

MEDIA RELEASE

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PROGRESS MADE ON HOMELESSNESS BUT MUCH STILL TO BE DONE

An overall reduction in the number of homeless persons across the Northern Territory over the past five years is welcome news but numbers remain unacceptably high and provide a sobering reminder of the huge task ahead according to peak affordable housing and homelessness body, NT Shelter.

The 2016 Census figures on homelessness released today by the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that the overall number of homeless persons in the NT has dropped from 15,337 in 2011 to 13,717 in 2016, representing a 10.5% decrease. The five year comparison shows a reduction of 2,105 persons living in severely overcrowded dwellings, partially offset by increased numbers of people sleeping rough and those in supported accommodation, particularly in Darwin.

The decrease in overcrowding homelessness is consistent with the findings of the report of the Remote Housing Review, commissioned by the Commonwealth Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Nigel Scullion, last year. In that report, investment in housing has seen rates of overcrowding reduced from 52% to 37% across remote communities since 2008.

“While there has been some good progress in reducing severe overcrowding, we are a far cry from where we need to be to get on top of our unacceptably high homelessness problem. We are not even half way there when it comes to providing appropriate housing for communities across the NT,” said NT Shelter’s Executive Officer, Peter McMillan.

“We know that half of the remaining houses still to be built across remote Australia are needed in the Northern Territory, the jurisdiction with the lowest capacity to meet this pressure.”

The Remote Housing Review Panel also warned that without further investment in remote housing, improvements made over the past ten years will be lost and the Commonwealth Government’s \$5.4 billion investment will have been “wasted”.

The Prime Minister’s Closing the Gap Report 2018 states that good quality housing underpins all of the Closing the Gap targets in health, education and employment, as well as community safety.

“We call on the Commonwealth Government, as a matter of urgency, to finalise arrangements with the NT Government on a long term, joint capital investment in housing. This needs to be in the form of a matched dollar-for-dollar commitment for housing construction as well as land servicing and infrastructure requirements,” said Mr McMillan.

The ABS figures show a rise in the number of urban homeless, especially in the number of people sleeping rough or staying in boarding houses. Demand for homelessness services in the NT increased by 13% on the previous year and the level of unmet demand for homelessness services is twice that of other states. Significant overcrowding and homelessness challenges extend beyond remote communities and are also present in urban and regional communities, including town camps and homelands.

Despite the latest figures indicating that the Northern Territory has twelve times the national rate of homelessness, it received only 1.3% or \$18.8 million of the Commonwealth's \$1.4 billion funding for affordable housing and homelessness in the previous year.

"We all know that the rate of homelessness in the NT is drastically higher than the national average and yet we receive only a tiny portion of what is needed because allocations have historically been done on a per capita basis", said Mr McMillan.

NT Shelter has written to the Commonwealth Treasurer, Scott Morrison, calling for a greater allocation of Commonwealth funding to the Northern Territory under the proposed new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) based on need.

Mr McMillan said that when it came to funding requirements for housing and homelessness, the evidence was clear.

"We now have several years of credible national data on the demand for homelessness services and where we are falling short. Nobody can reasonably argue that the NT shouldn't receive a greater allocation based on the overwhelming homelessness challenges we continue to face here, well above those in the other states," Mr McMillan added.

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NT Shelter is a not-for-profit organisation that works towards a just and fairer housing system in the NT. We aim to ensure appropriate and affordable housing is available for everyone, especially disadvantaged groups and those on low incomes.

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