



Senate Select Committee  
On  
Regional and Remote Indigenous communities

**NT Shelter Inc.**  
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## What is NT Shelter

NT Shelter is an independent community based incorporated body that works towards a just and fairer housing system by highlighting the needs of disadvantaged groups.

As the peak NT housing body, NT Shelter advocates for appropriate and affordable housing for all members of the community particularly low income housing consumers and disadvantaged groups.

NT Shelter receives funding for its core business from Territory Housing (NT Dept Local Government, Housing and Sport). This funding supports one full time Executive Officer position, a part time Central Australian Policy Officer and a part time Administration Officer.

While this level of funding severely limits our capacity to consult with or speak for Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory, our membership and Board of Management has a broad range of experience and has representation from all regions of the Northern Territory.

NT Shelter is incorporated under the NT Associations Act 2005 and was formally established as the peak non-government housing advocacy body for the Northern Territory in 1996.

NT Shelter is an active participant in the National Shelter network providing Territory input to national policy on matters such as remote and regional housing, specific NT housing issues, and links between housing and other social factors in the NT.

**Our Vision** is for 'Appropriate and Affordable Housing for ALL Territorians'.

**Our Mission** is to work toward 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 in the NT.

### Our Key Principles

- Housing is a human right
- NT Shelter works collaboratively with all stakeholders
- As a Territory wide organisation we have a focus on the regions and Indigenous communities of the NT
- NT Shelter promotes consumer rights
- Indigenous housing disadvantage must be addressed



## Our Submission

Housing is a basic human need.

Appropriate safe and affordable housing is the cornerstone for all other social functioning including health, education and having children grow up in caring, respectful and thriving communities let alone building towns, jobs, roads and other infrastructure.

NT Shelter acknowledges the extreme housing stress in remote communities and the need for a massive injection of funds to address chronic housing shortages, homelessness, repairs and maintenance, dilapidation of existing stock, overcrowding and negative health and life outcomes sometimes experienced by whole communities.

It is widely recognised that there is a \$2-3billion shortfall in funds required to meet the housing and infrastructure needs of Indigenous remote NT communities and that this level of funding is just not available.

NT Shelter has therefore welcomed the injection of significant funding through the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP) along with the NT Government commitment of \$100million over 5 years and the new funding under the 2009 National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA).

While these amounts fall well short of estimated need, it is a welcome commitment to housing and we are hopeful for lasting and positive impacts especially in relation to building skills, employment and community capacity, as well as improving and adding to housing stock and alleviating the current level of overcrowding in the 16 main communities.

Since announcing the NT Emergency Response some 2 years ago, the NT has seen some extraordinary changes being implemented in remote communities of the NT.

These changes include;

- The Federal Government's Intervention in 73 prescribed Indigenous communities
- An injection of new funding into Indigenous remote communities for housing and other social development functions
- The reform of local government which has reduced 59 Community Government Councils to 8 Shires and the subsequent loss of Indigenous Community Housing Organisations
- A change from Indigenous Community Management of remote area housing to a public housing management model

- The phasing in of a new Rent Framework so that rent equivalent to the public housing model can be applied
- The Government's 'Closing the Gap Strategy' which recognises the basic need to address Indigenous housing, education, health and the resulting lack of employment prospects and opportunity
- The changes to CDEP as an employment alternative in communities- when CDEP has underpinned many services in communities.
- The proposed phasing out of services to Outstation and Homeland communities from 2009/10 which is yet another new initiative which may impact on up to 10,000 people.

Within our current resources, NT Shelter does not have the capacity to effectively represent the interests of remote Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory.

NT Shelter has been unsuccessful in seeking funding through various means for an Indigenous Housing Policy Officer to facilitate Indigenous communities having a voice through NT Shelter as an existing funded peak body.

We believe that while many communities may have government representatives involved in discussions and service development work there is no independent voice from the communities nor any avenue through which Indigenous people across the whole of the Territory can have a voice.

While disappointed that there is no funding for what we see as a vital position within NT Shelter, the situation leaves our organisation uninformed around remote area housing initiatives and therefore other wellbeing indicators for Indigenous Territorians,

NT Shelter has established a significant database through which we circulate regular newsletters and e-bulletins to urban organisations, communities, shire service centres and outstations throughout the Territory. While this serves the purpose of circulating information to workers in the areas, it is ineffectual as a mechanism for engagement on the issues confronting communities and their residents.

NT Shelter is however committed to our Territory wide role in advocating appropriate and affordable housing for all and responding where possible when households remain disadvantaged in their access to adequate housing.

With the SIHIP program beginning to roll out, NT Shelter is hopeful that this program will make a real difference to the lives of people in the 16 communities receiving new housing and alleviating some housing stress in the remaining 57 communities identified by the NTER.



At this stage and 12 months since Territory Housing presented information on SIHIP at our Regional Forums in April 2008, no new community housing has yet been constructed although a handful of communities have now agreed to the new leasing arrangements and some report that refurbishments are beginning.

For the purposes of this submission, NT Shelter gathered some limited information from a small sample number of communities who responded to a direct request for information.

Each of these 10 communities report limited if any consultations have occurred. None was aware of how many new houses the SIHIP program may deliver to their community and only one identified the number of houses to be refurbished. All but one reported that they had been requested to enter lease arrangements and several identified the Community Clean up that had occurred in their community was either unnecessary, was not conducted to adequate standards or could have been done by existing housing teams.

16 communities have been selected for new housing and development as hub communities or townships.

All remote Indigenous communities in the NT however are experiencing a chronic lack of adequate and appropriate housing.

NT Shelter question the effectiveness of attempting to alleviate the pressures in these few communities through SIHIP and The Intervention and Closing the Gap Programs, while at the same time withdrawing services from homeland communities and leaving others to simply exist with current levels of resources and unacceptable standards of housing stock for the number of people living there.

We believe that health, education and safety programs will fail if the basic human right to clean, uncrowded and appropriately resourced housing is not available for all and that we all need to consider the whole rather than some of the parts and in quite new, collaborative and innovative ways.

NT Shelter also believes the building up of 16 major communities will attract high levels of migration either on a permanent or visitor basis.

The NT is already beset with high levels of mobility which occurs for various reasons including the need to access services and facilities however there has never been a comprehensive Territory wide mobility study which aids understanding of the patterns, causes and consequences and facilitates well grounded policy responses.

In the NT, many towns and communities are already overwhelmed by visitors and our urban towns require more affordable rental, crisis and transitional housing options to meet existing demand particularly from remote area visitors. Any additional pressure which adds to the mobility of Indigenous people into urban or larger communities will be disastrous until such time as urban housing issues are addressed along side other initiatives.

NT Shelter has previously recommended that empirical research be conducted to quantify and analyse the cost of maintaining communities vs the impact of mobility into other towns and communities with regard to;

- Anti-social behaviour
- Conflict which occurs from forcing different cultural groups together
- Overcrowding and the damage this has on housing, health and educational outcomes
- Homelessness and the lack of housing and support
- Towns being already overwhelmed and struggling to resource the resulting problems – especially Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine

An Overarching Recommendation from the NTER Review 2008<sup>1</sup> was that the Australian and Northern Territory Governments recognise as a matter of urgent national significance the continuing need to address the unacceptably high level of disadvantage and social dislocation being experienced by Aboriginal Australians living in remote communities throughout the Northern Territory as well as both governments acknowledging the requirement to reset their relationship with Aboriginal people based on genuine consultation, engagement and partnership.

In order to develop such relationships all levels of government along with other stakeholders need to properly engage and take the time to develop trust and dialogue with Indigenous people and service organisations in remote communities. Reports from NT Shelter members note that changes already underway remain poorly understood by many.

NT Shelter is committed to the principles of community engagement and communities' participation in decision making in order to foster an investment in the success of reforms.

We also believe that mechanisms need to be put in place to facilitate a future role for Indigenous community control of services and new enterprises and that this will require a commitment to true community development processes.

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the NTER Review Board, 13 October 2008. Commonwealth of Australia, 2008



With regard to housing services, NT Shelter believes both the Territory and Australian Governments need to collaborate on a strategy to develop incentives for additional financial investment that may be sourced from outside of government. This may include private- public partnership options or looking at how royalty funds could be channelled into housing and infrastructure, perhaps with particular reference to Indigenous home ownership opportunities.

With many uncertainties and a lack of data on progress with the Intervention or other reforms NT Shelter calls for all government programs and initiatives to continue for a minimum of 5 years and that this be done along side a research and evaluation commitment on which to establish an evidence base for policy and program change.

NT Shelter is of the opinion that the NTER has provided a significant level of additional resources to enable communities to operate more effectively however much more will always be needed so we all need to communicate and keep people informed and explained about the rationing of scarce resources and the detail in the plans.

We also believe that on the whole, most of the Intervention strategies have been welcomed in the affected communities.

NT Shelter however does not subscribe to the blanket application of the Income Management approach, the removal of the Permit System on Aboriginal Land nor the compulsory acquisition of leases over prescribed communities in the Northern Territory which has seen the overriding of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975.

Rather, we support effective and culturally appropriate consultation and negotiation with Indigenous communities and revised tenure arrangements under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT 1976) where these are supported by the local community and where these generate new investment in constructing new housing assets in remote communities and other social benefits such as sustainable employment opportunities and local enterprise development.

We believe that proper engagement with community members should also include discussion of what future people see for themselves and their communities (including in non-NTER communities), their issues regarding movement between larger and smaller communities, and their options for pursuing non-mainstream economic development possibilities which would contribute to their ongoing viability and inter-dependence with the wider economy and society.



## Conclusion

In conclusion I leave you with a quote from a comment received from an Indigenous community representative who responded to NT Shelter's request for information for this submission.

I believe the comment summarises the feelings being experienced.

*"Too many contractors, consultation that never results in anything, no new houses and not doing tin houses or ones not economical to repair but we got no new houses so where do they live as the shortage is horrible. Homes here with no bathrooms and toilets - is this really the 21st Century?"*

*.....  
No staff houses even looked at but we pay more rent and nothing done.  
Some work was undertaken by the intervention on community houses but we are still repairing the work done as it was in most cases not finished off or it didn't work after they went through eg hot water before and none after the workers left. No sign offs on work done, no set standards.*

*.....  
Is the government really serious about bridging the gap cause nothing seems to be happening here except lots of nice cars and staff asking questions as they trip around but no end result. What happened to all houses were going to be done. At Imangara of 21 homes only 3 will be done. Will being selective like this cause more problems in the communities.*

*.....  
Some of these communities have over 550 people living in them but they don't have anything like small towns in other states. Stop calling them communities and call them townships they deserve much more than they are getting.*

*.....  
How does the government answer the question that there are up to 7 families applying for one 2 bedroom house and some of them have 4 or more children. Territory housing taking over and they are not ready - everything is in draft.  
No wonder these very patient people don't believe a word they are told - so much for all houses being done in the first round of talk fests and now we here market problems, economy drop and contractors have to make a profit as well so the money won't go as far as originally promised.*

*.....  
What the hell is going on except for some wallets getting fatter.*

(Name and community withheld on request.)