



30 April 2018

Closing the Gap Refresh
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Australian Government

ClosingtheGapRefresh@pmc.gov.au

Dear team,

CLOSING THE GAP REFRESH

NT Shelter Incorporated is the Northern Territory's peak body for affordable housing and homelessness. We advocate for appropriate housing for all Territorians, particularly those on low incomes and others who are disadvantaged in the housing market.

We welcome the opportunity to provide our perspectives in that context.

The Closing the Gap Refresh process is timely and important as insufficient progress has been made to date against targets. We are far from where we need to be to close the gap on Aboriginal and Indigenous disadvantage and this should be of concern to all Australians.

While we acknowledge the significant investment by the Commonwealth in remote communities over the past ten years through National Remote Housing Partnership agreements, the reality is that 37 per cent of all houses in remote Aboriginal communities remain *severely* overcrowded.

The situation in the Northern Territory is particularly acute. As noted in the expert panel's *Remote Housing Review* in 2017, more than half of the remaining overcrowded houses are in the Northern Territory, "the jurisdiction with the least capacity" to meet the shortfall.

We believe that the continued levels of overcrowding across Australia, most prominently but not exclusively in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, mitigate against effective progress on closing the gap in areas such as education, health, safety, and employment.

That view is widely shared. Indeed, the Prime Minister has expressed this sentiment.

In the *Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2018*, the Prime Minister referred to the vital importance of housing:

"Good quality housing underpins all of the Closing the Gap targets in health, education and employment, as well as community safety." (page 112)

Moving forward, the provision of appropriate housing needs be an integral consideration in all efforts made to close the gap.

We cannot give this lip service. A long term, joint approach from the Commonwealth, States and Territories is needed to ensure that overcrowding and other forms of Aboriginal homelessness are comprehensively addressed.

Why housing is particularly critical in the NT

The NT continues to have the highest rate of homelessness in the nation at a staggering twelve times that of the national average. Aboriginal persons represent one third of the Territory's population but are significantly overrepresented as 88.5% of all homeless persons.

83% of homeless persons in the NT live in severely overcrowded dwellings, 71% of which are in remote or very remote communities outside of Alice Springs and Darwin.

The rate of demand for homelessness services in the NT is three times that of other states and territories and the level of unmet demand is twice as high. For every homeless person, other states are able to assist four-and-a-half times as many people.

It should be no surprise then that the demand for services in the NT increased 13% on the prior year, far above the rate of increase seen in other states.

We note that Housing has been included as one of the key priorities in the targets set by the committee in the Special Gathering Statement presented to the COAG. The proposed indigenous prosperity framework discussed at the round tables has identified the access to affordable good-quality housing as being key to the economic and social development of indigenous people.

Sadly, the NT is on track to meet only one of the seven Closing the Gap targets. There is much research available regarding the pressures and implications that overcrowded housing has for households and family members. It should be no surprise to anyone that we will struggle to close the gap on Aboriginal disadvantage until suitable housing is available for everyone.

Suggested Indicators of Progress

We suggest that governments should focus on the following indicators as measures of progress:

- (a) Reduction in number of Aboriginal persons living in overcrowded dwellings (based on ABS definition); and
- (b) Aboriginal homelessness as a percentage of total homelessness, OR
- (c) Specialist homelessness services provided to Aboriginal persons as a percentage of all persons

Culture and Partnership - Working Effectively Together

Improved community engagement and consultation will be fundamental. Mistakes in the roll out of housing in remote communities across the NT have been made. We believe there is a desire on the part of Government to learn from the mistakes of the past and work in partnership with Aboriginal people on their housing needs.

Ultimately, Aboriginal people need to have control of their housing. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples lay out the rights of indigenous people to improving their economic and social conditions; and the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for these improvements.

The Uluru Statement refers to the significance of this partnership and empowerment of communities:
"When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish"

We trust the information provided above and our perspectives provide some context from the perspective of housing challenges across the NT and implications for Closing the Gap. We look forward to outcomes of the Refresh process and working collaboratively with stakeholders to play our part in seeing meaningful and sustained improvement against targets.

