

YiSSA's closure should be a turning point for housing in the Territory

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YiSSA has closed its doors. Approximately four hundred people a day used YiSSA for a bed, meals, safety, and support. Many more were on the waiting list. Last night, those people were somewhere else. The need has not closed with the facility.

The Government has funded alternative accommodation in Batchelor. This provides an option for some former residents but cannot meet everyone's needs or replace the need for short-stay accommodation in Darwin.

Concerns from surrounding suburbs have featured in the debate about YiSSA's closure. People have a right to feel safe in their neighbourhoods, just as people experiencing homelessness have a right to well-located support and accommodation. These are not competing demands, and both require a response that does more than close what exists. Darwin's homelessness crisis has not been reduced, it has been redistributed.

This is not simply a homelessness services problem. It is a housing supply problem, a planning problem, and ultimately a question of how we invest in the Territory we want to build.

When people cannot move from short-term accommodation into housing, they remain in temporary accommodation longer or cycle through homelessness services. When social and affordable homes are scarce, pressure falls on families, frontline services and surrounding communities as rough sleeping and overcrowding increases. And when accommodation closes without equivalent replacement, the pressure migrates.

But building homes is only part of the answer. We must also consider where and how we build them.

None of this is easy. The Territory has longstanding problems with no quick fix. But we cannot keep concentrating social housing in a handful of streets and neighbourhoods, then responding when those same streets and neighbourhoods reach breaking point. We need to change how we plan and deliver social housing in our urban centres, making it part of new developments and established suburbs rather than an afterthought. That means planning for housing need and building mixed-tenure communities where social and affordable housing is integrated, not concentrated.

The NT's Housing Strategy recognises the importance of mixed-tenure developments. The question is how we translate that ambition into the homes that Territorians need, and importantly, how we ensure our housing system grows rather than contracts.

Inclusionary zoning is one option: using planning requirements to secure a proportion of new developments for social and affordable housing. Versions operate interstate, and the Territory has used affordable housing requirements in government land agreements. The settings must suit our market, but housing people can afford should not be an optional extra.

Every dollar invested in social and affordable housing reduces downstream spending on emergency departments, policing, child protection, and crisis accommodation. We need to act on this evidence before the next facility closes and the next community absorbs the consequences

That brings us back to YiSSA. The underlying need remains; people still need somewhere to stay while they wait for housing, access services, find employment or navigate a competitive rental market.

There are three practical commitments that would help put the Territory on stronger footing.

Protect and replace existing housing and accommodation capacity. Where social housing or accommodation facilities face closure, there must be a time-bound plan to replace the capacity lost. The Territory has demolished social housing without replacement before. We cannot keep repeating that pattern.

Use the planning system to grow social and affordable housing. Invest in social and affordable housing, and use planning mechanisms, including inclusionary zoning where appropriate, to integrate homes into communities.

Report publicly on whether the system is growing. Territorians should see how many social and affordable homes are built, removed or replaced.

The Territory cannot afford to keep responding only when a facility closes, a neighbourhood reaches breaking point, or people are left with nowhere to go. YiSSA's closure should be a turning point. We need a system that protects what we have, builds what we need, and plans for a Territory where people across different incomes and circumstances can live safely and with dignity.

The strategies exist. What matters now is turning those commitments into structures people can live in.

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