



# Tenancy Support Programs in Darwin: a review of service providers' roles and clients' experiences

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## Executive summary

NT Shelter observed that the work of Tenancy Support Program (TSP) providers in Darwin differed from one provider to another, with their work not well understood. In response, they contracted Catherine Holmes Consulting (CHC) to undertake a review to: explore the role of TSP officers; identify skills gaps; identify professional development and training needs of TSP officers; and gather the views and experiences of TSP clients. The findings and subsequent opportunities stemming from the review may inform Specialist Homelessness Services design discussions between NT Shelter, TSP providers and the Northern Territory Government's Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC).

Guided by key questions, semi-structured conversational-style interviews were undertaken during June, 2022, with twelve TSP officers and managers and thirteen tenants (clients) in connection with four Darwin-based TSP services. Interviews with clients were around 30 minutes in duration, and with TSP officers and managers, up to two hours. In addition, multiple informal and impromptu conversations with staff from two Darwin-based services were undertaken that provided a deeper understanding of the program complexities.

The review found that TSP clients had a myriad of underlying complex issues that compromised tenancies, including financial stress, dependence on public transport, mental illness, chronic disease, disability and infirmity, overcrowding, unemployment and limited employment experience, domestic and family violence and elder abuse, child protection, incarceration, alcohol and drug use and abuse and being the sole carer of grand/children. At the time TSP officers commenced work with clients, clients were in crisis mode and TSP providers were often under pressure from TFHC to deliver results quickly. The operational context, together with the underlying complex issues faced by tenants, heralds the nature of activities that TSPs must navigate if they are to be effective in maintaining a client's tenancy and preventing homelessness. Using a case management approach, TSP officers attempted to address issues through hands-on practical supports, information and education, intra-agency referrals and/or referrals to external organisations.

The complexity of clients' issues also points to the capacity needed within TSP teams in terms of skills, experience and qualifications, as well as the organisational and resourcing supports required to deliver a quality service that is responsive, appropriate and safe. With TSP providers reliant on linking their clients with a diversity of services and supports outside the program, human and health service sector literacy and strong networks were important attributes of TSP teams.

The case-load for most TSP officers was between 12 – 15 clients. Yet this load did not capture the other members of the household that were assisted through the program. Providers estimated that between 50% - 70% of their case-load required intensive case management, with clients remaining in the program for between six months and a year before exiting; some remaining indefinitely. In one TSP, the case-load was significantly higher and the type of support offered focussed on practical supports, such as yard maintenance, rather than underlying issues, highlighting the divergent activities across

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service providers and that opportunities to connect tenants with the right supports may be missed.

TSP providers consistently reported that they received referrals of homeless people living rough or in hostels. While supporting these clients was resource intensive, rarely were they able to assist due to a lack of accessible accommodation. TSPs argued that supporting this population sat outside the program scope. In relation to referring clients out, TSPs noted a distinct shortfall in specialist support services available to address their clients' needs.

Clients valued the relationship they had established with their TSP officers, describing them as kind, having empathy and understanding and being non-judgemental. They trusted their TSP officers and regarded them as being a reliable source of support, advice and assistance. They found the TSP place-based model accessible and appreciated the practical supports. The advocacy support with TFHC's housing branch was particularly valued.

The TSPs had many interconnecting strengths; a key one being the establishment of quality relationships for meaningful program engagement leading to change. A further strength related to its focus on empowering and motivating clients to build skills for independent living. Other program attributes included the TSP's role in advocacy, their client-centred case management approach and their local knowledge and extensive networks. Drawing on a diverse set of skills and experiences, the ability of TSP officer to maintain the cultural safety of clients and secure their tenancies are also important program strengths.

At its core, the aim of the TSP and the activities required of TSP officers firmly situate the program within the 'social work' discipline. By drawing on social work's grounded theories and practices to deliver an evidence-based program that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment of clients, many opportunities are created to inform the next iteration of the TSP. Building on the existing strengths and attributes of the TSP workforce, the program requires a practice framework and for TSP officers to participate in essential professional development and workforce capacity building opportunities. In addition, qualified and experienced social workers are critical inclusions on TSP teams. Other opportunities to strengthen the TSP relate to enhancing the cultural competence and effectiveness of teams, establishing feedback mechanisms that embed client experiences in service design and delivery, recognising the importance of broader organisational support and building the relationship between TFHC and TSP officers.

The review found TSP providers play a critical role in supporting tenants and their families to maintain stable housing and prevent them from becoming homeless. Yet their work is conducted under challenging circumstances. Service providers have: limited resources and access to specialist support services; variable organisational support; a workforce that wants and needs capacity building; limited or no access to qualified and experienced social workers on teams; and no universal practice framework ground in theory and evidence underpinning the program. By building on the existing program strengths, there are many opportunities to develop a safer, more responsive and evidence-based quality program that empowers tenants to sustain their housing.

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## 1.0 Background

NT Shelter recognises there are tenants in public housing who are vulnerable to eviction and homelessness as a result of unmanaged visitor anti-social behaviour. They note that this situation places a strain on the public housing system and the homelessness sector and is costly to the community in terms of emergency responses linked to health and policing.

In response, they developed a pilot program that aimed to support tenants to better manage visitors in order to maintain their tenancies. Promoting integrated service delivery, the pilot program aimed for key organisations to provide early intervention and support. In contrast to other initiatives, the pilot sought to engage visitors to address behaviours that compromise public housing tenancies.

Informed by an 'action research' approach, an evaluation of the pilot program commenced in August, 2021, and was completed in January, 2022. Data were collected through semi-structured conversational-style interviews with individuals and small groups of program stakeholders, including Tenancy Support Providers (TSPs) from: four Darwin-based organisations; Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation's (LNAC's) Host Program; LNAC Elders; and NT Shelter. The evaluation focused on the program concept, aims, methods, referral pathways, resource implications and program logic (including key actors). An unpublished report provided to NT Shelter contained ten key findings and associated lessons relating to the introduction and early to mid-stage stages of the pilot program operations. A key recommendation advocated for formal mediation training to be provided to TSPs, LNAC's Host Program staff and the NTG's Public Housing Safety Officers and the Anti-Social Behaviour Officers involved in the pilot project. The primary objective of this recommendation was to increase staff capacity to respond effectively to complex conflicts concerning visitors and to build the professional relationship between non-government and government providers. As a key strategy to strengthen tenancy support services, NT Shelter is advancing this, along with other recommendations.

Following the evaluation, NT Shelter conducted consultations with Tenancy Support Program (TSP) officers<sup>1</sup> working in the sector and the NT Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC)<sup>2</sup> Tenancy Team and Housing Grants Team. This revealed a diverse range of priorities and activities among the different TSP services. For instance, within government, the Tenancy Team focus on tenancy issues such as rent, cleanliness, yard maintenance and the management of anti-social behaviour, whereas the Housing Grants Team are concerned with the prevention of homelessness, broadening the TSP scope to address matters that place a person/family 'at risk'. Non-government Tenancy Support Program providers prefer a client-focussed approach, yet the work they do is not well understood and appears to differ from one provider to another.

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<sup>1</sup> For consistency, the generic term 'TSP officer' is used throughout this report. The author notes other terms, such as 'case worker' and 'support worker' are variously used by practitioners and clients.

<sup>2</sup> The author recognises that the correct reference is the Northern Territory Government Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC), however notes that TSP providers and clients generally refer to either 'Territory Housing' or 'Territory Families'. As such, these terms will be used in this report.

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The diversity in views regarding the activities of TSPs in Darwin highlighted the need to better understand the role of TSP officers and identify other professional development and training opportunities that may strengthen their capacity to deliver quality and well-targeted services that meet the needs of tenants.

## 2.0 Review aims and approach

Building on the data and findings generated through the pilot project evaluation, this review aimed to inform service design discussions with government as TSP providers prepare for the next five year grant round relating to Specialist Homelessness Services by providing an insight into:

- the day-to-day role of Tenancy Support Program officers in four Darwin-based services;
- any skills gaps that would need to be filled in order to provide enhanced or more comprehensive service delivery;
- the professional development and training needs of TSP officers; and
- the views and experiences of tenants who are clients of TSPs.

### 2.1 Data collection and analysis

The main form of data collection was semi-structured conversational-style interviews with TSP officers, managers and tenants (clients) in connection with four Darwin-based services. Interviews with TSP providers were initially facilitated by NT Shelter and then directly by the researcher. TSP providers contacted tenants and invited them to participate in the review. Interviews focussed on gathering information that provided insights into the review aims and were guided by key questions (see below). Interviews were undertaken with individuals and/or with groups of participants.

Using inductive and deductive interviewing techniques, the conversational-style approach aimed to support all review participants to discuss aspects of the TSP and for staff of services to safely engage in reflective practices that contribute to program development. Data collected have been analysed to construct a 'rich picture' of the role of TSPs and identify themes and trends.

#### 2.1.1 Guiding questions: TSPs

Interviews were guided by the following questions:

- What is your day-to-day role as a TSP provider?
- What activities do you do with tenants to support them?
- What agencies do you refer tenants to and why?
- Where do your referrals come from?
- What does the program do well? What is effective and why?
- What could the program do to be more effective and why?
- What are activities tenants need/request that you do not do?
- What are the challenges?
- What is your case load? Is it appropriate to meet the objectives of a TSP service?
- What skills gaps/PD requirements are there in TSPs?

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## 2.1.2 Guiding questions: tenants

Interviews were guided by the following questions:

- How is the tenancy going?
- What challenges are there in maintaining the tenancy?
- When you first moved in, what sort of help did you get to settle in?
- When were you referred to the TSP and why?
- If you didn't accept the first referral, why not?
- What do you like about the TSP?
- What does the TSP do for you?
- What would make the TSP more helpful to you?
- What sorts of problems, if any, do you have with visitors?

Data were collected in June 2022 from 13 clients and 12 TSP officers and managers. Interviews with clients were around 30 minutes in duration, and in all instances bar one, were face-to-face. There were five clients living in transitional housing and seven leased properties from Territory Housing. Initial interviews with program staff were between one and a half and two hours, followed by multiple informal and impromptu conversations with staff from two Darwin-based services, often related to the facilitation of interviews with clients. Their ongoing support throughout the project that enabled these interactions was invaluable in clarifying details and gaining a deeper understanding of the themes to emerge through the review.

## 2.2 Ethics

The informed consent of TSP clients to participate in the review was initially obtained by service providers. CHC re-stated the voluntary nature of participation and noted that no names would appear in any reports. A \$30 gift voucher was offered to clients following interviews to thank them for their time.

## 2.3 Limitations

All research has limitations. One limitation in this review relates to the recruitment of clients leading to a representative sample. Two TSP providers facilitated introductions to their clients and two did not. While the client experiences in participating TSPs were consistent, it is possible that their experiences differ from those that did not participate. In particular, this may be the case for clients in one of the TSP providers where the TSP officers' case-loads were notably higher than other TSPs and they reportedly made fewer external referrals as part of case management. One possible implication of this is that TSP officers and clients have had less time available to build the relationships necessary for complex issues to emerge and appropriate referrals made in response, altering the client experience, and ultimately, their view of the TSP.

Secondly, there may be some selection bias in the recruitment of clients. It is probable that TSP officers were more likely to be able to recruit clients with whom they have established good productive relationships, and therefore this group may be overrepresented. Conversely, the experiences of clients that did not establish good relationships with TSP providers may not have been captured.

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Another review limitation was that Specialist Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP)<sup>3</sup> reports relating to each TSP providers did not form part of the review. These reports may have provided useful information regarding client numbers and characteristics, the periods of support provided and their duration and referral details etc.

Finally, the input from one TSP service was limited to the information provided by the provider's program manager. While this reduced the total number of operational staff available to participate in the review, the program manager expressed insights and experiences consistent with the other three TSP providers.

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<sup>3</sup> SHIP is the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's platform that service users are required to use.

### 3.0 Findings

The four Darwin-based Tenancy Support Program (TSP) providers delivered services to clients in the greater Darwin region, including Palmerston. In this section, the key findings, learnt through an exploration into the day-to-day role of the TSP provider and the experiences of their clients, are presented.

#### 3.1 TSP clients: complex needs

The TSP providers generally receive more than half of their referrals from Territory Housing, with one reporting 90% sourced in this way. Common reasons for referrals are due to the tenants' 'failure to maintain' the property and visitor management and anti-social behaviour (ASB). Other referrals come from within the Families portfolio of TFHC or from other government agencies and services (Police, Royal Darwin Hospital etc.) and through self-referral.

TSPs generally do not receive referrals that can be processed 'quickly', with most clients remaining in the program for between six and twelve months. Early engagement between the TSP provider and the client usually occurs within the context of the client experiencing a crisis. These situations demand intensive support by TSP officers, often daily, and for several hours at a time. Building rapport and establishing a trusting relationship early, where the client feels understood, not judged and supported by the TSP provider, is critical to successfully addressing the multifaceted issues that compromise secure tenancies.

Failing to maintain a property or manage visitors are generally symptoms of, and exacerbated by, a myriad of underlying complex issues, including financial stress, dependence on public transport, mental illness, chronic disease, disability and infirmity, overcrowding, unemployment and limited employment experience, domestic and family violence and elder abuse, child protection, incarceration, alcohol and drug use and abuse and being the sole carer of grand/children.

The following client vignettes have been constructed primarily with information provided by clients and supplemented by TSP officers. (Pseudonyms have been used and other identifying details have been adjusted to maintain client anonymity).

##### 3.1.1 Esther

Esther was referred into the TSP as she was struggling to manage her yard and keep the grass cut and dispose of excess vegetation. She has been in the program for nearly a year. Esther, the lease holder of a Territory Housing property, lives with her grandsons. She has been their primary carer for many years. Esther explains their mother abandoned them and was incapable of caring for them due to mental illness and addiction. The boys have psychiatric issues and are most likely affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. One boy has recently started receiving support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Esther is navigating eligibility for an Aged Care Package. She explains that trying to access these supports is a fulltime job. She is hopeful that NDIS and/or Aged Care will provide some cleaning support.

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The boys are very difficult to live with. Their behaviours compromise Esther's tenancy. They do not clean up after themselves or their friends and visitors do not leave when asked. They spend their days inside using air conditioning. Esther has negotiated to pay a \$2500 power bill off at \$200 a week out of her pension. The boys do not listen to her and when they fight, they smash the place up. Esther is frightened to leave them as she worries they will kill each other. When Esther stays and attempts to intervene and deescalate conflict, she is vulnerable to verbal and sometimes physical abuse. These incidents usually involve alcohol. Esther calls the Police but they take too long and she believes she could die waiting. She doesn't have a formal safety plan but leaves the house early and goes to her daughter's house to stay.

Esther's doctor and TSP case worker have made mandatory domestic violence reports. Esther also has police reports with PROMIS numbers regarding damage made to the property, although they do not state the name of the person that caused the damage. She does not disclose this information when making reports to reduce the risk of being victim to domestic violence. Territory Housing allegedly want stronger evidence of domestic violence before they commit to making repairs to the house.

While there is constant concern and tension about leaving the boys to fend for themselves, Esther is simultaneously desperate to move into her own place. She wants to live in a clean and tidy place and wants control over her life, yet there are seemingly few options and no straight forward pathways.

Esther says her TSP case worker is 'marvellous' and she would be lost without them. They help her to organise everyday life issues, identify and access support services and navigate Territory Housing. Esther welcomes the visits from the case worker and likes that they check-up on her.

### 3.1.2 Angela

Angela, like Esther, is also a grandmother and the primary carer of her grandchildren; an arrangement that Territory Families have been involved with stemming from family conflict involving the parents. Angela has been receiving support from the TSP for more than a year while she lives in transitional housing and waits for her own house through Territory Housing.

Angela is very determined to get a good reference to support her application for housing. In particular, she is focussed on keeping the house clean, getting the children to school and managing her money so that she can pay for necessities. She is worried that if she fails in these areas, she may have the children removed from her care.

The TSP case workers show Angela what is expected when renting from Territory Housing. They show her how to clean properly, support her to repair or replace broken goods and help her to access the 'No Interest Loan Scheme'. They provide transport to get the children to school and to Foodbank, which helps reduce expenses.

Angela has some health problems, adding to her worries about caring for the children, and gets tired of cleaning up. The teenage children also often refuse to attend school, which is

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stressful for Angela. While Angela finds the TSP workers to be nice and helpful, she wants to live independently, rather than in transitional housing. Angela thinks there just aren't enough houses for the number of people waiting and is frustrated by her situation.

### 3.1.3 Bill

Bill heard about the TSP while accessing counselling services and self-referred. He was finding it very difficult engaging with Territory Housing and felt that every time he called to report something, they were really rude and his efforts were futile. This wasn't always the case though as Bill maintains he had a good relationship with his former tenancy manager for many years before the new manager started.

Bill has five children and is a single parent. Bill has been the victim of domestic violence and continues to be at risk. He experiences emotional turmoil and distress over his circumstances and feels deeply ashamed. His children are aware of this situation and have observed the impact the violence has had on their father.

Bill has been attempting, unsuccessfully, to have repairs made to the security screens on the house that are very old and which provide no functional security. The thought of an intruder entering the house while his family is sleeping keeps Bill awake at night. The TSP case worker has been advocating on behalf of Bill with Territory Housing to undertake urgent repairs and maintenance. They are also providing information about access to legal services and advice in the event they make no progress. In addition to the matters being addressed through the TSP to date, Bill allegedly has a hefty debt to Territory Housing. According to Bill, Territory Housing have not provided evidence or costings related to the debt, despite his requests, only complained about rubbish accumulation. Bill is not overly concerned about the debt.

Bill describes his case worker as 'awesome' and he is really happy to work with them. In addition to advocacy with Territory Housing, Bill's case worker has linked him up to a No Interest Loan Scheme for whitegoods and provided a referral to access furniture.

### 3.1.4 Amy

Amy is a mother and lives in transitional housing. Two of her children have disabilities and learning difficulties. She has been diagnosed with depression, anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. She does not drink alcohol and does not want her children around it. Amy previously used marijuana recreationally and for pain management. Amy sometimes becomes violent, and as a result, mandatory notifications have been made to Territory Families. She has trust issues with her partner and can become very jealous, leading to violent behaviour. Her partner, recently released from prison, does not understand Amy's illnesses and behaviours well and thinks she is merely lazy.

For Amy to stay well, she needs support and emotional stability. Under these circumstances, she is able to manage a tenancy. Amy finds the TSP staff supportive, helpful and trustworthy. She described the staff as having empathy and being understanding, compassionate and non-judgemental. She thinks they offer good advice. Amy turns to the TSP staff if she is feeling down and says she is comfortable to talk with them about anything.

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Like other tenants in transitional housing, Amy wants more autonomy over her living arrangements which she associates with public housing.

### 3.2 The day-to-day role of Tenancy Support Program officers

The multilayered and multidimensional issues clients face heralds the nature of the activities that TSPs must navigate if they are to be effective in maintaining a client's tenancy and preventing homelessness. The complexity of clients' issues also points to the capacity needed within TSP teams in terms of skills, experience and qualifications, as well as the organisational and resourcing supports required to deliver a quality service that is responsive, appropriate and safe.

While TSP officers want to proactively engage tenants, they described their work as typically reactionary, with no day the same as the last. They highlighted that clients had complex and diverse needs, and using a case management approach, attempted to address these directly through hands-on practical supports, information and education, intra-agency referrals and/or referrals to external organisations.

TSPs described the work context as intense, with Territory Housing often 'on your back', particularly when anti-social behaviour complaints were involved. They described Territory Housing as being 'accusatory' and believed that complaints about tenants were often not fairly or thoroughly substantiated; a view echoed by clients. TSPs also maintained that Territory Housing had unreasonable expectations of both tenants and TSP officers, particularly given that anti-social behaviour is 'just the tip of the iceberg' in a complex case and that TSPs are faced with challenges in accessing appropriate and timely support services.

Although no single day is the same, common activities of TSPs included:

- Receiving and reviewing referrals
- Attempting to contact/locate and connect with new clients
- Responding to initial referral content with clients
- Building rapport and trust with clients and identifying a range of issues to impact on tenancies
- Engaging clients in life skills development and knowledge acquisition (Some TSP providers use modules, either those developed by Territory Housing or in-house packages. Others do not use learning packages/tools at all and are guided by client needs)
- Making and following up referrals to: legal services; health care (including mental); social and emotional supports; counselling; financial counselling and loans; Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD); National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS); specialist, short-term and alternative accommodation; Foodbank; Emergency Relief Funds (ERF); family support services; domestic and family violence support services; youth services; men's services; aged care packages; employment assistance programs; Public Housing Safety Officers; Night Patrol etc.)
- Case management
- Case conferencing

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- Facilitating and/or supervising yard and property maintenance, cleaning and rubbish removal, including tip runs
- Assisting clients to address financial matters (exploring debts/loans, budgets)
- Responding to client inquiries
- Mandatory and other reporting
- Transporting clients to appointments e.g. court appearances, medical, shopping, Centrelink etc.
- Supporting and/or advocating on behalf of clients with visitors, government and other agencies (including Territory Housing, Territory Families, Jacana and legal services)
- Entering service delivery data into the commonwealth Specialist Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP)
- Attending anti-social behaviour meetings
- Engaging visitors associated with anti-social behaviour

With TSP providers reliant on accessing a diversity of services and supports outside the program to support client needs, providers recognised inherent advantages in being able to make intra-agency referrals. Further, they also noted that human service sector literacy and strong networks are important attributes of TSP teams. For instance, in one TSP, complex health issues form part of client eligibility to the program, requiring the provider to have solid health sector knowledge and dogged determination to navigate the system to address client needs, adding an additional layer to the supports provided, often over a protracted period.

### 3.3 Case-loads and intensive case management

Case-loads for TSP providers ranged from 12 – 15 cases per staff member at a time, with the exception of one provider where the case load was 25 cases per staff member. While a large proportion of the tenant/s referred to the TSP generally have complex needs, often the TSP officer needs to support multiple members of the household, regardless of whether they are leaseholders, adding to the challenging nature of the TSP officer role. Given this, TSP officers' case-loads can swell quickly, with the work-load not necessarily captured well in referral data and through SHIP reports.

TSP providers estimated that between 50% and 70% of their case-loads required intensive case management, with clients remaining in the program for six months to a year before exiting. Some clients may remain in the program indefinitely as they require ongoing support to maintain tenancies, with the level of support waxing and waning. Yet there was an expectation from the funding agency for clients' support to be time-limited. TSPs argued that a flexible model that recognised some clients would require ongoing (or even life-long) support to prevent homelessness was necessary.

Although providers reported their case-loads (including intensity levels) to be reasonable, (including the provider with the higher case-load), they stressed the importance of having some flexibility to manage the load to prevent staff burn-out and provide an appropriate level of intensity in service provision.

### 3.4 Divergent activities across TSP teams

While referral data (both in and out of TSPs) was not available for this review, one TSP provider reported to have a high proportion of clients that primarily required support to understand Territory Housing expectations and complete domestic chores, maintain their yard and remove rubbish. This provider made fewer clients referrals aimed at responding to other client issues, such as domestic and family violence.

Generally, the complexity of clients' needs are unlikely to differ significantly from one TSP to another. This situation flags that:

- TSP teams may be accepting referrals of clients with particular profiles that align with their team capability, capacity and resources;
- Where TSP teams are focussed on their team strengths to deliver services, they may only partially/temporarily address the underlying issues that compromise tenancies, limiting or missing opportunities to link clients to support services;
- TSPs must establish and maintain strong, mutually supportive and respectful networks across the human services sector (and beyond) to facilitate timely access to supports that address the diversity of issues that impact on clients' tenancies;
- TSP teams must have internal (and organisational) capacity, capability and supports to engage clients safely to explore, identify and respond to issues that impact on tenancies;
- TSP teams may benefit from utilising tailored risk identification and assessment tools when working with clients and their families; and
- TSP teams require a depth and breadth of skills (including cultural competencies), grounded experience and qualifications within teams to operate efficiently, effectively and safely.

### 3.5 Service gaps

#### 3.5.1 Referrals of homeless people

TSP providers reported they received referrals of homeless people living rough or in hostels, often from Territory Housing. Service providers reported they were rarely able to assist these clients due to an acute shortage of stable accommodation options and the high level of client mobility. Providers report that attempts to offer support were resource intensive and ultimately unproductive. TSP providers suggested that the nature of working with homeless people was misaligned with the TSP objective of maintaining a tenancy where clients already had housing.

One provider had ceased to accept referrals of homeless people. Another provider triaged clients and commenced work with them only when clients are within a month of securing public housing. While finding accommodation for homeless people was seen to sit outside the scope of the TSPs, organisations with a 'no wrong door' policy struggled to turn homeless people away.

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No TSPs reported to have access to Emergency Relief Funding to use for short term accommodation. TSP providers agreed that accommodating homeless people was important, yet they were unable to respond to the broader systemic drivers and respond effectively within the TSP.

### 3.5.2 Specialist support services

TSP providers experienced challenges in accessing specialist supports and services for their clients, maintaining there aren't enough supports and services to meet the demand. In particular, service gaps related to accommodation and targeted services for homeless people (as noted above) and for those needing medium-term accommodation. TSP providers also noted that many clients did not possess the requisite skills and knowledge to successfully manage a tenancy at the time they had secured a lease. They argued that transitional housing with intensive tenancy support, prior to being provided with access to public housing, would benefit many clients and prevent them from being 'set up to fail'.

Other difficulties related to getting access to domestic and family violence services (including Darwin Indigenous Men's Service), supports for children and counselling for families. One provider noted that around 1 in 10 of their clients needed support to access the NDIS and it was very difficult, time-intensive and frustrating navigating the system.

## 3.6 TSP client satisfaction

### 3.6.1 Establishing a trusting relationship

When exploring client-satisfaction with the TSP, clients consistently placed value on the relationship they had established with their case workers/TSP officers. They described case workers and TSP officers as being kind, having empathy and understanding and being non-judgemental. Clients trusted their TSP officers and regarded them as being a reliable source of support, advice and assistance to manage problems. Many described turning to their TSP officer for emotional support and friendship, enjoying their company and feeling comfortable to disclose private concerns. The importance of building a trusting relationship with the TSP officer is captured in the sentiments of a client that reasoned, "...we need to feel safe".

### 3.6.2 Program accessibility

Clients also noted that, unlike other programs where there are logistical barriers to participation, the TSP comes to them. Delivering TSP in a setting that acknowledges the reality of the day-to-day challenges they faced, makes it possible for clients and workers to engage in a meaningful way. This shared view is captured in the comments of one client that explained, "...I like it when the case worker visits. It's easier".

### 3.6.3 Practical support

Clients also appreciated the practical support, such as help with resources, like furniture, food vouchers, transport to attend appointments, get children to school and to go shopping, fly wire to repair screens, tip runs to dispose of rubbish and help with garden maintenance. Clients made comments like, "my case worker gives all-round support. Practical, social and emotional support" and "they help me manage the yard".

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### 3.6.4 Advocacy support with Territory Housing

TSP clients (excluding those in transitional housing) felt vulnerable and powerless when complaints were made by neighbours about them to Territory Housing. Some maintained that complaints were never properly investigated, authenticated or dealt with fairly, before blame was attributed to them, raising concerns about due process and natural justice. Given this experience, clients living in public housing consistently reported that the advocacy support they received to deal with Territory Housing was essential and invaluable. In addition, some clients maintained that repairs and maintenance that was the responsibility of Territory Housing was much more likely to progress with the involvement of the TSP officer.

### 3.6.5 Facilitating access to specialist supports

Clients valued their TSP providers' knowledge of specialist support services and their responsiveness and ability to secure access to these supports, such as counselling. They reported that referrals occurred quickly, and that *"other programs are all talk and no action... if I wasn't in the [Tenancy Support] Program, I would have been homeless"*.

### 3.6.6 Clients in transitional housing

In addition to the above findings, clients in transitional housing had feedback that stemmed from living in a congregate housing setting (i.e. where multiple program clients reside at a single site). In particular, these clients valued the additional layer of support afforded by the service provider to manage visitors. They believed visitor management would be more difficult when they were living in the broader community, although felt the TSP program had made them more confident in responding and increased their knowledge of the options available for support, such as Police and the Public Housing Safety Officers. This common view is captured in the words of one client who said, *"They [TSP] teach us to be strong for when we go to Territory Housing. We need to be able to be by ourselves... I feel more confident and stronger to send unwanted visitors away"*.

TSP clients place high value on their housing, the support received from the TSP provider and the trusting relationships forged with TSP officers. Despite this, clients in transitional housing simultaneously described tensions relating to autonomy and control over their lives. For example, clients made comments such as, *"...it feels like they [TSP providers] are mum and dad and we are the children"* and *"people interfere in your life here and it is difficult to stop them. We have no control"*. They believed public housing would enhance autonomy and control. One client explained that they wanted to maintain their relationship with TSP once in Territory Housing, *"but I want to have more control over whether I interact or not"*. Another client explained that they were required to follow the transitional housing rules, but when *"...in Territory Housing, there are more freedoms. You can have pets and visitors"*.

## 3.7 TSP strengths

The strengths within TSP teams and their approaches were interconnected and interdependent.

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### *3.7.1 Establishing quality relationships for meaningful program engagement*

In the human services, the quality of the relationship between the practitioner and their client is a powerful determinant for creating change and is fundamental to working in a strengths-based way. In this review, TSP officers and clients both identified the quality of their relationship as being a key program strength. They acknowledged they had established rapport that quickly led to trusting relationships and that these relationships were important precursors for agreeing on appropriate action and achieving tangible outcomes. This often happened in the context of the client experiencing a crisis where their tenancy was at risk and the TSP providers responded to prevent eviction, leading to trust and a spirit of good will.

### *3.7.2 Empowering clients with skills and knowledge*

TSP providers aim to work proactively with clients. In reality, however, their work occurs within a 'reactive' context, as they navigate the difficulties clients experience that impact on their tenancies. From this position, TSPs officers deliver tenancy education and make information accessible regarding the rights and responsibilities of tenants and Territory Housing. With a focus on empowering and motivating clients, TSP providers aim to build skills that lead to independent living.

The interactions between the TSP provider and the tenant, as noted, are typically highly reactive in the initial phases, particularly where there is pressure to get outcomes to secure a tenancy. This often means that TSP officers must 'do things for' rather than 'do things with' clients, and some TSP officers struggled to reconcile the 'doing things for' with notions of empowering practices. Yet through crisis aversion, TSPs often established rapport and trust with clients that enabled the relationship to transition and for more empowering practices to be embedded.

### *3.7.3 Advocacy support*

TSP providers supported clients in various settings and advocated on their behalf. In particular, TSP officers were seen by clients to be impactful when interacting with Territory Housing. (TSP officers, however, sometimes felt disregarded by Territory Housing, discussed later in this report).

### *3.7.4 Client-centred case management*

TSP providers aimed to apply a client-centred case management approach. This was often difficult to achieve when cases were complex and where there were limited support services available. Despite the challenges, TSPs attempted to be creative and resourceful, following through on case plans and connecting clients to services. TSP officers that had a sound local knowledge, coupled with an extensive network in the human services sector (and the broader community), were better placed to access to the supports their clients needed.

### *3.7.5 Cultural safety*

With the majority of TSP clients identifying as Aboriginal, TSP providers employed officers/case workers that had (cross-)cultural competencies and who engaged with clients in a safe and respectful manner. TSP officers that identified as being Aboriginal highlighted that some officers had had lived experience of housing insecurity and could empathise well

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with clients. Clients described TSP officers as being respectful of their cultural identity and working in a safe way.

### *3.7.6 Maintaining a tenancy*

While data was not available on rates of eviction/homelessness following participation in TSPs, providers reported that clients that engaged in the program generally maintained their tenancies. For TSP providers, a key program strength related to attaining improved safety for clients and their families through responding to domestic and family violence, managing visitors, ensuring housing was secure and that the house and yard were clean and maintained to an acceptable standard. In addition, these outcomes prevented clients and families from experiencing further trauma in their lives.

### *3.7.7 Diverse skill set and experiences*

TSP officers advised that the job required no specific qualifications or experience, and that experience was generally gained 'on the job'. Consequently, the TSP workforce had a diversity of attributes, skills, experiences and qualifications. Examples include qualifications and/or experience in:

- Alcohol and other drugs
- Mental health
- First AID
- Financial counselling
- Intensive family support
- Advocacy
- Case management (planning, conferencing, revising and monitoring)
- Domestic and family violence risk assessment (Safe and Together, family Safety Framework)
- Child protection
- Cultural competency
- Community services (Certificate IV)

## 4.0 Opportunities

The TSP is described by TSP officers and clients as essentially 'social work'. 'Social work', as endorsed by the Australian Association of Social Workers, is defined as:

*...a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing...<sup>4</sup>*

By building on the strengths and attributes of existing TSPs, there is opportunity to enhance service quality through the explicit embedding of social work theory and practice in the program. On this basis, and drawing from the review findings, the following opportunities are presented for consideration.

### 4.1 Developing a practice framework

Practice frameworks are methods that drive effective professional practice in social work and human services. They provide a template designed through and informed by value-based practice, research and evidence, mapping out of what practitioners do and why and promoting practice tools for assessments and interventions. According to Connolly and Healy (2009), a practice framework:

*...integrates empirical research, practice theories, ethical principles and experiential knowledge in a compact and convenient format that helps practitioners to use the knowledge and principles to inform their everyday work (p.32).<sup>5</sup>*

There is no universal or documented practice framework defining and unpacking what TSPs do, why they do it and how they do it. Elements described variously by TSP officers that shape TSP practice include:

- strengths-based practice
- person-centred
- case management
- empowering and enabling approaches, including creating options
- trauma-informed care

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Association of Social Workers, 2022, *What is social work?*, <https://www.aasw.asn.au/information-for-the-community/what-is-social-work>, date accessed 21 July, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Connolly and Healy, 2009, as cited in Department for Health and Social Care (UK), 2019, *Strengths-based Approach: Practice Framework and Practice Handbook*, <https://www.scie.org.uk/strengths-based-approaches/practice-framework-handbook>, date accessed 20 July, 2022.

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- reflective practice

Aspects of TSP practice are also implicit in some TSP's organisational documentation, such as mission, vision and values statements, principles that guide practice and strategic plans.

A well-considered practice framework that guides TSP officers and managers will enhance the quality of the TSP service provision overall, particularly where TSP officers are supported to engage in reflective practices that critically explore what was done, why and how and what opportunities exist to do things differently or better.

### 4.2 Reflective practice and managing vicarious trauma

According to Ferguson (2018):

*...reflective practice is a core concept in social work and probably the most well-known theoretical perspective across the entire applied professions of teaching, health and social care. Its origins lie in... how professionals engage in 'reflection in action' by thinking about their experience and what they are doing while they are doing it and afterwards using 'reflection on action' to think about and link their practice to knowledge (p.415).<sup>6</sup>*

Reflective practice helps practitioners to process and navigate tricky situations, learning in a safe and supportive collegial setting. Reflective practice not only improves the quality of a service, deliberate activities in this space support the management of vicarious trauma and staff burn-out; both likely to impact on staff wellbeing and retention, given the TSP officer role demands extensive communication with, and advocacy for, clients (essential in strengths-based practice).

Some TSP providers engaged in activities that supported notions of reflective practice and the management of vicarious trauma. For instance, one provider described the TSP team as participating in daily de-brief sessions, actively promoting a work/life balance, supporting staff to take mental health days off work and facilitating team lunches. Some TSP providers are situated in organisations that have an established culture that deliberately recognise, value and invest in actions to promote reflective practice as part of quality systems and the management of vicarious trauma. There is an opportunity to embed 'reflective practice' and manage vicarious trauma in all TSP services.

### 4.3 Strength-based practice

Building on the TSPs knowledge and application of strength-based practices is a central tenet of a practice framework. 'Strengths', according to Brown *et al.* (2021), are the positive capabilities found in individuals that support development, growth and goal attainment. They note that a 'strengths-based approach' is based on the notion that, with structured support, an individual's inherent strengths and resilience can be accessed. They maintain

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<sup>6</sup> Harry Ferguson, 2018, How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: the possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work, *Social Work Education*, 37:4, 415-427, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02615479.2017.1413083?needAccess=true>, date accessed 21 July, 2022.

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that the approach acknowledges the strengths and resources that individuals have access to within families, communities and their culture.<sup>4</sup>

A strengths-based process, according to Brown *et al.* (2021), is whereby a practitioner and individual collaborate to develop self-determined goals, identify opportunities, capabilities and assets that support progress and growth and ascertain what is going well, building on these successes. In short, the process identifies and cultivates strengths and assists individuals to transfer learnings to other aspects of their lives. The authors observe that:

*...strength-based approaches align with principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander empowerment, healing and self-determination. They are also seen as a counter to deficit-based discourse (Brown et al., 2021; p.2).<sup>7</sup>*

To combat critiques that place concern over strength-based approaches being Western ethnocentric and individualistic in nature and potentially shifting structural inequalities to the individual (or local) level, Brown *et al.* (2021) argue that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives must be central and respond to the strengths and outcomes that are valued by this population.<sup>4</sup>

### 4.4 Workforce capacity building

Building on the strengths and attributes of the workforce and acknowledging the complex needs of clients and the role and responsibility of TSP officers and teams, essential professional development and workforce capacity building opportunities include:

- Strengths-based practice
- Motivational interviewing – is often used on strengths-based approaches and is a form of counselling where the practitioner holds an open conversation, listens carefully and reflects back thoughts or statements that the person has made. The person then hears the motivations and reasons (relayed differently).
- Reflective practice
- Supervision (for program leaders)
- Case management
- Mediation training – TSP officers often had to negotiate conflict, particularly when addressing anti-social behaviour linked to visitors
- Advocacy – TSP officers wanted to be more assertive in their advocacy work and gain a better understanding about how to manage tensions when they advocate on behalf of a client with government agencies, NT Civil and Administrative Tribunal and at court

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, A., Mensah, F., Gee, G. *et al.*, 2021, Evaluation of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strengths based coaching program: a study protocol. *BMC Public Health* **21**, 1451, <https://bmcpublikealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-021-11503-3#additional-information>, date accessed 21 July, 2022.

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- Domestic and family violence training – while some TSP officers had undertaken training, many had not, potentially missing opportunities to explore options and improve client safety
- Mandatory reporting – child protection and domestic and family violence
- Trauma-informed care
- Mental health first aid
- Cultural competency - working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities

It is noted that some TSP officers may have undertaken professional development activities in some of these areas.

While these essential skill sets are vital to the role of all TSP officers, TSP teams also require specialist expertise. In particular, a qualified and experienced social worker will provide professional support and depth to teams and create opportunities for learning best practice on-the-job, adding rigour to a practice framework and enhancing the quality of TSPs. The need for, and value of, this expertise was identified by many TSP officers, along with the importance of establishing an organisational structure that acknowledged skills, experience and qualifications and allowed for career progression.

### 4.5 Cultural competency

Cultural competency in working with First Nations peoples is recognised as an essential skill set for TSP officers. In addition, TSP providers noted further opportunities to enhance the cultural responsiveness and effectiveness of teams. Strategies included:

- Enhancing communication with clients by engaging translators/interpreters
- Developing information and educational resources in Aboriginal languages and improving their accessibility
- Employing First Nations TSP officers and/or consulting First Nations peoples/organisations to provide cultural advice and support and contribute to TSP design and delivery methods
- Employing TSP officers with lived experience of tenancy instability
- Employing male TSP officers

### 4.6 Client feedback

Some TSP providers have introduced tools, such as the Personal Wellbeing Index and Global Life Satisfaction tools, to explore clients' social-emotional change over time. They also engage clients in interviews to gather feedback on the program. The information gathered is analysed against the values and work practices of the organisation and used to improve the program. There is an opportunity to explore the usefulness of these tools and to explore other suitable methods that enable tenant experiences and views to be embedded into service design and delivery to improve quality.

### 4.7 Organisational support

The challenging nature of TSP delivery and the vulnerability of TSP clients points to the importance of having organisational support. Host organisations must have a concrete understanding of what it means in practice to: engage in strengths-based approaches; be able to support reflective practice; engage staff in workforce capacity building activities; ensure teams have staff with a depth and breadth of skills, experience and qualifications; manage vicarious trauma; and have appropriate needs and risk assessment tools. They should document and articulate their practice framework and ensure all staff are provided with education and training in its application.

### 4.8 Relationship with Territory Housing

Atkinson *et al.* (2007) observed that:

*The tension between providing housing to those in need and serving an existing community who need to be protected from the effects of disruptive, demanding and anti-social behaviour is significant (p.14).<sup>8</sup>*

Territory Housing are at the forefront of receiving complaints about public housing tenants' (and their visitors') anti-social behaviour, with some of these complaints being lodged via elected Members of Parliament. The tenants are referred to the TSP providers by Territory Housing to address the issues. While there were positive interactions between TSP officers and Territory Housing, TSP officers also experienced frustrations. These included:

- Being criticised for advocating for clients with Territory Housing – there was a perception that TSPs should not 'bite the hand that feeds them'.
- Territory Housing not accepting the advice of TSPs – TSP officers felt that Territory Housing did not regard their advice as serious, but rather as 'nagging', and that they were not treated as professionals.
- Territory Housing staff retention – TSP officers observed a high turn-over of staff in Territory Housing. They believed this contributed to inefficiencies, poor communication, inconsistent approaches and loss of information.
- Due to the pressure Territory Housing may feel to resolve tenancy issues, TSP officers described their demands and expectations 'to deliver a quick fix' as being unreasonable and the pressure transferred to TSP officers effectively undermining the empowering approach providers tried to cultivate with clients.
- Inadequate resourcing of TSPs – TSP providers had limited access to resources/services to assist with housing maintenance. Their budgets did not extend to purchasing equipment to support tenants to develop skills, such as mowers.
- Inadequate housing supply and affordability – TSP officers noted it was almost impossible to move people in emergency situations, such as domestic and family

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<sup>8</sup> Atkinson, R., Habibis, B., Easthope, H. and Goss, D. 2007. Sustaining tenants with demanding behaviour, AHURI, [https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-09/AHURI\\_Positioning\\_Paper\\_No97\\_Sustaining\\_tenants\\_with\\_demanding\\_behaviour\\_a\\_review\\_of\\_the\\_research\\_evidence.pdf](https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-09/AHURI_Positioning_Paper_No97_Sustaining_tenants_with_demanding_behaviour_a_review_of_the_research_evidence.pdf), date accessed 23 July, 2022.

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violence situations, or away from locations that unwanted visitor found readily accessible. The absence of safe, accessible and affordable accommodation options for visitors placed enormous strain on tenancies through over-crowding and anti-social behaviour and the subsequent damage to properties and complaints.

- Lack of transitional housing – to avoid setting tenants up to fail, some TSP officers argued that prospective public housing tenants be assessed for risks that may compromise future tenancies and live in transitional housing and participate in an intensive TSP before moving into Territory Housing. They argue that this model allows for greater efficiency of limited resources, with 'house ready' tenants.

In addition to building the relationship with Territory Housing, some TSP officers did not have the competencies to use the SHIP system effectively to input data and generate reports for analysis to inform service provision. These officers were interested in accessing additional training.

### 5.0 Conclusion

The TSP providers play a critical role in supporting tenants and their families to maintain stable housing and prevent them from becoming homeless. The tenants in the program have multilayered and multidimensional complex needs and often require intensive support over a protracted period. For some clients, support is needed on an ongoing basis, with the level of support waxing and waning. Drawing on a diverse set of skills and experiences, TSP officers forge valued, trusting and supportive relationships with clients that enable the identification and management of issues that adversely impact on tenancies. Yet their work is conducted under challenging circumstances. TSP providers have: limited resources and access to specialist support services; variable organisational support; a workforce that wants and needs capacity building; limited or no access to qualified and experienced social workers on teams; and no universal practice framework ground in theory and evidence underpinning the program, articulating what TSPs do, how they do it and why. By building on the existing program strengths, there are many opportunities to develop a safer, more responsive and evidence-based quality program that empowers tenants to sustain their housing.

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