



## **NTCOSS Pre Budget Submission 2019 – 2020**

Dear Chief Minister

Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with the 2019 – 2020 Northern Territory Council of Social Service Inc (NTCOSS) Pre Budget Submission (PBS).

NTCOSS is a peak body for the community sector in the Northern Territory and is a voice for people affected by social and economic disadvantage and inequality. The community sector in the NT is made up of community managed, non-government, not for profit organisations which work in social and community service delivery, sector development and advocacy.

The community sector plays a vital role in creating social wellbeing for all Territorians and in building safe and healthy communities by providing services that enable people to access and participate in health services, education, employment, economic development, and family and community life.

Aboriginal people across the NT continue to disproportionately experience disadvantage in key areas such as homelessness, unemployment, education levels, imprisonment and child protection. They are at risk of developing preventable health problems at a much higher rate than non-Aboriginal Territorians. In the past few months, issues such as Rheumatic Heart Disease, ear and eye health, and sexually transmitted infections have been highlighted in the media. We urge both the NT Government and Federal Government to invest significant resources into addressing chronic and preventable health conditions primarily affecting Aboriginal people across the NT.

We also urge the NT Government to increase investment in education, particularly for children and young people who are at risk of becoming disengaged. Increasing the number of holistic programs that focus on children's wellbeing, with therapeutic care at their centre, is critical to increasing engagement in schools while addressing and supporting those students with challenging behaviours. Education should be a central focus in the youth justice and child protection reforms.

The past 12 months has seen the NT Government starting to implement the recommendations from several reviews – primarily the Riley Alcohol Review, the NT Royal Commission and subsequent response from the NT Government's 'Safe, Thriving and Connected' implementation plan, and the NT Concessions Scheme. NTCOSS broadly supports the recommendations of these reviews and acknowledges the progress the NT

Government has made thus far. NTCOSS strongly encourages the NT Government to continue working towards the implementation of the key reviews, as a matter of priority.

NTCOSS acknowledges the challenges of giving full effect to the recommendations of the reviews, given the current economic challenges due to factors such as a declining population, and decreased GST allocation from the Commonwealth Government. It is essential the NT Government increase its revenue base. Furthermore, while there is a need to find the balance between supporting business to operate and flourish in the NT, there is also a need to ensure business contributes to the community and essential services. Business benefit from physical and social infrastructure. Some businesses have a significant and detrimental impact on communities and environment.

Despite progress, there is more to do:

### **1. Implement and resource current reviews and commitments**

- The transitioning of out-of-home care to the non-government sector over a 7 year period, with an emphasis on the transition to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
- Implementation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement (AJA)
- The Safe, Thriving and Connected implementation plan as the response to the Northern Territory Royal Commission.
- Implementation of the Riley Alcohol Review
- Finalisation of the review of the NT Anti-Discrimination Act to strengthen and broaden protections for vulnerable Territorians.
- Implementation of the Early Childhood Plan – Starting Early For a Better Future

### **2. Cost of Living – access to Concessions**

NTCOSS has advocated for many years for electricity concessions to be made available to all Centrelink Health Care Card holders.

The Northern Territory is now the only jurisdiction in Australia not to offer electricity concessions to all Centrelink Health Care Card holders.

NTCOSS welcomed the reform of the NT Pensioner Concession Scheme, moving towards a targeted program that provides meaningful assistance to people struggling to pay for their electricity. However, too many low income people are excluded from the new scheme or are now only receiving a benefit because they were “grandfathered” when the new scheme started.

Recipients of Carer Allowance are currently excluded from the NT Pensioner Concession Scheme, as are people on low incomes who eligible for the Centrelink Pensioner Concession

Card. NTCOSS believes these people should be eligible for the NT Pensioner Concession Scheme,

Given that people can move in and out of eligibility for payments such as the Newstart Allowance, Low-income Health Care Card, and Pensioner Concession Card, a qualifying eligibility period could be introduced before people could be eligible for concessions.

Extending the eligibility for the electricity to these now excluded groups would be a big step towards addressing inequality and providing appropriate social supports to those who need it most.

***NTG to extend access to the Concessions Scheme to all identified low income groups***

***NTG to extend access to electricity concessions for all Centrelink Health Care Card Holders***

### **3. Extend OOHC to 21 years**

NTCOSS supports the national Home Stretch campaign, which seeks to extend the leaving care age for young people in state care from 18 to 21 years. Extending care until the age of 21 is currently agreed to in Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia and being piloted in Western Australia. NTCOSS acknowledges the work that the NT Government has undertaken towards providing ongoing support to young people leaving care, or who have previously been in care, by the commitment to resource an ongoing, supported housing program. Significant work is also being undertaken to establish an Aboriginal Out-of-Home Care system. NTCOSS calls on the NT Government to further support young people in care by extending care for young people who:

- Want to stay on in their foster or kinship care placement and have the agreement from their carer, or
- Who are not ready to leave care and wish to remain in a residential supported care environment but cannot remain in the care placement past 18 years.

To give effect to this arrangement, NTCOSS calls on the NT Government to provide support in the form of ongoing carer reimbursements to carers, case management or residential service to the young person and resources to access education or employment activity.

If the policy is adopted, we ask the NT Government to work closely with relevant agencies to develop the program design and guidelines, to ensure that those who will be impacted are consulted.

***Extend the leaving care age to 21 years***

#### **4. Human Rights Act**

All Territorians would benefit from having their human rights enshrined in legislation.

Enshrining human rights in NT law will demonstrate the Government's commitment to protecting, promoting, respecting and fulfilling the human rights of Territorians, and strengthen our democracy.

The amended sessional orders of the NT Legislative Assembly require that Members, upon presenting a bill, to table a signed statement on whether the bill is compatible with Human Rights as defined in the *Human Rights (Parliamentary Scrutiny) Act 2011* (Cth). This is a step in the right direction, but in itself is not an adequate protection of Territorians' human rights – it does not have the same status as legislation, and does not govern the conduct of public authorities or guide the interpretation of legislation by Courts.

An NT Human Rights Act would provide protection for vulnerable and disadvantaged Territorians, and would safeguard the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who face disproportionately high levels of disempowerment, disadvantage and discrimination. A Human Rights Act that includes protections of cultural rights would be consistent with the NT Government's commitment to an Aboriginal Justice Agreement in the NT.

***Commit to the development of an NT Human Rights Act and resource the consultation and implementation.***

#### **5. A comprehensive climate change policy**

The impact of climate change will have a devastating impact on those who are most vulnerable and less able to adapt – and this includes communities across the NT. We support the Environment Centre of the NT and the Arid Lands Environment Centre in calling for the NT Government to develop and resource a comprehensive climate change policy to:

- Achieve net zero emissions by 2050 (mitigation)
- Develop climate resilient communities (adaptation)

***Develop and resource a comprehensive climate change policy***

#### **6. Reduce Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence**

Domestic and family violence (DFV) continues to have a significant impact on the lives of Territorians. NTCOSS believes that in order to achieve the goals identified in the Domestic,

Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework there is a need for the identified actions to be fully funded.

As a priority, there is a need for housing and homeless responses for people experiencing DFV through improved resourcing of early interventions, crisis and post-crisis support. It is well established that DFV is the leading cause of homelessness for women and their children. Improved resourcing of 'safe at home approaches' to allow victims of DFV to stay at home if they choose such as through upgrading security at home, providing emotional support and critically, holding perpetrators to account and removing them to minimise disruption to the household. Where women and children need to leave, there is a need for safe shelter/housing needs as a priority. This can be better facilitated through improved resourcing of transitional housing and, in regional centres such as Katherine and Alice Springs, hubs where women come to escape DFV.

In accordance with the Framework, it is critical that to build the capacity of the broader workforce, so that they are skilled in identifying and responding to DFV. This entails the provision of DFV training beyond the Family Safety Framework. Training should be culturally appropriate and trauma informed and address the complexity and multiplicity of DFV.

In addition to this, NTCOSS calls on the Northern Territory Government to commit to a whole of government approach to DFV by addressing gaps in service provision and risk assessment. For example, there is a need for the Department of Education to develop a policy to respond to student disclosures of DFV and to improve victims' access to legal services for a range of domestic and family violence related legal matters across the Northern Territory. There is also a need for future frameworks and policies to align with and further the Framework.

***Appropriately and adequately resource the first Action Plan of the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework (the Framework) with a particular focus on improving the delivery of housing and homeless responses for people experiencing Domestic, Family and Violence (DFV) and building the capacity of Northern Territory Government services to respond to DFV.***

## **7. Housing and homelessness**

NTCOSS supports the NT Shelter Pre Budget Submission and emphasises the connection that housing and homelessness has to other key issues raised in this PBS.

***Accept the NT Shelter Pre-Budget Submission***

## **8. Lobby the Commonwealth Government**

There has been no increase in the Newstart payment since 1994. We see the impact of the continued low rate of both the Newstart and associated payments on a daily basis. We join ACOSS and many other local and national groups and individuals to call for a minimum increase of \$75 per week in the payments.

The Community Development Program is causing significant harm to Aboriginal people in remote communities across the NT. We support the alternative model proposed by APONT, which is also supported by groups such as ACOSS.

***The NT Government to advocate to the Commonwealth Government to lift the rate of Newstart and Youth Allowance***

***The NT Government to advocate for the APONT model of CDP to be adopted.***

## **9. Increase the revenue base**

It is clear that the NT is in difficult financial times and more needs to be done to increase and strengthen the revenue base. The NT taxation and revenue raising system must be effective, fair and sustainable. It should not place undue burden nor have undue impact on low income and disadvantaged Territorians.

As well as advocating for an equitable share of GST and other commonwealth revenue, NTCOSS urges the NTG to work with other states and territories in relation to commonwealth tax reform including but not limited to the following:

- Removal of negative gearing
- Ensuring private trusts and companies pay their fair share of taxes
- Reduction in the discounting of Capital Gains Tax
- Other tax reform initiatives outlined in the ACOSS 2018/2019 Budget Submission

***NTG to consider broad range of revenue raising measures (see [NTCOSS Response to the NTG Revenue Review, February 2018](#))***

Yours sincerely



Wendy Morton  
**Executive Director**