Dear Chief Minister,
cc: NT COVID 19 Regional and Remote Taskforce

Re: Call for Moratorium on Electricity Disconnections in Indigenous communities during NT COVID-19 Response

We write on behalf of Aboriginal frontline health and social service providers and communities affected by Northern Territory and Commonwealth COVID-19 public health measures. We outline our concern that household energy insecurity is creating additional hardship for affected residents and undermining collective efforts to manage outbreaks, particularly in the setting of impending extreme weather across the NT in the coming weeks.

A recently published analysis of daily smart meter data for 3,300 remote Indigenous households demonstrates the highest rates of energy insecurity and power disconnection of any population in the world.¹ Disconnection rates are exacerbated by extreme temperatures, with households experiencing up to a 1-in-3 probability of disconnecting from power each day in extremely hot weather.²

The primary method of COVID-19 infection control adopted by the NT Government in remote communities has been household isolation and community-wide lockdowns. These measures exacerbate overcrowding of dwellings, the majority of which have limited cooling options including air conditioners, fans or even working windows and breezeways.

Community solutions developed over decades of energy insecurity are to board up windows and install cheap and inefficient window-type air conditioners which counter the benefits of natural light and airflow and place significant burdens on electricity budgets. Household solutions to regular and extended power disconnections are limited to living outdoors or to shelter in other households when the weather is extreme. Household power outages encourage people to move between households, as has already been witnessed and experienced in COVID affected communities.

To date, there has been an inconsistent approach to energy security as a primary health measure as part of community COVID-19 response plans. This is having serious adverse outcomes for the agencies tasked with the local response. We need a clear, transparent and public commitment to energy and welfare support for our communities.

Alongside daily average summer temperatures above 35°C in many NT communities, the additional electricity demand during this peak pandemic period is resulting in more frequent power disconnections. Residents often have no way to secure reconnection through power card top ups when in lock-down. Many of our organisations have been required to redirect budgets from other frontline services to pay for emergency household power credit but due to health and travel restrictions ensuring these get to affected residents proves extremely difficult.

Power disconnections are impacting household and community food security, jeopardising urgent health conditions for vulnerable residents and driving population mobility between infectious and non-infectious households. Such conditions do not meet the standard of ‘reasonable comfort’ upheld by the NT Court of Appeal that residents can expect their housing to provide.³

**We urge your government to support these public health measures by introducing an immediate moratorium on electricity disconnection for communities or households subject to lockdown or household isolation requirements.**

Such a moratorium should rule out debt accrual or recovery to protect vulnerable residents from additional financial hardship and should apply for the duration of isolation or lockdown orders.

**Signed:**

Purple House  
Tangentyere Aboriginal Council  
Julalikari Council Aboriginal Corporation  
Australian Medical Association Northern Territory  
AMSANT  
Housing for Health Incubator  
Australian Lawyers for Remote Aboriginal Rights  
Yirjiya Guyula MLA  
Original Power

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³*Chief Executive Officer (Housing) v Young & Anor [2022] NTCA 1*