

Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

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MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED - Monday October 2nd 6AM

PEAK NT ABORIGINAL BODY CALLS FOR REVIEW OF REMOTE RENTAL POLICY, AS CHAOTIC SYSTEM REVEALED

29 September 2017

Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APO NT) is calling for a review of the rental system operating in remote communities, following revelations in *The Australian* that residents in Santa Teresa owe more than \$1 million in unpaid rent in circumstances likely to be replicated in remote communities across the Territory.

On Monday, the Supreme Court heard that the Department of Housing's bungled collection of rent under its Remote Rent Framework left unwitting Santa Teresa tenants with staggering rental debts.

70 tenants from the remote community first commenced legal action against the Department in the Northern Territory Civil Administrative Tribunal (NTCAT) more than 18 months ago, seeking over 600 repairs to their housing.

In response, the Department counter-sued for unpaid rent, despite tenants never having been notified that they were in arrears. Documents obtained by lawyers for the tenants under the *Information Act*, show rental debts average more than \$20,000 per household, and the community's collective debt runs into the millions.

"These debts took years to build up, and the Department never told the tenants they were making incorrect payments" said Leanne Caton, A/CEO of Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service. "It wasn't until the tenants took them to Court, demanding that their houses be repaired, that they tell them about all this debt. It's disgraceful."

With over 6000 houses across the Territory operating under the same rental system, APONT is concerned that tenants elsewhere may be facing similar crippling debts, but have not been told by the Department.

"The government needs to come out and explain the situation, and make clear the status of these debts" said Ms Caton. "If tenants are looking at repaying ten or twenty thousand dollars, for many people in remote communities, who are already experiencing financial distress, which will be an insurmountable burden."

Ms Caton said that this was not the first time the Department's mishandling of rent collection had come to light.

The current policy, known as the Remote Rental Framework, was introduced in 2010 as part of a federal government program to place remote communities within a standard public housing model. However, in 2012 it was revealed that the Department held \$1.39 million in an unreconciled rent account, and did not know who had paid the money, or for what housing. Meanwhile, remote tenants who had consistently paid rent, were told they were in arrears.

Also in 2012, a Commonwealth Ombudsman report found that the Northern Territory government had *"difficulties identifying whether people are paying rent when they should not or, conversely, not paying rent when they should"*.

In the same year, the Northern Territory Ombudsman called for "every single" rental payment collected by Centrelink for remote housing to be reviewed, however no action was taken.

More recently, a 2016 report prepared by the Northern Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency alleged that these problems were continuing, and that the Department had retained rental payments from people not living in houses and who had no liability to pay rent.

"We are obviously concerned about a Government pursuing vulnerable people through the courts to enforce debts from such a chaotic system," said Ms Caton, "especially in circumstances where the housing provided is of such a poor standard and subject to chronic overcrowding."

APONT is now calling on the government to conduct a review into the rental payment policy, and the accrual of rental debts in remote communities.

"The Gunner government has declared an interest in fixing remote housing. If it wants a solution it will need to have more courage than the governments before it, and address this issue head on" said Ms Caton.

Self-management over community housing was abolished following the Intervention and transferred to the NT Government.

Remote Aboriginal residents continue to call for a more diverse, community-based remote housing model. APO NT remain keen to work with the government to progress their commitment for a return to more community control in housing.

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