

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

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

APO NT SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH NMHC CONSULTATION NT

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About APO NT

The Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory (APO NT) is an alliance comprising the Central Land Council (CLC), Northern Land Council (NLC), Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (CAALAS), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT). The alliance was created to provide a more effective response to key issues of joint interest and concern affecting Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

Introduction

APO NT welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the “feeling safe, stable and secure” domain in the National Mental Health Commission’s *Contributing Life Framework*. APO NT participated in the half-day workshop in Darwin, and offer some further insights to support the NMHC aim of building a better understanding of housing, homelessness and mental health in the NT.

Aboriginal people in the NT experience unacceptably high levels of poverty, overcrowding, homelessness and poor housing conditions. These impact profoundly on social and emotional well-being and health outcomes of Aboriginal people in the NT, making their experience of the housing continuum one of the most significant challenges confronting Aboriginal communities today. Improving Aboriginal housing is a key priority area for APO NT, and holds the position that effective strategies and solutions will be those that are developed, designed and implemented by Aboriginal people in the lead. As housing is a determinant of health, mental health considerations are integral to any discussion on homelessness and housing for Aboriginal people. APO NT approaches this from a trauma-informed perspective and is guided by the UN recognition of self-determination as a central pillar to the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

NT context

Relevant to the NMHC are the following factors the Territory faces that differ to other jurisdictions:

- One third of the Territory's population is Aboriginal;
- 80% of Aboriginal people reside in remote or very remote areas;¹
- Aboriginal housing in the NT has suffered from decades of neglect
- NT has the nation's highest rates of overcrowding – 85% of people living in severely crowded dwellings.
- Overcrowding is rife in Town Camps not limited to regional or remote communities²
- NT has by far the nation's highest rate of homelessness – 17 times the national average;³
- These figures do not include the hidden homeless who are constantly on the move between houses of extended families without any permanent address⁴
- NT has the nation's highest rate of chronic disease, and includes complex trauma
- Domestic and family violence remains one of the primary causes of homelessness⁵.
- 73% of DV victims in the NT are Indigenous females⁶
- NT has alarmingly high rates of Aboriginal imprisonment and juvenile detention

Additionally, the most recent Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report (OID) (2016) identifies the following areas where outcomes have worsened since the previous 2014 OID Report:

- The proportion of adults reporting high levels of psychological distress increased from 27 per cent in 2004-05 to 33 per cent in 2014-15, and hospitalisations for self-harm increased by 56 per cent over this period.
- The proportion of adults reporting substance misuse in the previous 12 months increased from 23 per cent in 2002 to 31 per cent in 2014-15.
- The adult imprisonment rate increased 77 per cent between 2000 and 2015, and whilst the juvenile detention rate has decreased it is still 24 times the rate for non-Indigenous youth.

While the OID Report provides a national overview, it reflects the situation on the ground in the NT.

¹ Office of the Northern Territory Co-ordinator General for Remote Services Report, 2012

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Homeless People in SAAP: SAAP National Data Collection Annual Report 2005-06, www.aihw.gov.au/publications/hou/saapndcar05-06/saapndcar05-06-c05.pdf.

⁶ NT Family and Domestic Violence Reduction Strategy, 2014-17, Family Safety Framework training material.

Housing as a Human Right

The right to adequate housing is guaranteed in Article 11(1) of the Covenant and is recognised in more than 10 different texts adopted by the United Nations.⁷

In 2000, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights strongly recommended that the Australian government develop a federal housing strategy and ensure all state and territory governments establish housing policies in line with such a strategy. In 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, visited Australia and concluded that "Australia has failed to implement its international legal obligation to progressively realize the human right to adequate housing...", making specific recommendations to address what he described in his report as "a serious national housing crisis."⁸ As recently as March 2017, following a visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights to Darwin it was reported:

She was also "appalled" by run-down and overcrowded housing at Indigenous settlements in Darwin, likening the conditions to the developing world.

"There are some houses that don't even have toilets. There are many families in one house," she said. "This is really so dismal considering how rich Australia is."

The contractors who built the homes were non-Indigenous, she told the briefing, and subsequently "the design of the houses is not really culturally appropriate".⁹

However, in the past 12 years Aboriginal people have experienced significant disempowerment through decisions at both the Commonwealth and Territory level. This shift has been away from self-determination and has arguably been felt most in relation to housing in the NT. Post the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC - 2005), with nothing to replace it, the Northern Territory Emergency Response followed (2007), bringing many far-reaching changes in its wake. In relation to housing, these included the abolition of the local Aboriginal Community Councils (2008); the abolition of local Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (ICHOs); the compulsory

⁷ The right to housing is recognised in 12 UN covenants, conventions, commissions and recommendations. These include the ICESCR (1966), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

⁸ UN Special Rapporteur on housing, Kothari, M. MISSION TO AUSTRALIA, (31 July-15 August 2006).

⁹ <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/united-nations-appalled-at-indigenous-youth-detention-and-living-conditions-20170403-gvcdqe.html>

acquisition of five year leases (hard fought for in the land rights movement) over remote communities the streamlining of government funds to government designated 'prescribed communities' and 'community hubs'; new housing construction limited to only 16 government designated 'priority communities' conditional on consent to long-term leases; the wholesale transfer of housing management and capital works to the NT Government (widely considered an unsuccessful move); the sidelining of funds away from 400 Homelands across the NT, and the lack of new housing constructed on the majority of Town Camps over the past 20-30 years. None of these changes in policy were formulated in partnership with Aboriginal people in the NT - the very people they affect the most - but rather they were 'done to' Aboriginal people 'for their own good'.

The severe level of overcrowding in remote communities in the NT was described by the UN expert on housing as a 'humanitarian tragedy' in 2006¹⁰. In 2007, the *Little Children are Sacred* report described the lack of proper housing for Aboriginal people as 'nothing short of disastrous and desperate', estimating that 4,000 additional houses were needed to adequately house the Territory's population, with at least a further 400 houses needed to be built each year until 2027, to address the decades of neglect and keep up with population growth.¹¹

Current data on housing and homelessness

In 2017, an additional 8,000 houses are now needed if we apply the above estimates. Despite the significant investment under NPARIH, and the construction of 1,200 new houses, 2,929 rebuilds and refurbishments and over 1,800 upgrades over the life of the program to date, this falls dramatically short on what is needed to address the pre-existing decades of neglect¹² and the severe overcrowding experienced particularly in remote areas. A Review of NPARIH was called at short notice in late 2016, with the results due to be released in February 2017, but are still yet to be released.

While there has been an ongoing and significant decline in public housing dwellings over the last 15 years, with concomitant increases in public housing wait lists, the 2013-14 Annual Report of the Department of Housing revealed some stark realities between urban and remote public housing. There were 5,080 urban public dwelling with approximately 11,000 occupants, however in remote locations, there were 5,096 public housing dwellings with approximately 22,000 occupants.¹³ This

¹⁰ UN Special Rapporteur Report

¹¹ Muriel Bamblett et al, *Growing Them Strong, Together*: p 112

¹² Dewar, M. Darwin – no place like home: A history of Australia's northern capital in the 1950s through a study of housing. 2008

¹³ Northern Territory Issues Paper and Response to Housing Strategy Consultation Draft, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, February 2016

means only 16 more public housing dwellings in remote NT house twice the number of occupants. These speaks volumes to the real housing need in remote NT, and warrants the attention of the NMHC.

The impact of this housing shortage reality is a key to the urban drift, which sees many people leave their home communities for major centres, where far few services are designed to meet the need and high rate of mental health issues are commonplace. The 2008 Larrakia Nation Research report estimated that 50-75% of Darwin's Long-grass population were symptomatic of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In 2012, the Report of the NT Coordinator General for Remote Service Delivery recommended a study on mobility patterns be undertaken to better understand the full extent and causal factors, to inform appropriate policy responses and service delivery; to date this study has not been undertaken. APO NT reasserted this need in our various submissions, including the current NT Royal Commission into Child Protection and Detention. We draw the need for this study to be undertaken to the NMHC to inform better policy and more culturally appropriate mental health service delivery across the NT.

Overcrowding, homelessness and the protracted housing problems in the NT impact profoundly on Aboriginal families, impede parent's capacity to nurture and provide safe and protective environments, to maintain hygiene and support educational engagement. Aboriginal children are at a heightened risk of complex trauma and the relationship between trauma and housing must be understood. The conditions and stability of housing, or lack thereof, can affect the physical and emotional safety of a child's environment. High housing costs, housing mobility, overcrowding and homelessness all affect child development, health and wellbeing.¹⁴ Inadequate housing can be the cause of trauma and exacerbate existing trauma. Complex trauma underlies complex health, social and emotional issues.¹⁵ Trauma is transferred from parent to child (intergenerational trauma), across generations (transgenerational trauma) and across families and communities and manifests often in lateral violence (Atkinson; Dudgeon).

[Race, stigma and discrimination](#)

APO NT draws the NMHC attention to significant research undertaken by Larrakia Nation relevance to the current focus of the NMHC and we recommend the following reports for further reading:

¹⁴ The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

¹⁵ N Ralph et al, 'Transgenerational trauma, suicide and healing from sexual abuse in the Kimberley region, Australia' (2006) 4(2) *Pimatisiwin; A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 118–36.

An investigation into the influx of Indigenous 'visitors' to Darwin's Long Grass from remote NT communities - Phase 2; Being undesirable: law, health and life in Darwin's Long Grass", Holmes C and McRae-Williams E, National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund, 2008.

Message in the bottle: a survey of drinking patterns and attitudes about alcohol policy amongst Darwin's homeless. Larrakia Nation, Taylor P, Walker, SJ. Marawali, B. 2011

Telling it Like it is. Taylor, P, Habibis, D, Brady, M. Larrakia Nation and UTAS, August 2016

The way forward: Trauma Informed, Community control, Self-determination

In 2015, APO NT hosted the Aboriginal Housing Forum to discuss the ongoing housing crisis in the NT. Attended by over 150 delegates from across the Territory, the three key outcomes of that Forum were: the desire of all delegates to work with government to find solutions to the housing crisis; recognition that only solutions developed with Aboriginal in the lead will succeed; and, the formation of an Aboriginal Community Controlled Peak body to provide a co-ordinated voice on housing issues and work with government on solutions on these issues.¹⁶ Since its formation, the Aboriginal Housing NT (AHNT) Committee, with the support of the APO NT members, has undertaken the role of an interim peak Aboriginal housing body, and made considerable progress in working in partnership with the Australian and NT Governments. AHNT will host the 2nd Aboriginal Housing Forum later in 2017.

The formation of an interim Aboriginal peak body specifically in relation housing is a significant step toward self-determination, and regaining some ground lost in the last 12 years. In keeping with myriad UN Conventions and a human rights framework, APO NT advocates strongly for Aboriginal designed solutions to issues that Aboriginal Territorians; that engagement in itself is positive for mental health. APO NT call on the NMHC to recognise and incorporate these principles in their work moving forward.

In 2014, APO NT worked with NT Shelter and Larrakia Nation on the NT Homelessness Summit, which brought together 100+ service providers. At that Summit APO NT was instrumental in introducing the importance in working from a trauma-informed approach in the homelessness service delivery in an Aboriginal context. APO NT draws the NMHC attention to the need for broad-based training in working with complex trauma across the NGO and Public sector to improve overall outcomes.

¹⁶ *Home is Where the Heart is*, Aboriginal Remote Housing Report, APO NT, Shelter NT, Central Australian Affordability Company, March 2015

APO NT and the AHNT welcome any further contact or information requests from the NMHC on the topic of Housing, Homelessness and Mental Health particularly in relation to Aboriginal Territorians.