



30 January 2026

Office for Workforce Development  
Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations  
Northern Territory Government

To the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations,

**RE: NTCOSS Submission to the Development of the Workforce Strategy Consultation**

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Northern Territory Government's (NTG) consultation on the Workforce Development Strategy (the Strategy) for the Northern Territory (NT).

**About the Community and Social Service Sector**

NTCOSS is the peak body for the NT Community and Social Services Sector (the sector) and is a voice for people affected by social and economic disadvantage and inequality. NTCOSS membership is comprised of community managed, non-government, not for profit organisations and charities that work in social and community service delivery and advocacy across urban, remote and very remote locations.

The sector is a significant employer throughout the NT and a key part of the Territory's workforce development ecosystem. The charity sector employs 9.7% of the Northern Territory workforce, a larger share than mining and manufacturing at 4.7%, construction at 8.2%, and agriculture, forestry and fishing at 1.6%. Employment in the sector has grown to more than 13,000 staff, reflecting sustained and increasing demand for community based non-government services across the Territory.<sup>1</sup> As a charity is only one type of not-for-profit, these figures are likely to underrepresent the whole not-for-profit sector in the NT.

The sector is experiencing acute and compounding workforce pressures that threaten its sustainability and service capacity. A recent NTCOSS workforce survey found that almost

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<sup>1</sup> Gilchrist, D.J., B. Perks & T. Emery. 2025. "Value of the Not-for-profit Sector 2025: The Fourth Examination of the Economic Contribution of the Not-for-profit Human Services Sector in the Northern Territory". A report developed by the Centre for Public Value, UWA Business School, for the Northern Territory Council of Social Service, Darwin, Australia. Available at: <https://ntcoss.org.au/publications/2025-value-of-the-sector-report/>

three-quarters of organisations have active vacancies, 16% manage more than 11 vacancies at a time and one-third of vacancies take more than three months to fill.<sup>2</sup>

As identified in the *National Skills Agreement, Australia*, these challenges will intensify as the NT population ages and demand for care and support services grows.<sup>3</sup> Without targeted and sustained support, workforce shortages and instability will increasingly constrain the sector's capacity to meet community needs.

## **NTCOSS Workforce Development Consultations**

As the sector's peak body, NTCOSS works closely with members to bring frontline expertise and lived experience into government decision-making. This submission draws on extensive engagement with members, our experience supporting and providing stewardship across the sector, and desktop research.

In late 2025, NTCOSS engaged with 65 people across 42 member organisations to inform our 2026-27 Pre Budget Submission, which included considerable discussion regarding workforce. Thirty-eight NTCOSS members completed a Workforce Survey in November 2025 to better understand the workforce pressures across the sector. In January 2026, we held two drop-in sessions to allow members to provide direct input into this submission, with 12 people from 11 organisations participating.

The recommendations provided in this submission are directly informed by the sector. This submission provides feedback below under the priority areas as identified in the Consultation Paper, as well three additional priority areas, identified by members. While recommendations are organised under the most relevant priority area, it's important to note that many recommendations relate to multiple areas of priority and the interconnected nature of this work must be acknowledged.

## **Response to the 5 Priority Areas identified in the Consultation Paper**

### **1. Deliver skills and training systems that provide pathways into jobs**

#### **Fund pathways for on-the-job training in the social service sector**

Finding skilled workers remains a major challenge across the sector, driven by gaps in training pathways and local skill development. Aboriginal identified positions are difficult to fill, highlighting the need for stronger local workforce pipelines and culturally appropriate supports.

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<sup>2</sup> NTCOSS members workforce survey, 2025

<sup>3</sup> [National Skills Plan 2025-26 Update](#)

Paid, on-the-job training has proven effective at increasing long-term employment, especially in regional and remote areas and Aboriginal Community-Controlled organisations. These programs are most effective when models support learning on Country, learning in language (or bilingually), flexible scheduling and workplace-based assessments.

However, most community service organisations lack the resources and funding to train new workers whilst stretched delivering frontline services. As such, there is an opportunity for the government to invest in partnerships with sector employers and training providers, providing dedicated funding at the true cost of running on the job training, including covering the costs for hosting trainees, supervision and backfilling roles. This investment will create sustainable entry pathways, support career progression and build a stable, skilled local workforce.

#### **Case study: Katherine West Health Board – Aboriginal Health Coaching Program**

This two-year accredited program supports Aboriginal Health Coaches to manage chronic health conditions through primary prevention and early intervention. Delivered on the job, on Country and in language, the program was designed with the context of local staff in mind, delivering culturally safe pathway into sustained employment.

The results of the program show high attendance and completion rates, with 25 coaches completing training in the first year.

**Recommendation 1:** Invest in partnerships between workplaces and training providers, with adequate funding for workplaces to support on-the-job training, including supervision, mentoring and backfill.

#### **Fund local providers across the Territory to deliver more accredited social service sector trainings**

Despite growing demand for care and support services, NT lacks the training infrastructure to build a qualified local workforce at scale. Consultations highlighted the challenge in accessing in-person training for social service accreditations outside Darwin. For example to access accredited training in mental health, aged care, community services and youth work, NTCOSS members in Katherine and Alice Springs paid for their staff to undertake training through interstate providers. As these providers were not embedded in the NT context the training was said to be disconnected from local realities and workforce needs.

An analysis of the 20 short courses and eight TAFE courses offered in person through Charles Darwin University (CDU) in Katherine highlights this gap. With the exception of Certificate/Diplomas in Early Childhood Education and Care and School Based Education

Support, there is no training relevant to the social service sector; despite 18% of the local work force being employed as community and personal service workers. This is more than three times the number of people working as machine operators and drivers, twice as many people who work as labourers and more than the number of technicians and trades workers. However, half of the short courses available focussed on these trades.

Similarly, there are no in person community and social service courses available through CDU in Alice Springs.

As the demand for social services grows, expanding the availability of free, in-person, locally delivered accredited social service sector training is essential to building sustainable local workforce.

**Recommendation 2:** Expand the availability and breadth of social service sector TAFE and accredited training offerings across the NT.

Particular consideration should be given to expanding training offerings in remote Aboriginal communities, including sufficient and sustained funding for language, literacy and numeracy programs.

### **Delivery of regular, context-specific job-readiness training**

Regardless of formal qualifications, all staff working in the NT, in particular social and community service workers, need NT specific preparation to work safely and effectively. Workers trained interstate or overseas require orientation to the Territory's cultural, environmental and service system context.<sup>4,5</sup>

A targeted job-readiness training for staff entering the sector would improve worker confidence and safety, reduce early burnout, and support retention. Trainings should include an introduction to local history and cultural capability that recognises the ongoing impacts of colonisation and trauma on First Nations people. Improved cultural capability would improve job sustainability for non-Aboriginal staff by increasing skills and knowledge, while also strengthening cultural safety for Aboriginal staff, clients and

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<sup>4</sup> King, K. C. (2011). How understanding the Aboriginal Kinship system can inform better policy and practice: Social work research with the Larrakia and Warumungu Peoples of Northern Territory. [https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/download/5175a224ea15b5b7bf1b8e8b33cc09c9a3bac7979e90df7747da3ed38a9431c7/4104001/King\\_2011\\_How\\_understanding\\_the\\_Aboriginal\\_kinship\\_system.pdf\(open\\_in\\_a\\_new\\_window\)](https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/download/5175a224ea15b5b7bf1b8e8b33cc09c9a3bac7979e90df7747da3ed38a9431c7/4104001/King_2011_How_understanding_the_Aboriginal_kinship_system.pdf(open_in_a_new_window))

<sup>5</sup> Riss, C (2022). Impact Evaluation of a Central Australian Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Training Program for Health Professionals and Students. [Impact Evaluation of a Central Australian Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Training Program for Health Professionals and Students](#)

communities.<sup>6</sup> Training should also include cultural humility and competency for working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

In addition, formal training in local services and referral systems in the NT and working safely and effectively in remote contexts (ie. 4WD driving, working safely in extreme heat) will better set up staff for sustainable employment.<sup>7</sup>

**Recommendation 3:** Resource organisations to deliver place-based, job-readiness training sessions.

### **Delivery of ongoing professional development and support for frontline staff**

Access to professional development is a well-established driver of workforce retention and service quality.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, persistent underfunding across the sector limits organisations' capacity to invest in consistent and high-quality professional development.

Establishing rolling trainings and professional development in core competencies, and regular communities of practice is an efficient way to upskill the workforce, improving outcomes and job satisfaction and in turn, retention.

**Recommendation 4:** Establish trainings and communities of practice for the social service sectors across priority areas. These areas would include data collection, digital literacy, service quality and governance, cultural competency and trauma transformative practice to support sector-wide capability uplift and peer learning.

## **2. Reduce barriers to participation**

### **Support people with disability to enter the workforce**

Targeted training and transition support is required to better enable people with disability to enter the community services workforce. Longitudinal studies show that gaining after-school employment is a strong predictor of post-school employment outcomes. However, people with disabilities face significant barriers to workforce entry.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cosgrove, C., Maple, M., & Hussain, R. (2017). Factors affecting job satisfaction of Aboriginal mental health workers in community mental health in rural and remote NSW. *Australian Health Review*,

<sup>7</sup> Northern Territory Government (2023). *BushReady*.

<https://bushready.nt.gov.au/tools>

<sup>8</sup> Bevis, M (2025). Exploring Aboriginal employees' experiences of the fit between Central Australian lifeworlds and NGO workplace practices and service delivery models.

<sup>9</sup> Lamb, S. & Huo, S. (2024) The costs of failing to be inclusive: an analysis based on education in Australia, In P. Downs, G. Li, L. Van Pragg, S. Lamb (Eds.) *The Routledge international handbook of equity and inclusion in education*, Routledge: London.

## **Case Study: YouthWorx NT**

Career Launchpad is a program run by YouthWorx NT that supports young people to transition from school into the world of work. It is a specialised program for young people with a disability who are not eligible for an NDIS Plan. Career Launchpad offers personalised coaching, accredited life skills training, skills development and access to real-world opportunities that build confidence, independence and work-readiness. The program has been proven 'highly effective' in the NT.<sup>10</sup>

### **Byron's story<sup>11</sup>**

Before he started in Transition to Work, Byron had been trying for over two years to find a career pathway that was meaningful to him. Previously with an adult employment services provider, he attempted the various job placements he was given, however as none of them were in his area of interest he found it difficult to stick with them. Byron is a natural when it comes to all things IT and business.

When Byron heard about YouthWorX NT he requested a referral into the Transition to Work service. Byron never missed an appointment and thrived in the 1:1 sessions provided by his dedicated Youth Development Coach. He participated in a variety of volunteering opportunities in order to develop his work-readiness skills and attended guest speaker sessions to learn about securing employment and different career pathways.

In his personalised coaching sessions Byron updated his resume, learned budgeting skills, social skills and how to set and achieve goals. He is successfully 'on the road' to achieving one of his major goals, taking driving lessons regularly in order to be ready to sit for his Probationary (Ps) drivers' licence. In early July, Byron commenced an internship with New Future IT and is excited to have commenced a career pathway that matches his skills, talents and aspirations.

**Recommendation 5:** Increase investment in school-to-work transition programs for people with disability, including funding NGOs to deliver coordinated programs.

The programs should provide:

- Job-readiness support
- Structured volunteering or placement opportunities
- One-to-one mentoring
- Support to access further education pathways (TAFE, apprenticeships and university)

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<sup>11</sup> [Byron's Story : YouthWorX NT](#)

## **Support women to enter and remain in the workforce**

Women face systemic barriers to entering, remaining in, and re-entering the workforce. This is particularly true for single mothers, with employment rates being particularly low and poverty rates are highest for single mothers.<sup>12</sup>

**Recommendation 6:** Improve access to childcare, particularly in remote areas.

## **Support people with lived and living experience to enter and remain in the workforce**

Lived and living experience roles are positions held by people who draw on their personal experience of an issue, such as domestic, family and sexual violence, mental distress, disability, or system involvement; to inform, support, and improve services, systems, and outcomes for others. These roles recognise that people with lived experience bring unique insight, credibility, and expertise that cannot be gained through formal training alone. Living experience refers to experiences that are current or ongoing, while lived experience may relate to past experiences that continue to shape understanding and perspective<sup>13</sup>.

Supporting people with lived and living experience to enter and remain in the workforce requires recognition of lived experience as a form of expertise alongside formal qualifications and professional experience. This includes developing safe and supported entry pathways, such as accredited peer roles, traineeships, and co-designed positions, supported by flexible employment conditions, reasonable adjustments, and manageable workloads and fair to promote sustainability and retention. Investment in training, mentoring, and career development, including access to peer support qualification, is essential, as is establishing clear role boundaries and scopes of practice to prevent role strain, tokenism, and re-traumatisation.

Organisations must foster workplace cultures that genuinely value lived experience input in governance, service design, decision-making, and evaluation support peer workers to transition into broader professional or leadership roles if they choose.

## **Case study: YWCA Women's Business Centre**

This project set out to explore whether Darwin needed a women-only day centre for women and children experiencing homelessness. Lived experienced voices were placed at the centre of the process and established that lived experience was not only crucial in shaping both the justification for the service and the design of the proposed model, but also the on-

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<sup>12</sup> NTCOSS analysis using Census 2021 data

<sup>13</sup> <https://livedexperienceworkforces.com.au/lived-experience-peer-work/>

going staffing arrangements- with women calling for an all-women multidisciplinary team including peer workers with lived-experience and culturally diverse staff.

This project demonstrates that lived experience leads to practical, inclusive and effective service design, including shaping workforce development; and the importance of lived experience workers in the NT workforce.

**Recommendation 7:** Work with lived and living experience workforces and the organisations and networks that represent them, to develop guidelines for working with lived experience employees and provide lived and living experience specific trainings ie. traineeships and formal certificate qualifications.

### **Support Aboriginal people to enter and remain in the workforce**

Aboriginal employment is central to the functioning of the sector. The sector is the most significant employer of Aboriginal staff in the NT, whereby Aboriginal workers account for 16% of Community and Personal Service Workers<sup>14</sup>. Despite this, Aboriginal representation in employment remains persistently low and must be addressed.

Supporting Aboriginal people to both enter and remain in the community services workforce requires recognition of the distinct roles, risks and responsibilities that Aboriginal workers carry, particularly when working within their own communities.

Proper recognition and support of Aboriginal workers is vital to ensure worker's physical and mental health is protected, prevent burnout and disengagement, and improve workforce retention. This includes appropriate pay and flexibility to recognise the additional levels of responsibility, risk and workload.

Case study evidence (see below) highlights that Aboriginal frontline workers are frequently undertaking roles that extend far beyond formal job descriptions, particularly in relation to domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) response.

### **Case Study: RAMF Champion Organisations**

RAMF Champions are organisations in the social and community sector who are implementing the DFSV Risk Assessment Management Framework, supported by an NTCOSS Project Officer. Through this work, Champion organisations have highlighted the impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees working on the frontline of DFSV response.

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<sup>14</sup> By number and percentage based on 1-digit level OCCP Occupation (Census, 2021)

As articulated by a RAMF champion, Aboriginal employees often work in the community that they are from and where they hold deep cultural and kinship connections. When working in the DFSV sector, their roles typically involve casework and direct engagement with DFSV, but unlike non-Indigenous colleagues, First Nations workers carry an additional and largely unrecognised burden of higher volume of disclosures and being entrusted with more detailed and distressing accounts of trauma. As a result, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers carry an immense volume of trauma content while holding ongoing concern for the safety of their own families and communities. Unlike non-Indigenous staff, they cannot leave the community or rotate out of high-intensity roles.

Organisations often fail to acknowledge the labour and responsibility involved in this work, and cultural knowledge is rarely valued at a system level. Inequities in pay persist, with non-Indigenous staff with formal qualifications often earning substantially more than First Nations workers with extensive on the job and cultural knowledge and experience.

Their experiences highlight the urgent need for systemic recognition, culturally safe workforce practices, and meaningful investment in supporting and protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the DFSV sector.

**Recommendation 8:** The Workforce Development Strategy should align to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and add Closing the Gap in employment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as a central goal of the Strategy.

**Recommendation 9:** Advocate nationally for award classifications and remuneration frameworks to ensure they appropriately recognise cultural brokerage, community authority and the additional responsibilities carried by Aboriginal staff working in their own communities. Pay equity must reflect not only qualifications, but the complexity, expertise, risk and cultural labour inherent in these roles.

**Recommendation 10:** Adequately fund organisations to appropriately pay Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to recognise additional levels of responsibility, risk and workload.

### 3. Regional and remote workforce activation

#### Housing shortages

The severe shortage of suitable housing in the NT generally but in particular in remote communities is a critical barrier to workforce attraction and retention. Workers are frequently required to share accommodation with colleagues, an arrangement that is often overcrowded and unsustainable in the long term. At the same time, many local community members experience overcrowded housing conditions, further limiting options for local workforce participation. Inadequate housing directly affects workers' ability to rest, recover and remain safe, ultimately undermining their capacity to sustain employment in demanding roles.

**Recommendation 11:** Target investment in service accommodation in remote and very remote communities to support workforce stability and enable local employment.

#### Tyranny of distance

Distance remains a significant factor affecting workforce sustainability in remote locations. For workers recruited from interstate, extended separation from original location can contribute to burnout and early exit from the Territory workforce. Limited opportunities to return to their original location, due to limited statutory leave and long travel times, particularly during times of family bereavement or crisis, exacerbate these pressures.

Whether recruited locally or otherwise, all remote workers experience challenges in accessing services that may be unavailable in remote areas, attending professional development opportunities and higher cost of living in remote areas.

**Recommendation 12:** Ensure funding provided for remote positions across the sector includes additional funding and flexibility to allow for entitlements that can support the retention and wellbeing of remote workers - including more flexible leave arrangements and improved access to affordable air travel. NTG should also ensure to model best practice with their own direct employees.

### 4. Attract and retain the workforce

#### Attracting and retaining an overseas workforce

Territorians born overseas make up approximately one-third of the local labour force and have higher labour force participation rates than those born in Australia. Given the significance of overseas born and CALD workers in the NT workforce, the Strategy should explicitly recognise CALD workers as a priority cohort. They are also nearly twice as likely to work in Health Care and Social Assistance, representing a significant opportunity to address

workforce gaps in the social and community services sector. However, lengthy and complex qualification recognition processes often delay or prevent workforce entry.

**Recommendation 13:** Advocate to the Federal government for the streamlining of the qualification recognition processes to enable faster workforce entry for internationally trained professionals in allied health, social work, education, early childhood, community development, law, media and communications, monitoring and evaluation, and social policy.

Despite strong participation rates, people born overseas are more likely to leave the NT than those born in Australia<sup>15</sup>. Improving retention requires a whole-of-government approach that supports cultural safety, inclusion and long-term settlement.

**Case study: Connected Women, Australian Red Cross**

Connected Women is a program run to help migrant women make connections, learn new skills, and thrive in their new home. Most have moved thousands of kilometres and arrive not knowing anyone and speaking little English. This is a place where they can feel safe, supported, and valued.

Preeti came to Australia from India as a young mum, looking for better opportunities for her and her family. A qualified accountant back home, when she first arrived, she didn't know anyone and struggled to find work as her qualification and work history wasn't recognised by local employers. She found Connected Women whilst looking for volunteer opportunities – and whilst she started as a participant, she quickly became a volunteer, helping to run the program activities and supporting other women like herself. With support from the program, she found work in her field and is now in the process of setting up her own business. The bonds she formed at Connected Women have changed her life.

**Recommendation 14:** Invest in a dedicated multicultural advocacy organisation to represent CALD communities, drive systemic advocacy, coordinate collaboration, and embed CALD perspectives in Territory-wide policy and service planning.

**Recommendation 15:** Increasing funding to skills development and pre-employment programs targeted at CALD communities.

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<sup>15</sup> NTCOSS analysis through Census, 2021

**Recommendation 16:** Establish a targeted grants program to support the development and delivery of leadership training targeted at NT organisations to help strengthen organisational capability to recruit, retain and support CALD staff and communities. Funded programs should focus on inclusive leadership, culturally responsive recruitment practices, and ongoing cultural humility and competency training to build more diverse, equitable and effective workplaces across the sector.

### **Portable long service leave**

Portable long service leave schemes, that allow workers long service leave entitlements to follow them between different employers within a sector, are common for workers in industries such as construction. These schemes are also in place in the social service sector in ACT, South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. It is seen as an important entitlement to retain workers within sector, recognising that while they may change employers, staying within that area of work is a benefit to the sector.

This is particularly important in the social service sector in the NT, as short-term funding and grant cycles contribute to workers moving employers out of necessity rather than choice. A portable long service leave scheme acknowledges the challenges of working in a sector that is not always able to offer ongoing roles, and the importance of recognising that commitment to the work of the sector and retention of skill benefits all employers across the sector.

The NT briefly introduced a portable long service leave scheme for the community services sector in early 2024, which was then repealed in 2025. That scheme, as legislated, failed to provide sustainable benefits to workers in the sector.

NTCOSS maintains that a well-designed, sustainable portable long service leave model is necessary to support the sector's workforce and retain skilled workers in community services.

**Recommendation 17:** Re-initiate a process to design and implement a sustainable portable long service leave model that provides real benefits for employees and is developed in genuine consultation with sector representatives to ensure it is both equitable and workable.

### **Creating safer workplaces**

Workplace culture and safety are key determinants of staff wellbeing (particularly for Aboriginal and CALD staff) and organisational sustainability. Strategic investment in proactive mitigation to trauma and discrimination has a strong return on investment. Unmitigated psychological distress has a financial cost- studies found that, on average, workers experiencing psychological distress took 43% more sick days per month and had

154% higher performance loss than peers not experiencing distress, equating this finding, on average, to a cost of \$6,309 per year<sup>16</sup>.

This generates a significant financial risk for organisations as the higher staff turnover leads to increased costs associated with recruitment and onboarding, loss of specialist expertise, additional pressure on remaining staff, service disruptions during vacancies, and reliance on overtime or temporary staff.

In addition to productivity impacts, unmanaged trauma exposure contributes to impaired decision-making, increased error rates, and compromised service delivery, particularly in high-risk frontline settings. Investment in leadership capability to understand how to embed best practice trauma and discrimination mitigation into organisational culture is therefore critical.

Funding NTCOSS to facilitate access to specialist trainings for sector leadership could enable managers and supervisors to build the skills required to identify, prevent and respond to psycho-social hazards and trauma exposure, psychological injury, improve cultural and workplace safety, implement anti-discrimination policies and meet their obligations under work health and safety legislation. Over time, this approach would support improved staff retention, reduced burnout and workers' compensation risk, and more sustainable service delivery.

**Recommendation 18:** Fund NTCOSS to facilitate access to specialist trainings for sector leadership on embedding best-practice workforce safety. This should include providing resources for organisations to: conduct needs assessments, manage effective role design, improve staff satisfaction and become an employer of choice.

### **Response to trauma exposure**

Exposure to vicarious trauma undermines retention and workforce sustainability.<sup>17</sup> Workers consistently report high levels of stress and fatigue associated with ongoing exposure to vicarious trauma and systems fatigue in frontline roles. Without adequate wellbeing supports these pressures contribute directly to turnover and the loss of experienced staff.

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<sup>16</sup> Becher, H., & Dollard, M. (2016). Psychosocial safety climate and better productivity in Australian workplaces: costs, productivity, presenteeism, absenteeism. Safe Work Australia; University of South Australia. <https://apo.org.au/node/70872>

<sup>17</sup> Hallinan, S. (2019). Assessing the organizational response to vicarious trauma in first responder and victim assistance agencies. Northeastern University ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2185950089?pq-origsite=summon>

Professional supervision is a cornerstone of supporting workers to be safe and ethical in their work within the community services sector. Supervision strengthens practitioners' professional capacity, effectiveness within organisations, and contributions to positive outcomes for the people they work with. It supports the development of skills and knowledge, provides a space for critical reflection and professional support, and enables practitioners to explore ethical and professional practice within their specific work contexts.<sup>18</sup>

**Recommendation 19:** Ensure funding models enable staff to have external supervision and specialist debriefing.

### **Cost of living in the NT**

Fundamental to the workforce's experience of living and working in the NT, is the cost of living. While appropriate pay and conditions are essential, workers in the NT experience significant cost of living pressures. This impacts the ability of NT organisations to attract, retain and support a sustainable workforce.

The NT has a higher proportion of renters than the rest of Australia - with almost half of the Territory's population renting. This means the costs of the private rental market have a significant impact on the workforce. As of June 2025, the NT had the second highest average rent price in the country, with \$668 the average weekly private rent for a 3-bedroom house.<sup>19</sup> When assessed as a proportion of weekly minimum wage, renting in any region in the Territory would put a family working full time in rental stress. While rental price fluctuations are inevitable and out of scope for workforce development, there are key policy levers the NTG could use to mitigate the impact of high rental costs on the workforce.

**Recommendation 20:** Amend the *Residential Tenancies Act 1999* (NT) to ensure Territory renters have at least the same rights and protections as other jurisdictions, including:

- Establish an independent Residential Tenancies Bond Board
- Implement minimum standards in rental housing, including for energy efficiency
- Increase protections against rent increases

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<sup>18</sup> Practice Standard 8 (Professional Supervision) of the AASW Practice Standards 2023- <https://aasw-prod.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/AASW-Practice-Standards-Supplement.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> NTCOSS and NT Shelter, October 2025, Cost of Housing in the Northern Territory. Available at: [Cost of Living Reports - NTCOSS - Northern Territory Council of Social Service](#)

## 5. Shape the Territory's future workforce

### Renewable energy

Developing a sustainable energy industry in the NT will require a growing expertise in renewable energy and the development, planning, implementation and maintenance of large-scale solar projects, community energy projects and rooftop solar.

Jobs and Skills Australia estimate there will be a national shortfall of 32,000 electricians by 2030. The domestic and global shortage of these skilled electrical workers is an opportunity for the NT to build a world-class Northern Australia Renewable Energy Training Centre of Excellence with four campuses throughout the NT.

This would enable the NT to capitalise on its established higher education sector and equip local workers with the skills needed to prosper in the growing energy economy.

Likewise, a program to retrofit social housing to improve energy performance and living conditions would provide opportunities for employment and training across a number of trades and professions. Establishing pathway into training, apprenticeships and tertiary education is a necessary step in building the energy workforce of the future.

**Recommendation 21:** NTG invest in \$25 million to establish the Northern Australia Renewable Energy Centre of Excellence.<sup>20,21</sup>

## 6. Additional priorities

### Self determination

Fundamental to all workforce development, is the recognition that jobs and training must focus on community demand.

The industries that not only generate local jobs, but contribute to the wellbeing of communities, provide the foundation for a strong economy over the long-term and should be a priority for future workforce development.

Prioritising development aligned with the priorities of the local community will improve the sustainability of the workforce and ensure needs of the community are met ongoing.

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<sup>20</sup> A \$25 million investment could establish a primary campus for the Northern Australia Renewable Energy Centre of Excellence in Darwin/Garramilla (\$15M) at Charles Darwin University, plus three regional campuses at the Intyalheme Centre for Future Energy in Alice Springs/Mparntwe (\$7M), as well as Katherine (\$2M) and Tennant Creek (\$1M) to ensure all Territorians can receive world-class electrical training.

<sup>21</sup> [Recharging the Territory Report - Environment Centre NT](#)

## Foundational Workforce Priorities

### Funding

Underpinning every recommendation in this submission is the recognition that current funding models do not adequately support organisations to attract and retain staff. Workforce attraction, retention and growth is impossible with low paid, insecure work. Without appropriate funding, organisations within the sector cannot manage risk, invest in staff training, respond to crisis, or enable safe and sustainable work–life balance for their workforce.

#### *Restoration of funding value*

Industry funding must be urgently restored to 2018 levels in real terms to ensure frontline services can respond to the needs of vulnerable Territorians. Grant indexation has failed to keep pace with wage growth and unavoidable cost pressures. Between 2018 and 2025, award wages increased by 34.7%, while industry grant funding increased by only 7.2%. This disparity has been driven in part by the application of government-style efficiency dividends to non-government organisations.

At the same time, organisations have absorbed additional, non-controllable cost increases, including rises in the Superannuation Guarantee Charge, insurance premiums and other core costs of doing business. As a result, almost half of not-for-profit social service providers operated at a loss in 2023. Restoring funding to 2018 levels in real terms is essential to ensure frontline services can be adequately staffed to deliver critical programs. As discussed above, understaffing increases workforce attrition.

**Recommendation 22:** Uplift grant funding over 3 years to restore funding to 2018 levels in real terms and remove efficiency dividends for social service sector grant funding.

#### *Indexation*

Efficiency dividends are fundamentally incompatible with the nature of frontline work, where demand is rising and costs cannot simply be absorbed through “efficiencies.” To ensure funding keeps pace with real need, future grants should fully remove efficiency dividends.

**Recommendation 23:** Remove efficiency dividends and adjust the grant indexation formula to reflect sector specific cost pressures.

Current grant indexation (CPI + WPI) fails to reflect sector-specific cost pressures such as SCHADS Award increases and superannuation changes. Working with the sector to develop a new indexation formula, such as the one below, will protect service viability and provide certainty for long-term workforce and financial planning.

$$NFA = PVA + (NWC+OAI) \times 75\% + (CPI \times 25\%)$$

- *NFA = New grant funding amount*
- *PVA = Previous funding amount*
- *NWC = National Wage Case Decision (% increase)*
- *OAI = Other Award Increase determinations e.g. Gender Undervaluation Review*
- *CPI = CPI increase for the previous 12 months*

#### *Funding for indirect and operational costs*

Grants typically incorporate 10–20% for indirect, operational costs. However, on average, operational costs account for 33% of spending.<sup>22</sup> Such parameters force organisations to underinvest in IT, training, and quality systems. Research highlights that enabling larger proportions of grant funding to be untied increases efficiency, allowing services to adapt to local and emerging needs.

**Recommendation 24:** Fund the development of an independent, credible set of definitions and data on indirect and operational costs that both funders and not-for-profits can use. There must be specific reference to costs in remote and very remote areas. In the interim: Incorporate a minimum of 30% untied operational funding in all NTG grants.

#### **SCHADS Award Review**

As part of their gender-based undervaluation review, the Fair Work Commission is currently undergoing a large-scale review of the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2010 (SCHADS Award). As most organisations across the sector employ staff under the SCHADS Award these changes are expected to have a significant impact on the sector.

**Recommendation 25:** Fund a Workforce Development Officer within NTCOSS to support implementation of the new SCHADS Award, under which every position in every social and community organisation will need to be reclassified to ensure compliance.

#### **Casualisation of the care industry**

Short term and insecure funding arrangements limit organisations' ability to offer long term employment.

The charity sector has a high proportion of casual staff. In 2022, over 30% of staff were on casual contracts.<sup>23</sup> This has increased since 2017. An increasing reliance of casual staff

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<sup>22</sup> Social Ventures Australia, 2022, [Paying what it takes: Funding indirect costs to create long-term impact](#)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

reduces stability of the sector, continuity of care, and service quality. It also results in underinvestment in staff training and condition and hinders meaningful career progression.

**Recommendation 26:** Adjust grant funding to support long term contracts, predictable hours and fair conditions for sector staff.

### **Systems change**

Research shows that when trauma exposure is appropriately supported, frontline work can be sustainable. Instead, the most rapid and severe burnout occurs due to exposure to systemic failure. This creates a sense of helplessness as workers are unable to create lasting change for clients within broken systems. In the NT, structural challenges such as severe housing shortages, high poverty rates, and systemic racism make meaningful, long-term outcomes difficult to achieve. While investment in the workforce, as outlined above, is essential, it must be accompanied by broader reforms that improve outcomes for disadvantaged Territorians. This includes strengthening the concession scheme to ease cost-of-living pressures, alongside greater investment in affordable housing and accessible transport.

Thank you for considering our submission. Please contact [ceo@ntcoss.org.au](mailto:ceo@ntcoss.org.au) for further information.

Yours sincerely,

Sally Sievers AO

CEO NTCOSS