

**City of Darwin submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee's  
Enquiry into Homelessness in Australia**

The Northern Territory has the highest number per capita of people experiencing homelessness in Australia, with rates estimated to be 12 times the national average<sup>1</sup>. Although homelessness and high levels of people displaced into 'rough sleeping' are national issues, there are specific challenges with regard to the disproportionately high levels of homelessness experienced in the Northern Territory.

Firstly, the Northern Territory has a very high Indigenous population, with a very large percentage of the population living in regional and remote communities. It is widely recognised there are significant deficits in the provision of housing in both communities and urban centres, as well as chronic overcrowding in existing dwellings, including in 'town camps'<sup>2</sup>. There is also a huge gap in the provision of short to medium term accommodation in urban and regional centres in the NT, including Darwin, for visitors who access major centres for a range of health and social reasons. The overall shortage of accommodation, including long term housing and accommodation places for those who need it in the short to medium term, (or in times of crisis) puts huge pressure on existing housing across the NT. It also pushes people into a cycle of sleeping rough and puts an inordinate amount of pressure within human service organisations and/or the community sector tasked with addressing homelessness and the complex social issues that go hand-in-hand with it. A lack of safe accommodation greatly increases the vulnerability experienced by individuals and families and creates further deficits in the interrelated areas of health, social and emotional wellbeing, employment outcomes and education<sup>3</sup>.

Currently, there are few federal programs that specifically support homeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at risk of experiencing homelessness in the NT and few Territory-based ones either<sup>4</sup>. Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness remain overwhelmingly 'mainstreamed'. It is clear the sector heavily underfunded, struggling to cope and for those reasons service provision is vastly inadequate in addressing need. With the provision of adequate housing linked to so many aspirational outcomes for Indigenous people, such as those identified in the Closing the Gap strategy<sup>5</sup>, suitable supply of accessible accommodation reflects the most basic of human needs. Without adequate accommodation, improvements to health and other measurements of wellbeing will almost certainly remain an unmet target for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. There needs to be immediate recognition that a lack of suitable housing disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and

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<sup>1</sup> NT Shelter, 2019. *Homelessness in the Northern Territory*.

<sup>2</sup> *Living on the Edge. Northern Territory Town Camps Review*, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> *Indigenous Housing*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019

<sup>4</sup> NACCHO, 2018. *Funding for Remote Indigenous Housing*.

<sup>5</sup> Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2020). *Closing the Gap report 2020*. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.



contributes to very poor outcomes across a range of parameters. Provision of culturally appropriate crisis and early intervention services are required immediately and in the long term whilst more robust accommodation arrangements are planned for and enacted upon. Otherwise, the chronic and unmet need for housing and other shorter term accommodation services for Indigenous people will continue to negatively impact our community, including increased domestic violence, greater deficits in health care, a reduction in mental health outcomes and the ongoing, substantial problem of alcohol and substance misuse.

There is no doubt that a range of factors within communities, including inadequate and overcrowded housing, causes significant displacement of people to Darwin and other centres in the NT. Darwin and the smaller, regional centres such as Katherine and Alice Springs operate as key service hubs for visitors from remote and regional communities to access health and medical services; employment and training opportunities; participate in community events and leisure activities and to fulfil other requirements, such as shopping. In Darwin especially, high numbers of long term homeless and rough sleepers affect the City in a myriad of ways and put significant pressure on local and Territory Government and human service organisations in the community sector. In the local government area, organisationally and operationally, City of Darwin is impacted by large numbers of people temporarily residing in Council owned parks and reserves. For many years, City of Darwin Council has advocated at Territory and Federal level within a number of forums with regard to the issue of homelessness and the impact it has in the Municipality. Council regularly identifies the issues experienced by people who travel to Darwin from regional and remote communities who do not, for a host of reasons, have access to suitable shelter while in Darwin. Compromised sanitation, illegal camp sites, public intoxication, antisocial behaviour, litter and peace disturbing conduct continues to challenge our community as a result in the absence of suitable and supported accommodation and housing infrastructure. Ongoing and significant expenditure and/or resources are utilised in an attempt to address the issues that arise from people having little or few options with regard to housing or accommodation in the Municipality. This lack of appropriate accommodation remains a substantial service gap in community infrastructure and cannot be addressed by local Government without a coordinated approach at all levels of Government, and one we recognise, must be led and resourced by the Commonwealth Government.

City of Darwin recognises that responding to homelessness and/or addressing the lack of suitable shelter, especially for the highly vulnerable cohort who reside in the NT, is a major undertaking. Similarly, Council understands it is not the responsibility of local government to resource such a response, nor is it possible in terms of provision of the very high levels of funding that is needed to address it. Local governments across the NT however can play a role in affecting change and in advocating for a whole-of-government response to address the overwhelming need of NT residents for the adequate provision of housing and accommodation needed. Multi-faceted approaches are required to address the complex and disproportionate rate of homelessness in the Northern Territory. This includes the provision of new and appropriate housing in remote communities and towns throughout the



Territory to meet demand, the provision of better health care in communities and the supply of a variety of short term and low cost accommodation options in Darwin and other centres.

There is little doubt that what is needed in the first instance to address the high levels of people experiencing homelessness across Australia are significant and sustained investments in housing and associated community programs which address such things as tenancy support<sup>6</sup>. In the NT, a dramatic increase to the inadequate current level of funding the NT receives from the Federal Government for this issue is needed urgently in order to address the crisis that is remote housing and to increase public housing supply in urban regions. Without adequate funding the current situation will continue, as will the disadvantage and poor outcomes which are intrinsically linked to inadequate provision of housing as a basic human right.

To illustrate this point, in the 2016 Census<sup>7</sup> it was estimated that the NT had nearly 14,000 estimated homeless (599 people per 10,000) yet received only 1.3% of total funding provided by the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement. Under the Agreement, the NT received a total of \$18.9 million from the National funding pool. In comparison, Western Australia, with an estimated rate of 36 homeless per 10,000 received \$157 Million in funding and nearly 11% of total pool funding.<sup>8</sup>

State	Estimated # of people experiencing Homelessness (2016 Census)	Rate of Homelessness per 10,000	NHHA + NAHA (\$ Million)	% of Total Funding	Rank (Actual Homelessness)
NSW	37,708	50.4	465.0	31.5%	1
Vic	24,818	41.9	373.9	25.3%	2
QLD	21,675	46.1	302.1	20.5%	3
WA	9,004	36.4	157.3	10.6%	5
SA	6,222	37.1	103.9	7.0%	6
ACT	1,593	40.1	24.4	1.7%	8
TAS	1,619	31.7	31.7	2.1%	7
<b>NT</b>	<b>13,721</b>	<b>599.6</b>	<b>18.9</b>	<b>1.3%</b>	<b>4</b>
TOTAL		49.7	1477.2		

<sup>6</sup> NT Shelter, 2019. *Pre-Budget Submission, 2019-20*.

<sup>7</sup> Australia Bureau of Statistics. *2016 Census*.

<sup>8</sup> NT Shelter Factsheet. NT Shelter.org



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At the base level, it is clear that the amount of funding received by the Northern Territory from the Commonwealth Government does not and cannot in the future address what would be seen in other parts of the world as a humanitarian crisis; one which is affecting right now the most vulnerable in our society and which includes future generations (and future custodians) of this country.

