



NORTHERN TERRITORY
for senior Territorians

Recommendations for the Northern Territory Government

*To advance
wellbeing and social
justice for
Territory Seniors
2024*

*Prepared by COTA NT, the peak advocacy
body for seniors in the Northern Territory
since 1969*

*COTA NT's Recommendations to the Northern Territory Government 2024
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COTA NT acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout the Northern Territory where we work and live; teach and learn; talk and listen; and their continuing connection to land, culture and community. We pay our respects to elders, past, present and future.

About Us

COTA NT is the Peak Body for seniors in the Northern Territory and is dedicated to promoting the well-being of senior Territorians aged 50 years and over.

COTA NT's role is to empower older people and those who work with them - government and the community - into achieving well-being and social justice for older people. In consultation with its Members and NT community, COTA NT provides a peak body for senior Territorians and sound policy advice to all levels of government. It maintains a strong policy council and ensures accessibility to all senior Territorians.

The organisation delivers seniors' services and support programs including events and activities throughout the year (including Seniors Expo and Seniors Month), Aged Care Navigators, PICAC NT and NT Seniors Card; and it takes a leading position in combatting age discrimination with a positive staffing policy.

About this submission

Whilst acknowledging an ongoing commitment to Territory seniors' well-being by successive NT Governments, more needs to be done. COTA NT presents its "Election Recommendations to the Northern Territory Government 2024" with a focus on addressing immediate and pressing needs.

These recommendations have been informed by the organisation's extensive engagement with senior Territorians, the wider community, advocacy and non-government organisations and service providers. They relate to 6 key priority areas:

- aged care
- housing
- cost of living
- safety
- health and wellbeing
- and civil rights.

Recommendations - summary

- **Aged Care:** We urge a comprehensive strategy for the provision of aged care services in the Territory which ensures accessibility, affordability and quality care for seniors. This includes lobbying of Federal Government to ensure Territory providers can support ageing at home, provide long-term quality community care and maintain regulations to uphold standards in residential aged care facilities.
- **Housing:** Addressing the housing challenges faced by seniors is paramount. We propose that the NT Government's housing policy for all Territorians specifically addresses *seniors'* housing needs, delivers on past and unfulfilled election promises and prioritises the build of seniors' housing to provide real and liveable options.
- **Cost of Living:** Consideration for the financial strain on seniors is essential. We recommend measures such as adjusting concessions in line with the rising cost of living, increasing MVR discounts and helping those on fixed incomes to find everyday savings.
- **Safety:** Enhancing safety measures for our older community members is imperative. This involves continued investment in community engagement to inform seniors about issues, concerns and support for safety at home, in the community, on transport, online and from elder abuse.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** Prioritising the health and wellbeing of our seniors requires development of a Ageing Well in the Territory policy and Seniors Active Recreation Plan, plus an enhanced investment into community activities which foster social inclusion and wellbeing.
- **Civil Rights:** Upholding the civil rights of older individuals is non-negotiable. We advocate for policies that safeguard against age discrimination, promote inclusivity in public spaces and empower seniors to actively participate in community life. Civil rights and end of life choices include the right to access Voluntary Assisted Dying.

In a COTA NT survey, we asked seniors the question, 'how do you feel about ageing in the Territory?' (COTA NT, 2022). Numerous seniors reported that they were feeling scared, frightened or terrified with concerns around employment security, declining health, living off pensions, facing loneliness and lack of support systems.

We can, and should, do better.

We ask the Northern Territory Government to consider our recommendations so senior citizens can age with dignity, security and with the necessary support.

1. Aged care

Aged care service provision and access in the Northern Territory is a particularly urgent issue affecting senior Territorians. The ABS statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024) show that the Northern Territory has the highest population growth rate of seniors over 65 so it is an issue that must be addressed.

In the Territory, challenges associated with delivering aged care services and supports are particularly formidable due to worker shortages, training costs, affordable accommodation options, infrastructure, distances, climate, prohibitive costs for aged care businesses and limited non-digital information/access to services.

Recommendations

Our recommendations to the NT Government are to:

- embrace visionary thinking of *boundless possible* and make the Territory the best region in Australia for ageing well.
- commit to developing an effective, long-term **Aged Care Strategy** for the Northern Territory in collaboration with service providers, communities and advocacy groups for the provision of quality aged care services in the Territory which effectively addresses issues *unique* to the Territory.
- strengthen the *Seniors Policy 2021-2026* commitment from identifying opportunities to work with Federal government to **vigorously lobbying** Federal government to ensure the best outcomes for aged care in the Northern Territory (e.g. no older citizens residing in hospital rather than a home environment, more consumer choice for Territorians in terms of providers, shorter waiting times for delivery of home care packages, high quality of care in urban, rural and remote areas).
- increase investment in funding incentives for non-government developers and service providers in building and servicing age care residential facilities and dementia care units (e.g. land provision free of charge, incentives for contemporary village-style aged care accommodations).
- continue to invest in initiatives that aim to recruit, train and retain staff in the aged care sector including mature workforce incentives.
- invest in the COTA NT-run **Aged Care Navigator** services, which offers a free service to *any* Territorian needing information about and help to access government-funded age care services and support.
- invest in aged care information for the community with targeted, easy to read and understand digital and print information in translations.

2. Housing

There are persistent challenges regarding seniors' housing in the Territory including housing affordability and a critical shortage of housing options, especially those that are age-appropriate and accessible.

The *Seniors Policy 2021-2026* expressed government commitment to supporting the development of retirement villages in Alice Springs, Darwin and Batchelor.

To date, nothing has been built.

COTA NT has been lobbying for the Northern Territory government to address the lack of safe and affordable housing built specifically for seniors for many years.

The shortage across the Territory is now at a critical level (Stonhill, 2022) with increasing numbers of seniors, especially women at risk of homelessness.



Recommendations

Our recommendations to the NT Government are to:

- review the NT housing system and *A Home for all Territorians* (Department of Local Government Housing and Community Development, 2020) to specifically include the need for seniors' housing provision, which addresses the housing needs of seniors who may be on low-incomes, socially vulnerable, have increasing medical and care requirements, who require homes that meet the National Construction Code for liveable housing design and who need homes that enable them to age 'in place'.
- deliver on past election promises (2016) to build retirement village-style homes that offer seniors safety and safeguards for living and ageing independently.
- increase investment in social housing with a view to reducing wait times specifically for older people and ensuring accessible and appropriate housing is available.

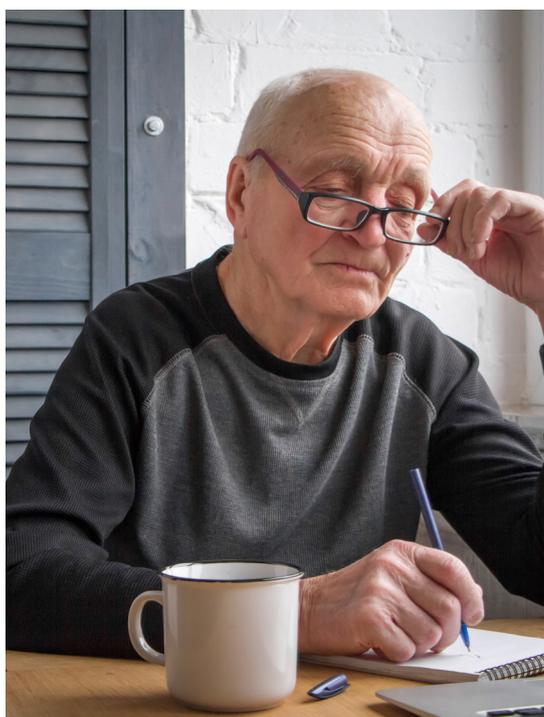
3. Cost of living

The impact of a high cost of living on seniors in the Northern Territory is substantial and affects many aspects of their daily lives and overall well-being.

Seniors surveyed in two cost of living surveys conducted in 2020 and 2022 (COTA NT, 2022) revealed that seniors were experiencing financial strain, especially those living on fixed incomes such as pensions or retirement savings. Financial stresses included meeting the basic costs of housing, utilities, groceries and healthcare.

The rise in the cost of living means for some seniors: less social interaction, sub-standard nutrition, limited mobility and less comfort in their homes due to rising energy costs.

Respondents to the NT Seniors Card survey 2023 stated on multiple occasions that 'Every dollar saved counted' and were especially keen to see their NT Seniors Card help them access savings on groceries and fuel.



Recommendations

Our recommendations to the NT Government are to:

- increase amount provided to seniors on the Northern Territory Seniors Recognition (NT-SRS) scheme by \$100, or alternatively index the NT-SRS to the consumer price index (CPI).
- consider inviting EOI to develop a Best Price Finder style app for NT use – based on unit pricing, which is easy for seniors to download and use (e.g. like wiselist (WiseList Pty Ltd, 2023) but NT and senior-focused).
- continue investment in the NT Seniors Card program and increase MVR discount on registration from \$55 to \$100.
- lobby large supermarkets, such as Coles and Woolworths for seniors' concessions on groceries.

4. Safety

Safety concerns for older residents in the Northern Territory, particularly in the context of their homes, communities, online and transport appear to have become more acute in the last two years.

In 2023, COTA NT collaborated with *No More* to highlight the prevalence of domestic violence in the Territory at its major Expo event and led elder-based discussion on how to raise awareness and prevention. Safety workshops held between 2022 and 2023 dealing with online safety and personal safety were filled to capacity in Darwin, Alice Springs and in the rural areas.

Some of the conditions unique to the Territory mean that seniors can be particularly vulnerable. For example, inadequate seniors' housing means that ageing in place can be challenging within homes if lighting is inadequate, floors are slippery and no rails are installed. Limited financial capability is also problematic for those seniors needing to make modifications or repairs to their homes to make them safer.

Geographic isolation may result in limited access to emergency services and community support and limited transport options and vast distances between communities can impact the mobility of older individuals.

Extreme weather conditions and weather events, such as high temperatures, fire or flood may affect the safety of older residents both at home and during travel. Adequate emergency services a vital to ensure the safety of senior Territorians for emergencies as well as accidents.

Recommendations

Our recommendations to the NT Government are to:

- subsidise the procurement of Personal Safety Alarms for seniors in the Northern Territory.
- increase the investment and funding to Victims of Crime for delivery of Personal Safety Workshops.
- intensify efforts to ensure that all school aged children attend school and enforce the No School No Service Policy.
- review safety measures (e.g. CCTV and Transit Safety Officers) on public transport and aim to increase safety measures for drivers and seniors (i.e. emergency response capability).
- Increase investment in community engagement workshops that ensure seniors (and their families and carers) know how to get help and support during situations in which their safety is compromised.

5. Health and wellbeing

As the number of seniors continues to grow in the Northern Territory, addressing their health and well-being becomes critical to maintaining a thriving and resilient community.

Prioritising their health and wellbeing ensures that they can lead active, fulfilling lives, participate in community activities and maintain strong social connections.

Healthy seniors can contribute to the workforce and economy by staying active and productive, help reduce the costs of healthcare and live independently for longer.

Implementing policies and initiatives that prioritise and support the health of seniors is an investment in the wellbeing of the entire Territory.



Recommendations

Our recommendations to the NT Government are to:

- create a **Senior Territorians: Ageing Well Policy**
- develop a **Seniors Active Recreation Plan** which includes:
 - provision of Seniors Sports/Activities Voucher scheme to help seniors continue, renew or start sporting or fitness activities which improve long-term physical and mental wellbeing.
 - fund seniors' free exercise and fitness stations which aim to improve both physical health and cognitive skills.
- supply vital health and wellbeing resources (i.e. phone numbers for support services dealing with issues such as emergency services, elder abuse, aged care, civic rights, health advice, legal and financial support) in print via post to seniors who may not have access to digital materials.
- continue to invest in non-governmental organisations promoting awareness of elder abuse and offering support to victims (e.g. DCLS, CAWLS, Anglicare, Catholic Care, Relationships Australia, DAIWS).
- invest in Territory-wide outreach programs that deliver health and wellbeing education on a wide variety of topics such as stroke prevention, scams awareness, advance personal planning, end of life/estate planning, retirement, finance and legal responsibilities and rights.

6. Civil rights

The importance of civil rights for seniors in the Northern Territory is substantial and encompasses various aspects of their lives, emphasising principles of equality, dignity and inclusivity.

Civil rights ensure seniors are

- treated with dignity and respect and their inherent value as individuals is recognised.
- empowered to make decisions about their lives, healthcare and living arrangements.
- exercising their civil rights under the law.
- free from financial, physical or mental abuse.
- communicating and complaining about treatment, care or services if they wish to.
- participating in community activities, accessing public spaces and engaging in social and cultural events.



COTA NT believes that seniors should be protected from discrimination in employment and training (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023) and have the right to earn a wage whilst on the pension.

Seniors rights in aged care, retirement, health care, judiciary services and cultural rights must also be protected.

Recommendations

Our recommendations to the NT Government are to:

- prioritise voluntary assisted dying legislation in order for Territorians to have the same rights as all other Australians.
- support VET course for mature aged workers and continue to promote employment opportunities in the NT Public Service.
- invest in training mature aged workers in the aged care sector.
- continue to support initiatives and projects around observances such as Elder Abuse Awareness Day, Grandparents Day, Ageism Day and International Day of Older Persons.

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Further information

COTA NT's Chief Executive Sue Shearer is available should any Member of the Legislative Assembly wish to discuss any of the issues and recommendations in this document.

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