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‘Anti-social behaviour’ changes are a sleight of hand that will push Territorians into homelessness

Legal services, community organisations and land councils call on the NT Government to abandon proposed social housing laws

A coalition of Northern Territory legal services, community organisations and land councils has called on the NT Government to abandon its proposed social housing changes, warning they will push large numbers of vulnerable Territorians into homelessness and drive more crime and violence in the community.

In a joint open letter to Housing Minister Steve Edgington released today, the coalition says the Government’s Consultation Paper, *Addressing anti-social behaviour in social housing*, uses the language of “anti-social behaviour” as a sleight of hand to justify evicting tenants into homelessness on a large scale.

The proposed amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999* (NT) would strengthen the Government’s powers to end tenancies, create an additional administrative pathway to end social housing tenancies with just a letter in the mail, and extend those powers to community housing providers. They follow the Government’s “three strikes” policy, which began on 19 October.

The coalition says the conduct being labelled “anti-social behaviour” is most often the product of domestic and family violence, a lack of treatment and support for people living with mental illness, experiences of crime, overcrowding and poverty.

Research shows around 43 per cent of social housing tenants live with mental illness, and 87 per cent are First Nations people, meaning the impact will fall overwhelmingly on Aboriginal families.

The Northern Territory already has the highest rate of homelessness in the country. The coalition warns that evicting more people will increase homelessness, which in turn will bring more crime, violence and pressure on police, hospitals and the justice system.

The changes follow the removal of tenants' right to be heard on rent determinations and the closure of YiSSA, the 400-bed short-stay facility in Darwin, which relocated residents 100km from essential medical and social services.

> "Labelling this a crackdown on anti-social behaviour is dishonest - the proposal would move large numbers of people out of public housing with less independent oversight. Nearly nine in ten tenants are First Nations people, so this falls overwhelmingly on Aboriginal families - every eviction is a family with nowhere to go."
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> "Laws that allow people to lose their homes need clear definitions, a real right of review and proper scrutiny by a tribunal. These proposals fall short on all three, and vulnerable families and the legal assistance sector will be left dealing with the consequences."
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> **Ben Grimes, Chief Executive Officer, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA)**

> "A woman experiencing violence too often carries the blame for the noise, damage and unwanted visitors when a violent partner turns up at the door. She gets the strike and loses the house, and losing a safe home is one of the main reasons women return to a violent partner."
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> **Clara Mills, Principal Legal Officer, North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service (NAAFLS)**

> "Every week tenants bring us breach notices for things they could not control, like relatives arriving from community for sorry business or hospital appointments. Tenants cannot manufacture support services into existence, and a new administrative pathway risks sidelining NTCAT's independent check before anyone loses their home."
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> **Rachael Bowker, Chief Executive Officer, Darwin Community Legal Service (DCLS)**

> "Our people move between community and town for health care, family and ceremony, staying with relatives because there are not enough houses in either place. Punishing tenants for meeting their cultural obligations to family will not fix overcrowding, but building the remote housing that has been promised for years will."
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> **Yuseph Deen, Chief Executive Officer, Northern Land Council**

> "Overcrowding in remote communities is the reason so many people end up in town in the first place. If the Government is serious about safer towns, it should fix housing shortages in communities, not make it easier to put families on the street."
>
> **Warren Williams, Chair, Central Land Council**

The coalition is calling on the Northern Territory Government to abandon the proposed changes and work with the community services sector and social housing tenants to develop an effective, evidence-backed and adequately resourced approach to sustaining social housing tenancies.

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