IAHA Northern Territory Workforce Development position paper on housing and the workforce in Northern Australia

Background

IAHA Northern Territory Workforce Development (IAHA NTWD) is an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families, and communities across the Northern Territory and Northern Australia more broadly to achieve equitable outcomes in education, training, employment, health, and wellbeing.

IAHA NTWD recognises the significant role that housing plays both nationally and within Northern Australia, and its relationship with success in education, training, and employment. IAHA NTWD assert that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must have access to adequate, safe, secure, affordable, and appropriately designed and maintained housing, that meets their cultural and unique environmental needs, aspirations and priorities, as a foundation to wellbeing at the individual, family, and community levels. This is consistent with a rights-based approach to housing under the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights[1], the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)[2]* and *Closing the Gap Target 9: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need. [3]*

In addressing access to safe, secure, affordable and appropriate housing, the ongoing role of colonisation, dispossession,[4] racism and discrimination must be acknowledged and recognised as a significant barrier contributing to housing challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families, and communities. This impact is visible, for example, in the higher rates of homelessness, inequity of intergenerational wealth transfer for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and barriers to securing housing and tenancy, including through racist policies and biases in the selection of tenants in private rentals[5]. There has also been a lack of political will, collaboration, shared responsibility, leadership and investment, both nationally and within Northern Australia, from

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[1] https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
[2] UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples | Australian Human Rights Commission
[3] Closing the Gap targets and outcomes | Closing the Gap
[4] Lifting our gaze for Social Impact (apo.org.au)
[5] https://apo.org.au/node/179591

Commonwealth and State and Territory governments, coinciding with inadequate social housing supply and significant wait times.[6]

Housing as a social determinant of health and wellbeing

It is well established and understood the role of housing as a social determinant of health,[7] a fundamental human right closely associated with health and social and emotional wellbeing, education, and employment outcomes.[8] Access to safe, secure, appropriate, and affordable housing can ensure that individuals are able to maintain engagement in education and employment, which can have long term impact across a person's life course. Conversely, insecure, overcrowded or otherwise unsuitable housing can have a flow through effect on people's engagement with other social determinants of health, reinforcing the negative impacts of social issues such as domestic and family violence, feeling of or real security issues, and/or contribute directly to preventative or chronic diseases or poorer health outcomes, with significant long-term impact and cost. This is true in metropolitan, regional, rural, and remote communities.

The Northern Territory (NT) in particular experiences a range of unique challenges when it comes to housing such as the impact of climate change, weather, and geographical factors. Currently, the NT experiences the longest wait times for public housing[9] and has the highest proportion of people living in overcrowded households in Australia, with the highest levels of overcrowding occurring in very remote NT.[10] Overcrowding poses a significant impact to health, increasing the risk of preventable illnesses such as Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD)[11], scabies[12] and trachoma, a condition eliminated among all 'developed' countries except for Australia.[13] Inappropriate housing also increases risk of chronic disease and impacts modalities, outcomes and quality of care. Access to adequate housing and other physical infrastructure - as determined by Aboriginal people living in the NT - is crucial in the physical and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples, families, and communities in the NT and provides opportunities for intergenerational benefit. For those with access to housing, schemes which help more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families into home

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[6] https://nt.gov.au/property/public-housing/apply-for-housing/apply-for-public-housing/waiting-list
[7] Housing as a social determinant of health and wellbeing: developing an empirically-informed realist theoretical framework | BMC Public Health | Full Text (biomedcentral.com)
[8] Remote Housing in the Northern Territory (apo.org.au)
[9] NT's urban public housing sector in 'crisis' as priority applicants face a two-year wait - ABC News
[10] Housing circumstances and health / Overcrowding - AIHW RIFIC
[11] https://www.rhdaustralia.org.au/primordial-prevention-and-social-determinants-health
[12] https://www.onedisease.org/
[13] The Relationship between Infectious Diseases and Housing Maintenance in Indigenous Australian Households - PMC (nih.gov)

ownership, such as through the 'Help to Buy' shared equity scheme and Regional First Home Buyer Guarantee[14] should be a priority for generational change.

In some parts of the NT, inadequate housing exists with limited access to and maintenance of essential services such as water, sanitation, and electricity.[15] For example, prepaid power cards are used to access electricity, contributing to energy insecurity and may have a significant impact on people with chronic disease who require cool storage for medication, food storage, and heating and cooling.[16] In many, primarily Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, access to safe drinking water is not guaranteed. Reports have identified a lack of testing and presence of contamination to tap water in more than 500 remote Indigenous communities[17]. These inadequacies exacerbate chronic health conditions and increase the risk of transmissible illnesses.

The location of housing and absence of other physical infrastructure can also have a reinforcing effect on people's participation in society and access to education, employment, and services. Housing that is poorly connected via public transport links and built infrastructure increasing social isolation, particularly for those with intersecting needs such as older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability. The workforce in Northern Australia needs to be skilled and knowledgeable in their professions, but also in the social, cultural, environmental, political, and historical determinants of health and wellbeing, with a particular focus on building relationships and respect for the centrality of cultural and connection to Country. This includes working with people living in insecure or inappropriate housing or experiencing homelessness, to provide culturally safe care free from racism, discrimination, and bias.

The impact of housing availability on the workforce

The availability of housing can also impact on the current and future workforce such as, school attendance and success, career decision making, recruitment and retention, employee health and wellbeing, and absenteeism, presenteeism and productivity, particularly in remote and rural locations.[18]

Conversations about housing availability and workforce outcomes often focus on addressing maldistribution challenges that exist across many sectors, notably health care and social assistance and education, both of which have been the focus of several government initiatives to address

[14] https://ntshelter.org.au/download/13267/?tmstv=1683523870
[15] Water supply and sanitation in remote Indigenous communities-priorities for health development - ScienceDirect
[16] Climate, housing, energy and Indigenous health: a call to action - Quilty - 2022 - Medical Journal of Australia - Wiley Online Library
[17] https://www.wsaa.asn.au/publication/closing-water-people-and-communities-gap-review-management-drinking-water-supplies
[18] Social Determinants of Rural Health Workforce Retention: A Scoping Review - PMC (nih.gov)

workforce issues, with a focus on the impact on recruitment of qualified people from other locations and metropolitan regions and their families. This often ignores both the impact of housing availability and affordability within metropolitan and regional centres, and the relationship between housing and local workforce development.

Housing support for the health workforce, for example, is often inequitably available, with preference given to professionals travelling from interstate and professions which typically occupy clinical leadership roles such as medical practitioners and nurses. Where allowances, housing, and rental support, subsidises, and similar initiatives are available, these same incentives are usually not provided to the local workforce and/or those occupying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker or Practitioner roles. Purchasing of housing for professionals or students by universities and service providers can further exacerbate challenges related to housing affordability and availability. While these strategies are necessary, broadening our thinking about growing a local workforce needs to appropriately position and understand the role of housing.

These workforce shortages can determine and undermine the services delivered locally, requiring people to travel long distances to access health care off Country. The need to travel to access services can also heighten personal and community challenges with respect to housing, including placing additional stress on supportive accommodation where individuals access care and increasing risks of discharge to insecure housing arrangements. Even where services are provided short term or long term through in-reach to communities, these drive in-drive out/fly in fly out or locum models see resources and economic opportunities return with the workforce, back to regional and metropolitan centres.

Housing as a workforce challenge also undermines the success and stability of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, including peak bodies and other Aboriginal community controlled organisations, who are similarly impacted in the ability to recruit and retain suitably qualified staff. To achieve the outcomes intended by the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including the empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities, housing investment is essential.

Addressing housing and homelessness challenges
In addressing access to adequate, safe, secure, affordable, and appropriate housing, a multi-sectorial and coordinated approach, that is culturally safe and responsive to the needs, aspirations, and priorities, is needed. It must centre self-determination and Indigenous knowledges, culture, beliefs, and preferences to ensure that Aboriginal peoples, families, and communities in the NT and Northern

Australia, are empowered to make decisions about their own housing needs in the context of place and community.

While significant investment in increasing housing supply is desperately needed, this investment needs to be directed to housing which is up to standard and considers the environment in which its being built. Opportunities to maximise thermal comfort through design, install renewable energies including solar to minimise expense to occupants and address energy insecurity, and investment in housing maintenance including the development of local maintenance workforces with economic and business opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities should all be considered within housing policy.

IAHA NT WD calls for further and greater investment, development, and support in an environmental health workforce, who are vital in assessing and managing environmental risks that affect housing to contribute to a healthier and sustainable future for generations to come. In the development of this workforce culturally informed training pathways, from NT and Northern Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges would be required. This is in alignment with the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2013,*[19] which identifies the environmental health workforce as significantly improving individual and community outcomes and reducing burden of disease, and which all governments have committed to.

Housing policy needs to consider opportunities to address the ongoing impact of past housing policies and to prioritise support for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, women and children experiencing domestic and family violence, and those otherwise most at need. IAHA calls for urgent investment in social housing, homelessness services, crisis and short-stay accommodation and initiatives which support the long-term self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families. IAHA NT WD also call on employers and organisations to improve equitability in housing availability, which should include providing access to housing and relocation support to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the workforce and to plan transition of corporate housing to communities, which is particularly relevant to regions with a strong resource sector presence.

In addition to the need to support jurisdictional peaks, IAHA are supportive of the ongoing support of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak body and the importance of the housing

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[19] National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031 | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care

policy partnership under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It is essential that this work is recognised, valued, supported, and progressed by all governments, Commonwealth and States and Territories, in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people, as intended under the National Agreement. The Housing Sector Strengthening Plan[20] speaks to many of the challenges and solutions.

Conclusion

Access to housing is a foundational human right and one that is not being met for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, and communities across Australia. For too long, governments have operated at the fringes, without adequate investment, leadership, strategies, and coordination to meaningfully uplift the status of housing, particularly in Northern Australia. This cannot continue and urgent action is needed. IAHA NT WD are deliberate in the use of the term investment, and investment in housing needs to be considered exactly that, an investment in the livelihoods, success, and wellbeing of our communities and workforces with significant financial and social return. Better outcomes across all areas, including education, training, and employment hinges on housing and infrastructure.

Summary of key messages:

- Housing is a fundamental human right and concentrated action to address inequitable access to housing is needed to uphold and affirm the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.
- While understood as a social determinant of health and wellbeing, housing needs to be considered also in the context of its complex interplay with other determinants of health, such as capacity to engage in and succeed in education, training, and employment.
- Housing access is also a significant driver of health workforce recruitment, retention, and distribution, with specific strategies to support the health workforce and which are equitable and inclusive of local people required.
- Substantial and urgent investment, leadership, and collaboration from all levels of governments are needed, working under the leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families, and communities.

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[20] https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-08/housing-sector-strengthening-plan.pdf