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Mr Trevor Riley  
Chairperson – Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review  
C/- Department of Health  
PO Box 40596  
CASUARINA NT 0811

Dear Mr Riley, *Trevor*

**ALCOHOL POLICIES AND LEGISLATION REVIEW**

Thank you for your letter dated 26 May 2017 requesting the Department of Housing and Community Development provide input into the Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review.

The Department of Housing and Community Development provides funding for homeless services and is responsible for provision of government employee housing, public housing in urban and remote areas, administration of the *Local Government Act* and municipal and essential services to homelands and town camps. This broad service remit means that the department has contact with a large and diverse number of Territorians.

Therefore, Northern Territory alcohol policies and legislation have an impact, either directly or indirectly on the majority of our clients. There are two particular areas where our clients, and the problematic use of alcohol intersect more closely, public housing safety and homelessness.

Further information regarding these areas, including the data you requested regarding public housing safety, is provided in the attached response from my department.

Please contact Ms Christine Fitzgerald, Executive Director – Strategy, Policy and Performance on 89 998333 or [Christine.Fitzgerald@nt.gov.au](mailto:Christine.Fitzgerald@nt.gov.au) if you require further information.

Yours sincerely

*Jamie Chalker*  
Jamie Chalker  
Chief Executive Officer

19 June 2017

## Department of Housing and Community Development

### Submission to the Alcohol Policies and Legislation Review

The Department of Housing and Community Development provides funding for homeless services and is responsible for provision of government employee housing, public housing in urban and remote areas, administration of the *Local Government Act* and municipal and essential services to homelands and town camps. This broad service remit means that the department has contact with a large and diverse number of Territorians.

Therefore, Northern Territory alcohol policies and legislation have an impact, either directly or indirectly on the majority of our clients. There are two particular areas where our clients, and the problematic use of alcohol intersect most closely, that being public housing safety and homelessness. Further information on each of these areas is provided below.

#### Public Housing Safety

The department is responsible for public housing in both urban and remote areas and whilst the safety of all public housing clients is important, Public Housing Safety Officers (PHSOs) are only located in urban areas. While public housing safety covers antisocial behaviour more broadly, alcohol misuse is often a factor in antisocial behaviour incidents.

Public Housing Safety Officers provide a first response to antisocial behaviour in public housing properties. Officers build relationships with public housing tenants, neighbours and other agencies, have the power to tip out alcohol and move visitors on from public housing, work closely with police to monitor 'hot spots', and conduct regular patrols of public housing.

Under the *Housing Act*, PHSOs have powers to do all of the following:

- ask tenants to stop antisocial behaviour
- ask visitors to leave public housing
- ban people for up to 12 months from being in public housing
- tip out alcohol that is open
- seize dangerous items and unopened alcohol
- enter the yard of a public housing property without giving notice
- ask a person on public housing property to give their name and address.

The majority of antisocial behaviour incidents attended by PHSOs will involve alcohol and other substance use. As part of their incident write up, Officers will note if there are intoxicated people, and if a premises is alcohol restricted. This information will be passed on to the Northern Territory Police.



The department cannot yet accurately report on the total number of incidents attended by PHSOs where alcohol misuse was a factor, however a range of alcohol related data is currently collected. This includes:

- Public housing safety incidents that involve alcohol misuse between 1 July 2016 and 31 May 2017:
  - 453 events, or 6% of 7,331 antisocial behaviour allegations were confirmed as involving a breach of the *Liquor Act* in relation to offences occurring on Alcohol Restricted Premises (dwelling), Area (common area of complexes) and Special Area (town camps),
  - 284 events, or 4% of 7,331 antisocial behaviour allegations resulted in 264 litres of alcohol being tipped out.

Data extracted from WebEOC Housing and accurate as at 6 June 2017

The department collects information regarding the number of public housing residences which have been declared alcohol restricted premises and areas. Department records show that:

- The number of public housing residences which have been declared alcohol restricted as at 15 June 2017:
  - 232 current tenancies are declared alcohol restricted premises,
  - 60 unit complex common areas are declared alcohol restricted areas, and
  - Town camps in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek and Remote Communities are declared alcohol restricted special areas.

Data extracted from WebEOC Housing and accurate as at 15 June 2017

Department of Housing and Community Development Service Delivery staff assist tenants with completing the application to have their premises declared alcohol restricted and the Director General Licensing is the administrator and relevant body for issuing the restrictions and will provide the signs to be erected.

Where alcohol is involved in an incident of antisocial behaviour the following may occur:

- Public Housing Safety Officers can seize alcohol, and if open, tip it out. If the alcohol is unopened and it is seized by the PHSO's, a seizure notice is completed, and as required by the *Housing Act* the alcohol is retained for three months before disposal unless claimed,
- Public Housing Safety Officers or Police may issue a Notice of Direction banning non-residents from entering the premises or area, or direct our tenants to stop engaging in prescribed offences relating to the *Liquor Act*,
- A tenant or person responsible for the alcohol can be fined by the Police, or if necessary court action may be taken,
- The department may contact the Police if people drink in restricted premises, and/or
- The Police can enter an alcohol restricted premises without a warrant.

A number of methods are used by the department to record and report on alcohol related matters. Public Housing Safety Officers record:

- every instance where they have seized unopened containers of alcohol or tipped out opened containers of alcohol in WebEOC Housing, including the amount of alcohol seized or destroyed, and



- where an allegation solely relates to a prescribed offence against section 75, 101AE or 101AL of the *Liquor Act*, the result code for the allegation is recorded as “Prescribed Offence – Liquor Act” in WebEOC.

No other indicator has been included in recording practices to identify whether alcohol was involved in substantiated antisocial behaviour incidents.

## Homelessness

Access to safe, secure, appropriate and affordable housing provides a fundamental component of individual, family and community wellbeing and prosperity. Housing provides the basis for good physical and mental health, participation in education and employment, safety, security and comfort. People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are often at their most vulnerable and providing the right mix of support services at these critical times can improve long term outcomes both for individuals and the wider community.

Based on the ABS definition, the NT has a rate of homelessness that is almost 15 times the national average<sup>1</sup>. On Census night in 2011, there were 730.7 homeless people per 10,000 persons (or seven per cent of the NT population), a significant number in comparison to an average for Australia of 8.9 people per 10 000 persons (or less than one per cent of the national population).

Of the total number of homeless people counted in the NT, 90 per cent identified as Aboriginal and about half were female and half male. The NT homeless population comprises a significant proportion of people who are living in overcrowded and severely overcrowded dwellings, the majority of which are located in remote areas of the NT. A significant proportion of the NT homeless population are aged under 25 (52 per cent). Twenty-seven per cent of all homeless persons counted on Census night in 2011 were aged 12 or under<sup>2</sup>.

Homelessness is typically more complex than the lack of an appropriate place to live. People tend to find themselves homeless and in need of housing assistance or support for a range of reasons rather than a single cause<sup>3</sup>. Homelessness can be triggered by the accumulation of structural (e.g. housing supply and labour market issues), institutional (e.g. contact with the corrections or child protection systems), relationship (e.g. family breakdown) and personal factors (e.g. mental health and addiction).

For some it results from a change of personal circumstances, such as losing a job or a family breakdown, others are forced into homelessness due to family dysfunction (e.g. domestic and family violence), mental health issues, substance abuse or a combination of these things<sup>4</sup>. The flow-on effects of homelessness are felt by the wider community and come at great human and economic cost. Homelessness and poor housing outcomes undermine efforts to improve a range of social outcomes. The cost of homelessness is reflected across the human services system; such as in prisons, hospitals and children’s services<sup>5</sup>.

In 2015-16, 5.7 per cent of clients assisted through NT specialist homelessness services (461 people) cited health related issues as their main reason for seeking assistance. This included

<sup>1</sup> ABS 2049.0, 2011, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness*

<sup>2</sup> ABS 2049.0, 2011, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness*

<sup>3</sup> AHURI, 2016, *Effectiveness of the Homelessness Service System*

<sup>4</sup> AHURI, 2016, *Effectiveness of the Homelessness Service System*

<sup>5</sup> AHURI, 2016, *Effectiveness of the Homelessness Service System*



183 people citing problematic alcohol use. Further, 3,533 or 43% of the clients who accessed specialist homeless services did so as a result of domestic and family violence. It is likely that alcohol has been a contributing factor to many incidences of domestic and family violence.

For people experiencing homelessness who have significant alcohol dependency other treatment may be required, including medically supervised withdrawal and detoxification, structured assertive day programs or alcohol residential treatment programs. Where someone has been assisted through an intensive residential treatment facility, careful cross agency planning is needed to ensure people are not exiting treatment facilities into homelessness.

Therefore it is hoped that within the context of this review, and any subsequent changes to alcohol policy and legislation, the following treatment and support models may be available to assist people to sustain their tenancy where alcohol or drug abuse is placing a tenancy at risk of homelessness:

- Alcohol counselling and support provided either through government or NGO services,
- Harm reduction services to initiate changes in unhealthy or risk behaviours,
- Goal orientated, client centred counselling.

Importantly, new models aimed at addressing chronic homelessness do not depend on the historic 'Treatment First' models, where the provision of housing depends on participation in treatment programs. The new model is a 'Housing First' approach, which is based on the idea that a homeless individual's first and primary need is to obtain stable, secure and long term housing. It is only once stable housing is obtained that other more enduring issues can be appropriately addressed. In practice, a Housing First approach involves moving chronically homeless individuals and families from the street or homeless shelters directly into long term housing. Housing is complemented by the provision of services to assist each individual to sustain their housing and work towards recovery and reintegration into the community<sup>6</sup>.

The department does not fund housing and homelessness support programs that are directly targeted to address alcohol and alcohol harm minimisation strategies, however, it is highly likely that all, or a majority of housing and homelessness funded services are impacted by clients who are affected by alcohol and will be impacted by these policies.

## Conclusion

The Department of Housing and Community Development is a social service provider that aims to maximise opportunities for Territorians to strive, thrive and prosper. Through partnerships and by providing connected and resourceful services the department's purpose is to develop sustainable communities that enhance the physical and social wellbeing of Territorians.

In closing, the Department of Housing and Community Development supports the development of a broader, integrated Alcohol Harm Reduction Framework. It is hoped that any changes to policy and legislation result in a greater access to a range of early intervention and harm reduction services for vulnerable Territorians.

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<sup>6</sup> AHURI, 2012, *Policy Shift or Program Drift? Implementing Housing First in Australia*