



Mental Health Association of Central Australia

MEDIA RELEASE: (EMBARGOED until 31 March 2010)

URGENT ACTION NEEDED ON HOUSING PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS

“Finding and keeping housing is a major problem for people with a mental illness, meaning many of them become homeless”, said Claudia Manu-Preston, General Manager of the Mental Health Association of Central Australia (MHACA), at the launch of a new report.

“One third of the people surveyed for the report live in short term or unstable accommodation, frequently moving from place to place. Two thirds of the people surveyed are uncertain how long their current arrangements will last.”

The research report *There’s No Place Like Home—There is No Place*, commissioned by MHACA was launched today by Lisa Coffey, acting Anti-Discrimination Commissioner for the Northern Territory.

The report looked into the housing needs of people with mental illness in Alice Springs and confirmed that people with a mental illness are considerably disadvantaged in their efforts to find suitable housing and maintain tenancies, resulting in many being homeless.

“The impact of homelessness for people with a mental illness results in their health getting worse, more time spent in the mental health unit and possible time in prison through lack of treatment”, Ms Manu-Preston said.

“The housing difficulties for people living with a mental illness in Alice Springs are overlaid by the critical shortage of housing currently affecting all sections of the community”.

“While both the Federal and NT Governments allocate resources for social housing and several organisations provide valuable services to support people with mental illness in Alice Springs; the resources available simply do not meet current needs.”

“With often poor rental histories and a lack of support to obtain housing and maintain tenancies, and the stigma or discrimination associated with mental illness, people frequently find themselves “prioritised out” of whatever accommodation is available”. “Without appropriate support, tenancies - when they are found - are at risk of failure, perpetuating the cycle of ill health and homelessness.”

David Crosbie, CEO of the Mental Health Council of Australia, said in his message of support for MHACA’s Report, “When mental health consumers or their carers are asked what they most want to improve their lives, the most common response is not better access to psychiatrists, more hospital beds or more drug treatments, what they most want is access to stable and secure housing”. “This is also our experience in Alice Springs”, said Ms Manu-Preston.

“People are often forced to live in short term or unstable accommodation, moving frequently between hostels, shelters, caravan parks, camps, staying with friends or relatives, or living on the streets or in the riverbed”.

“Without a place to call home, people have no sense of security or stability upon which to regain their mental health and build their lives. Instead, they face the daily reality of finding shelter.”

The Report revealed that people with a mental illness “want to live in affordable housing suited to their individual domestic situation as part of the general community, with support as and where needed, to enable them to get on with their lives and live as independently as possible”.

The Report calls on Government to recognise the fact that people with mental illness are a priority group at very high risk of homelessness and put in place a policy framework and systems to address this.

It calls for immediate practical action in Alice Springs to establish 24 additional beds, across a range of accommodation types – short term, crisis, respite and supported accommodation and long term housing. In addition the report calls for 15 individual care packages to assist people to help develop their skills to live independently and for improved support for carers and accommodation services by strengthening the capacity of clinical services to provide timely community-based response, including after hours. “This is a start to meet the most critical need but is only the beginning of what is needed to address the issues of housing and support for people with a mental illness” said Ms Manu-Preston.

For further media comment contact: Claudia Manu-Preston 8950 4601 or 0428 529 284. www.mhaca.org.au



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WHAT THE REPORT IS CALLING FOR

The Report reveals major gaps in housing infrastructure and support services for people with mental illness in Alice Springs that adversely affect

- the mental health and recovery of people with mental illness
- the psychological distress of the carers and families of people with mental illness
- the frequency of admission of people with mental illness to hospital and the duration of their stay in hospital
- the incidence of homelessness among people with mental illness
- the management of people with high support needs and difficult behaviours associated with mental illness and other disabilities.

The Report calls on Government to

- Recognise the fact that people with mental illness are at very high risk of homelessness and that government plans and policies need to give particular consideration to this fact when addressing general housing needs and homelessness in Central Australia and Alice Springs.
- Establish stronger partnerships across the government portfolios of Housing and Health and between government and non-government organisations in order to develop the policies, plans and systems needed to monitor the unmet need, and implement and evaluate sustained strategies for improving housing and support for people living with mental illness in Alice Springs.
- Take immediate practical action in the first year to address the most urgent needs quantified through this Report, then reassess the situation annually over the next 3 years to incrementally establish a further range of accommodation and support options to address the unmet needs of other people with mental illness in Alice Springs.
- In the first year, establish 24 additional beds across accommodation types with additional intensive support to address the urgent housing and support needs of those most disadvantaged through their mental illness, as follows:
 - establish 10 additional units of long term housing for people with mental illness who are currently homeless or at significant risk of becoming homeless and require additional support to live independently.
 - provide 10 additional hours of direct support per week to each of 15 people with a mental illness through flexible individual care packages to help people develop their skills to live independently.
 - provide 24 hour supported accommodation in community housing for 6 people with severe mental illness requiring long term specialised supervision and support.
 - provide short term crisis or respite accommodation to avoid unnecessary hospitalisation of people with mental illness by purchasing 4 beds with on-site support from existing social housing providers, for the designated use of people with mental illness.
 - provide long term housing to avoid unnecessary incarceration for 3 people with psychiatric disabilities in contact with the criminal justice system, in a duplex comprising of 2 units each with 2 bedrooms, with associated operational funding sufficient to ensure ongoing safe, high level supervision and support.
 - increase the capacity of clinical services to provide timely community-based response, (including after hours) to improve support for carers of people with mental illness and providers of accommodation services for people with mental illness.



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MESSAGES OF SUPPORT FROM PEAK BODIES

1) NT Mental Health Coalition - Phil Dempster, Program Coordinator

The Northern Territory Mental Health Coalition applauds the Mental Health Association of Central Australia (MHACA) on the production of their new report, *There's No Place Like Home—There is No Place*. The findings and recommendations of this report are consistent with the huge evidence base already demonstrated across Australia. However, in looking at the issues from a local level, we also see that vast differences exist in Central Australia and indeed in the whole of the Northern Territory compared to the rest of the country.

This report is not about “government bashing” - it is about partnerships, the community partnering with Government to make a difference to people not currently in stable living conditions. It is about providing people with their basic human rights - stable, appropriate and sustainable accommodation options. This alone will alleviate many of the problems facing our emergency services, our often over-taxed hospital system and prison systems. This report goes a long way to providing some of the answers we need to improve this situation throughout the Northern Territory.”

2) NT Shelter - Toni Vine Bromley, Executive Officer

“NT Shelter welcomes the MHACA Report *There's No Place Like Home—There is No Place*. This piece of research clearly identifies the housing and support needs of people suffering with a mental illness and their inability to secure adequate accommodation in Alice Springs.

In the Alice Springs population, the general rate of homelessness is estimated to be more than 4 times the national average. Homeless people are 3 – 4 times more likely to have a mental illness than people in the general population.

NT Shelter have long advocated the need for people with mental health problems to have access to stable, secure and affordable housing and support relative to their specific needs.

We urge Government to act upon the solutions in the report for addressing the specific accommodation requirements of people with a mental illness in Alice Springs.”

3) NT Council of Social Service - Jonathon Pilbrow, Central Australian Policy Officer

Spokesperson for the Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS), **Jonathon Pilbrow** stated: “MHACA’s Report comes at a time when the over-representation of people with mental illness among those who are homeless is receiving national attention. Some estimates indicate that up to 75% of homeless people have a mental health condition.”

4) Mental Health Council of Australia - David Crosbie, CEO

“The Mental Health Association of Central Australia is to be commended for its new report *There's No Place Like Home—There is No Place*. Both the findings and the recommendations are consistent with what evidence across Australia and around the world has already demonstrated.

Homelessness and mental illness are inter-related. Mental illness can lead to homelessness and homelessness can lead to increased mental illness. Access to stable and secure accommodation is one of the most fundamental measures needed to reduce the impact of mental illness on individuals, carers and the community.

When mental health consumers or their carers are asked what they most want to improve their lives, the most common response is not better access to psychiatrists, more hospital beds or more drug treatments, what they most want is access to stable and secure housing.

We all pay a price when we fail to meet the fundamental human need for a safe and secure place to call our own. Sometimes that price is counted in police call outs, court appearances and prison beds. Sometimes it is counted in hospital beds, frequent emergency department visits, or ongoing physical health problems. Sometimes it is simply counted in lost human potential. Either way we all pay the price that is much greater than simply providing appropriate and sustainable accommodation options for people with a mental illness.

Again let me congratulate the Mental Health Association of Central Australia and commend both the author and her subjects for being so generous in sharing their experiences.

I hope this report is widely read and its recommendations heeded.”