



Appropriate and Affordable Housing for ALL Territorians

15 months after the release of the Federal Government's White Paper-
'The Road Home'-

A look at where the NT is positioned to achieve the objectives of the
National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness

A Report by Louise Weber
Funded by Homelessness Australia

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How the NT is positioned to achieve the objectives of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness

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Background

The rate of homelessness in the NT far exceeds the national average (248 per 10,000 as compared to 53 per 10,000) and varies dramatically across the Territory. Unlike elsewhere in Australia, homelessness in the NT is not concentrated in urban centres, but is also high in regional and remote areas, with the highest rate found in Katherine (AIHW 2009). Furthermore, the implementation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) has resulted in increases in the rate of primary homelessness, albeit unintended (Holmes, 2009)¹. With this backdrop, NT Shelter welcomed the signing of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness in December 2008.

Since December 2008, media releases continue to boast 'the biggest spend ever'; an end to years of neglect under the previous government; the arrival of a new era of 'partnerships' - in housing, homelessness, Indigenous affairs, and more. So, fifteen months down the track we look at the progress of 'the big spend' and consider how well positioned the NT is to achieve the objectives of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH).

The NPAH comprises the Implementation Plan on Homelessness for the NT, signed off in August 2009. This establishes priority locations, service types and the relative effort of each jurisdiction to reduce homelessness. The NPAH runs over five years, 2008–2013. The Commonwealth is to allocate \$25.604m in funds, topped up by the Territory Government's contribution of \$29.389m; thus a combined total of \$54.993m to be spent over the term of the NPAH.

Primary responsibility for overseeing the NPAH initiatives and outcomes in the NT sit with the Northern Territory Government's Homelessness Working Group. Comprised of representatives of the Departments of Justice, Health and Families, Chief Minister, Housing, Treasury, Lands and Planning, Education and Training, this Group reports directly to the NT Inter-Departmental Community Safety Working Group.

While the Northern Territory and Federal Governments have made commitments to reduce homelessness, no formal targets have been set for the NT. The NPAH states that both governments will agree on baseline measures and targets by June 2010. On behalf of the homeless services sector, NT Shelter looks forward to the release of these. NT Shelter welcomes both Governments' commitment to reduce homelessness and particularly welcomes indications of the need to improve understanding of the drivers of homelessness, including Indigenous homelessness, and responses to it. The NPAH signals the recognition that a wider range of services on the continuum of need are required if homelessness is to reduce.

Implementation detail for the NPAH in the NT

Both Northern Territory and Commonwealth funds will be distributed on an annual basis to projects considered to meet the identified outputs of the Agreement. Outputs are divided in two parts: core and discretionary outputs. The four core outputs are:

- (a) The A Place to Call Home initiative
- (b) The Street to Home initiative
- (c) Support for private and public tenants to help sustain tenancies, and
- (d) Assistance for people leaving child protection services, correctional and health facilities.

The discretionary outputs articulated in the NPAH are also expected to occur over the five year term. Given these are 'Discretionary', by definition they suggest these are optional, creating some doubt that all these initiatives will, or can, be delivered.

¹ Darwin's primary homeless are locally known as 'Long Grassers'; research suggests an increase in the Long Grass population following implementation the NTER in remote NT Aboriginal communities.

NT Implementation Plan progress

A Place to Call Home (part 1) – aims to build 32 dwellings over five years. Progress: Allocations have not been made. Part 2 aligns to the Tenancy Sustainability Program, see below for progress.

Youth Development Crisis Accommodation in Tennant Creek - providing 12 residential beds for young people aged 11-24, with an allocation of \$240,000 in 09/10. Progress: This commenced in October 2009 and reported to be running well.

This is the only youth accommodation service in the Barkly region and homelessness in Tennant Creek stands at 147 per 10,000 (Chamberlain, 2006), with the total population of just 3000². Territory Housing and Julalikari Council have a combined total of 140 people/families waiting to be housed. Julalikari is one of few remaining NT Aboriginal Housing organizations since 2008³.

EOI's for Street to Home initiatives for chronic homeless people – an allocation of \$1.06m for 09/10. Progress: To date 4 projects have been funded to provide a total of 100+ beds: YMCA (Darwin) will retain 63 rooms that were to close, with an additional 15 rooms as well as a 3 bedroom house and a 2 bedroom unit; Mental Health Assoc (Central Australia) were funded to broker 6 rooms; funds have gone to Salvation Army for case management and outreach support. The Street to Home program is to be an NT wide initiative; we look forward to the expansion of these over the term of the NPAH.

Palmerston Youth Crisis Accommodation - aims to reunify young people with their families and ensure they are linked to education, training, living skills and counseling. Progress: Scoping this has begun, in consultation with the sector; aims to have a model ready to go to tender in June.

Tenancy Sustainability Program TSP – is the expansion of an existing Territory Housing program providing life skills training and intensive case management to public housing tenants and applicants, and town camp residents to reduce evictions and 'at risk' tenancies. Progress: This commenced in May-June 2009, with 6 caseworkers delivering TSP in Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs. An evaluation of outcomes of the current contracts is underway to determine where an additional \$1m will be directed next.

Assistance for people leaving correctional services (Darwin & Alice Springs) - Outputs will be the proportion of sentence plans/case plans that incorporate post-release plans; proportion of clients referred to continuing education, training or employment post release. The NT has by far the highest rate of imprisonment at a staggering 645.8 per 100,000 (ABS 2009), with Indigenous people making up to 85% of the NT prison population. In 2006-2009, there was a 50% increase in the female Indigenous imprisonment rate. The NT recidivism rate is the highest in Australia, and 73% of prisoners held in custody are unemployed prior to incarceration (NAAJA, 2009).

Initiatives that focus on this population are overdue and a focus on the causes of recidivist behaviour will bring some redress to insufficient government attention here. A concern with this initiative is the use of 'the proportion of referrals' as a performance measure – referrals are meaningless unless they produce outcomes. Progress: A program has just begun.

High Risk Youth Program (Darwin & Alice Springs): No progress made.

Service Coordination System (Darwin) Progress: Internal work within the Department of Housing has commenced.

Homelessness system mapping studies (Darwin, Katherine and Maningrida): No progress made.

Intervention and Case Management Service - this is an extension of an existing program with the Larrakia Nation, to assist countrymen with multiple issues to support a transition into short then longer term secure accommodation. It has \$3.25m allocated over 4 years.

Domestic and Family Violence Support: \$15m over 5 years is to be directed to implementing the Family Violence Investment Strategy however other details of initiatives here are unknown.

Young People Leaving Care program: Negotiations have begun with a service provider.

2 While below the Territory's average, Tennant Creek's rate is almost three times the national average

3 Prior to 2008, all housing funding for remote communities was channeled through more than 60 ACHOs that managed approx 6,000 dwellings and housed 42% of the NT Aboriginal population.

NT Homelessness Summit

In November 2009, the NT Homelessness Summit was held over three days in Darwin, to engage the homelessness services sector and relevant stakeholders in the transition from the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) to new arrangements under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). The Summit also served as a forum to consult with the sector on future responses to homelessness; the outcomes of which have been developed into an Action Plan for the NT. It is anticipated the Action Plan will augment outputs of the NPAH and form the basis of ongoing sector engagement by NT Shelter, in collaboration with government.

Some areas of concern

The Implementation Plan identifies urban sites as initial priority areas - Darwin, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, with Katherine omitted from the mix of direct services scheduled. Given Katherine has the highest rate of homelessness in the NT at 507 per 10,000 — almost 10 times the national average (Chamberlain, 2009) — NT Shelter is concerned by this omission, it suggests the Plan is not sufficiently evidence-based. Moreover, the Katherine region has been hit hard by the NTER; the introduction of income management has meant that people from outlying communities are required to shop in Katherine stores to access 50% of their incomes using the BasicsCard system. Remote transport systems and the prohibitive cost of taxis (with fares to some communities in excess of \$200), means that people can be, and often are, stranded in town (Smith, 2008). Existing services provide minimal accommodation and are overburdened; Katherine lacks the capacity to support these additional individuals and families in town. Such scenarios are not limited to Katherine and apply equally to Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. The challenge to people on income management further increases when you consider they are expected to save for rental bonds from the remaining 50% of their payments not subject to income management (Fisher, 2009).

Funding for the range of homeless services (women's refuges, youth shelters, men's shelters, outreach services, drop-in centres and living skills programs) now come under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). The shift from the long-standing CSHA arrangements is accompanied by uncertainty for specialist homelessness services in the sector. As with other states, the key concerns remain the consolidation of 92 special purpose payments into 5 payments; the status of matched funding arrangements from the States/Territories; new governance arrangements; data collection; and, commitments to research. The overall question remains, how will all this impact on service delivery and agency core business?

An issue for this sector is insufficient information to base a considered assessment of the impact of changes under the NAHA. The absence of service agreements and sustained funding levels preclude strategic planning or direction setting beyond the next 3 years. Staff in front line services confront the devastating impact of homelessness and violence on their clients on a daily basis; commonly clients arrive traumatized, raising the risk of vicarious trauma for staff; poor engagement with the sector over changes under the NAHA has added an undue stress.

The broader NT policy context

A range of policies are running concurrent to the NPAH in the NT, impacting on its broad goals. Some understanding of these is required to decipher the Commonwealth's progress report on the NPHA, *Along the Road Home*, released in December 2009, to mark the first anniversary of *The Road Home* White paper.

The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing is operational under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) in the NT and aligns with the NPAH. This joint Commonwealth Territory program of \$672m is being rolled out over five years, with targets to build 750 new houses, rebuild 230 existing dwellings, and refurbish 2500.

All the new builds will occur in 20 communities⁴, with upgrades to occur in 57 communities. The location of SIHIP corresponds with the 73 prescribed communities subject to the NTER. The SIHIP commenced in 2007/08 and is due for completion by the end of 2013. To date, just two houses have been built to lock-up stage under the SIHIP; not a boastful rate of progress. Additionally, concerns have been expressed that refurbishments have not met with community expectations.

Given SIHIP is aligned to the NPAH, NT Shelter is concerned that its thrust overlooks the housing needs of one-quarter of the NT Aboriginal population, with 10,000 people residing in over 500 outlying Homelands/Outstations across the NT (Altman, 2008). This is occurring in the context of the governments' policy priority on the COAG 'Closing the Gap' Agreement, to ensure targets for improved health outcomes are reached for this population. Given the strong evidence of the relationship between improved health outcomes and housing, ignoring the housing needs of this large population lacks coherency and poses the threat that progress made in one area will be negated by ignoring the needs in another.

Arguably, the exclusion of Homelands/Outstation from housing dollars is also flawed on fiscal terms, ignoring the contribution these communities make to the nation through their flexible 'hybrid- economies' (Altman, 2009). Furthermore, as history shows, governments cannot evade the consequences and costs elsewhere if they continue to neglect Aboriginal housing needs.

The NPHA also aligns with the Alice Springs Transformation Plan, announced in May 2009. A joint Federal / Territory initiative under SIHIP, it includes \$100m for new housing and upgraded infrastructure in town camps, with \$11 m for short-term accommodation, as well as programs to address causal factors of homelessness, such as family violence. The February announcement of a plan to construct the 'Alice Springs Accommodation Park' appears to offer some answers. This aims to accommodate up to 150 people to address homelessness by providing accommodation to Indigenous people visiting town for medical and other services (Snowden 2010). In contrast, the new Public Places By-Law in Alice Springs effectively criminalizes homelessness.

The NPAH comes at a crucial time for the NT; it has the highest rate of national homelessness, as housing demand continues to exceed supply, there is an unprecedented rise in house purchase prices and Darwin is one of the least affordable locations to rent in Australia. Additionally, the NT Government has sold off significant public housing stock in the last 10 years without replacing supply, despite population growth forecasts (NT Shelter 2009)⁵. Not so long ago, urban NT was a comparatively affordable place to rent or buy and a wider demographic is affected. The NT also suffers from an under-developed community housing sector, which in other states provides some relief for low-income households. Furthermore, the absence of a not-for-profit housing sector in the NT has precluded any opportunity to access the National Rental Affordability Scheme incentives. Moreover, as the numbers of households experiencing housing stress continues to rise (NT Shelter 2009); the cumulative affect is an increase in people 'at risk' and vulnerable to all levels of homelessness - primary, secondary and tertiary.

Will the NT's complex policy matrix work?

We welcome the diverse initiatives in the NT Implementation Plan. They indicate recognition of the need to increase, improve and diversify services for Indigenous, youth women and those exiting the justice system. However, beyond that, a strategic direction and overall vision is clear. Further, while welcoming the new commitment and the dedication of resources, the confidence expressed by the Government in its progress report and media releases is not immediately shared by all. In the NT, progress to date has been slow in all areas, including the release of information on program targets. Despite allocating significant funds, the NT sector sees this has having enabled services to 'catch-up' on outstanding improvements to service delivery and there is quite some way to go if we are to begin to reduce rates of homelessness.

4 The focus on 20 communities aligns with the 'Working Futures' policy to create centralised 'economic hubs' in the NT. This policy reflects the government's outstations policy – arguably assimilation via inaction and neglect for people who have chosen to 'live on country' in 500 Homelands/Outstations.

5 The accepted formula is housing costs (rent or mortgage) are 30% of income create housing stress; costs that reach 50% create a housing crisis, when applied to the lower 40 percentile of average incomes.

As we go to print, there have been a total of only 2 new dwellings completed under SIHIP and one-quarter of the NT Aboriginal population are not factored into this program for any new housing assistance; Katherine, with NT's highest rate of homelessness, has no direct services in the Plan; and, the SAAP sector await service agreements to plan with confidence under the new NAHA.

The complex policy framework and concerns that the effort outlined will create any sustained improvements is uncertain without a strategic framework. If we are to see any improvements in the alarming rate of homelessness NT, better coordination is needed to ensure agreed directions is reflected across Government policy in the NT and the Commonwealth – currently contradictions must reconsider new policies that impact negatively on the Indigenous population. As ever, Territorians live in hope that 'the biggest spend ever' will flow to where it is needed most – outcomes on the ground.

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