



**Northern Territory Council of
Social Service Inc.**

**2011-2012
Pre-Budget Submission**

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Introduction

NTCOSS is a peak body for organisations and individuals who work to improve the circumstances of low-income and disadvantaged Territorians. One of our major undertakings each year is the production of our Pre-Budget Submission which we provide to the Northern Territory Government in November to feed into the process that will determine the Territory budget in the following May.

The single most important issue highlighted throughout this document is the critical shortage of accommodation right across the Territory. The seriousness of this problem cannot be overstated. There is an urgent need for additional transitional housing for those seeking accommodation post-prison or post drug/alcohol rehabilitation, and for safe houses for women and children fleeing family violence. The chronic and well-documented shortage of housing in remote Indigenous communities must continue to be addressed, particularly for communities not receiving new housing under the SIHIP program.

The crisis in accommodation also restricts the capacity for community sector organisations to attract staff from other states, thus limiting the quality of service they can provide, and holding back the Territory's economy. The recruitment and retention of quality staff into the community sector is also limited by the fact that remuneration in this sector is in the order of 20% less than that on offer in both the government and the private sector.

As we finalise this document, the report and recommendations into the Northern Territory's child protection system have been released. NTCOSS supports the prioritising of keeping children safe. However, it is important that we recognise the relationship between child protection and other factors, such as homelessness, over-crowding, alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, reduced access to educational opportunities and health care.

I would like to thank all of the organisations and individuals who have given freely of their time to assist NTCOSS in making this document as comprehensive and precise as possible. We trust that this will be a useful tool for member organisations as they work to better articulate the needs of their particular sector.

Wendy Morton

Wendy Morton
Executive Director
NT Council of Social Service

Sector Wide

There are two key issues across the whole of the community sector of critical importance to the future of the sector. Firstly, the chronic lack of affordable accommodation across the whole Territory, threatens the capacity of all community organisations to provide an adequate level of support to their clients. Secondly, the growing gap in pay and conditions between community sector workers and their counterparts in government and the private sector is making it increasingly difficult for services to attract and retain quality staff.

1. ACCOMMODATION

The shortage of affordable accommodation across the Northern Territory is now critical, and particularly affects disadvantaged groups such as people with a disability, Indigenous Territorians, and those seeking refuge from family violence. This lack of housing has direct negative implications on the capacity of individuals to access educational opportunities, maintain an acceptable level of health, and to participate fully in the workforce. Without secure accommodation it is enormously difficult for Territorians to establish themselves and make a contribution to the community.

Significant intervention by government is needed to avert a crisis which threatens the whole infrastructure of social services in the Territory. If we fail to address this crisis in accommodation, then we will face the prospect of reduced economic growth, higher unemployment, poorer health and an increased incidence of family breakdown. NTCOSS has drawn attention to these dire circumstances in our last two pre-budget submissions. If community service provision were to be reduced in some locations or sectors then there would be a significant cost to government in terms of picking up the pieces.

The critical nature of the housing shortage is such that the lack of affordable housing was raised in all sector consultations, with many agencies identifying the impact of the chronic housing shortage on their clients across the NT. The housing situation in the NT is at crisis point, with accommodation out of the reach of a growing number of working families and individuals, as well as low-income and disadvantaged groups. NTCOSS calls on the NTG to investigate the establishment of an affordable/community housing sector as a matter of urgency.

The Housing sector report in this submission identifies the need to build capacity and maximise self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led housing providers in both urban and remote NT communities. There is also an immediate need to increase the supply of affordable housing in urban centres across the Territory. NTCOSS believes that the NTG must encourage the development of a viable not-for-profit housing sector. Finally, there must be greater collaboration between government and the NGO sector to address homelessness and its root causes, and to meet identified homelessness reduction targets.

RECOMMENDATION:

The NT Government must act urgently and on a large scale to work closely with the sector to address the critical shortage of affordable accommodation in the NT.

Sector Wide

2. COMMUNITY SECTOR WAGES AND CONDITIONS

Community sector organisations in the Northern Territory continue to struggle to recruit skilled staff. Salaries in the sector lag up to 20% behind rates on offer in the government and private sector, making it very difficult to recruit and retain suitably skilled and qualified staff. This has obvious implications for the level of service that these organisations are able to offer their clients.

The substantial salary differential between the community sector and the government and private sector is the largest single obstacle to community organisations recruiting and retaining staff. Community organisations report that the sector is losing skilled employees to government positions, or to interstate locations because they can't afford to live in the NT on a community sector wage. The housing crisis in the NT exacerbates this situation.

NTCOSS calls on the NTG to invest in community sector organisations to enable them to offer competitive wages and conditions to staff. This will allow organisations to can maintain a skilled and stable workforce capable of providing quality services to clients.

The upcoming 'equal pay' national pay case may result in higher award rates being established for community sector workers. However community organisations will be unable to pay these new salaries and maintain the same level of service provision without a commensurate increase in funding from the Territory Government. NTCOSS believes that it is important for the NTG to follow the lead of the Victorian Government and give a clear undertaking to provide supplementation to organisations to enable them to pay any new salary rates which might be established by a court decision.

RECOMMENDATION

The NTG Government must undertake to provide community organisations with additional funding to cover the costs of any Award increases ordered by Fair Pay Australia as a result of the equal remuneration case.

Alcohol and Other Drugs

Alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues continue to be a critical social problem in the Northern Territory where much consumption of alcohol continues to occur at dangerous levels. AOD misuse is not simply an Indigenous problem but is prevalent among all sections of society, The cost of this misuse is borne disproportionately by young adults, and Indigenous Australians, who suffer major social, economic and health consequences. The most effective ways to reduce alcohol consumption are to increase the price of the cheapest alcohol, limit the number of alcohol outlets and reduce trading hours. Over recent years alcohol restrictions in regional centres across the NT have achieved considerable success in terms of reducing consumption and harms.

NTCOSS acknowledges the commitment shown by the NTG over the past 12 months, with measures such as the review of the Alcohol Court, and the restrictions on the sale of four and five litre wine-casks in the Darwin/ Palmerston area. These measures will begin to reduce the immense human and financial cost of alcohol misuse in the Territory. We would also urge the Government to implement a minimum floor price on takeaway alcohol across the NT, which would further reduce the harm caused by alcohol.

NTCOSS acknowledges the NTG's contribution of \$50,000 in seed funding to work towards the establishment of an AOD peak body. A consultative process is well underway to develop an appropriate model for such a body. We note that the Territory 2030 Strategic Plan has set a target to reduce the amount of alcohol Territorians consume to the national average by the 2020, and we believe that the creation of an AOD peak could play a key role in advising the NTG on policy and strategy to assist in achieving this target. We estimate the recurrent cost of running a peak to be in the vicinity of \$250,000 per annum. While NTCOSS plans to seek funds from the Federal Government and other sources, we believe a substantial contribution from the NTG will be required for the body to be effective. It is likely that we will seek a recurrent grant of approximately \$200,000 from the NTG and ask that this be factored into NTG budget planning.

While some increased funding has been provided for prisoner rehabilitation and for an alcohol counsellor in Alice Springs, there remains a critical need for outreach and post-rehabilitation services, as well as community-based rehabilitation and treatment services. In the remote areas, access to alcohol and other drug services is severely limited. Significantly more needs to be done to improve prevention and treatment pathways through the consistent roll-out of community based youth development programs, and diversionary activities for young people such as bush culture trips for families. These projects are critical to providing alternatives to alcohol and other drug use, and should be carried out in partnership with communities on an action-research basis, with ongoing evaluation being a key component.

There is an enormous need for further funding for outreach and post-rehabilitation services, as well as community-based rehabilitation and treatment services for both young people and adults. Remote based services are critical, as they allow treatment to be provided at a distance from alcohol outlets. Finally, NTCOSS regards it is unsatisfactory for treatment and rehabilitation to be so closely linked with the criminal justice system. Territorians should be able to access assistance for their health problems before they come into contact with the criminal justice system.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Make provision for a contribution of \$200,000 annually to the recurrent funding of an NT AOD peak body**
- 2. Make available \$1.1M annually for the next three years for community organisations to undertake prevention, education, rehabilitation and treatment programs, particularly in remote communities.**

Carers

One in four Australians currently provide unpaid care and support to a family member or friend. The person they are caring for may have a disability, mental illness, chronic illness, terminal illness or simply be frail, and rely heavily on this care. The overwhelming majority of Australians will at some time in their life either be a family carer, or rely on one. The provision of unpaid family care is a huge and multifaceted issue in the Northern Territory, with health, disability, work, housing, cultural and even legal implications for our community.

There are currently around 26,000 carers in the NT, which is a significant proportion of the Territory's population. While the social value of the work that carers do is obvious, the economic benefit the community derives from their efforts are not readily apparent. People who undertake this unpaid caring work often find that their own career and social opportunities are reduced as a consequence of the commitment they have made. The dedication of carers across the Territory allows people to stay in their homes rather than move into care facilities, saving the NTG many millions of dollars per year. Demographic projections suggest that in the future we will have a growing number of older people and people with a disability to care for, so the contribution of carers will become even more important.

The NTG has recognised the importance of family carers in its Territory 2030 Strategic Plan. Under Objective 5 the government has identified the following target: "The Territory is a community where carers enjoy good health, wellbeing, resilience and financial security; and caring is recognised as shared responsibility of family, community and government". NTCOSS endorses this target, but we believe that this aspiration can only be realised if the NT Government takes immediate action to ensure that appropriate supports are put in place for carers. There is a particular need to address the lack of respite and supported accommodation for families which include a person with a disability such as autism.

The Carer Recognition Act 2006 enshrines the Northern Territory Carers Charter which requires that carers be treated with respect and dignity and 'acknowledged as individuals with their own needs within and beyond the role of carer'. NTCOSS proposes the appointment of support workers to assist families, friends, patients and staff in ensuring that they are aware of the implications of the Act. Carers are entitled to support during and after a patient's stay in hospital through referral to appropriate services, and assistance to manage their own wellbeing as they undertake the role of carer.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Appoint a 'family carer support worker' at each of the Royal Darwin, Katherine, and Alice Springs hospitals.**
- 2. Establish an annual grant of \$150,000 to Carers NT to provide increased policy and research capacity to the organisation to assist the community in achieving the target announced in the 2030 Strategic Plan.**

Children and Families

Significant extra resources were dedicated to child protection in the May 2010 NT budget. NTCOSS acknowledges the initial funding for a Care and Protection Engagement Policy Officer for NTCOSS to work with the Department of Health and Families in developing the role of non-government organisations in a new child protection system in the NT. However, there are still specific unmet needs for early intervention services and family support initiatives, and a general need for more integrated service delivery across the whole of the NT.

In last year's Pre-Budget Submission, NTCOSS recommended an increase in resources for early intervention and support services such as respite for families with children at risk, especially on remote communities. This remains a priority and requires resources being directed into specific programs and services to prevent children from actually entering the child protection system. Recurrent funding for the establishment of effective early intervention services is critical. Such services could include community and school-based programs designed to deal with behavioural problems arising from trauma and abuse. There is a critical need to address issues such as overcrowding, exposure to domestic violence, substance abuse by carers, the burden on elderly carers, poor school attendance, and child neglect.

We are aware that the number of children in care has risen significantly (e.g. in Alice Springs), requiring the Department to establish group homes for very young children, because of the lack of alternative 'out of home care' options. Families are continuing to experience a lack of access to services, particularly on remote communities, with the result that in some instances the removal of children becomes the only viable option. We are also concerned at the significant time lag between the department receiving a report about an at-risk child and then actually taking action on the matter. These delays dramatically reduce a family's capacity to achieve good outcomes. Given this crisis, it is vitally important to establish and maintain targeted family support services to families outside the care system, and to develop proactive child protection strategies.

Sector representatives have also raised concerns in relation to case management and 'leaving care' plans, suggesting that the inconsistencies in these plans, and the absence of a cultural component are issues that require urgent attention. The risk of homelessness for young people exiting care is also critical, particularly as advocacy and support organisations like Create Foundation lack the resources to service the whole of the Territory.

The general lack of coordinated and timely services, cultural consideration and referrals to community organisations from government departments remains a significant matter. The Aboriginal Medical Service Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) has agreed to auspice and support the development of an NT children and family services co-ordination group. The establishing of a presence of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) in the NT, is also seen as a positive option. Such a group would have a major role in addressing broader family support issues and identifying best practice around children in care. They could also advise on care plans, family and community education, parenting and life skills programs, resources for early intervention, and family support services with children at risk, especially on remote communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Increase funding for early intervention and family support initiatives to ensure broader access to low risk/high needs families (outside the care system) across the NT.**
- 2. Support the funding of a peak body for the Children and Family sector, to address broader family support issues, best practice, and an integrated approach to service delivery, especially on remote communities.**

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

Community harmony in the Northern Territory is fragile and needs to be nurtured by the community as a whole, and by our political leaders in particular. Public response to the recent action by asylum seekers at the Berrimah detention facility demonstrates that there are worrying levels of ignorance and intolerance in parts of our community. NTCOSS members expect our politicians to seize every opportunity to promote understanding of, and tolerance for, new arrivals to this country. The 2030 Strategic Plan notes the importance of developing the Territory as an “inclusive society, valuing and embracing cultural diversity.”

On a more specific issue, there is a growing need in the Territory for further services to support the increasing population of seniors from various cultural backgrounds. There is a large number of senior women, particularly from the Indonesian, Greek, Italian and Filipino communities, who experience social isolation and have a need for culturally appropriate care and community interaction. Their key issues include safety, transport, accommodation, and social isolation. In the not too distant future upwards of 25% of those in our community aged over 50 will be from various non-English speaking backgrounds, so it is critical to plan for appropriate services. Currently the NTG provides a small amount of funding to COTA for this purpose, however, additional resources are required.

There is also a need to nurture and protect young people from multi-cultural backgrounds to ensure that their life chances are maximised. It is critically important that teenagers remain engaged with the community, with experience suggesting that one of the best ways of doing this is to encourage participation in organised sports, arts and other recreational pursuits. It is crucial that clubs in the Territory are welcoming of people from multi-cultural backgrounds. Many sporting pursuits are relatively expensive in terms of the costs of uniforms, equipment, fees and travel; however evidence suggests that this is still a wise investment. NTCOSS would encourage the NTG to provide assistance to sporting clubs to encourage disadvantaged groups to stay engaged with community. One solution may be for government to provide a pool of funds which sporting clubs or non-government organisations could access for this purpose.

Accommodation remains a major issue for refugees because of the entrenched lack of affordable housing in the Territory. NTCOSS member organisations in Alice Springs report that groups of up to ten refugees are living in two-bedroom units because this is all they can afford. They are often evicted from this accommodation when real estate agents become aware of the extent of the overcrowding. More generally, this chronic lack of accommodation across the Territory significantly restricts the capacity of community organisations to attract specialist staff. Finally, women with young children, who are often isolated and lacking in support, need advice about family planning / sexual health / preventative health, particularly as cultural issues may limit their capacity to seek this assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Provide funding for a project officer to explore options for culturally appropriate services for seniors from non-English speaking backgrounds.**
- 2. Provide further funding for at-risk young people from non-English speaking backgrounds to ensure that they stay engaged in the general community.**

Disability Services

The Productivity Commission is to conduct an inquiry into the establishment of a National Disability Insurance Scheme. The enquiry, which is to report back in July 2011 will examine how a scheme should be designed and funded to better meet the long-term needs of people with disability, their families and carers. NTCOSS believes that the establishment of such an arrangement is critical and calls on the NTG to provide all necessary financial and logistical support for a national scheme.

The KPMG review of 'Disability Services in the Northern Territory' which was released in 2005 outlined a five year strategy designed to provide a new direction for disability support provision through an integrated approach to service delivery. While there have been some positive developments - such as the opening of a disability information service for Darwin and Alice Springs, and the funding of National Disability Services (NDS) to develop a quality framework and provide sector support for disability service providers - there is little evidence to suggest that things have improved significantly for people with disabilities, their families, and carers. While extra funding has been allocated to the disability sector over the past five years, organisations still report a chronic under-funding of block-funded services and individualised funding packages. This situation places considerable pressures on organisations and high levels of stress on families, and results in an ad hoc approach to service provision. NTCOSS calls on the NTG to provide funding for sector development to increase the capacity of organisations to provide high quality services to people with disability across the Northern Territory.

In last year's PBS, NTCOSS identified the need for increased funding to be allocated to supported accommodation and post-school options. We also called for funding to be allocated to build the capacity of families to support people with disabilities. While acknowledging that the replacement of the Post School Options program with a Community Pathways Program offers longer term support for young people with severe disability, there continues to be a shortage in funding for supported accommodation - both existing and new placements. In addition, the capacity building and support for families to cope while caring for children with severe to profound disability remains an urgent need. Neither of these critical needs was met in the previous budget.

Workforce issues continue to impact on the disability sector, with wages in the community sector continuing to languish way behind those on offer in both the government and the private sector. NTCOSS encourages the NT Government to financially support the community sector as it implements award modernisation and the outcome of the gender equity wage case. Further, job security for staff is difficult to guarantee because of the lack of consistency and security in funding arrangements. Currently, the short term nature of individualised funding packages for clients is a significant obstacle to effective service provision for agencies who receive a significant proportion of their funding from this source.

Transport issues also continue to be a major concern. Taxi services suitable for people with disabilities are unreliable, and in most areas of the NT are not even available. Public transport options only exist in Darwin and Alice Springs, and despite recent increases in bus routes, are often limited in their areas of service. This lack of appropriate transport further disadvantages people as it reduces their opportunity to seek and maintain employment and to participate in recreational activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Increase funding for supported accommodation models which include both increased support in the home for families of children with disability, and quality supported accommodation facilities for adults with high disability support needs.**
- 2. Provide all necessary support for the development of a national disability insurance scheme.**

Education Access

Improving educational outcomes for young Territorians is crucial to the future of the NT. Last year, NTCOSS highlighted that the non-government sector, with its extensive experience in engaging families, has a key role to play in working with families and communities to improve educational outcomes. We recommended provision of a pool of funds for community organisations to foster partnerships with local communities to develop engagement strategies around school attendance, transport and other supports. This recommendation was not addressed.

In addition, NTCOSS recommended that the NTG support schools to develop flexible local practices in education, including teaching delivered in first-language. This was partially addressed in the \$3.1 M for the establishment of after school Indigenous language and culture initiatives in very remote community schools to make school resources available to the community for resource development around language. However this does not go far enough to address concerns around the policy of 'English only' for the first four hours of the day.

Big issues still remain for many families who struggle to get their young people to school or pre-school. Youth Services continue to provide transport to a number of children who have been disengaged from school for a prolonged period, and for whom catching a bus is not an immediate option. Additional school buses have been helpful, however, many young people require significant support to engage with the education system and attend school on a regular basis. In addition agencies have argued for alternative education models to be made available to cater for students who have missed significant periods of schooling, or those with challenging needs.

NTCOSS acknowledges the additional funding in the 2010 NT Budget for an alternative education program in Alice Springs, more resources in schools to tackle disengaged students and more teachers in remote communities, however a great deal more remains to be done.

The funding model based on attendance, not enrolment, continues to raise concerns that children in some areas are still not receiving sufficient support in schools. We understand that the NT is the only jurisdiction using this model, and urge the NTG to provide funding based on enrolment to ensure that as attendance numbers increase, schools can provide for all new attendees.

Parental engagement and support has again been raised as a critical issue across the board, but in particular with Indigenous families, and families from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Research points to the value of schools and families working together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. Positive partnerships between schools and families assist in young people's social and emotional development, their resilience and well-being, their own sense of belonging and a positive, optimistic outlook for the future. Some schools are able to promote parent engagement well. Critical to the genuine engagement of parents and communities in schools is interaction between parents, parental understanding of school processes and regular contact between parents and school personnel. Provision of resources for face to face training, support and advice across all school communities would improve parental engagement and in turn learning outcomes students.

Improving the recruitment and retention of teachers in remote communities requires the provision of housing for teachers in the bush, and better conditions for teacher assistants. More flexibility and innovation around the delivery of education on remote communities is also needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Provide all NT Government Schools with funding and staffing based on enrolment numbers rather than attendance.

2 Provide a funding pool for NGO's to foster partnerships with communities and schools to develop strategies for attendance, parental involvement, transport and other supports.

Employment Opportunity

In last year's pre-budget submission NTCOSS recommended improving access to training for people in rural and remote communities by providing additional office space and housing, and by reviewing NT DETs funding formula for the provision of training services in these locations. NTCOSS also called for improved access to other support services on remote communities such as mental health services. These recommendations were not addressed.

A continuing shortage of affordable housing in the NT remains the single greatest barrier to employment. It is extremely difficult for a person to seek and retain employment if they do not have safe, stable accommodation. The lack of housing has also become a barrier to community services recruiting and retaining quality staff, particularly where wages lag significantly behind those on offer in the government and private sector.

Funding formulas and performance measurements are also of concern to training organisation who are trying to operate in rural and remote communities. Outcomes for training organisations are measured by the number of job seekers that secure employment. NTCOSS believes that this is an unrealistic measure because of the very limited employment opportunities in rural and remote communities. Further, the current funding formulas do not adequately address the additional costs of delivering services in remote locations: travel time, transport, staff costs, and the financial risk of participants not attending scheduled training.

Lack of transport options for residents living in rural and remote communities is a further barrier. Travelling to and from work can be arduous when public transport is simply unavailable or unreliable. In Alice Springs the bus service does not run through many of the employment areas. People who are unable to walk long distances face difficulty in accessing public transport, and are therefore restricted in their employment options.

The lack of job seeker support services such as mental health services and childcare services in remote communities also creates further obstacles to employment in areas where unemployment rates are already very high. Assisting those who face multiple disadvantages to find worthwhile work within their community requires intensive planning to ensure that people do not have to leave their community. For example, expanding Aboriginal Health Worker (AHW) development and retention programs is critical, as is providing adequate accommodation for AHW's in remote locations. Finally, NTCOSS is keen to see the NTG remove age barriers to seniors re-entering or continuing in the workforce.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Refine funding formulas so that they meet the actual cost of providing services, including the cost of accommodation in remote communities for trainers, support service staff and Aboriginal workers

2. Improve access to employment by increasing the opportunity for residents of remote communities to obtain 'real' local jobs through the development of social enterprise and commitment to develop the health care workforce.

Family Violence

Alarming rates of family violence continue to occur in the NT with Indigenous women particularly vulnerable to severe injury as a result of assault by partners. The NT Government's 2030 Strategy has set a target to reduce the number of Territorians "turned away from supported accommodation services for people escaping domestic and family violence". The Working Future policy identifies the need to ensure "Indigenous children and families are safe and protected from violence and neglect in their home and communities." The NT Government's Women's policy highlights safety as a major focus area and a need for early intervention, specialized domestic violence services and work with offenders. It is therefore critical that the NTG develop a specific Family Violence policy based on early intervention and prevention and research and evaluation. Such a policy would reflect a "full spectrum public health approach" to tackling domestic violence, which is increasingly viewed as international best practice for DV, and is identified in the national 'Time For Action' (12 year) Federal Government policy framework.

Last year's Women's section recommended the establishment of a Domestic Fatality Review Board and funding of broad domestic and family violence education. These remain a high priority, and are supported by the National Council to reduce Violence against Women and their Children, which recommended that boards be established 'to review deaths that result from domestic and family violence so as to identify factors leading to these deaths, improve system responses and respond to service gaps'.

Last year's Men's section recommended the development of community-based violence prevention programs, healing places for Aboriginal men, and 'half-way' houses to aid successful reintegration into communities. NTCOSS also called for strategies at a local level to address recommendations from Male Health Summits held in the NT in recent years. These needs remain unaddressed.

NTCOSS acknowledges the continued support, in the recent NT Budget for the Indigenous Family Violence Community Based Program and the continued development of integrated community family violence and support services in remote communities. However, further training needs to be provided to staff across the police, judicial, and health systems around working with victims of domestic and family violence. There is also a need to extend the range of programs available to all male prisoners to include family violence programs, as well as parenting, alcohol and family wellbeing courses.

The Federal Government White Paper report on homelessness, *The Road Home*, identified domestic violence as the principle cause of homelessness for women and children. Reflecting these findings, better accommodation options for women escaping violence and crisis situations are critical, as homelessness is a reality for many victims. Specialist accommodation services for victims of family violence are critical, as a focus on accommodation deliverables alone can skew performance indicators, putting pressure on organisations like women's shelters to tackle housing only, without regard to the complexity of issues faced by clients. International evidence shows increased wellbeing for women receiving assistance from specialist DV service 18 months after leaving a relationship. A long term commitment to safe houses in remote communities, including provision for the recruitment and training of staff, is required to ensure their effectiveness. More crisis accommodation, community housing, transitional housing, public housing, and supported housing is critical, as well as outreach services for women and children exiting crisis accommodation, and long term support for victims post-separation.

Family Violence

Addressing broad support needs of families after violence is critical. A well rounded early intervention model focusing not just on men as perpetrators, but provision of safe spaces to provide a holistic approach to related issues, such as men's wellbeing, roles and responsibilities in families (including parenting skills), leadership and dealing with trauma loss and grief, is required. Men's centres can address issues such as depression and isolation, and connect men with their local communities, leading to improved health and social and emotional wellbeing, and positive lifestyle changes, and be a catalyst for economic activity, using men's knowledge and skill. In addition there is a need for cooling down houses in promoting "safe at home" style programs which focus on removing perpetrators not victims. Some night patrol services already promote the practice of removing perpetrators, rather than victims, and the provision of men's spaces would further strengthen this approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Provide funding for the Federal Policy Framework 'Time for Action', in the areas of a fatality review process, men's safe places, workforce capacity and safe accommodation.**
- 2. Develop program funding for local initiatives around community education/early intervention and prevention based programs. – which focus on community strengthening and building men's roles and responsibilities.**

Health Access

The Territory 2030 Strategic Plan identifies the “relatively affluent middle class lifestyle” of most Territorians, where the major threats to good health are chronic disease, mental illness, and “lifestyle inspired” conditions such as obesity, alcoholism, smoking-related illness and heart disease. However, the 2030 Plan also notes that a large proportion of Indigenous people experience “appalling health outcomes which are linked to social disadvantage and poverty.” In the NT, Indigenous children are more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to die before the age of one. Life expectancy for Indigenous people is 16 to 20 years lower, largely due to non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer, exacerbated by poor access to primary health care (NTG ‘Closing the Gap of Indigenous Disadvantage’ Action Plan). The NTG has developed plans to address these disparities, but targets must be closely monitored to ensure outcomes are being achieved.

The absence of effective public transport in remote NT and the crisis in affordable accommodation combine to make it very difficult for people living in the bush to gain access to medical treatment. The lack of maternity services in Tennant Creek, for example, means that people living in surrounding communities, have to arrange transport to Alice Springs and accommodation for the period before and after the birth. This can be very costly if people are paying commercial rates, even after the PATS subsidy is taken into account.

Darwin’s newly established Barbara James House has been of benefit to many patients. However, there is no equivalent accommodation in Alice Springs. It is of great concern that there are times where some patients are unable to keep medical appointments due to a lack of accommodation (for patients and escorts). In addition, at times appointments are cancelled by Health Department staff for the same reason. The accommodation crisis is also a significant disincentive in the recruitment and retention of staff for medical and ancillary services. People will simply not relocate to the Territory if they can’t find a place to live.

NTCOSS has called for renal health issues to be addressed by increasing accommodation options for dialysis patients in centres where renal services are provided, and by expanding dialysis options in major remote communities. These needs remain. Despite a recent inter-governmental agreement, the circumstances of renal patients from SA and WA in central Australia have generally not improved. While eight dialysis chairs in Alice Springs have been guaranteed for South Australian patients, currently sixteen people from SA receive treatment in Alice Springs, so the notion that demand is being satisfied is illusory. Patients from the large WA Community of Warburton must still travel to Perth for dialysis, even though they have traditionally looked to Alice Springs for services.

There is still a critical need for better training and support of Aboriginal Health Workers. Turnover rates are high because of the lack of support for such workers. AMSANT estimates that the training of 30 new AHW’s is required each year in the NT, yet current intake is only 25% of this figure. Attention also needs to be paid to identifying strategies to ensure that the most skilled and experienced AHW’s remain in front-line roles, rather than move into the administrative bureaucracy. A new federal body, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Association* will be more effective if a local Territory association can be established.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Establish additional accommodation centres for people traveling to medical appointments.

2 Commit further funding to the training, development and career structure for Aboriginal Health Workers in the NT.

Housing

Access to appropriate and affordable housing is an issue for every client group in the Northern Territory. With waiting times for public housing increasing, and rent prices in the private market now beyond the reach of most low-to-moderate income households, the gap in the housing system increases every day forcing more and more vulnerable Territorians into homelessness, or unsafe, overcrowded, or otherwise inappropriate accommodation.

NTCOSS recognises that in the past year there has been a significant investment in new housing options in the Territory through the Social Housing Stimulus Package, as well as new initiatives in short term, transitional and homelessness services. We welcome the NTG's *Housing the Territory* strategy announced early in 2010, particularly the Government's recognition of the shortfall between housing supply and demand. The strategy offers a suite of new housing products in the urban context, which includes new public housing, land releases, first home owner opportunities, and affordable rental housing suitable for people on low and fixed incomes. However, with very few new dwellings on the ground by October 2010, the need to increase the supply of social and affordable housing remains, paramount and we urge Government to continue this commitment.

The Northern Territory still has the highest rate of homelessness in the country at 248 per 10,000 (2006 Census). Yet over the term of the current National Partnership Agreement between the NT and Federal Government, Commonwealth funding for specialist homelessness services is decreasing. NTCOSS urges the NT Government to respond by ensuring that funding is provided to adequately support the homelessness service sector in the NT.

In previous pre budget submissions, NTCOSS has recommended that governments at all levels work in partnership with the non-government and private sectors to address the chronic lack of affordable housing supply. While the NT Government is in the process of establishing an NT Affordable Housing Rental Company, this will still only meet the needs of a particular population group.

The gap between public housing and the affordable or private sector remains vast for many households on very low to moderate incomes. In the Territory, Government support through stock transfers and head-leasing management arrangements is needed for community-based housing providers to develop their capacity to become viable community housing providers for those who fall into this gap. A viable and strong community housing sector or association would, over time, also develop the capacity to increase housing stock for its market segment.

NTCOSS has also called for an Indigenous Housing Strategy in the NT which incorporates effective and appropriate consultation to address the needs of housing and infrastructure in Aboriginal remote and urban communities. This has been partly addressed through the \$893 million Strategic Indigenous Housing Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) in remote communities, with the NT Government contributing \$100 million. Mainstream government and community-based services need to genuinely engage with Aboriginal peoples to develop appropriate housing and support models in order to address issues of overcrowding and to sustain tenancies.

The Alice Springs Transformation Plan has offered an innovative approach to a much needed urban response to Aboriginal transience and mobility, and NTCOSS strongly supports similar models being developed in Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin. While SIHIP continues to roll out in remote areas, and a public housing management model is introduced, NTCOSS is strongly of the view that Aboriginal community leaders must be engaged and supported to play a central role in meeting the housing needs and community aspirations of Aboriginal peoples into the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1 Provide increased funding to grow the supply of public housing and re-generate social housing stock for a range of household types through the development of a viable not-for-profit housing sector supported by stock transfers and housing management opportunities for very low, low and moderate income households.

2 Address the diminishing funding for specialist homelessness services under the National Homelessness Partnership arrangements and support the establishment of managed Visitor Accommodation Parks in Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin.

Law and Justice

Indigenous Territorians continue to be incarcerated at a much higher rate than their non-Indigenous counterparts, accounting for more than 80% of the NT prison population even though they make up only about 30% of the general population. A much greater investment in the rehabilitation and support of prisoners in the NT is clearly needed. In our previous submission, NTCOSS called for a greater investment in alternatives to prison programs to reduce the incarceration rates of Indigenous people. We also recommended provision of more support to prisoners, and to those who are exiting the system on post-release programs or after completing community work orders. NTCOSS welcomes additional funding for the Barkly prisoner work camp; increased funding for rehabilitation programs for sex offenders; and funding to manage increased prisoner numbers and additional remote area corrections officers.

The recent announcement of the ‘New Era in Corrections’ is welcome, particularly the emphasis on rehabilitation and targeted programs, and the increased focus on driving offenders. The criminalisation of minor driving offences results in driving offenders making up about 25% of the current prison population. Prisoners on remand and on shorter sentences will now be able to be diverted into treatment. However, the needs of young people in the criminal justice system are not mentioned in the new announcement. NTCOSS remains particularly concerned about the lack of funding to reform the Youth Justice System to provide an appropriate mechanism for processing young people, and to help keep them out of the detention system in the first place. It is totally inappropriate for young people to be processed in the adult system.

While NTCOSS welcomes the Commonwealth funding that has been directed to NAAJA for post release support, more still needs to be done. The lack of housing for exiting prisoners is a major obstacle to effective rehabilitation, forcing many people to return to the conditions that contributed to their offending behaviour in the first place. Additional resources are required in this area, and housing needs must be addressed urgently.

Last year’s pre budget submission called for funding increases to provide better legal representation to domestic violence victims and perpetrators and this need remains. Regional and remote centres often don’t have resident criminal lawyers and this may limit the understanding clients have of their rights, with impacts for both victims and perpetrators. Further support from Government is needed to recruit and retain staff in smaller centres.

Organisations have also highlighted that many Territorians are struggling with credit and debt issues yet there are few legal services available to assist people. Some of the issues include book up, “payday lenders” and people entering into contracts without really understanding what they are committing to. Consumer advocates and legal aid agencies report that Territorians have consumer credit legal needs that aren’t being met. A specific service funded to address these needs could also provide support to the growing number of financial counsellors across the NT.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Provide \$200,000 in recurrent funding for a credit and debt legal advice service.**
- 2. Fund the development of an appropriate Youth Justice system with a separate court for children and young people’s matters.**

Mental Health

Mental illness remains one of our community's great taboos – but a climate of greater openness is required if we are to appropriately address the way mental health issues impact on people in our community. Despite the fact that one in five Australians will experience a mental health illness at some time in their lives, the issue is given no particular prominence in the Territory 2030 Strategic Plan. Mental health problems constitute 14% of the national disease burden but receive only 6 % of the funding allocated to health services.

In last year's Pre-Budget submission, NTCOSS recommended the establishment of an appropriate accommodation and support model for people with challenging behaviours and complex needs, and varying degrees of psychiatric disability. While the NTG has begun planning for two secure care facilities to be established in the Territory for young people and adults with complex needs, there is still a need for a broader framework of accommodation and support in the Northern Territory for people with mental illness.

In addition, last year we also recommended the establishment of a return-to-work program appropriate for people with mental illness and mental health needs. This recommendation remains un-addressed and there is still a need for an effective framework of support services to assist people with mental illness to enter, or re-enter, the workforce, and to gain access to the training which will maximise their employability.

Indigenous Australians suffer disproportionately from alcohol and volatile substance abuse, which exacerbates pre-existing mental health problems. It is particularly difficult for residents of remote communities where services are limited or non-existent, to access adequate mental health care. Travel to regional towns often involves long journeys on poor quality roads, and there are additional difficulties in terms of arranging accommodation.

Australia faces deeply concerning rates of suicide. While Indigenous Australians are once again over-represented, these frightening statistics know no racial economic or social boundaries. NTCOSS believes that agreements and protocols need to be developed between all agencies involved in the care of people at risk of suicide: police, government and non-government mental health services, Indigenous organisations, telephone support services, and others. This will assist in raising awareness of suicide prevention and will improving the referral and continuity of care for people at risk of suicide. Better data must also be gathered about the incidence of suicide attempts, so that the issues can be better understood and more thoughtfully addressed.

More generally, the incidence and severity of mental illness in our community can be reduced through more effective provision of a whole range of key services for people who are disadvantaged. In addition to appropriate and affordable housing and support services, it is education, alcohol and other drug services, employment opportunities, legal aid, financial services and family support which provide the safety net to ensure that the most vulnerable in our community receive at least a basic standard of care.

The absence of accommodation options for disadvantaged people right across the Territory is discussed more fully in the "sector wide" section of this document. However this issue is highlighted here, as the implications for the mental health sector are so stark and severe. The inadequacies of housing infrastructure and support across the whole range of mental health accommodation from low level to 24 hour care are so pronounced that there is simply no possibility of providing an adequate standard of mental health care until these deficiencies are addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Expand the service range by providing more community-based services and support options for mental health clients in urban centres and remote communities**
- 2. Develop as a priority more comprehensive accommodation and support services for people with a mental illness**

Older Territorians

The Northern Territory has a growing population of people aged over 55 who lack adequate services and support. Dementia is now the 3rd most significant health issue in terms of financial costs. By 2060, it is predicted to be the most prevalent health condition in the country. If we continue at the current rate of diagnosis, a further 175, 000 carers will be needed to provide the necessary support. More resources need to be invested in risk reduction strategies, research, and support. Currently, the NT does not even acknowledge dementia in their Chronic Disease Management Plan. A lack of action will result in the costs associated with managing dementia continuing to rise

In recent pre-budget submissions, NTCOSS has identified the need to improve access to geriatricians. There is currently access to a part time Geriatrician in Darwin, soon to be full time from 2011; and in Alice Springs there is access to a Doctor who provides a geriatric clinic half day a month. NTCOSS welcomes the two psychogeriatric clinical nurse consultant positions created at the end of 2009, which sit with the Aged Care Assessment Teams (ACAT). However, great needs remain – and specific responses are required for both older people (over 65) and younger people with dementia.

A psychogeriatric unit at the Royal Darwin Hospital is urgently needed to provide care for older people with complex needs, who respond to drugs and treatment differently and often present with different symptoms as well. There is also a concern that younger people with dementia (under 65) will fall through the cracks once Aged Care goes to the Commonwealth. Capacity building in the disability sector is required to provide for younger people with dementia, including funding for Indigenous Project Workers to promote awareness about dementia in remote Indigenous communities. The development of alternative models for the care of younger people with dementia in residential care settings, as an option to aged care facilities is also critical

Previous submissions have noted the urgent need for affordable and appropriate housing options for older Territorians. Lack of access to transport also continues to be a major barrier to older people participating fully in the community. The establishment of safe, accessible and reliable community transport services for vulnerable older people across the NT is critical in supporting these senior Territorians to have fulfilling lives.

Workforce issues continue to be of major concern. The sector struggles to recruit and retain workers in a situation where wage levels in the community centre languish some 20% below those on offer in the government and private sectors. Additionally there is a lack of value and recognition for those who work in the industry. Few career paths are available to young people who work as carers.

Organisations have raised specific concerns regarding the lack of understanding of the diverse needs of older people and in particular identified groups such as Indigenous people, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, and those from the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual communities. More work needs to be done to improve the capacity of the sector to respect - and respond to - this diversity of need.

More funding is needed for all aged care programs including HACC, CACP/EACH. Organisations report a decrease in hours for many of their clients on these packages. They also report an increasing complexity in the needs of many clients, including those living on Town Camps. For many clients, especially Indigenous people living in town camps and remote areas, there is only very limited choice of service providers. Further, the Pensioner Concession Scheme should be reviewed to ensure that the benefits are directed to those who are most in need.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Provide project funding to an appropriate organisation to work with service providers to build their capacity to support senior Territorians from diverse backgrounds.

2. Develop and implement a dementia risk-reduction strategy across the whole of the NT.

Transport

Transport continues to be of significant concern to each sector NTCOSS consulted. In our previous Pre-Budget Submission, NTCOSS recommended the provision of a safe, affordable public transport system to link remote communities with major regional centres. Some new funding was made available in the May Budget to trial remote passenger transport services in Katherine and Yirrkala, and fund some road and air strip upgrades. However, it is disappointing to note that the NTG's 'regional transport strategy' report has not been placed in the public domain.

Last year, we also called for improved public transport in regional centres, and we welcome the \$3.2M for improved bus services in the Greater Darwin area, and an additional \$650,000 towards public transport in the Alice Springs area. In addition, \$800,000 was allocated in the budget to construct bus turnaround areas at town camps in Alice Springs. These are promising first steps, however additional resourcing is still required to further improve access for all Town Camps.

More funding is urgently required for transport for remote community residents, both between communities and major centres, and within regional centres. While there has been an increase in the bush bus service between Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, one service stops only on the side of road at community turnoffs, and the other bus takes nine hours. Locations like Epenarra and Canteen Creek still have no service. Residents of Tennant Creek using the other commercial service must wait in a roadhouse for the 3am bus to depart. The return service arrives back at 2am at a pizza shop, where there are no toilets or public phones, creating obvious safety concerns. While we welcome the recommencement of a Tennant Creek to Darwin airline service, the \$600 one way cost will be prohibitive for most people.

Residents of larger remote communities like Wadeye and Maningrida with populations approaching that of Tennant Creek, have even less choice. In the context of the national and NT Social Inclusion agendas, people on smaller remote communities and the 10,000 Territorians who live on outstations need effective transport links if they are to access medical treatment, shops and services. The lack of appropriate transport services means that families from communities can't get back home after major events, increasing the risk of social issues arising through increased alcohol consumption. There are also additional costs to agencies that end up filling the gap left by the absence of transport.

Those who suffer most from the lack of transport are already marginalised. Wheel-chair users and people with other special transport requirements find their mobility severely restricted, even in large regional centres due to a shortage of suitable vehicles. In the Barkly region, where there is no public transport, getting into town for things like urgent dental appointments is highly problematic. Lack of access to transport reduces people's ability to access work, health services, shops, and recreational activities. Where affordable public transport is not available, those on low incomes are often forced to pay for taxis or minibuses for essential travel. Yet in Alice Springs and Darwin public transport is free for pensioners, and heavily discounted for Health Care Card Holders. These inequities must be addressed or many poor will continue to pay more.

Community transport options exist in all other jurisdictions in the country, and provide special care, using small group transport for the Home and Community Care target group, including frail aged, people with disabilities, and their carers. Short term assistance is also provided for people to attend medical appointments. A similar model of transport for the NT needs to be explored, and could include using existing agency vehicles.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Provide a safe, affordable public transport system to link remote communities with major regional centres.**
- 2. Provide funding for a community transport model in regional areas such as Tennant Creek and Katherine**

Youth

The Northern Territory has the youngest population of any Australian state or territory and the highest proportion of Indigenous young people in any Australian jurisdiction, many of whom are potentially at risk. Urgent needs have been identified in the areas of accommodation, youth justice, alternative education, and recreation.

In our last four Pre Budget Submissions, NTCOSS has recommended the establishment of a youth sector peak body. Funding has recently been allocated to NTCOSS for an NT wide Youth Policy Officer position, which commenced in October 2010. This position will facilitate input from youth sector organisations across the Territory to social policy development and advocacy, and NTG consultative processes. It will also facilitate the development of partnership opportunities between DH&F and the youth sector. While this is important recognition of the need for resources for youth policy coordination and development in the NT, the new position does not remove the need for a peak-body. Last year, NTCOSS also recommended comprehensive mapping of existing youth services to identify gaps and provide a transparent basis for planning decisions to meet the escalating demand for new services in the most cost-effective manner. This recommendation was not funded.

While an additional \$2M has been allocated to manage juvenile detainees, NTCOSS is concerned about the lack of money earmarked to reform the Youth Justice System to help keep young people out of the detention system in the first place. In addition, the need for dedicated police liaison officers located in Darwin and Alice Springs was again seen as a way to assist in forging more positive relationships with young people, and establishing the preconditions for problems to be solved before they become serious. Such staff could be involved in operational work, and mentoring police officers in providing youth friendly practices. They would complement the role of school-based constables by also working with young people outside school age.

Further, the provision of safe, friendly places for young people, and the creation of structured activity programs are crucial for the development of young people. This need is acute across both regional, and remote areas, where youth diversionary programs are desperately needed. The presence of an active and viable youth program in remote communities is essential for the development of young people, and one of the most important means of minimising substance misuse, including the use of inhalants. Funding is required for both wages and one-off infrastructure costs such as recreational halls, accommodation and vehicles.

School attendance issues, which are linked to patterns set at home (e.g. drinking), were highlighted, and a need for more alternative education programs and extra tutoring options was identified. In particular there is a critical need for a TAFE system, with its focus on a skills-based learning model. Under this system young people from the bush could attend courses such as mechanics for a six week block. In Alice Springs there will be an alternative education provider from Term 1 of 2011, but the needs in other regions remain high. The need for community awareness programs to encourage parents to involve themselves in education was also highlighted.

The urgent need for short-term crisis accommodation, especially in places like Katherine and Nhulunbuy was highlighted, as was the need for transitional housing programs (e.g. 'same household different landlord' model) and longer term rehabilitation facilities for young people with drug and alcohol problems. Organisations also identified a clear need for improved access to health services for young people. Greater focus must be placed on creating youth-friendly services, with flexible appointment schedules, where young people could be comfortable in talking about issues such as pregnancy, sexual health and violence. Headspace, which provides bulk billing, has improved access for young people to health services in Darwin and Alice Springs. However, young people in other regions have very limited choice of health services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Provide additional recurrent and one-off infrastructure funding for recreational services across remote areas (\$6.4M) and recurrent funding for regional areas (\$1M) of the NT.

2 Fund Youth Police Liaison Officer positions in all regional centres of the NT.



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