbeing and Preventable Chronic Diseases Division, Menzies School of Health Research



Vacant Houses

In September 2023, Menzies School of Health Research completed an evaluation of Healthy Homes, the Northern Territory's (NT) remote housing maintenance program.[1] NT Government data in December 2022 showed that, of the 5,498 properties subject to the program, 52.9 per cent were 'overcrowded'.

Well-known to everyone in the NT's social housing sector, the 19 national socio-economic targets under Closing the Gap include the goal that *'People can secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need'*. Target 9a aims to *'By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent'*.

Consecutive national agreements between the Federal and NT governments have sought to reduce remote community crowding by increasing much needed housing stock and by refurbishing and extending existing stock. Increasingly, as recommended by Menzies' evaluation and prior research,[2] greater attention is being given to preventive and cyclical maintenance services as the key means to improve the function of housing and prolong the life of the asset.

One feature of the remote housing system that is rarely considered, but which is relevant to the goal of reducing the proportion of crowded houses, is the prevalence of vacant or unoccupied stock.

In December 2022, 604 of the total 5,498 dwellings were unoccupied. From 2017 to 2022, the proportion of vacant remote housing stock has ranged from eight to 11 per cent.[3]

There are various legitimate reasons why a house may be vacant, including that it is scheduled for demolition, undergoing upgrade or maintenance works, or pending allocation to a tenant. This is a feature of any housing system.

However, the proportion of vacant remote community houses in the NT is relatively high. Housing providers registered under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH) are required to minimise the proportion of vacant properties. The NRSCH performance measure codes properties as green, amber, and red for calendar days vacant at less than 14, 14 to 29, and over 29 days respectively.[4]

In the Reporting Framework established for the National Partnership for Remote Housing NT (2018–2023) one measurement established to monitor property and tenancy was the *'Average year to date turnaround time (days) — vacant dwellings'*.[5] This data does not appear to be publicly reported, but a 2022–23 Budget Paper set a key performance indicator for the *'Days to occupy vacant urban public housing (average)'* at 70 days.[6] In Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC) annual reports, the days to occupy urban public housing has increased from an average of 99 days in 2017–18 to 165 days in 2022–23.

As it stands, there are challenges to streamline the process for re-tenanting a property once a householder vacates. In remote communities, Alice Springs town camps, and Tennant Creek community living areas, the TFHC department is responsible for managing tenancies while the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics (DIPL) is responsible for superintending remote housing maintenance services contracts. When a tenant vacates a property, TFHC must alert DIPL, which will inspect the property for necessary vacate works and request upgrade and maintenance works from the contracted provider for remote housing maintenance services. Once works are completed, the property can be re-tenanted by TFHC.

Menzies' Healthy Homes evaluation consulted with service providers that expressed frustration with the delays in this process, which can result in properties sitting vacant for extended periods of time.

Improving the mechanisms by which the departments communicate with one another to manage the vacancy, upgrade, and allocation process has the potential to significantly increase the utilisation of existing remote housing stock.

New and upgraded housing stock, subject to preventive and cyclical maintenance programs, is much

needed in remote communities. But increasing the efficiency by which vacant properties are tenanted — without compromising on maintenance works and community consultation for housing allocations — appears as low hanging fruit for reducing crowding.

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Darwin street art.



"I tried to get help from all kinds of services, but a safe home just wasn't an option. I was 18, scared and completely alone." — Kaitlyne

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hometime.org.au

Fred Docking

Services Manager and Northern Territory Coordinator, Social Mission, Salvation Army Northern Territory



Starting with Justice

I grew up in the Northern Territory (NT) and, if there is one word I have to describe living here, then I would say the Territory is 'unique'. I have often heard visitors comment on how nice the people are, how divine our street markets are, how far the ocean goes out at low tide, and of course how dangerous our wildlife is. There is one reptile called the crocodile that can turn up in the most unexpected places, in the ocean, in rivers and creeks, and even in backyard pools. The saltwater crocodile is a delicacy eaten by locals and tourists and, in turn, sometimes the crocodile will eat the locals and tourists.

When I was young, it wasn't uncommon to have people turn up by boat and their migration was a celebration of a great human feat; migrants were often billeted out and experienced a welcoming 'Darwin hospitality'. Sadly, times have changed, and populist views encourage border protection and detention.

The city I live in, Darwin, was founded by poor and disadvantaged people and my grandmother was one of them. I like to think of their tenacity and drive to not accept being 'second class citizens'. They saw living in Darwin as an opportunity to have a good life. I also love our First Nations Peoples who continue to maintain a strong identity, protect their culture and connection with country, and their political desire to overcome the lasting effect of colonialisation.

Recently news reports have depicted the Territory as having a 'spike' in crime, with the highest rates in Australia and youth curfews imposed in Alice Springs. According to the Justice Reform Initiative, over 85 per cent of our prison population in the NT is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Northern Territory Aboriginal Justice Agreement 2021–2027 was formed for Aboriginal organisations and non-government organisations to work in partnership to achieve better outcomes and express their commitment to change.

In this they aim to: reduce offending and imprisonment of Aboriginal Territorians, engage and support Aboriginal leadership, and improve justice responses and services for Aboriginal Territorians. Increased funding into justice intervention as a response to crime is of benefit only when there is an increase in social services that provide healing, and beneficial interventions to break the cycles of trauma, such as adverse experiences during childhood, sexual abuse, and domestic violence.

Historically, the Territory community has experienced significant traumatic events that contribute to intergenerational trauma and ongoing disadvantage. Our First Nations Peoples suffered from colonisation and displacement of lands, followed by the bombing of Darwin in World War II and later cyclone Tracy. Intergenerational trauma is real and needs to be considered across any social services policy reform. The Territory has 12 times the national average of homelessness with 87 per cent being made up of First Nations Peoples, according to NT Shelter, the peak homeless and housing body. YWCA also reports that the NT has the highest youth homelessness rate in the nation.

If we unpack historic traumas, we begin to understand that our community has been exposed to events that have caused economic, cultural, and familial distress, including adverse physical and emotional outcomes, abuse, discrimination, racism, war, and natural disasters. People and families who experience trauma like this may develop health conditions such as anxiety, depression, heart disease and post-traumatic stress disorder that is passed down through generations with layers of discrimination and prejudice. Cycles of persistent trauma experienced by minority populations such as Indigenous communities deliver ongoing health and economic disadvantages including poverty, oppression, and epigenetic changes due to chronic stress and nutrition deficiencies.

Understanding localised traumatic events helps us to understand how communities in different areas may participate in policy and reforms. In some areas we need local governance and decision making that will empower community groups to build their identity, confidence and self-worth in order to create social justice frameworks that address

feelings of social isolation, negative or oppressive policies, and encourage participation in improving life skills and person-centred self-management. Social justice generally refers to a fair and equitable division of resources, opportunities and privileges in society.

The population size and vastness of our landscape makes it difficult to address these issues without assistance from others. Commonwealth funding to the NT Government finances social institutions to deliver 'help' and economic benefit to the people most affected. However, this is only a Band-Aid solution and doesn't address social trauma. Social trauma often begins when a community collectively experiences a horrific event, poverty and discrimination. Addressing trauma requires changing living environments that exacerbate the effects of trauma such as homelessness, overcrowding and overrepresentation of indigenous people in prison and poverty. Healing from trauma requires investment in therapies that focus on mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drug treatment and traditional healing methods that are culturally competent and incorporate traditional beliefs and values. Healing starts within a safe space, be it accommodation, family housing or living on country.

The ABC recently reported on the success of The Salvation Army partnership with Red Dust to deliver a culturally appropriate therapy program. They understood the importance of empowering local communities. The partnership recognised the sad reality that First Nations men within Central Australia were not valued for their wealth of knowledge. By changing the narrative to First Nations men delivering the program on country in their own way did indeed provide a place where people felt valued and safe. Since the beginning of the partnership in 2019, the number of men participating in the program has increased and The Salvation Army has helped Red Dust to obtain national accreditation for the program.

In March 2023, The Salvation Army partnered with Northern Territory Correctional Services to deliver a homelessness program that offers an alternative to custody. It aims to redesign key service deliveries to address indirect discrimination of disadvantaged homeless and minority cohorts. The program hopes to transform lives and to meet the needs of Territorians by increasing opportunities for people to attend therapy programs that reduce re-offending. The program is called 'Open House' and provides accommodation and wrap-around' support and advocacy for adults who have encountered the justice system but have no place of residence, usually those who are also highly vulnerable socially and who have little or no immediate community support.



Roughsleeping — Darwin CBD Kaley Scott-McLennan

Understanding where people have 'historically' come from is critical when trying to bring about effective change. This program is a 'relational program' with peer mentors, staff and managers building on a genuine sense of care for the individuals. Factors that lead many into the justice system and homelessness are complex, and complex responses are often needed — in other ways, the answers can be 'quite simple'. It is about communicating that, *'we understand you've gone through trauma, and we want you to have the space to heal and get your thoughts together; we want you to know that someone cares for you as a person, and you are a valued member of a community'.*

Providing a place for people to live and recover gives back a sense of identity, hope and connection, supported with services that develop life skills and improved rehabilitation for better outcomes. Since the program commenced in 2023, we have had over 240 people receive support.

Sadly, many people we see coming into the Open House program have never been affirmed in their lives. There is no judging, but rather positive affirmation, positive experiences and opportunities. *'Sometimes it just takes a person to care, it can actually sometimes take one word at the right moment to change a life'.*

'Starting with justice' requires us to look deeply into our own personal responses, and how we view alternative reform and how we support people experiencing homelessness, addiction, mental illness, unemployment and isolation. Policies that affect policing, crime reporting, and imprisonment are like crocodiles: they can sometimes live alongside the community, or they can devour our most vulnerable. Effective change comes from giving people a voice about their experiences, spaces to talk about their trauma, and by advocating for change to systematic barriers that continue to promote poverty and disadvantage in minority groups.

There is 'good' in giving people an opportunity to feel hope, to make better life decisions and feel like they are a part of our community. People who feel like they belong are more likely to live longer, healthier and happier lives. As a community, we can be a part of policy reform by encouraging social equity and by being a part of the solution. We can be a voice that supports minority groups by encouraging each other to be future focused, and to enabled positive dialogue between government, community, business, health and social services, and our vulnerable cohorts. Recognising historic trauma will allow us to seek to empower, transform, and grow the confidence of our local community members. Better policies can address the individual's need to heal so they can fully participate in life, enjoy the benefits of place, gain an income, and recognise the importance of culture and community connection.

Opinion 4

Michael Rotumah

Chief Executive Officer, Larrakia Nation

Mike Byrne, Regional Coordinator, Northern Australia, NT Shelter.

I recently sat down with Larrakia Nation CEO Michael Rotumah in his Coconut Grove office to talk about Larrakia Nations' work and the impacts of the negative messaging around Aboriginal people living in Darwin's public spaces on the land of the Larrakia people.

Michael is a proud Aboriginal man from Darwin and traditional owner of Wauk (Murgenella) and Croker Island in Western Arnhem Land with strong kinship ties to the Larrakia people. He played football in the AFL, SANFL, WAFL and the Northern Territory Football League (NTFL) before forging a 17-year career in the Australian Government with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

Michael had been directly involved in the delivery of programs and projects in the Northern Territory, where he travelled to 63 of the 72 communities listed by the Australian and Northern Territory Government, as well as approximately 300 outstations/homelands. So has a great understanding of why Darwin is experiencing an influx of people who are living in public spaces.

Greater Darwin is the land of the Larrakia people. Larrakia Nation was established back in 1997, to represent the rights and interests of Larrakia people, traditional custodians of the area who don't have land rights and recognition of their country, but have had one of the longest running claims in Australia being the Kenbi land claim.

Larrakia Nation has a Larrakia First focus, the Board working with management and senior elders to reinforce their cultural authority to lead, connect and protect. Larrakia Nation looks at the priorities that benefit Larrakia people, such as the transfer of land back into Larrakia hands, maintaining culture and educating the broader community on these aspects of the Larrakia Nation.

Larrakia people seek to protect their land and their legacy by providing services to a Darwin community struggling to deal with the historical influx of Aboriginal people who sleep rough in and around Darwin and Palmerston's public spaces. The behaviours of some Aboriginal visitors can reflect negatively on Larrakia People. Larrakia Nation see education as a way of mitigating this situation as an uneducated community can tend to place all Aboriginal people into one homogenous group. The fact that not every Aboriginal person you see in Darwin is a Larrakia person is a difficult message to get across to some in Darwin's society. Media, politicians and others often seem to report mainly negative aspects of what is happening in the community and rarely make any distinction between the different groups and the drivers of poverty and disadvantage that result in rough sleeping. A Larrakia family enjoying a day at Buffalo Creek fishing and hunting are not itinerants or long grassers but are often referred to in these terms.

As well as engaging with the Darwin community, Larrakia Nation also seeks to engage with leaders, elders, senior law men and women from remote communities to work with them to look at ways of working with rough sleepers and providing better support to their people in Darwin. Michael has a firm belief that doing this in language is the most appropriate and effective way to create understanding. This requires investing in an alternative model of action to the regular policing by authorities and security guards.

Now seen as a major provider of important services to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the region, Larrakia Nation's Day and Night Patrol is the most visible program that has the most interaction with the rough sleeper community.

Disappointingly when compared to the actions of the police, security guards or council rangers, Larrakia patrollers only use the tools of communication and positive engagement skills (not capsicum spray, handcuffs, legislation or anti-social behaviour by-laws). They are there to step in and help people before they come under the notice of authorities, to ensure that people are safe and to connect vulnerable people with other support services and facilities. Michael sees the main objective of the Patrols is to try and reduce the number of Aboriginal people who encounter the justice system and to reduce the recidivism of those people exited from watch houses and prisons back onto the streets.

Each year, the Day and Night Patrol has in excess of 30,000 engagements with Aboriginal people and this allows them to develop an extensive database of where people come from, where groups are likely to camp, why they are here, what supports they need and if they want to return home.

This data shows the diversity of the rough sleeper or long grass community and highlights the futility of having one size fits all responses to homelessness, rough sleeping and anti-social behaviours. Although the reasons for being in Darwin are diverse, Michael believes that there is a unifying issue that most rough sleepers have experienced is overcrowding.

When you have been to as many communities as Michael, and seen houses with up to 20 or 30 people living under one roof, it's obvious that overcrowding is a major driver of people ending up in Darwin's public spaces. People are born into poverty and will likely die in poverty. It is a sad reality in this day and age. No room, or privacy along with other challenges such as unemployment, kids struggling to get to school or to stay awake at school. Michael feels it is understandable for people who have had enough of living like this to see the bright lights of Darwin as an opportunity.

The Healthy Engagement and Assistance in the Long Grass or HEAL program is a natural partner to the Patrol program. The HEAL program focuses on support for people living rough in the Darwin and Palmerston areas. They provide social and community engagement through assistance with Larrakia Nation activities such as Arts in the Grass. As one of Darwin's most prominent rough sleeper engagement programs, the HEAL is regularly called upon by other mainstream services and agencies to assist with locating people, getting them to health services and court appointments, connecting them with family, and sometimes just for a welfare check and connection to many other services.



As Michael says we need to look at local solutions, and that often, the 'best practice' responses for rough sleeping implemented in southern states are not suitable for the Darwin or Northern Territory context. Michael says his are a people of culture and for those people the pull to return to community or their country is strong. This makes the rough sleeper cohort a very transient group. It's in their DNA and any type of permanent accommodation model is not necessarily going to change that situation. Solutions are required to be flexible and allow for the way culture is practiced amongst the Aboriginal population from remote communities where culture is so strong.

Looking to alternative models of support, Larrakia Nation are partnering with the St Vincent de Paul Society on the relocation of their Ozanam House drop-in service and to also developing an alternative accommodation facility, somewhere people living in Darwin's public spaces can go that is safe secure and supported. This might be a safe space to camp under the stars or an opportunity to get indoors during a monsoon downpour. It will be designed taking into account cultural requirements and it will be operated in a culturally safe manner.

While those homeless in Darwin wishing to live here permanently can take on the more traditional transitional or supported accommodation options, this proposed service will be for those temporary visitors here for many reasons, but not wishing to remain here permanently. The fear Michael and others have is that people come to Darwin for many reasons, but with plans to do what needs to be done and return home, but through circumstances, get 'stuck' here and exposed to the negative issues of living in the long grass and losing contact with their families.

Ideally Larrakia want to be less reliant on government funding, to be sustainable and provide more employment opportunities for Larrakia, whether it's through the establishment of businesses or partnering with other likeminded organisations and corporate partners to see what opportunities can benefit Larrakia people. Meanwhile, Larrakia Nation will continue to work to reduce the impacts of rough sleeping on visiting Aboriginal people and the wider Darwin community.

To learn more about Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation, their many projects and the Larrakia People visit *https://larrakia.com*

Craig Kelly

Chief Executive Officer, Anglicare NT



A Welcome Turnaround in Northern Territory Funding

It's not often I'm this happy about funding, but the announcement in the Federal Budget of a seven-fold increase in homelessness support for the Northern Territory (NT) was exciting news indeed! The pledged increase from $5.9 million to $42.8 million shows a welcome turnaround in the way the NT is funded.

Historically federal funding for the NT has followed a per capita model, which sets us up to fail. Our national fixation on value for money means we've neglected the conversation of how to manage small populations with high need. In the NT we have a small population with great need due to a large extent to the historical and ongoing effects of colonisation. Historically federal funding has fallen woefully short of meeting this need.

Another reason for my happiness is an apparent shift in the value of homelessness prevention. I interpret the investment in housing and in particular homeless support as an acknowledgement of the irrefutable connection between safe and affordable housing and mental health, educational and employment outcomes and community wellbeing and cohesion. The dire lack of suitable housing options sits at the centre of all social issues in any jurisdiction and the NT is no different. It is our most significant obstacle for closing the gap.

Reducing crime is a national challenge and a priority in the NT, but we won't get very far if we don't first fix our housing problem and fund prevention services. The NT has 12 times the national rate of homelessness, we are in a terrible situation, and this latest announcement acknowledges that.

Evidence and Inclusion Must Lead our Decision Making

The NT Government has done some excellent planning in recent years on how to tackle intergenerational issues and improve outcomes for the Territory's children and young people. Now is the time to use what's been learned to move quickly, invest wisely and match planning with funding a fit for purpose service system.

However, the NT Government's recent election year budget strategy to heavily invest in more prisons and police, and to largely ignore its own planning to invest in prevention, is of great concern. Fully funding schools is fantastic but should not be seen as the solution to prevention, and the jury is out on the bureaucratic will to reengage young people in education and to dramatically increase school attendance from a shameful base.



There is an opportunity here to develop responses that are appropriate for the people and places that require them, and ensuring there are co-design processes that involve all stakeholders will be critical to creating successful community led solutions. We know place-based options continue to result in engaged communities and positive outcomes. I feel a sense of urgency in putting into action what we know works, to start the slow process of social change.

Next Steps

The most powerful reform we can make today to lift young people out of poverty is to increase the Youth Allowance. The recent increase in rental assistance sounds great, but it makes virtually no difference to those on the lowest incomes, with two out of three young people who get the payment still in rental stress. Only one in three people on JobSeeker are eligible and only one in ten looking for work on Youth Allowance.

I see the substantial investment of money into remote housing in the NT — if combined with a three tiers of government policy shift to strengthening homelands, outstations and remote communities, through major improvements to the delivery of essential services



Ludo Kuipers, ozoutback.com.au

— as going a long way to stop the drift into service hubs which has a range of negative social impacts communities are grappling with.

And finally, surely, the national debate on gender-based violence has yet again reinforced the need for prevention. Initiatives like Youth Foyer, our very own SHAK (safe hangout for all kids) and intensive youth outreach programs (IYOP) are all great examples of what can be achieved when housing is linked with wrap-around support services. Substantial gains can be made by simply funding and scaling up what we know already works.

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