



NTCOSS

**Northern Territory
Council of Social Service**

NTCOSS Pre-Budget Submission 2025 - 2026

19 December 2024

Foreword

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service' (NTCOSS) vision is for a fair, inclusive, and sustainable Northern Territory (NT) where all individuals and communities can participate in and benefit from all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life. NTCOSS is the not-for-profit member-based peak body for the NT's community and social services sector (the community sector).

The community sector is made up of community managed, non-government and not-for-profit organisations that work in community service delivery, sector development and advocacy. NTCOSS represents over 100 members, including peak bodies, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), large charities, small grassroots organisations and individual members.

The Northern Territory Government (NTG)'s 2025-26 budget comes after another year of social and economic challenges in the NT. Continuing cost of living increases, a national rental and housing crisis, and critical levels of domestic and family violence and increased public understanding of the vital role of specialist frontline services have impacted our communities and organisations across the Territory.

Some of the recommendations in this submission have been in previous NTCOSS pre-Budget submissions. Repeat recommendations have been included in areas of ongoing need. The community sector in the NT continues to develop and advocate for programs that address long entrenched disadvantage in the Territory, including working in genuine and meaningful partnership with First Nations communities at all stages of the Budget development process.

If funded, the proposals in this pre-budget submission would enhance community safety, support Territorians to be able to participate in and enjoy the Territory lifestyle and provide much needed economic stimulus across all regions of the NT.

NTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide this pre-budget submission and looks forward to an ongoing collaborative relationship to support better outcomes for all Territorians,

Yours sincerely



Sally Sievers

Chief Executive Officer

19 December 2024

Summary of recommendations

Ensuring safety: Addressing workforce issues in Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence sector in the NT

1. Increase baseline funding for frontline DFSV crisis services by 10% in recognition of increased demand on services
2. Fund adequate consultation for a NT peak body for DFSV and then sustainably fund a Peak Body for DFSV
3. Adequate funding for a NT DFSV Workforce training & resource centre
4. Establish a DFSV Innovation fund
5. Fund DFSV Communities of Practice to support DFSV practitioners working in emerging fields of DFSV work in the NT to improve retention and upskilling of workforce
6. Fund the development of Risk Assessment and Management Framework (RAMF) Implementation Tools and Guides
7. Fund the RAMF Champion Community of Practice to hold a 2-day conference for members in-person

Covering the basics: helping Territorians with the cost of living

8. Update the eligibility criteria for the NT Concession Scheme to include people who hold a Centrelink Health Card and revise administrative arrangements so it's easier for eligible people to stay in the Scheme
9. Increase the MVR concession to a minimum of \$221.70 per 12 month period to make up for lost value over time and establish ongoing indexation
10. Fund a scoping project to inform implementation of minimum energy standards in rental accommodation in the NT

Supporting Young People in the NT

11. Fund a Youth Peak for the Northern Territory

Community sector sustainability

12. Immediate increase to base funding for frontline service by 2.5% in 2025-26 and by 5% in each subsequent year across forward estimates to restore sector funding to comparable level in 2018
13. Work with NGOs to design a sustainable indexation formula
14. Remove efficiency dividends and budget saving measures from NGO funding

Support for other NGO proposals

NTCOSS supports the proposals included in pre-budget submissions made by other NT community services, including NT Shelter's proposals. We note in particular the proposal to fund a feasibility study to explore options for transitional housing for women and children escaping domestic and family violence in the Barkly region.

Ensuring Safety: Addressing workforce issues in the domestic, family and sexual violence sector in the NT

The NTG needs a strengthened and more effective domestic, family and sexual violence sector (DFSV) workforce to achieve stated aims of reducing crime. A sustainable, highly skilled and adequately supported domestic and family violence (DFV) and sexual violence (SV) workforce is foundational to achieving safety and healing for victim-survivors; effective interventions with those using violence to reduce crime and offending; early intervention and prevention to turn around the NTs high prevalence of DFSV and to build safer communities. An uplift in capacity and skills for the DFSV workforce is critical in appropriately meeting the growing demand for DFSV services and delivering an effective service system across the NT. Effective and targeted investment in the DFSV workforce will allow for a more responsive service system and ensure effectiveness of government policy in this area.

Recommendation 1: Increase baseline funding for frontline DFSV crisis services by 10% in recognition of increased demand on services

With a more effective policing response, the impact of Risk Assessment and Management Framework (RAMF) reforms and community education about Territorians' rights to be safe from DFSV, frontline services are seeing an inevitable rise in demand for their services. The NTG should increase the baseline funding for frontline DFSV crisis services (for example, but not limited to, safe houses, outreach support for women and children experiencing DFSV, and counselling and healing services) by a figure in the order of 10%, to address the quantified lack of core funding which results in unmet need. This was recommended in the NT Coroner's Report¹, November 2024 (Recommendation 34, p.240).

Recommendation 2: Fund adequate consultation for a NT Peak Body for DFSV and then sustainably fund a Peak body for DFSV

A peak body for the DFSV sector would support efficiencies in the interface between the Governments reform agenda and funded frontline specialist services. Successful implementation of any policy reform to drive down crime in the area of DFSV will require ongoing sector engagement. In other jurisdictions this function is served by specialist DFSV Peak organisations.

By investing in the consultation and development of a fit for purpose NT DFSV Peak Body the NTG would invest in setting up for long term systemic impact. DFV and SV Peaks form a crucial function of supporting the DFSV workforce, by streamlining increasing demands on their specialist expertise from NT and Federal governments as recognised in the coroner's recommendations (Recommendation 2, p.231). DFSV specialists delivering services are unable to keep up with the requests for input into policy reform across the whole of government in the area of DFSV. The Government will benefit from the provision of comprehensive expert policy advice and coordination of a diverse DFSV sector across the NT.

A properly funded and fit for purpose NT Peak could:

- Do research, support policy development, provide advice to government and the sector

¹ *Inquests into the deaths of Miss Yunupingu, Ngeygo Ragurk, Kumarn Rubuntja and Kumanjayi Haywood* [2024] NTLC 14.

- Identify and synthesize on-the-ground issues, trends and effective interventions for government and other decision makers
- Disseminate information within the sector and to the community
- Conduct sector consultation and coordination
- Build capacity and promote best practice to enable better service delivery

Recommendation 3: Adequate funding for a NT DFSV Workforce training & resource centre

Estimated cost: \$1.6 million²

A properly funded NT DFSV Workforce training & resource centre to train, upskill, and ensure best practice for DFSV workers from government and non-government organisations would meet recommendation 3 of the NT Coroner’s Report (p.231). The centre would help with the rapid upskilling of new workers and create efficiencies and shared understanding, resources and best practice guidance across urban, regional, and remote DFSV workforces.

Across the NT, DFSV specialist services and Government agencies seeking to uplift their responses around DFSV have struggled to recruit workers with the required level of understanding of DFSV and the complexities impacting service delivery in the NT. There is currently no streamlined way for organisations to uplift capacity in their staff with each organisation carrying the burden of trying to find NT relevant training for their staff. Even where Government departments or specialist organisations have training budgets and have prioritised upskilling staff in this area, a lack of specialist subject matter trainers who can deliver trauma-informed and culturally safe best practice including and meaningful training is extremely limited in the NT. A DFSV Workforce training & Resource Centre has been recognised as a priority spend across numerous Government and Non-government forums including: an identified priority for action from the NTGs October 2024 DFSV Advisory Forum; and a key ask of the DFSV specialist sector as identified in their Day of Action Asks. The training and resource centre could rapidly build workforce capacity across the NT by providing these functions:

- Provide trauma informed and culturally safe face to face training in urban, regional and remote areas to build workforce capacity in DFV and SV prevention; identification; response and healing
- Provide online training to build workforce capacity in prevention and in identifying and responding to DFSV
- Run specialist DFSV trauma-informed and culturally safe best practice including Communities of Practice to support upskilling and resource sharing among DFV and SV practitioners in the NT.
- Run specialist Communities of Practice and Training to support trauma-informed and culturally safe best practice including leadership development in the DFSV sector
- Develop and promote resources and tools that support trauma-informed and culturally safe best practice including best practice in the NT
- Be contracted to provide specialist trainers and coordination of NTG mandated training for Government employees such as RAMF and Prevent. Assist. Respond. Training (PART) training - as recommended in the NT Coroner’s report, recommendations 3, 11 and 12

² Note: this estimated cost is based on a service with offices in both Alice Springs and Darwin, with combined staffing of 11 FTE, comprising a CEO, trainers, learning and resource designers, relevant administration staff, a significant travel budget and a vehicle in each location.

Recommendation 4: Establish a DFSV Innovation Fund

Estimated cost: \$450,000 per annum

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG establish an innovation fund to provide one-off funding to trial innovative or transformational approaches to the delivery of services that address DFSV the NT. The fund would support low cost, value-for-money programs that deliver innovation and support sector capacity building and should receive funding annually.

Innovation by organisations and collaboration between organisations is a key concept in the community services sector – and should be supported by access to funds to develop and deliver innovative and/or collaborative projects. Innovation and collaboration represent low cost, value for money investment in the sector with better outcomes for clients. Those working on the ground often see unmet needs and service gaps for those that use their funded services but are unable to set up innovative interventions and programs as these may sit outside what they are funded to provide. We note the success of the NTG’s Homelessness Innovation Fund as a model for this funding. It has funded pilot programs like Katherine Doorways Hub, and the Homelessness Response Group (HRG) pilot.

Well designed and evaluated programs can be shown to deliver savings from other “system costs” e.g. broader costs of homelessness, domestic and family violence, hospitalization etc.

Recommendation 5: Fund DFSV Communities of Practice to support DFSV practitioners working in emerging fields of DFSV work in the NT to improve retention and upskilling of workforce

Estimated cost: \$330,000 per CoP³

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people who work in a specialised area, who develop better understanding, skills and knowledge by interacting and learning with, and from each other on an ongoing basis. Funded positions to facilitate CoPs are a cost-effective way of uplifting DFSV sector capacity in the NT by supporting collaborative practice and skills sharing. Many specialist DFSV practitioners in the NT are geographically and organisationally isolated from people doing similar work and retaining and upskilling these staff is difficult for individual organisations. CoPs help workers build confidence and commitment to their roles by supporting best practice and provide an innovative learning environment that promotes connectedness, shared problem solving and NT relevant resources.

If a NT DFSV Workforce training & resource centre were funded, specialist CoPs could be run through there. In its absence, services could be funded to have specialist workers run CoPs. Priority CoPs in the NT would include:

- Safety in the remote context (for frontline workers working with victim survivors in Remote Communities)
- Non-collusive practice when working with those who use violence (for workers in men’s behaviour change and intervention programs)
- Supporting the frontline or team leaders and managers of frontline services such as refuges, safehouses and DFSV crisis accommodation
- Talking Sexual Violence Prevention (for those delivering programs in schools and other settings with young people)

³ \$165,000 per annum for 2-year project, this includes 1 x full time salary, travel and admin on-costs

RAMF Champion Projects

The NT DFV RAMF launched in 2021. The RAMF Champion project (through the NTCOSS' RAMF Champion Coordinator) seeks to provide capacity building, coordination and support to 8 services who received funding to implement the RAMF from the Department Children and Families (DCF) in June 2023. The following two recommendations have been developed by the RAMF Champion Project Community of Practice (CoP).

Recommendation 6: Fund the development of RAMF implementation tools and guides

To strengthen the implementation of RAMF and to more effectively and efficiently expand RAMF implementation, NTCOSS and the RAMF Champion Community of Practice (CoP) recommend implementation tools, guides and templates be developed.

Suggested tools are listed below:

- Project management guide for RAMF implementation
- Board and executive briefing package articulating the project scope, investment required, rationale for implementation
- A guide for improving culturally safe and secure implementation of the RAMF
- A tool for mapping a services workforce against RAMF responsibilities and developing a guide for internal referral pathways
- Organisational Readiness Checklist and Gap Analysis template for services
- A guide for improving the prevention of vicarious trauma in workforces exposed to and managing DFSV
- A guide on changing DFSV policies and procedures to fit a remote context
- Template policies and procedures (all to align with the RAMF, Common Risk Assessment Tool (CRAT), NT Health Clinical Guidelines, and PART)
- A guide and visual framework for health services on how the RAMF, CRAT, Family Safety Framework (FSF), PART, Clinical Guidelines (NT Health) and other similar projects intersect, and how they should be implemented together

These tools and templates would increase the efficiency of implementation by helping organisations to avoid reinventing the wheel, and the duplication of existing resources. These tools could be publicly available on the RAMF website and therefore will impact the entire DFSV and universal (including health and education) service sector to better implement RAMF, and therefore better respond to and reduce rates of DFSV.

Recommendation 7: Fund the RAMF Champion Community of Practice to hold a 2-day conference for members in-person

Estimated cost: \$27,000

This will improve the RAMF champions capacity to implement RAMF by providing a best-practice opportunity for culturally safe and NT relevant education, skill sharing and workforce skill development. Services across the NT report significant challenges recruiting and retaining their workforce creating an under-resourced and 'in-crisis' approach to service delivery that is not sustainable. Emerging research indicates that workforces that are exposed to trauma are better equipped to manage their jobs (staff retention) when they are appropriately emotionally supported and feel connected to a greater purpose.

All members of the RAMF Champion Project Community of Practice in a recent survey indicated full support for a 2-day conference, however no organisation has the capacity in this funding crisis (see recommendations 12-14 in this submission regarding about sector sustainability) to spend on this activity. Survey respondents indicated that the in-person conference would provide them with greater opportunities to connect and support each other in what is deemed 'emotionally challenging work'. By investing in the RAMF Champions through this activity, they will in-turn be better equipped to implement RAMF in their organisations, meaning that this conference has the capacity to improve the workforce skills of 1,460 people across the NT to better respond to and reduce rates of DFSV.

Covering the basics – helping Territorians with the cost of living

Too many Territorians are struggling with the cost of living. NTCOSS's recent Cost of Living factsheets⁴ demonstrated the immense pressure felt particularly strongly by Territorians who are on low incomes and those living remotely.

The following recommendations are for proposals that would help ensure Territorians can make ends meet, enabling them to participate in employment and community activities, and can enjoy the Territory lifestyle.

Recommendation 8: Update the eligibility criteria for the NT Concession Scheme to include people who hold a Centrelink Health Card and revise administrative arrangements so it's easier for eligible people to stay in the Scheme

Targeted measures like concession schemes ensure that support is given to those who need it the most. Updating the NT Concession Scheme (the Scheme) is a cost-effective way to provide direct support to Territorians who are impacted by cost of living rises the most.

Currently, while people receiving income support payments such as the Aged Pension, Disability Support Pension and Parenting Payments are eligible for the Scheme, people receiving Jobseeker and Youth Allowance payments are not eligible for concessions, despite these payment rates being significantly lower.⁵

NTCOSS reiterates its call for the NTG to invest in extending the Scheme to all Centrelink Health Care Card holders. This will assist households on low incomes and those living in poverty to meet essential costs.

Further update of the Scheme's administrative arrangements is required to ensure more eligible people are enrolled on the Scheme, and that is easier to stay in the Scheme. Currently only 65% of people eligible are enrolled on the Scheme.⁶ The requirement for annual renewal should be changed, and NT Concession scheme members who receive permanent entitlements such as the Aged Pension and the Disability Support Pension, receive life-long membership of the scheme. This would reduce the administrative burden for both the recipient and the Department.

⁴ Available at <https://ntcoss.org.au/cost-of-living-reports/>

⁵ See NTCOSS (June 2024) Factsheets: Cost of Utilities in the Northern Territory. Available at: https://ntcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-CoL-Utilities_22072024.pdf

⁶ Northern Territory Government (2024) Territory Families, Housing and Communities Annual Report 2023-24, p.110

Recommendation 9: Increase the MVR concession to a minimum of \$221.70⁷ per 12-month period to make up for lost value over time and establish ongoing indexation

Estimated cost: \$1.3 million⁸

While the available entitlements under the Scheme provide important relief on essential costs, many payments have not kept pace with inflation and are now no longer providing the intended relief.

For example, the motor vehicle registration (MVR) concession under the Scheme hasn't changed since 2009 and is a set amount of \$154 per 12-month period. The value of this concession has diminished significantly, for example in 2014, it represented 23.5% of the registration cost of a small vehicle, in 2024 it is only 19.2%.⁹

Recommendation 10: Fund a scoping project to inform implementation of minimum energy standards in rental accommodation in the NT

Housing must be fit for purpose, including thermal comfort. Improved energy efficiency of all dwellings will enhance the health and wellbeing of residents, reduce energy bills, create jobs, reduce demand for energy, reduce the NT's carbon emissions, and improve equity across the whole of the NT.

NTCOSS recommends that the NTG allocate funding to develop and implement a detailed plan to achieve minimum energy standards in rental accommodation in the NT and provide priority funding for community and public housing providers to upgrade existing housing to meet the required standard.

We note the agreement between the NT and Commonwealth Governments to provide matched funding to upgrade 625 social housing dwellings between 2024 and 2027.¹⁰ NTCOSS recommends that as part of a staged implementation plan, the NTG allocate funding for a scoping project to identify the current energy performance of existing housing in the private, social and community housing sectors, and identify options for upgrades that will improve the energy performance of all rental dwellings in the NT to 7-star energy rating.

Undertaking energy upgrades provides health and financial benefits for households, takes pressure of the NT electricity grid and be and will stimulate economic activity right across the NT.¹¹

⁷ Calculated using Reserve Bank Australia's [inflation calculator](#) to estimate inflation since 2009.

⁸ Note: This estimate is calculated based on there being 16,812 members of the Scheme as at 30 June 2024. If all eligible members were enrolled this cost would rise to approximately \$2 million. Given the underspend of over 6.3 million in the 2024-23 budget for the Northern Territory concession and recognition schemes as reported in the annual report, this could be covered within the existing budget.

⁹ See NTCOSS (2024) Factsheet: Cost of Transport in the Northern Territory. Available at: <https://ntcoss.org.au/media-releases/media-release-cost-of-living-october-2024/>

¹⁰ See: [Joint media release: \\$10 million to boost cooling and heating in more than 600 Territory homes | Ministers](#)

¹¹ Two reports released in 2024 that look at the health, comfort, economic and environmental benefits of improving energy efficiency of housing provide useful information about the benefits of different levels of upgrading and likely costs. ClimateWorks report about health, comfort, economic and environmental benefits by weather zone and jurisdiction is [here](#) and ACOSS commissioned report by Deloitte's is [here](#).

Supporting young people in the NT

Recommendation 11: Fund a Youth Peak for the Northern Territory

Estimated cost: \$434,442 in year 1, \$4.5 million over 5 years

A Youth Peak for the NT would be a voice for the youth sector and enable more supportive and connected services for all young people. It would provide central advocacy for young people across the NT experiencing hardship and issues, provide a place for young people to discuss new innovations and work with the government to create efficient solutions. Noting that a comprehensive proposal for a Youth Peak for the NT has been submitted to the NTG, please see this proposal for more details and see summary of the proposal below.

NTCOSS recommends a Youth Peak for the NT should be set up under these three guidelines:

1. An NT youth peak body is formed under the auspice of a suitable organisation
2. Receives an initial five-year funding agreement, with an increase in funding annually until at least Year 4
 - a. The youth peak is funded \$434,442 in Year 1
 - b. An annual budget increase to allow for scaling up of service and indexation.
 - i. Year 2 \$756,771, Year 3 \$907,992, Year 4 \$1,152,031, Year 5 \$1,168,863
3. The Youth Peak establishes mechanisms to ensure priority is given to the following strategic and operational areas:
 - a. Establishing a model in the first 12 months of operation to ensure opportunities for young people to advise and inform policy development and decision making at organisational, Territory and National levels
 - b. Provision of support, connection and collaboration in the youth services sector
 - c. Ensure a collaborative partnership between the NT and Commonwealth government
 - d. The production and communication of positive, youth-led content that challenges harmful attitudes and beliefs about young people

Community sector sustainability

Sustainable funding, including indexation

Recommendation 12: Immediate increase to base funding for services by 2.5% in 2025-26 and by 5% in each subsequent year across forward estimates to restore sector funding to comparable level in 2018

Recommendation 13: Work with NGOs to design a sustainable indexation formula

Recommendation 14: Remove efficiency dividends and budget savings measures from NGO funding

The community sector has been struggling with underfunding for almost a decade, leading to reduced and/or disrupted service delivery. Community services in the NT have experienced three key challenges over the last 6 years that have placed significant pressure on an already stressed sector. These are:

1. Lack of adequate indexation
2. Application of budget repair measures and efficiency dividends
3. Failure to fully fund relevant wage increases, including annual national pay case increases, award variations, and increased compulsory superannuation contribution

The community services sector in the NT provides key services that assist Territorians experiencing disadvantage and at times of crisis, keeping them alive, safe, and with a roof over their head. Community services play a vital role in addressing the diverse needs of the NT community, and – crucially – addressing the root cause of crime by delivering community led and community run programs. Being located in community, community services are able to identify and respond to changing circumstances and innovate to provide place-based solutions. They have flexibility and reach to provide services to people and places that the public service is unable to provide and are a crucial part of the NTG's overall service delivery.

The community sector is also a major employer in the NT. With more than 20,000 workers and volunteers, the sector provides frontline services for Territorians experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, including in remote areas where limited service provision exists. It is vital that organisations keep their doors open, ensuring that the people of the NT can continue to access critical services that support them to participate fully in employment and community life.

Staff costs typically account for around 70-80% of organisational running costs. Community service providers are obliged, and acknowledge the importance of, remunerating their employees in line with relevant wage increases, and superannuation contribution guarantee increase. However, services have not received additional funding to cover these increased costs. With the continued cost of living increases and increased costs across the board, an urgent boost in funding is needed. The development of a longer-term sustainable funding model that recognises the need for services to keep up with demand, community needs, and inflation is essential to ensuring Territorians receive the support they need.

The decision by the NTG in December 2023 to provide an increase of 5% to key frontline services sectors in the 2023-24 budget and a further 5% in the 2024-25 budget was a welcome acknowledgement that community services were at breaking point. However, it did not address the entire funding shortfall and does not apply to all community sector funding agreements. For these reasons, an immediate injection of funds is required, as is a commitment to working with the sector to develop a funding formula that ensures funding keeps up with inflation and community needs.