



SUBMISSION TO THE DRAFT
NATIONAL PLAN TO END
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
AND CHILDREN 2022 - 2032

NT Shelter



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NT Shelter

NT Shelter is the Northern Territory’s peak body for affordable housing and homelessness. Our members are specialist homelessness services (SHSs), community housing providers (CHPs), and other stakeholders engaged with the provision of appropriate and affordable housing for all Territorians¹.

NT Shelter members



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Introduction

Domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) and access to safe and affordable housing are inextricably linked. Inadequate housing is widely understood to be a risk factor for DFSVⁱⁱ and DFSV is the top reason that people, predominantly women, leave their home in Australia.ⁱⁱⁱ

NT Shelter strongly supports the inclusion of safe and secure housing as part of the Draft National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032 (“The Plan”) under Pillar Three: Response. We note however that the provision of safe and secure housing was also emphasised in the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022 yet continues to be elusive for many Territorians. In addition, rates of DFSV have remained stable since 2005,^{iv} despite the implementation of the 2010-2022 Plan.

While NT Shelter recognises that future Action Plans will be forthcoming, our primary recommendation is that The Plan be strengthened by the inclusion of a clear set of goals and a tangible timeline by which to meet them. Specifically, a blueprint setting out how The Plan will ensure women and children escaping violence have safe and secure housing across the spectrum from crisis to longer term, sustainable social housing.

NT Shelter’s member organisations include specialist DFSV crisis accommodation providers and we acknowledge that a number of these organisations may also provide their own feedback on the Draft Plan. Further, NT Shelter supports the submission of the Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) and the extensive work they have done with their members in the area of DFSV.

The Northern Territory has both the highest rate of DFSV^v and the highest rate of homelessness in Australia^{vi}. Our submission highlights the Northern Territory context with a focus on the relationship between access to affordable housing, the experience of homelessness and DFSV, with a view to informing the next iteration of The Plan.

The Northern Territory Context: DFSV, Homelessness and Housing

Homelessness

The Northern Territory has the highest rates of homelessness in Australia at twelve times the national average.^{vii} In the 2020-21 reporting period, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that family and domestic violence was the top reason clients sought assistance from specialist homelessness services.^{viii} In the NT, this client cohort sits at 53% compared with 39% nationally.^{ix}

The rate of demand for homelessness services in the NT is almost four times that of other Australian jurisdictions.^x Unmet demand represents 39.3% of total client demand in the NT and is on the rise; in 2020-21, 22 requests for assistance went unmet each day^{xi}, compared to 19 the year prior^{xii}. It is important to note that this level of unmet demand is reflective only of the number of people who have approached SHS agencies for support and does not measure the population level unmet demand, which would likely be much higher. On average nationally, over two thirds of unassisted requests in the 2020-21 reporting period came from women.^{xiii} Most commonly, agencies were unable to assist because there was no accommodation available at the time.^{xiv}

In both Alice Springs and Darwin, the cases of women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness due to DFSV, are regularly presented at the Homelessness Response Group (HRG) that is auspiced by NT Shelter. We hear from members and stakeholders that, with little accommodation available, victim-survivors of DFSV often manage their own homelessness by sleeping rough or couch surfing with friends and family, in some cases impacting existing public housing tenancies. This is supported by research on the female experience of homelessness, showing that women have a greater tendency to 'self-manage' homelessness.^{xv}

Services report that they regularly utilise brokerage funds to support women and children into hotels, however these options can also be unavailable (at capacity), unsuitable to the needs of the client, or reticent to accept the client, citing bans that are put in place due to destructive or intimidatory past behaviours by perpetrators.

NT Shelter members and stakeholders have identified a need for short term accommodation options for women at risk of or experiencing homelessness who, due to their homelessness alone, are more vulnerable to violence. This includes the increasing number of single women and families experiencing, or at risk of homelessness, and women leaving prison. The appropriate services response would not be a 'crisis response' space but rather, short term accommodation for women who seek respite to avoid a potential crisis, or who are seeking shelter for other reasons.

While this submission focuses on the adult experience of DFSV and homelessness, NT Shelter member organisations and stakeholders have also raised concerns about the lack of crisis accommodation options for victim-survivors of DFSV under the age of 18.

Housing

In the Northern Territory, there is a shortfall of housing to meet demand right across the housing continuum, including emergency, transitional, supported and longer-term housing infrastructure. Those on low incomes, including people attempting to escape DFSV, are frequently excluded from the housing market. The failure of the market to supply sufficient social and affordable housing, and insufficient government intervention to address the supply shortfall, means that the housing needs of many of Australia's most vulnerable people are not being met.

In the private housing market, the NT remains one of the least affordable jurisdictions in the country in which to rent a property.^{xvi} The regional and remote townships of the Northern Territory have historically low supply and high demand markets. The Northern Territory also has the least protection for renters in Australia with 'no grounds' evictions and short lease periods contributing significantly to the risk of people becoming homelessness.

The Northern Territory has an underdeveloped community housing sector and an overwhelmed and deficient public housing system. Existing social housing stock in the Northern Territory falls short of meeting demand as evidenced by lengthy wait times for both the general and priority waitlists for public housing; as at February 2022, the longest wait time is eight to ten years.^{xvii} There are over 5,400 families on the Urban Public Housing Waitlist alone and it is no consolation to these people that new housing and homelessness strategies continue to be released without any significant additional funding to underpin them.

NT Shelter members and stakeholders consider the most critical gap in services to be the lack of transitional and longer-term housing, with accompanying support, including public housing, community housing and the private rental market. For women who are exiting from domestic and family violence crisis shelters or women who are not at imminent threat, there are few if any viable accommodation options in the Territory's regional centres of Katherine, Tennant Creek, Nhulunbuy and Alice Springs. This gap is highlighted in NT Shelter's Pre-Budget Submission 2022-23, in which NT Shelter supports the calls of our member organisations for more investment in medium and long-term accommodation for women.

The lack of accommodation on all levels of the housing continuum leads to women who are at risk of DFSV cycling in and out of crisis accommodation.^{xviii} Women's legal service providers regularly report that a lack of transitional and long-term accommodation options is the biggest barrier facing many of their clients. In a recent example provided by Central Australia Aboriginal Family Legal Unit (CAAFLU) Aboriginal Corporation, a woman from a remote community was evacuated to Alice Springs with her children due to being at high risk of family violence. Once in Alice Springs, she was able to access crisis accommodation. Once her stay was over, the woman sought medium to long-term accommodation in Alice Springs where her children had settled into a new school. With no luck, the woman returned to her community where she was again assaulted. Again, she was evacuated to Alice Springs and placed into crisis accommodation. For this woman, this story has repeated itself dozens of times over more than a decade. She is stuck in a cycle of disruption and violence, unable to get the stability she needs, stability that starts with housing.

The greatest evidence of a housing system under stress is the perceived necessity for a person attempting to escape DFSV to return to the relationship to avoid homelessness for themselves or their children. Without an increase in housing stock, it is challenging to envisage how The Plan will progress Pillar Three, Focus Area Three: Ensure women and children escaping violence have safe and secure housing, across the spectrum from crisis to longer term, sustainable social housing.

In NT Shelter's submission to the House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence made in 2020, we noted, "It is critical that the next National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children incorporates dedicated housing investment for the areas of greatest need (demand) and works in conjunction with all State and Territory Governments in their development of a National Housing Strategy".^{xix}

NT Shelter's subsequent recommendation for the next iteration of The Plan is therefore consistent with this advice. It is essential that The Plan includes a clear goal to increase housing investment and ensure that vulnerable people have access to safe and secure housing without a ten year wait. NT Shelter recommends that The Plan incorporate dedicated housing investment for the areas of greatest need and works in conjunction with all State and Territory Governments to develop a National Housing Strategy.

Both the recommendation to develop a National Housing Strategy and to employ a needs-based funding methodology, are supported by the recently released Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia Final Report.^{xx}

Housing Key Workers

NT Shelter DFSV sector members and stakeholders commonly report that they face difficulties when recruiting staff members, often due to a lack of available housing to rent. This is particularly evident in the Territory's regional centres. There are regular reports of key workers from all sectors leaving the Northern Territory due to the rising costs of housing. In Darwin, rents have risen by more than 20% over the past year, coinciding with an increase in property prices.^{xxi} Compounding the steep increases, supply has not kept up with demand.

The first Focus Area identified by the Draft Plan under Pillar Three: Response, relates to ensuring that an adequately staffed service system is available to support victim-survivors of DFSV regardless of their location. Without adequate housing options, this will be challenging.

NT Shelter recommends that a plan to adequately house key DFSV workers in the Northern Territory, particularly in regional centres, remote and very remote areas, is included in the next iteration of The Plan.

First Nations Territorians

NT Shelter acknowledges that First Nations Australians are disproportionately impacted by DFSV, homelessness and barriers to appropriate housing.

The NT has the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, representing one third of the Territory's population,^{xxii} a population disproportionately impacted by both DFSV^{xxiii} and homelessness^{xxiv}. In the NT, Indigenous Australians account for 88.5% of all homeless peoples^{xxv} and 89% of all victim-survivors of DFSV. Compared with non-Indigenous people, Indigenous Australians are more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence and more likely to be murdered by a family member.^{xxvi} The Northern Territory's Police Commissioner recently described the rate of DFSV in the NT as "the worst it's been".^{xxvii}

According to a 2020 Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families, an acute lack of crisis, transitional and long-term housing, particularly in regional and remote locations, is a key factor in the high rates of domestic and family violence-related injury and death amongst Indigenous women.^{xxviii}

The inquiry found that the focus of current initiatives to target DFV is on generic populations, leading to policy that fails to account for the cultural and socioeconomic realities of Indigenous Australia.^{xxix} This lack of focus on the distinct profile of Indigenous housing and its impact on DFV, a profile that includes access to housing and homelessness services, exclusion from the mainstream housing market, the vulnerability to tenancy breaches and physical and financial abuse,^{xxx} must be considered in the next iteration of The Plan.

In the context of the Northern Territory, capacity must be built in Aboriginal housing and homelessness services to ensure a culturally safe, responsive and Aboriginal-led service model for people who are

experiencing DFSV and are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This includes investing in Aboriginal housing organisations and Aboriginal DFSV services, as well as homelessness, crisis and prevention agencies.

NT Shelter recognises that a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island Action Plan is forthcoming. It is our recommendation that this Action Plan is informed by the experiences of First Nations Australians in all contexts, including the remote and very remote context which offers unique challenges for service delivery. We recommend that the forthcoming Action Plan include a clear set of targets to reduce the burden of DFSV-related homelessness on First Nations Australians.

*Case Study: Veeta**

Veeta comes from a community near Darwin. She experienced continuing domestic violence in her community. Veeta obtained a Domestic Violence Order (DVO), but the perpetrator of the violence regularly breached the order. The Police were unable to follow up every breach and the perpetrator was not apprehended.

Territory Families became involved, and Veeta understood that if she could not keep her children safe from the regular incidences of domestic violence, they would be removed from her care. Veeta left her home, forced into homelessness to ensure the safety of herself and her children. She left her community and cultural supports and moved to Darwin.

While in Darwin, Veeta stayed with friends and family. She moved from place to place because she felt unsafe. She called crisis services looking for accommodation, but they were full or didn't meet the needs of her children.

Eventually, Veeta secured crisis accommodation and stayed there for three months. She was approved for a priority three-bedroom Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development house. With housing security, Veeta was able to get her life on track, but it wasn't long before the perpetrator found her and began to threaten the family. His behaviour escalated and he broke into the home while Veeta and her children were out, causing extensive damage.

Veeta's children struggled with life in the city and with school, which was difficult because English wasn't their first language. The trauma of the continued violence by their father added to the situation and their education deteriorated rapidly. They eventually stopped attending school. The school contacted Territory Families, who told Veeta that she must ensure her children attended school and that she must keep them away from the violence perpetrated by their father. Veeta made sure to call the Police when the perpetrator came over, but by the time they arrived he had always fled. Police were unable to record a DVO breach.

Veeta was forced to leave her house and seek crisis accommodation. She lost her house and incurred significant debt due to the damage by the perpetrator. With little available accommodation, Veeta became homeless. Territory Families removed the children due to ongoing homelessness. Without her children in her custody, Veeta became ineligible for a three-bedroom home. She also became ineligible for DFSV accommodation because she was no longer perceived to be at immediate risk of DV.

**To ensure the confidentiality of the woman described in this case study, her real name has not been used.*

COVID-19 Impacts and Planning

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the holes within the current Northern Territory housing system.

NT Shelter members and stakeholders report that demand for services has increased significantly while capacity has decreased. One domestic and family violence service for Aboriginal women in remote communities has reported a 100% increase in calls for assistance. The service has also highlighted the additional workload for their staff who are now navigating the complexities of working across biosecurity zones and changing state and territory border restrictions.

As COVID-19 continues to spread across the Northern Territory, staffing has emerged as a key issue for services as they try to keep their doors open. While widespread, this issue particularly impacts regional centres where staffing is already limited.

Many crisis and short-term accommodation providers have reduced their capacity, drop-in centres aimed at supporting the basic food and personal care needs of rough sleepers have experienced forced extended closures and private-accommodation providers have increased their requirements.

The number of COVID-19 positive cases in crisis and short-term accommodation facilities further limits 'flow-through' on the housing continuum and prevents new referrals from being adequately addressed. It also places an unreasonable responsibility on the shoulders of services that are not specialised in health and on their staff members who are not healthcare workers.

The Draft Plan recognises that times of increased stress correlate with a rise in DFSV. NT Shelter recommends that the next iteration of The Plan is complemented by a strategy to adequately respond to the shelter needs of DFSV victim-survivors during health and other emergencies.

Overview of NT Shelter Recommendations

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The inclusion of a clear set of goals and a tangible timeline by which to accomplish Pillar Three, Focus Area Three.

While NT Shelter recognises that future Action Plans will be forthcoming, our primary recommendation is that The Plan be strengthened by the inclusion of a clear set of goals and a tangible timeline by which to meet them. Specifically, a blueprint setting out how The Plan will ensure women and children escaping violence have safe and secure housing across the spectrum from crisis to longer term, sustainable social housing.

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The inclusion of dedicated housing investment in the areas of greatest need and a plan to work in conjunction with State and Territory Governments to develop a National Housing Strategy.

NT Shelter's subsequent recommendation for the next iteration of The Plan is therefore consistent with this advice. It is essential that The Plan includes a clear goal to increase housing investment and ensure that vulnerable people have access to safe and secure housing without a ten year wait. NT Shelter recommends that The Plan incorporate dedicated housing investment for the areas of greatest need and works in conjunction with all State and Territory Governments to develop a National Housing Strategy.

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A plan to adequately house DFSV sector workers

NT Shelter recommends that a plan to adequately house key DFSV workers in the Northern Territory, particularly in regional centres, remote and very remote areas, is included in the next iteration of The Plan.

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Consideration of the unique experiences of First Nations Australians in the development of the dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan and the inclusion of a clear set of targets to reduce the burden of DFSV-related homelessness on First Nations communities.

NT Shelter recognises that a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Action Plan is forthcoming. It is our recommendation that this Action Plan is informed by the experiences of First Nations Australians in all contexts, including the remote and very remote context which offers unique challenges for service delivery. We recommend that the forthcoming Action Plan include a clear set of targets to reduce the burden of DFSV-related homelessness on First Nations Australians.

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The inclusion of a strategy to ensure an adequate response to health and other emergencies.

The Draft Plan recognises that times of increased stress correlate with a rise in DFSV. NT Shelter recommends that the next iteration of The Plan is complemented by a strategy to adequately respond to the shelter needs of DFSV victim-survivors during health and other emergencies.

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