

**Submission to the Family and Community  
Development Committee, Parliament of Victoria into  
the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing  
in Victoria**

**Submission by the Council to Homeless Persons**

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# **Submission to the Family and Community Development Committee, Parliament of Victoria into the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing in Victoria**

## **Submission by the Council to Homeless Persons**

The Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Adequacy and Future Directions of Public Housing in Victoria.

The most recent homelessness figures from the 2006 census report that 122,172<sup>1</sup> people in Australia are homeless. CHP estimates that the actual number of homeless Australians may be greater due to the global financial crisis and the Victorian bushfires in 2009. In 2007-08, more than 36,000 people in Victoria were assisted by homelessness support and accommodation services.

Homelessness affects people from all backgrounds and all walks of life, regardless of gender or age. CHP utilises the Australian Bureau of Statistics cultural definition of primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness, which highlights the variety of physical conditions in which those who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness are living. We also recognise the spiritual definition of homelessness encompassing separation from traditional land or family/networks<sup>2</sup>, which is specific to indigenous Australians and refugees.

CHP is committed to working with all parties and stakeholders who hold an interest in homelessness towards an Australian landscape where every person has timely access to safe, affordable and secure housing.

We recognise the crucial role public housing plays in addressing homelessness. We welcome a broad and collaborative approach to tackling the ongoing issues of housing and homelessness within our community and work towards the goal of Australian governments of halving homelessness by 2020.

CHP believes that in order to end homelessness, the community needs:

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Counting the Homeless 2006* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Indigenous homelessness within Australia / prepared by: the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness and the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and supported by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Homelessness Consultations.

- A comprehensive national plan that recognises the increasingly complex nature of homelessness and addresses the specific needs of different groups.
- Adequate government investment in homelessness-specific services and integrated mainstream responses to homelessness.
- Domestic human rights legislation to protect the rights of homeless people.
- New and comprehensive data collection systems and analyses
- A coordinated and multidisciplinary national research program on homelessness.

We welcome National and state based social housing initiatives, which will work alongside Victoria's cross-government approach to tackling homelessness as a step towards achieving these goals.

#### About the Council to Homeless Persons

Established in 1972, the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak Victorian body representing individuals and organisations with a stake or interest in homelessness.

Our mission is to work towards ending homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy and sector development. We do this through:

- Promoting individual and systemic advocacy
- Promoting consumer participation
- Developing strategic relationships, partnerships and alliances to ensure the interest and issues of homeless people are addressed across all sectors
- Educating the wider community on issues of homelessness
- Leading state and national policy development
- Representing and assisting organisations on sector related issues
- Promoting, facilitating and disseminating research, evaluation and continuous improvement in collaboration with others.

CHP also incorporates the Homelessness Advocacy Service (HAS), which provides individual advocacy to homeless people and those at risk of homelessness, secondary consultation, training and consumer participation through the Peer Education Support Program (PESP). PESP is a consumer group, trained and

supported to provide input into sector practice, community and government education and policy development relating to homelessness.

### **Public Housing in Victoria**

In September 2009, close to 40,000 people were on the waiting lists for public housing in Victoria. Of these, 8,215 were on the priority housing list, a further 30,861 were on the general waiting list. An additional 3,070 were on the early housing transfer list and 6,160 were on the general transfer waiting list. This shows little shift from June 2009 figures.

The high demand for public housing relates to a lack of affordable housing options, particularly for people on low incomes. Sydney and Melbourne have some of the highest house prices in the world, excluding many from home ownership, and putting further strain on the private rental market, where vacancy rates have declined to just above one percent. .

The Office of Housing (OoH) Rental Report indicates that only 22% of private rental dwellings are affordable for those on statutory incomes, compared to 40% in 2004. Despite the drop in affordable housing, Victoria's long term social housing stock (which includes public housing) has only increased marginally over the past decade.

A lack of affordable housing is a significant contributing factor for homelessness, though the causes of homelessness are complex.

CHP is regularly informed that there is currently insufficient and inadequate stock to cater for the large number of people who require public housing, many of whom are homeless, and stress that growth in adequate and affordable stock is essential to long term system improvements and outcomes.

Any recommendations arising from this inquiry should compliment Victoria's Homelessness 2020 framework, due to be released later this year.

### **Public housing waiting lists in Victoria**

The housing and homelessness service sector has expressed longstanding concerns over the length of time people remain on waiting lists to access public housing in Victoria. CHP believes this is primarily due to a lack of available, affordable stock but also a misuse of the allocation of some existing stock.

CHP acknowledges the current review regarding segmented waiting lists and the likelihood of model reform in 2010. We welcome further discussion and new initiatives which ensure those most at need are allocated housing quickly. However, we seek further information as to how those currently on wait lists will be reprioritised under a new system, and encourage a transparent and equitable approach to reform

CHP believes that the application system for Segment One housing is complex and onerous for applicants (and workers assisting them) to complete. CHP is regularly informed by its members of a lack of consistency in policy interpretation across regions regarding the application and allocation system.

CHP believes that a priority system where those in most need are given more immediate access to housing is necessary. The current segmented waiting list does prioritise homelessness which is important. However, the system has become overly administrative and complicated and requires a greater balance between housing need and social and support needs.

Public housing should be accessible to those on low incomes and who are disadvantaged, and careful attention must be paid to definition and articulation of both need and disadvantage.

It is important that the eligibility criteria for public housing remain focussed on low income. However there may need to be some flexibility in determining eligibility for some groups. The prime example of this is women escaping family violence who are ineligible for public housing if they co-own property with a perpetrator.

Research shows that the longer people spend in insecure accommodation, the higher their risk of moving into chronic homelessness.<sup>3</sup> As such, CHP recommends developing and reforming that ensure people are moved through the homelessness system as quickly as possible, with an end goal of secure housing.

The management of the current system needs to be simplified and not discriminate based on transience and disadvantage. Currently, people can be removed from waitlists when they have not made contact with the OoH in a specific time frame. For the homeless, who are often transient, and may have multiple and complex needs,

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<sup>3</sup> See Chamberlain, C, Johnson, G & Theobald, J (2007) Homelessness in Melbourne: Confronting the

language and/or literacy issues, or be living in, or fleeing unsafe housing, staying in contact can be extremely difficult.

CHP believes applicants should not be disadvantaged in terms of access to permanent housing because of their homeless or transient status. In the administration of waiting lists, greater effort is required to ensure that people in genuine housing need are not excluded.

CHP also supports a system which places the emphasis on support during and after gaining secure housing. Support services have an important role in supporting clients to maintain tenancies, rather than becoming part of the homelessness and housing support churn.

The current high and unmet demand for public housing properties has created longer waiting periods and reduced options for exiting crisis and transitional housing. An overall lack of affordable housing supply, including in the private rental market and types of social housing, has created bottlenecks in transitional housing. In this context CHP recommends flexibility in transitional stock management, including the capacity of some transitional housing becoming long term tenure where individuals, families and children have settled in a suburb and/or school. Whilst this is relevant for a range of target groups, it is particularly important that children are provided with stability to reduce the negative impacts of homelessness and frequent accommodation moves.

People on waiting lists are frequently forced to endure unsafe, inadequate temporary accommodation which may include couch surfing, staying in motels, caravans, private rooming houses, THMs and refuges or rough sleeping. Agencies report to CHP a severe shortage of appropriate, safe and affordable accommodation available to refer clients on to. Living in insecure accommodation, alongside the other personal and support needs, which vary in intensity and complexity for each individual compounds housing stress experienced, thus creating an ongoing and currently unsustainable reliance on support services.

CHP has frequently heard the stories of people on the choosing to sleep rough rather than stay in substandard accommodation options that are available (such as private

rooming houses). This is particularly the case for singles.

Furthermore, living in unsafe, unaffordable and inappropriate rooming houses can render people ineligible for public housing under the current eligibility criteria. CHP argues that people who might otherwise apply and be eligible for public housing should not be disadvantaged by homelessness and having to take up unsuitable options in the face of no other alternative.

Public housing needs to continue to be a secure form of tenure for individuals who are disadvantaged and/or who have complex needs. These include low income earners, those living with high medical needs, women and children escaping domestic violence, individuals exiting the prison system, and young people exiting state care.

Security of tenure is more than simply having accommodation. It directly relates to social inclusion philosophies and allows a person to become connected to a community. It is a foundation on which people can build or rebuild their lives, and may facilitate other activities such as study, employment and the fostering of relationships. Having a place to call home, without the risk or fear of eviction, allows people who may have otherwise been marginalised, to integrate further into society

Members of the Peer Education and Support Program (PESP) at CHP reported their observations of vacant properties in public housing estates, and knowledge of underutilised premises, including those where sole tenants residing in multiple bedroom properties have requested a transfer and remain in large underutilised properties.

PESP members report that these vacancies and underutilised properties are common knowledge shared by other residents and those on waiting lists, adding to frustrations at not being able to access housing.

### **Adequacy, Quality and Standards, Safety and Location**

CHP acknowledges that the adequacy of public housing can vary significantly based on location and place. CHP highlights again, however, that the current level of housing available is inadequate to meet the demand.

We are please the Victorian Parliament refers to international human rights standards

of adequate housing in the terms of reference, demonstrating commitment to ensuring these rights are upheld in Victoria.

Generally, those wishing to access public housing, and particularly those who are on the priority housing list, have no other options where accommodation is concerned. When accommodation becomes available they must accept what is offered, even if there are shortcomings (whether in location, design, security and mix of residents).

While some people may accept a housing offer believing they will be able to transfer on to another more suitable property, transfers can take many years. A larger pool of stock will assist with both turn-around of properties and wait times, as well as access to more adequate housing.

CHP believes that there should be an audit of occupancy, suitability and adequacy every five years to ensure existing resources are being best matched to individuals.

We believe the location of public housing should be in areas which enhance 'adequacy', and suggest adequacy of housing reflect the definition outlined in the International Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) (Art.11(1)):<sup>4</sup>. We recommend the definition of minimum standards be the converse of current classification of inadequate housing. That is, adequate public housing:

- In no way damages, or threatens to damage, the person's health
- In no way threatens the person's safety
- In no way marginalises the person.
- Provides access to:
  - adequate personal amenities; or
  - economic and social supports that a home normally affords
- In no way places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing
- Is long term and secure
- Is affordable and accessible.

We believe notions of housing adequacy go beyond a physical structure and also relate to the 'dwelling' and its location promoting social wellbeing and social inclusion. This is achieved via affordability, security of tenure, and access to

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/469f4d91a9378221c12563ed0053547e?Opendocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/469f4d91a9378221c12563ed0053547e?Opendocument)

networks and services.

CHP believes that there are specific issues relevant to regional and rural communities in relation to public housing. These are partially based on the much wider geographical spread in rural and regional areas as well as shorter waiting lists in rural and regional areas meaning there can be relocation from metropolitan areas.

City dwellers, unfamiliar with the hardships of poor transport links or reduced access to healthcare and employment opportunities, may be enticed into rural areas by shorter public housing waiting lists, only to find they are unable to meet the additional costs of accessing these facilities, or find themselves isolated in public housing.

Public housing should be created in a way which assists people to remain connected to their communities, where safe and appropriate.

Investment in infrastructure to allow people to not become isolated in public housing is important. Public housing should serve as a stable point for further inclusion and participation in a locality, rather than creating further disadvantage through lack of opportunity.

Many public housing units have reasonable good access to transport and other facilities and services. Neighbourhood Renewal projects have assisted in generating a greater sense of community well being and providing residents with some control and autonomy of their surrounds. CHP supports on-going investment in Neighbourhood Renewal and project with similar objectives.

The Office of Housing has a substantive job maintaining the quality and standards of public housing stock. This is compounded by the fact that over a third of public housing stock is more than 20 years and many properties require substantial repair or upgrade.

CHP acknowledges recent efforts by government in recent years to maintain and improve housing and this is to be commended. CHP would like to see a commitment to ongoing renewal and upkeep of existing stock and clear guidelines about maintenance of new stock.

The concentration of public housing in specific locations combined with a housing

allocation system based on high support needs has contributed to some community difficulties such as greater incidence of anti-social behaviour and tenant and neighbourhood disputes in some areas.

CHP encourages a system that works to support tenancies and communities. We understand that balancing individual security of tenure and public safety can be complicated. However, we support systems which attempt to prevent homelessness and address underlying social needs.

We acknowledge the often overwhelming workloads that OoH workers face in terms of caseload, and encourage additional investment to enable greater capacity and further training for OoH staff.

CHP encourages engaging the general public to promote that public housing is an important housing tenure playing an essential role and addressing housing need. It is a critical element in the broader development of social housing and in the role housing has in addressing social policy needs. Government should acknowledge that education regarding homelessness, disadvantage, human rights and different housing models, should be undertaken to facilitate social inclusion, reduce stigma associated with homelessness and public housing and assist all members of our community to be able to integrate into their community without fear of persecution or discrimination. This may reduce the negative impressions some people have of public housing, and assist in the development of diverse and healthy communities.

## **Conclusion**

CHP asserts that the provision of affordable, appropriate and secure housing will assist to both prevent and reduce the incidence of homelessness. Housing is an important and vital element in meeting the social, health and well-being of all people. The provision of social housing, which public housing is a key part, greatly assists the achievement of social inclusion and community policy objectives for low income people.

The provision of safe, affordable and appropriate housing demonstrates a government commitment to providing protection and opportunity to our most vulnerable members of society.

CHP supports the retention of the existing public housing stock as a component of an

overall social housing program in Victoria.

Despite resource constraints and other acknowledged difficulties in the public housing sector, CHP believes public housing has and does play a critical role in positive outcomes for many people who have experienced homelessness.

We encourage and endorse the development, improvement and enhancement of public housing as part of a broader social housing agenda.

CHP believes that homelessness is a cross-government responsibility and an issue that requires response from the entire community.

The implementation and development of a mix of social housing projects and initiatives designed to meet a diverse range of social, health and well-being needs is an important part of current government innovation into addressing homelessness, and acknowledges that people at risk of or experiencing homelessness are not homogenous and come from a range of backgrounds and age groups.