



# MHACA

## **NT Community Housing Growth Strategy 2021-2030 Discussion Paper**

### **Submission by the Mental Health Association of Central Australia**

10 May 2021

The Mental Health Association of Central Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide information to support the growth of the community housing sector in the Northern Territory.

MHACA is a community managed organisation that provides individual and group based psychosocial support services, NDIS support coordination, tenancy support and homelessness assistance, suicide prevention and mental health promotion programs in Central Australia. We are the only specialist mental health NGO in the Northern Territory (NT) outside of Darwin.

Our submission supports the key aims of the NT Community Housing Growth Strategy 2021-2030 and is informed by the issues our participants experience in relation to homelessness and their risk of homelessness in Central Australia.

Access to safe, affordable housing is a significant challenge in Alice Springs. The biggest barrier continues to be the inadequate supply of housing stock as well as limited housing options. Short term accommodation options such as hostels cannot accommodate people for long periods which means while people are waiting to be housed they either sleep rough or couch surf which contributes to overcrowding. Private rentals are largely out of reach.

We believe there are two key actions for addressing homelessness in Central Australia:

- Targeted investment in social and community housing infrastructure in Central Australia
- Investment in long term supported housing programs, and in particular those based on a Housing First model

Beyond MHACA's general support for the development of more community housing options, we would like to provide some information on mental health and the connection to homelessness. We would also like to provide comment on sections 2, 4 and 5 of the discussion paper that addresses outcomes for tenants, incentives and principles for growth.

### **Mental Health and Homelessness**

There is a strong association between mental health and homelessness. Few people with mental health difficulties have access to specialist housing services in the NT outside of Darwin. Addressing appropriate housing and homelessness is critical to the recovery of people with mental health difficulties.

Homelessness in Central Australia disproportionately affects Indigenous people. Indigenous people make up 17.6 % of the population in Alice Springs<sup>1</sup>. In MHACA's experience, nearly seventy percent of people with a diagnosed mental illness who are homeless or at risk of being homeless in Alice Springs are Indigenous.

Indigenous people are highly mobile due to a range of social, cultural, economic and seasonal factors which drive their mobility. They often attribute residency to a region rather than a specific place or structure. The notion that a successful tenancy is one that is permanent is not necessarily relevant to many of our clients in central Australia.

In MHACA's experience the whole housing system needs to be understood in the context of how the services and opportunities that a house can afford are realised and managed. For example, in Central Australia we expect transience and movement of tenancies within the housing system. A successful tenancy is one that supports recovery and stability and is not measured by the length of stay in a building.

The housing market factors affecting homelessness include:

- The high cost of housing with high rental cost compared to other parts of the NT and Australia, contributing to poverty and housing affordability stress. There is a lack of affordable housing to rent – particularly for households on low incomes – as rental prices are comparatively high in the NT to other regions<sup>2</sup>
- High occupancy rates in the private rental market which cause low rates of housing availability
- Insufficient housing stock in central Australia

There are systemic issues which cause and affect homelessness in Central Australia which include:

- A lack of residential rehabilitation and supported housing options in Alice Springs for people with mental illness and their carers. This contributes to higher levels and longer stays in in-patient settings, higher levels of incarceration and significant distress (see case study)
- An increasing demand on transitional housing caused by clients in transitional housing unable to access a secure tenancy compounded by the migration of people from remote areas who use transitional housing while in town to access services, such as renal dialysis
- Many households, particularly Indigenous households, with overcrowded conditions
- Inadequate support (duration, type and level of support) to obtain housing and to maintain tenancies
- A waiting time on the priority list for public housing in central Australia of seven years

## 2. Outcomes for Tenants

MHACA recently supported the implementation of the Trajectories project in Alice Springs, with a particular emphasis on homeless Aboriginal people with mental health difficulties<sup>3</sup>. This report highlighted the need for service designs that are culturally and trauma informed.

There is a significant evidence base for Housing First Models as the preferred approach for people with complex needs including people with mental health difficulties, yet there are none of these programs available in the NT<sup>4</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> ABS. 2016 2016 Census Quickstats Alice Springs (T) LGA, Canberra.

[https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/LGA70200](https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/LGA70200)

<sup>2</sup> NTCOSS 2018, Cost of Living Report - Issue No. 20 (Part 2) Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc, July 2018, Darwin.

[https://mk0ntcoss2rx2i6x3dbk.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/FINAL\\_Cost-of-Living-Report-No.-20\\_Part-2-HOUSING.pdf](https://mk0ntcoss2rx2i6x3dbk.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/FINAL_Cost-of-Living-Report-No.-20_Part-2-HOUSING.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/housing/trajectories>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/housing/policy-analysis/mental-health-and-housing>

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lack of access to community housing, either through head leasing or allocated properties, is a significant barrier to implementing a Housing First Model.

In a piece of research conducted by MHACA in 2020 we identified that there are 20-30 people with mental health needs in Alice Springs who are unhoused due to being considered to have needs that are too high to qualify for public housing, and who have no other options available to them. A joint approach between the Departments of Housing and Health is urgently required. These people may be given short-term assistance through the Tenancy Support Programs but no real outcome will be achieved until there are options in place to support them to stabilise in a housing situation.

MHACA's Tenancy Support Program (TSP) is a person-centred, short term support program for people with mental health difficulties who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The TSP aligns with MHACA's vision that Central Australia is a safe and inclusive community that actively fosters and supports good mental health by recognising the importance of safe and secure housing for vulnerable people. TSP workers use case management processes to assist vulnerable people, who are often prone to abuse in the community, to find appropriate housing and/or maintain their tenancies.

From MHACA's experience, skills building programs like tenancy support and work-readiness programs significantly improve outcomes for tenants with moderate support needs in their capacity to maintain tenancies. We would like to reinforce the importance of tenancy support programs being acknowledged and built into the NT Community Housing Growth Strategy.

#### **4. What incentives will be used to grow the community housing sector**

MHACA would like to support the inclusion of the three objectives:

- Sustain tenancies and improve services to social and affordable housing tenants
- Break the cycle of multigenerational disadvantage through targeted access to education and training programs for social housing tenants
- Deliver tangible efficiencies to Government and improved client outcomes through early intervention and implementation of innovative practices through multi-agency responses for mutual clients

From MHACA's experience access to education, training and skills-building supports social housing clients to maintain their tenancies, and early intervention is critical to supporting people manage emerging issues and helps reduce reliance on crisis and government services.

The Coordinated Living on Arrernte Country program (CLOAC) is a partnership between the Northern Territory Department of Health; Central Australian Mental Health Service (MH-CAHS), Northern Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC); Mental Health Association of Central Australia (MHACA), Anglicare NT and Community Housing Central Australia (CHCA) and provides wrap-around clinical, tenancy and psychosocial (non-clinical) supports to people with identified mental illness in addition to other complex care needs. This may include people with dual

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diagnosis issues (substance misuse disorders) or other types of health issues. This project demonstrates a successful multi-agency response to supporting vulnerable people in the community.

### **5.1 Principles for growth**

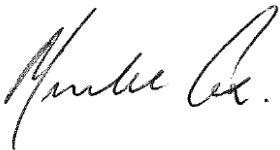
MHACA believes that the 'Person and family-centred' principle should be the first principle listed in the strategy, followed by "Culturally responsive' to demonstrate the importance of person-centred and culturally responsive services in the context of community housing.

MHACA supports the key aims of the NT Community Housing Growth Strategy 2021-2030 as access to safe, affordable housing is a significant challenge in Alice Springs, particularly for vulnerable people in our community. Targeted investment in social and community housing infrastructure in Central Australia is a key action to help reduce homelessness in Central Australia, as is the provision of educational and skills building programs to support tenants maintain tenancies once they have secured housing.

MHACA welcomes the opportunity to provide further comment on any of the issues outlined in our submission.

Yours Sincerely,

Merrilee Cox

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Merrilee Cox'.

CEO – Mental Health Association of Central Australia