

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

An alliance of the CLC, NLC, CAALAS, NAAJA and AMSANT

MEDIA RELEASE

New NT Aboriginal Housing Body to tackle Aboriginal housing crisis in the NT

16th March 2015

A landmark NT Aboriginal Housing Forum in Darwin has resolved to form a new NT Aboriginal Housing Body to tackle the worsening Aboriginal housing crisis in the NT.

The forum brought together about 150 delegates in Darwin on the 12-13th March to voice their concerns with the current housing management system in the NT, and to develop solutions and alternatives. Convened by the Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT¹, in conjunction with NT Shelter and the Central Australian Affordable Housing Company, the Forum brought together Aboriginal people living in remote communities, town camps and homelands along with national and international housing sector experts, community housing groups from across Australia, regional councils and government representatives.

APONT spokesperson and Chair of the Forum, David Ross, said “this was a critical opportunity for Aboriginal people from right across the NT to share our experiences and frustration with the housing system, and develop our own solutions for our communities. It doesn’t matter where our people live the housing issues are the same.”

Tony Jack from Robinson River was appointed interim Chair of the new Aboriginal housing body. “Individuals are just a voice in the wilderness and we need a new body to move this issue forward”, Mr Jack said.

The new body will work towards a new Aboriginal housing system which is diverse and flexible, allows for local control over services, generates local employment and suits the needs of our people. We need to do more with the funds available, and diversify funding sources, to provide better housing management outcomes and increased housing stock to counter overcrowding.

The NT public housing system is in crisis and millions of dollars in housing investment has not had the outcomes we were promised. Dollars are disappearing into the bureaucracy while the housing system is falling to pieces on the ground.

¹ APO NT is an alliance of the Central and Northern Land Councils, the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT, the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency and Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service

The Hon Bess Price, Minister for Housing, attended the Forum. The Forum called on the Northern Territory Government to abandon the current approach and support a more diverse, flexible and locally appropriate housing system that would put Aboriginal people back in control of the design, construction and management of Aboriginal housing.

While the national mainstream housing sector has shifted to a diverse, community-based sector, Aboriginal housing in the NT has gone in the opposite direction. Aboriginal housing in the NT has been moved wholesale to government control.

Stories from participants painted a vivid picture of a housing system which is failing; it is expensive, ineffective and wasteful, disengaged from communities and tenants, and working against local employment and local capacity building. The following common problems were highlighted:

- Failure of the public housing management model to adapt to the cultural and geographical demands of remote communities in both the design and management of houses;
- Lack of maintenance, poor quality maintenance and poor response times to urgent maintenance requests;
- Poor quality housing stock with many of the new houses poorly constructed
- A lack of transparency at all levels of the system, including funding and expenditure of rent collected;
- Limited local employment and a reliance on expensive outside contractors;
- No accountability for outside contractors leading to poor workmanship and no process for checking the quality of the work performed;
- Houses are overcrowded and no new houses being built in many communities;
- Housing Reference Groups are not working well in some areas – they are not meeting or not being listened to;
- Funding for outstations and town camps is uncertain and unclear, and no new houses have been built for many years;
- Public housing tenants do not have long term security of tenure because they are not given the opportunity to enter into fixed term tenancy agreements, and;
- Overall sense of loss of control and inability to understand the system or have a say over the decisions which impact life in communities.

While the scale of the problems could have been overwhelming, the Forum also heard inspiring examples of local, national and international Indigenous and community housing organisations that are implementing effective community housing alternatives. Factors for success included:

- Taking control over your own destiny – becoming a leader in housing delivery and management;
- Working collaboratively in regions and calling on the expertise of qualified and committed professionals;
- Developing strategic and realistic plans for the short and long term;
- Building strong and capable special purpose housing organisations at a regional level to work in partnership with local communities;
- Identifying low cost building alternatives;
- Developing new finance models that do not rely solely on government funding – particularly operational funding.

Our colleague from New Zealand, Victoria Kingi, made an important point, and one which was reiterated by leaders from across the NT, she said 'you need one group and one voice to get governments to listen. You need an empowering framework from which to move forward'. Tony Jack from Robinson River said 'individuals are just a voice in the wilderness and we need a new body to move this issue forward.'

The Forum has charged a group of leaders, supported by APONT, with the responsibility to work on housing issues and drive an alternative agenda for housing. We will not continue to accept a housing management system which is controlled and implemented by government and fundamentally fails to deliver at any level.

Aboriginal leader, Phillip Wilyuka from Titjikala, summed up the strong feeling at the Forum, '**Home is where the land is, and that is where the heart is**'. Forum participants are going home with a renewed sense of unity, strength and inspiration to challenge the failures of the current system and build a new future in our communities, town camps and homelands.

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Aboriginal Remote Housing Forum

HOME

12-13 March 2015
Greek Hall, Darwin, NT

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Northern Territory
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NT Shelter

is where the heart is ...

The banner features a central graphic of two hands holding a heart, with the text 'HOME' in large white letters above it and 'is where the heart is ...' in a script font below it. The background is split into black and red sections.