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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs

Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia

I have worked as a Specialist Physician in the remote Northern Territory for the past eight years. This is a region plagued by the highest rates of homelessness not only in Australia but the developed world, and represents long-term systemic and repeated local, territory and federal government failures to address the complex needs of housing and 'home' for recently displaced Aboriginal Australians.

The many tribal nations of remote NT have all been impacted at different stages and different ways by colonisation, and for almost all of them, homelessness and severely overcrowded housing has been a standard state since they or their ancestors were dispossessed of their land.

The remote NT has the highest rates of homelessness in Australia and the lowest levels of service provision to meet these vulnerable peoples' needs.¹ It therefore stands that this region of Australia needs the greatest attention and action.

This submission is solely my perspective and does not represent that of the organisations that I work for or am affiliated with.

In relation to the Terms of Reference of this committee's inquiry:

1. The incidence of homelessness in Australia

The incidence of homelessness in the Katherine region is probably the highest in Australia, recorded as over 31 times the national average.² Given that homelessness in this region is almost entirely an Aboriginal phenomenon, at least 1 in 4 Aboriginal people are homeless. This is almost certainly an under-estimate – there were issues with the last census data collection in the region, and Aboriginal people living in severely over-crowded houses will run and hide from any government official knocking at their door, as 'visiting' a relatives' house for more than 2 weeks is forbidden³ (as is advertised on local television and radio).

Anecdotally, children in my daughter's classrooms were living in tents. Aboriginal people on haemodialysis are homeless. Young people with terminal disease are not given the dignity of

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/interactives/homeless/>

² <https://www.katherinetimes.com.au/story/6317821/homelessness-week-in-the-town-with-the-highest-rate-in-australia/>

³ <https://nt.gov.au/property/public-housing/tenants-your-rights-and-responsibilities/visitors-in-public-housing>

adequate housing before they die. The NT Department of Housing's stated waitlist⁴ of less than 2 years for medical Priority Housing is simply not true as attested by a significant number of referrals that I have myself made.

2. Factors affecting the incidence of homelessness, including housing-market factors

Cost of remote housing is high. Status quo inefficiencies and high costs in the industry appear to go unchecked and without innovation – it can cost thousands of dollars to change a single washer in a tap in remote communities. Opportunities to develop local Aboriginal workforce are limited and often poorly executed. Aboriginal people in the Katherine region are caught in a cycle of deep poverty and are unable to support a private property market.

3. The causes of, and contributing factors to, overcrowded housing

In the remote NT, the cause of homelessness is colonisation. These people were displaced from ancestral lands that were conceptually home, and this was replaced by grossly inadequate housing infrastructure, from the first generation to be impacted and all subsequent generations. The issue of homelessness has followed a clear trajectory:

- Colonisation and displacement from ancestral lands (1870-1970 depending on region)
- Placement into colonial-style missionary communities with over-crowded housing (1880-1960)
- Change from Missionary-style to Government bureaucratic service provision (1970 onward)
- Multiple large system changes disrupting locally developed progress, i.e. the Intervention⁵
- Multi-generational expectation of very poor quality housing
- Standard expectation to live in highly over-crowded housing
- Ongoing lack of funding and planning for appropriate housing
- Inappropriate housing design for remote and tropical communities
- Inappropriate cultural or community input into housing design
- Unavoidably high costs of remote area construction
- Lack of community capacity to even consider that housing could be self-determined in architectural design or housing stock numbers. This is now how it is expected to be, a consequence of generational hopelessness.

4. Opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness

The simple and only solution is more housing stock. There is enormous opportunity to do this in a complete paradigm shift through architectural design, community engagement and development.

This is required urgently. There have been recent and dramatic heat events in the tropical north of the NT with unprecedented periods of extreme record breaking hot weather, and coupled with housing design, energy insecurity, overcrowding and homelessness, there is a short window to urgently address the following:

Urgent:

- Improving energy security for remote communities to allow sustainable and resilient energy supply

⁴ <https://nt.gov.au/property/public-housing/apply-for-housing/apply-for-public-housing/waiting-list>

⁵ <https://theconversation.com/ten-years-on-its-time-we-learned-the-lessons-from-the-failed-northern-territory-intervention-79198>

- Housing architecture and design to consider the complex variables of tropical environment, cost of remote infrastructure, insulation and energy efficiency
- Design of new houses and retrofitting of energy-efficiency measures to old housing stock

Longer term:

- Acknowledging the multi-generational issue of homelessness in remote Aboriginal communities in the north of Australia
- Recognition of normalisation of extremely poor housing standards
- Engage with remote living people over a longer term to allow them to have more autonomy in housing design and construction
- Recognise the vital role of hope for a better future

5. Services to support people who are homeless

Despite the clear need, there has and remains a lack of strategically aligned services for homeless people in remote NT towns like Katherine. NGOs are fragmented by short-term grant funding models, agencies are plagued with staff turnover and short term grant funding undermines individual job security in towns with limited other employment options for trained professionals. The funding models build tense local competition that is can be destructive to community collaboration. Government agencies often fail to achieve stated outcomes because of similar in-house workforce challenges. There is no-long term community-wide strategy, and a sense of hopelessness pervades organisations that have witnessed repeated failures and now accept profound under-investment in homelessness as the norm.

In the towns of Katherine and Tennant Creek, there is a significant lack of corporate capacity in local organisations, and no way around addressing this other than gradually and slowly building local capacity and acknowledging that frameworks set up for mainstream Australian organisations are simply not feasible in small towns, where Aboriginal cultural values strongly imbue and enrich an organisation's culture but can pitch the organisation against western governance standards. The alternative is to enact punitive mechanisms on local organisations that are struggling with corporate governance, which only results in longer-term disempowerment and fracturing of growth of local services and corporate capacity.

Despite the challenges, many of the local institutions involved in homeless service provision and housing have had dramatic and resounding local successes that are often unrecognised and undervalued by funding organisations. Government agencies and funding bodies often overlook these successes and all too often do not support what is working well.

6. Services to support people at particular risk

It is vital to emphasise that **ALL HOMELESS PEOPLE IN THE TROPICAL NORTH** are at immediate environmental risk, especially in the hot tropical summers. There is clear evidence that the hotter weather exacerbates chronic conditions in towns like Katherine.⁶⁷ Given that this remote region of

⁷ <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2016/204/3/factors-contributing-frequent-attendance-emergency-department-remote-northern>

Australia has the highest mortality rates and lowest life expectancy, many people living rough or in overcrowded houses are extremely vulnerable to heat.⁸

There is a lack of services for people at risk of homelessness who suffer health vulnerabilities in towns like Katherine. For instance I recently described in a study we have had published providing services to people with chronic illness who are homeless. People with severe heart failure, people on dialysis, people with advanced cancers, are living in tents or severely over-crowded houses and often not knowing where their next meal is coming from.⁹ Heat waves are dangerous for these people.

As clearly demonstrated by the last 2 years of record-breaking heat,¹⁰ extreme heat conditions are likely to escalate in the immediate future and will almost certainly result in more deaths.¹¹ These deaths are almost always not being recorded as due at least in part environmental exposure to heat.¹²

Towns in the tropical north crippled by homelessness rapidly need significant strategic investment in planning and infrastructure around climate change and increasing frequency of extreme heat.

7. Suitability of mainstream services

Given that a lack of housing is at the core of the issue of homelessness in remote towns in the NT, community engagement in design and layout of housing is mandatory. There are cultural and social complexities that mean that a standard urban dwelling will not necessarily meet social needs. This is confounded by the fact that Aboriginal Australians in the NT are now so used to living in such inappropriate housing that it has become normalised.

A house in the tropics designed for Aboriginal people should look very different from a housing commission house in suburban Eastern Seaboard.

Given the extreme summers that have been occurring in regions like Katherine recently, for instance this last summer of 2019 that saw a 900% increase in days above 40c and tripling the previous record of days above 40c,¹³ it is imperative to recognise that a house without air conditioning is not conducive to health and in the future may not even be adequate to sustain life, especially for household members with chronic disease. Energy costs for remote living people are high,¹⁴ and there are many barriers to energy security for Aboriginal people in the NT. Ensuring a supply of affordable community controlled renewable electricity is necessary to adapt to a warming climate, and if it is not achieved then homelessness will be exacerbated and the impacts of heat and homelessness will be amplified.

8. Examples of best practice

I have lived and worked in inner city Sydney before and am aware of the rich tapestry of services to homeless people in this area. It is a far cry from what is available to people in Katherine.

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/how-a-rethink-of-emergency-care-is-closing-the-gap-one-person-at-a-time-127020>

⁹ <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/22/4306/htm>

¹⁰ <https://www.katherinetimes.com.au/story/6495938/heatwave-smashes-all-records/>

¹¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(19\)30016-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(19)30016-6/fulltext)

¹² <https://theconversation.com/heat-kills-we-need-consistency-in-the-way-we-measure-these-deaths-120500>

¹³ <https://www.katherinetimes.com.au/story/6546833/twas-the-40-scorching-days-before-christmas/>

¹⁴ <https://www.katherinetimes.com.au/story/4960867/katherine-mums-living-costs-worries/>

Simple ABS data analysis should mandate that the most basic of services in a town like Katherine – 7-day homeless drop-in facilities with clothes washing, legal advice, free meals, social work input. Such basic “best practice” does not need any work to define.

In 2018, The Doorways Hub¹⁵ opened in Katherine, the first ever such centre in the town, and has been an incredible success. This was a much celebrated event but it was 30 years late, and is vulnerable to collapse if not adequately supported.

Successful Diversionary Youth Justice, Post-Prison services and school programs that support people at very high risk should be mandatory.

9. Adequacy of data

- There is a paucity of how homelessness, heat and morbidity/mortality are related across Australia
- There are clear holes in data collection of homeless people in towns like Katherine in the ABS – for instance in the last census, a critical staff member was ill and did not collect data on homeless people living rough in Katherine.
- There is inadequate health service data collection – hospitals and health services do not collect data on homelessness. When an Aboriginal person who is homeless attends an NT hospital, this data is not collected. This data would be useful to develop targeted services more likely to be effective in meeting what is at this point undefined need.

10. Governance and funding arrangements in relation to homelessness

- Current competitive grant funding is highly destructive of community cohesion and inter-agency collaboration
- Towns with high levels of homelessness should have a homelessness strategy with corporate support, with resource allocation based on national homeless population rate benchmarks
- Programs perceived to have been successful at a local level have not been supported at a state level. The contribution of higher level bureaucratic dysfunction to the stalling of locally successful programs currently has no mechanism to be recognised or addressed. It is too easy to blame the remote service providers for dysfunction.
- Innovation funding for new programs should have:
 - o Clear and realistic expectations of outcomes
 - o Clear commitment to ongoing funding in the case that the project is successful
 - o Long term strategy should be to build on all successes of any program rather than simply de-funding or not clearly articulating the nature of ongoing government support for programs, for instance as experienced in some aspects of the Wellness Support Pathway program¹⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That this committee consider climate change and its impact on homeless people.
2. That this committee recognise the fundamental issue of lack of housing stock is contributing to homelessness in remote NT, and that inadequately designed housing and housing without energy security will exacerbate future harms caused by homelessness and overcrowded housing

¹⁵ <https://www.katherinetimes.com.au/story/6417389/katherine-doorways-hub-re-funded-for-five-years/>

¹⁶ <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/22/4306/htm>

3. That this committee recognise that solutions to housing stock need innovative policy and engineering solutions to make remote housing more affordable to construct, more socially suitable in the longer term state of flux that Aboriginal people are now used to living with, and more energy efficient
4. That energy security is recognised as a fundamental contributor to structurally sound environmental security in a tropical environment – that a poorly designed house without access to air conditioning in Northern Australia is not suitable for safe human habitation
5. That this committee recognise that the current state of homelessness in remote Aboriginal Australia is a direct and ongoing impact of colonisation, and in addressing this issue in remote Australia it is vital to develop an understanding of nuanced regional patterns of the history of this dispossession and homelessness in order to adequately engage in solutions
6. That local level strategic long-term approaches are taken and supported federally in jurisdictions where local and state government have been unable to address issues around homelessness
7. That such strategies include centralisation of community level funding rather than competitive grant rounds, that organisations in the community are supported to be collaborative rather than forced to be competitive, and that funds for innovation clearly articulate how the government will support ongoing funding for successful aspects of that program
8. That an independent arbitrator with legislated authority be placed to independently assess local level performance of innovative and other programs for those who are or at risk of homelessness. Such a position should be able to:
 - a. Seek independent feedback at a community level around program performances and successes
 - b. Seek independent feedback at the community level around higher level bureaucratic support or lack thereof of programs for homeless people
 - c. Be able to address concerns raised about impact of higher level bureaucratic failures on the ongoing strategic development of services for homeless people and others vulnerable to homelessness
 - d. Support long-term growth of local innovations in strategic development of local and national homelessness services and policy