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To whom it may concern

We write to make submission to the consultation regarding the Safe Places Emergency Accommodation Inclusion Round.

Access Community Housing Company (ACHC) is a Community Housing Provider, registered as a Tier 2 with the National Regulatory Scheme for Community Housing. Operating for over 30 years in the Cairns region, we currently manage approximately 650 properties for social and affordable housing, housing over 1250 people. Approximately 70% of our tenants identify as First Nations people and 25% receive a Disability Support Pension.

In 2020 ACHC constructed a 10-unit secure complex specifically for women and children escaping Domestic and Family Violence. We are currently constructing 4 dwellings as part of the first round of Safe Places grant funding which are anticipated to be complete in April 2023. We have entered into formal partnerships with two Domestic and Family Violence services to provide specialist services, one of whom is the Women's Centre, who is co-author to this submission.

Established in 1984, the Women's Centre is a community based and community managed feminist organisation that provides a range of services to women and their children who are homeless, at risk of homelessness and experiencing Domestic and Family violence. Our goal is to assist women to obtain safe, independent, permanent housing free from violence and abuse. We operate over 3 sites in Cairns and Atherton. 77% of our clients identify as First Nations Women and Children. We work alongside our families to transition them away from violence and the child safety system. Our framework is client centred, culturally responsive and collaborative.

The Inclusion Round is of particular importance to the Far North Queensland region considering there is a much higher proportion of First Nations people (10% vs 3%), 16 times the rate of Domestic and Family Violence amongst First Nations women, and the significant over-representation of First Nations people on the social housing waiting list and in homelessness data, reflected in the 70% of tenants in our tenancy profile. This equates to a crisis situation in our region for First Nations women and children fleeing Domestic and Family Violence situations.

Of greatest concern is the definition of emergency accommodation to be utilised within the program. Whilst recognising that the immediate safety and accommodation needs of women and children fleeing domestic violence must be met, it is critical to think beyond the initial 3-month period and recognise that for many women, even 12 months is not sufficient to be planning the next stage of their lives and for services to establish appropriate supports. Unfortunately, for many there are no options following crisis or refuge accommodation, and returning to unsafe environments is common.

This must be viewed in the context of the current rental and housing crisis. The trends in Cairns include the following, all of which are exacerbated for women and children fleeing Domestic and Family Violence situations:

- Rents increased 30% in the period 2019-2022.
- Property costs increased 17% over 2 years.
- Rental vacancy rate currently sits at 0.8% (Feb 23) but has been as low as 0.5%.
- 8.9% of households are with unmet housing needs (i.e., they are homeless, overcrowded or spending >30% income on rent (UNSW).
- 4800 people are without a safe place to sleep (QCOSS).
- Social housing waiting list is at 1900.

Critically, it is once trauma has been acknowledged and healing has begun, that family support services can step in, putting in long-term safety planning and wrapping supports around the whole family, women and children. Positive outcomes from trauma and healing counselling services for children are enabled by a secure, safe, and stable environment, which is a longer-term commitment, often not even established within the initial crisis period.

It is therefore imperative that this round explicitly includes projects that provide longer-term supportive housing outcomes.

Greater flexibility in housing models is required to meet the needs of diverse communities, particularly in this, the Inclusion Round. Alternative housing options to the 'refuge' model of keeping women safe are especially important for mothers with boys who are too old to access shelters (over 12yrs, sometimes even 10yrs). Boys are often left with other family members, leaving them vulnerable and traumatised due to separation from their mother and other siblings. Our experience is that often women do not want to be locked away in a shelter, particularly First Nations women. They want to remain in their own community, with support from family members, as well as services wrapped around them, allowing them to have the power to make their own decisions.

It must also be recognised that the program is to develop and manage properties for this specific cohort, requiring organisations to demonstrate experience and expertise in property development, along with asset and tenancy management. This is a role undertaken by Community Housing Providers who very effectively partner with Domestic and Family Violence specialists, and other community service providers.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion. We strongly urge the inclusion of long-term supportive accommodation in this round, and welcome this being a focus of the workshop discussions.

Yours sincerely



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