



Northern
Territory
Government

DEPARTMENT OF
**HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND
REGIONAL SERVICES**

Submission to the Inquiry into the Child Protection System

Northern Territory 2010

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Regional Services (DHLGRS), while not directly responsible for the provision of child protection services or specific children's programs, has responsibility for several programs and initiatives that either directly or indirectly relate to the safety and wellbeing of children.

DHLGRS is the NT Government's central point of responsibility for effective coordination of the delivery of government services to remote areas, oversight of the Working Future framework, Indigenous policy coordination and for promoting and supporting regional and Indigenous economic development.

Informing its coordination and service delivery work in these areas are the COAG building blocks which provide a whole of government agenda. Many of the COAG building blocks play an important role in reducing the risk to Indigenous children. Although an effective child protection system is vital to ensure appropriate responses for children already in need, or at high risk, also vital, is a whole of government approach to services that reduces the likelihood of children being exposed to risk. DHLGRS is contributing to this approach through Working Future and its collaboration with other agencies.

In addition, DHLGRS has direct responsibility to implement programs to support strong local governments; affordable and social housing programs in urban and remote areas; the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP); interpreting and translating services for Aboriginal, migrant and refugee peoples; water safety and animal welfare programs and through all these measures drive a strong focus on employment opportunities for local people.

A key plank of SIHIP and all social housing initiatives (such as Homelessness National Partnership Agreement) is to reduce overcrowding in remote and urban and town camps. The \$672 million SIHIP housing program will deliver 750 new houses, 230 rebuilds of existing houses and 2,500 refurbishments across 73 remote Indigenous communities and a number of community living areas (town camps) in the Northern Territory by 2013. Additionally all new urban developments will include 10% dedicated to affordable housing and 5% dedicated to social housing. DHLGRS is well aware of the health and family implications that can arise from overcrowded houses, in particular the direct relevance to neglect and potential abuse of children.

The most pertinent of DHLGRS programs and the area of the department most likely to have an impact, both directly and indirectly, on child protection and wellbeing issues is in provision of housing. The frontline tenancy staff in all the regional Territory Housing offices are the most likely to interact with and have first hand knowledge of families and children who may be vulnerable, in stress or requiring referral for care and protection.

There is a strong focus on contemporary and adaptable tenancy management frameworks for social housing. With very similar workforce issues to the Northern Territory Families and Children (NTFC), DHLGRS is currently assessing the appropriate housing officer profile in regards to skills, experience and training/education so as to realign the workforce model to work more effectively in today's operating environment. The multifaceted complexity of the public housing environment demands complex layers of service delivery and support systems for the majority of tenants.

In November 2009, following collaboration between DHLGRS and NTFC, Territory Housing commenced facilitating mandatory reporting training regarding child protection, delivered by NTFC, for all front-line housing staff. To date this training has been delivered to all regions bar the Arnhem region. There is the potential to provide this training to other DHLGRS business units and to service providers who deliver housing services on behalf of the department.

Further collaboration between DHLGRS and NTFC has continued to develop formal communication processes and protocols between each agency, regarding children at risk due to impending eviction and/or other situations where tenancy staff identify possible at risk family situations. It is intended that

this collaboration will extend to community organisations with which both agencies have established working relationships.

A significant number of the disadvantaged and vulnerable families in the Territory do not speak English as a first language and come from the Aboriginal, migrant and refugee sector. It is imperative that government services are delivered in a way that people fully understand them and effectively take up these services. This is particularly important within the human services sector. DHLGRS provides a 24-hour Aboriginal interpreter service and the interpreting and translating services for migrant and refugees, these services are available to Territory and Australian government agencies and the non-government sector. Key users of these services are in the areas of community health, hospitals, family services, the courts, legal aid, police and Centrelink.

Out-of-home care and home-care services can be set-up in public housing dwellings. While DHLGRS is not the service provider, the department's assets may be used as care facilities with appropriate approvals. Grant funding may also be available to eligible applicants for the establishment of child-care centres in the Territory through Indigenous Business Development Team.

Another area that DHLGRS has as a high priority is to proactively work with local community structures and systems, such as local government shires and boards, to ensure community engagement with government services and programs and to strengthen leadership at the local level. This includes supporting the development of community safety plans.