

MEDIA STATEMENT

15 August 2024

New survey: Rundown health facilities and inadequate staff housing crippling health sector in Aboriginal communities

Outdated and poorly maintained infrastructure is crippling Aboriginal Community-Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) across the Northern Territory according to a new survey, which suggests the condition of health facilities is impacting the sector's ability to deliver vital services and exacerbating the critical workforce shortage.

Conducted by peak body the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT), the survey of 11 member ACCHOs – which represent most Aboriginal primary health client contacts in the NT – finds nine of those organisations aren't sufficiently resourced to maintain safe and fit-for-purpose facilities, which is negatively impacting their ability to deliver primary healthcare services.

More than three-quarters of member ACCHOs reported that the poor conditions had impacted their ability to recruit and retain qualified staff and are concerned they will not be equipped to meet demand in future if the condition of their facilities doesn't improve, signalling a worrying downward trend.

These findings are compounded by a sector-wide workforce shortage with full-time equivalent staff vacancies at First Nations-specific primary health care providers in the NT more than doubling in the four years to 2023.

AMSANT CEO, Dr John Paterson, said health facilities and staff housing that is not fit-for-purpose presented a significant barrier to the recruitment and retention of health professionals in remote communities.

As part of AMSANT's Six-Point Plan for improving the health of Aboriginal Territorians, which has been provided to all parties ahead of the upcoming NT election, AMSANT is calling for urgent government action to audit all clinics and staff housing and develop an asset upgrade and replacement plan to enable ACCHOs to effectively deliver services.

"The workforce crisis is being experienced across all professions, but the decline in numbers of doctors, nurses and Aboriginal Health Practitioners is particularly concerning and is threatening to reverse some of the life expectancy gains we have made for Aboriginal people during the last 20 years," Dr Paterson said.

"An Expert Advisory Group are developing practical solutions to the workforce shortages in Aboriginal primary health care, but as it stands, we cannot transition these services to community control or employ people in facilities that are falling down.

"As a baseline we need to provide infrastructure and housing that is fit for purpose and allows staff to both do their jobs and live in facilities that are safe and appropriate. At the moment, we simply cannot offer that, to the detriment of the staff and communities who rely on those services."

Among the survey's key findings:

- 9 out of 11 do not believe they have sufficient resources provided by the government to maintain their facilities to a safe and acceptable standard
- 9 out of 11 feel the condition of their facilities negatively impacts their ability to deliver primary healthcare services
- 4 out of 11 have had to reduce services due to equipment and facilities not being maintained in the past year
- 8 out of 11 say the conditions have impacted their ability to recruit and retain qualified staff

- 8 out of 11 are concerned that, if the condition of their facilities and equipment doesn't improve, they will not be adequately equipped to meet demand for healthcare services in future.

Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation's Steve Rossing reported that general practitioners at the Yirrkala clinic in East Arnhem were seeing patients in corridors due to lack of space. Meanwhile, the Gapuwiyak clinic has lost the mental health and two-week trachoma team visits and will likely lose the next optometrist visit due to no available accommodation.

Poor road and airstrip conditions is further hampering access to remote communities while the Sunrise Health Service reported that 6 of their 8 facilities were not fit for purpose and lacked vital security measures.

"The staff accommodation we have is falling apart. We have lost staff as a consequence of the standard of accommodation we can provide," Sunrise Health Service CEO Rebecca Bond said.

"It's very difficult to access funds for further security measures and to ensure contingencies for communications and internet access. Several of the clinics in our catchment have been without communications for weeks at a time, presenting considerable risk to community members and staff."

Rob McPhee, Chair of AMSANT, echoed calls for urgent action to support fit-for-purpose infrastructure.

"The response from the sector makes it incredibly clear that we need to work together with the NT Government and the Federal Government to both urgently repair facilities and establish a long-term plan to maintain and improve health infrastructure, as well as safe and sufficient housing, to allow ACCHOs to meet growing demand for their services," Mr McPhee said.

"The sector is currently under immense pressure to obtain funding from grants for health infrastructure and acquire trades, leading to delays and insecurity over future timelines. Rather than wait for things to fall down and expect at-capacity providers to apply for individual funding, we need to develop a long-term plan to ensure facilities remain fit for purpose and fit for the future."

"AMSANT has delivered a six point plan for action to all parties ahead of the election and is calling on a commitment to address infrastructure concerns as one of several baseline actions to support NT Aboriginal primary health care and improve outcomes for our people and communities, in line with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap."

Media Contact: Amy Price, 0437 027 156