



McAuley Community Services for Women (MCSW) provides accommodation, support and advocacy for women and their children who are homeless, primarily as a result of family violence or mental illness.

MCSW was formed in August 2008 by the Sisters of Mercy to expand its commitment to women and children and to incorporate its two existing long-term services:

- Mercy Care (est. 1988) - A 24 hour safe house providing accommodation and support for women and their children who have experienced family violence. The Mercy Care program incorporates a Specialist Children's Program to support children with the emotional impacts of family violence and programs to assist mothers to recognise such impacts on their children.
- Regina Coeli (est. 1986) - Medium-term, community accommodation for women who have experienced homelessness and mental illness. Regina Coeli assists women to achieve their goals through intensive, individualised case management support, on and off-site social and recreational activities, links with health services to assist woman to regain good health and wellbeing and continued, outreach support when or if women move into independent housing.

In addition to the above, MCSW will soon be delivering Working for Wellbeing, a program to assist women to obtain and maintain meaningful employment and to achieve greater independence.

*MCSW is committed to advocate for a better, safer and just society.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Affordable Housing & Homelessness

McAuley Community Services for Women (MCSW) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria.

MCSW believes that any discussion about the provision of affordable housing needs to also consider homelessness. MCSW believes that:

- The major **causes** of homelessness for women are:
  - Structural constraints – such as income inequality/inadequacy and a lack of affordable, safe, accessible housing, particularly **public housing**; often coupled with
  - Individual circumstances – such as family breakdown, family violence, ill health (mental, physical or substance use related) and/or a lack of family/community supports.
- The main **barriers** to *accessing* stable housing for women who are homeless are inadequate income and a lack of affordable, secure, safe accommodation. For women with a mental illness the additional barriers to *maintaining* stable housing are ongoing support appropriate to changing levels of need. For women who have experienced family violence the additional barriers to *maintaining* stable housing are ongoing safety and security.

#### Policy & Advocacy

McAuley Community Services for Women  
67 Cade Way  
Parkville, VIC 3052  
mcsww@mcauleycsw.org.au  
ph: (03) 9261 2050  
fax: (03) 9261 2055  
ABN: 85696671223

#### Family Violence

Mercy Care Program  
P.O. Box 161  
Ascot Vale, VIC 3032  
mercycares@mcauleycsw.org.au

#### Homelessness

Regina Coeli Program  
149 Flemington Road  
North Melbourne, VIC 3051  
reginacoeli@mcauleycsw.org.au  
ph: (03) 9269 6868  
fax: (03) 9326 5897

- The **effects** of homelessness for women are many and varied and include a lack of personal safety, social isolation, ill-health (physical and mental), inability to take on education and employment opportunities and family disruption/destabilisation. For children there are additional potential serious adverse affects including developmental delays, especially in terms of language, reading and motor skills.
- The **pathways** out of homelessness for women should include:
  - Safe, affordable, well-located housing, particularly **public housing**,
  - Flexible practical and emotional support based on thorough ongoing assessments of the woman's needs, with links to specialist support, and
  - Community connection and participation, including to schools, mainstream services, community activities and education or employment.

## 1.2. Social Inclusion

MCSW strongly believes that the development and provision of public housing should be embedded within a social inclusion framework. Such a framework would provide an acknowledgement of public housing's dual role: 1. As a safety net for individuals and population groups to protect against poverty; and 2. As a developer of healthy and inclusive communities in areas that have been viewed as disadvantaged.

## 1.3. Women, Poverty, Homelessness & Affordable Housing

### Women & Poverty

In considering the makeup of people living in poverty in Australia, older single women and female sole parents are significantly over-represented. There are considerably more low income women in sole parent families than there are men (104,000 compared with 34,000) and there are 106,000 low income single women over 65 as compared with 40,000 men in this group in 2000<sup>1</sup>.

The key causes of poverty among women, particularly female sole parents, are:

- The inequality of wage levels, insufficient income support, the nature of female-dominated work – e.g. part-time, casual or precarious in nature, leading to a lack of wealth accumulation during working life;
- The high costs of education;
- The high costs of child care; and
- A lack of access to affordable housing;

MCSW strongly believes that affordable housing in general, and public housing specifically, plays a significant role in eliminating poverty amongst women and their children.

### Women & Homelessness

The 2006 'Counting the Homeless' report showed that in Australia in 2006, 104,676 people were identified as homeless. Women comprised 44 per cent of the homeless population; an increase in the proportion in 2001 (42 per cent). In Victoria women comprised 45 per cent of the homeless population.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/poverty\\_in\\_australia/#women](http://www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/poverty_in_australia/#women), viewed 28/1/2010

Family violence is one of the major reasons for women seeking homelessness assistance. This is especially the case for women with children, who reported family violence as the main reason for seeking assistance in 55 per cent of contacts with homelessness agencies in 2006-07; sexual, physical or emotional abuse was the main reason given in a further 2.6 per cent of support periods for women accompanied by children.

Women aged 25 years without accompanying children also most commonly gave family violence as the main reason for seeking assistance (in 37 per cent of contacts). Unaccompanied women aged younger than 25 years cited family violence as the second most frequently reported reason for seeking assistance (16 per cent of contacts) after relationship breakdown.

In 2007/8 nationally 45,700 women sought homelessness assistance due to family/domestic violence. In Victoria, 10,602 women sought assistance due to family/domestic violence.<sup>2</sup>

### **Homelessness & children**

In 2007/8 the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) reported that 47,900 (22.3 per cent) of clients seeking homelessness assistance had accompanying children. In Victoria alone, more than 14,830 women with accompanying child sought assistance, totalling 21.4 per cent of all clients – a stark contrast to the rate of males accompanied by children of only 1.3 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of homelessness on children is particularly concerning. According to research undertaken by Hanover Homelessness Services children experiencing homelessness have particularly high rates of depression, behavioural problems or severe academic delay. Based on a random sample of 51 children from 31 families using Hanover's services the study found that:

- The children involved experienced a range of physical health problems, such as asthma, ear infections, eczema and accidents, at rates significantly higher than that of the general population;
- 50 per cent of school age children had social or academic competency scores in the clinical or border-line range; and,
- Over 33 per cent experienced behavioural problems within the clinical range requiring treatment<sup>4</sup>.

MCSW believes that affordable housing in general, and public housing specifically, plays a significant role in mitigating such harmful effects on children.

### **Women & Family Violence**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' National Crime and Safety Survey estimated that about 5 per cent of Australian women had experienced assault at least once in the prior year<sup>5</sup>. Assault by partners, especially by previous partners, is the most common form of physical violence against Australian women. In addition, most physical assaults against women occur at home. This increases women's probability of experiencing homelessness, impacting on their livelihoods as well as their children.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Homeless People in SAAP*, SAAP National Data Collection annual report 2007-08, p 45.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p 43.

<sup>4</sup> Horn and Cooke (2001). *Housing, Housing Assistance and Social Cohesion*, For the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Swinburne-Monash Research Centre.

<sup>5</sup> *Crime and Safety, Australia, ABS Cat. No. 4509.0*. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The benefits of public (or affordable housing) for women and children affected by family violence are immense. It can potentially provide safety, stability and normality.

### **Mental health and homelessness**

Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged in regard to housing. In comparison to men with disabilities, women are underrepresented in the workforce, over-represented in public housing as well as in statistics related to poverty, violence homelessness<sup>6</sup>.

While mental health may contribute to a woman's homelessness, mental illness can also be triggered by a woman's homelessness and the uncertainty, anxiety and lack of safety that accompanies it.

According to Coutts, Gronda and Johnston (2008)<sup>7</sup>, people suffering from mental illness that are affected by homelessness tend to remain in the homelessness cycle longer than any other group. This is shaped by three major factors:

- Social attitudes towards mental illness
- Difficulty meeting labour and housing market demands
- The extent of family support

The stigma surrounding mental illness harmfully contributes to those suffering mental illness and homelessness. "People with mental health issues have to deal with the unpredictable nature of their health problems, making it difficult to comply with the rules, structures and social practices in each market".<sup>8</sup> This is also often coupled with the need to navigate a complex social security system, while contending with the internal and external stigma of being mentally ill. "To be mentally ill was to be a loser, 'a worthless nothing'".<sup>9</sup> In addition to the above, once a person suffering from mental illness is faced with homelessness, they are extremely vulnerable to exploitation from others.

Coutts et. al. found that the key to staying out of homelessness for all groups was affordable housing; however, for those with a mental illness ongoing quality support, appropriate housing and realistic expectations were just as important. And that people with a mental health issue remain vulnerable even when they have good housing.

## **2. Public Housing**

### **2.1. General comments**

For women who have experienced homelessness, mental illness or family violence being allocated to public housing has the potential to be either a comfort or a curse. This will depend on many factors, particularly the location of the property (e.g. suburb or neighbourhood), the housing type (e.g. density), the housing quality and her employment situation.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.wwda.org.au/currie.htm>, accessed 25/01/2010

<sup>7</sup> Coutts, Gronda and Johnston (2008) . *On the Outside: Pathways in and out of homelessness*. Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

## Location

In recent years the Office of Housing has made a concerted effort to spot purchase properties in established suburbs rather than develop broad acre estates. This has achieved greater integration of public housing into the community, which has benefits for both public housing tenants and other community members. For women who have experienced homelessness, living within what they perceive to be a 'normal' community – i.e. not an estate that is branded as "welfare housing", is beneficial in terms of health, self-esteem and social and economic opportunities.

Unfortunately there are still large tracts of public housing that attract social problems – not only from other tenants but from their visitors. For women who have experienced trauma in the form of mental illness or family violence, living in such areas can leave them feeling unsafe, anxious and mentally unwell and is likely to lead to recurring homelessness.

This situation is exacerbated for women by the inability to nominate the suburb in which they would like to live – only the large cluster of suburbs that make up the broadband areas. This has the potential to restrict social and economic opportunities for women and increase their social disconnection and isolation, as well as reduce their mental wellbeing. Children will also experience these effects, exacerbated by having to move schools and have potential disruptions to their education.

- 1. The current broadband areas should be reviewed to facilitate more choice for applicants. These areas are too large and the criteria for location exemptions are too narrow which leads to social and economic disconnection and unsustainable tenancies.**

## Safety

Safety and security are of prime importance all people, irrespective of whether they are living in public housing or private; people need to be able to live and actively participate in a community without fear and/or persecution.

Some groups, such as single women and sole parents (especially those subjected to family violence), and people with a mental illness, are more vulnerable to safety concerns. Unfortunately they are more likely to reside in a high crime neighbourhoods, which are more likely to be a 'poor neighbourhood' with a high public housing ratio<sup>10</sup>. These high crime areas also result in social exclusion for the residents, leading to heightened issues such as unemployment and education. Safety and security are a fundamental right and the Office of Housing needs to consider this in future public housing policy, particularly in allocations.

- 2. The Special Accommodation Requirement policy and procedures should be revised to enable applicants with valid reasons to gain exemptions from areas they feel have security or safety concerns for them.**

<sup>10</sup> Management of Crime and Safety on Public Housing Estates, Prepared by Project Partnerships for the Neighbourhood Renewal Project Advisory Group March 2003.

[http://www.collingwood.vic.au/sites/www.collingwood.vic.au/files/management\\_crime\\_safety\\_publichousing.pdf](http://www.collingwood.vic.au/sites/www.collingwood.vic.au/files/management_crime_safety_publichousing.pdf)  
accessed 25/01/2010

### **Housing type & quality**

Housing type and quality also has the potential to impact on women and children's physical and mental health and to significantly increase their cost of living. The Office of Housing manages a large number of properties that are at best inadequate and at worst, patently unhealthy. This includes high density housing, with its associated noise and lack of secure outdoor space, and aged, poor quality housing, much of which has inadequate ventilation and insulation and energy inefficient appliances. While contributing to increasing greater energy use and the associated costs, such housing may also contribute directly to poor health outcomes for women and their children and result in higher expenditure on health care and medication.

### **3. The property upgrade program should be extended and regular property inspections need to be undertaken.**

### **Employment**

"Effective housing policy should support and enable people's participation in social and economic life".<sup>11</sup> The benefits of being employed are vast, for the individual and their family, as well as the surrounding community. They range from improved confidence and self esteem, better health, independence, personal development and a sense of purpose.

The incidence of joblessness of people living within public housing has risen from 43 percent in 1981 to 66 percent in 2001. This is due to a variety of reasons, one being the increase in single parent households due to increased targeting to those most in need.

Unfortunately public housing can act as a poverty trap, when the financial value of employment is lessened by disposable income available through government benefits. This is especially the case for women who work casually or on a part-time basis, with lower average earnings, and even more so for those with children who need to pay for child care. When a woman earns an income not only does her rent rebate get adjusted accordingly, so she will pay more on rent, she also loses Centrelink benefits.

Often the location of public housing also presents a barrier to employment for women; for women and their children escaping family violence who feel unsafe in their property a consequence may be feelings of instability and a lack of overall confidence, and an increase in their ability and desire to seek employment.

Access to child-care is also a significant barrier to employment.

### **4. Barriers to employment for public housing tenants should be identified and addressed and access to employment should be facilitated by further developing employment projects in partnership with community agencies and investigating the provision of child care.**

<sup>11</sup> AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin, *What can be done to improve employment outcomes among people receiving housing assistance?*, In AHURI Issue 114 May 2009.

### Rent arrears processes

In comparison to other essential services arrears procedures, the Office of Housing's processes are punitive and do not assist tenants to repay their arrears and maintain their tenancy<sup>12</sup>; the processes in fact exacerbates their overall financial difficulties.

#### 5. The Office of Housing rental arrears policy and procedures should be reviewed including the following:

- a. Review all information or correspondence provided to tenants, in particular Rental Account Statements and arrears letters, to maximise clarity and to include information on how and where to get assistance if they have difficulties paying rent;
- b. Include a Rental Liaison Arrears Liaison Officer within each Area Office to assist Housing Officers by providing advice on appropriate action to assist tenants who are in arrears, to assess a tenant's specific circumstances and their capacity to maintain agreements and to liaise with relevant support services such as SHASP, financial counsellors and emergency relief agencies;
- c. Provide a flexible response based on the needs of each tenant – i.e. to defer repayment of arrears in special circumstances for a limited time;
- d. Include a list of relevant support services in ALL correspondence relating to rental arrears and to make assisted referrals to support agencies once an Order of Possession has been gained as a matter of course;
- e. Increase the number of local agreements a tenant can enter into prior to legal action being taken and that agreements are based on each tenant's individual circumstances;
- f. Stop demanding unreasonable lump sum payments from tenants when an Order for Possession is about to expire if the tenant has maintained a repayment agreement;
- g. Contact tenants by phone or home visit if they do not respond to an Order of Possession letter.

## 2.2. Waiting Lists

The impact of the extensive waiting times for public housing for all applicants, new and transferring, is that individuals and households are forced to remain in insecure, inadequate or unsafe housing, with the associated risks and costs. For women and their children the associated risks and costs are significant.

Extensive waiting times mean that a woman's ability to (re)settle into a community is delayed, including linking children into school and recreational activities, obtaining employment or developing community connections. Due to the scale of the broadband areas, they will not know which community they will be residing in and therefore will not be able to begin the settlement process until they are allocated a property.

For women who are homeless who have children there is a risk that their inadequate or unsafe housing may lead to intervention by Protective Services. If children are removed the chance of women accessing

<sup>12</sup> Lyons, M (2000). *Policy in Arrears: Comparing arrears procedures of the Office of Housing with those of publicly-regulated utility companies*. Brotherhood of St Laurence, December 2000.

private housing, while waiting for public housing, is diminished as their income is reduced. And without suitable housing there is a great risk that a Permanent Care order may be sought and obtained.

For women escaping family violence, this has implications for the safety of women and their children as they may have to remain with violent partners or with family or friends who are known to the perpetrator.

Women with a mental illness will have their mental health and wellbeing compromised as the uncertainty about their future contributes to stress and anxiety.

**Q. Is the current system of segmented waiting lists preferable?**

Given the lack of public housing to meet the needs of all people who require it, MCSW supports the prioritisation of women who are homeless, especially those escaping family violence or with a mental illness. While such women are given early access under the current segmented waiting list framework, they will most likely gain greater access under the first suite of changes proposed under the Segmented Waiting List review which is currently accepting feedback. MCSW believes, however, that further discussion is required prior to the implementation of the second suite of proposed changes.

**Q. Should public housing be restricted only to those on low incomes or who are otherwise disadvantaged?**

MCSW supports in principle a system that prioritises the allocation of scarce public housing resources to people with greatest need. However, MCSW would prefer a system that could offer affordable and secure housing to **all** Victorians on low or moderate incomes as an alternative to home ownership. This would reduce the welfarisation and stigmatisation of public housing and increase the rental returns for the Office of Housing to make public housing more viable. To do this there needs to be a **dramatic increase** in the number of public housing properties.

Furthermore it is crucial that eligibility criteria for public housing be consistent with other social housing providers. By restricting public housing eligibility to those on low incomes or who are experiencing disadvantage, while enabling social housing providers to house people on low to moderate incomes, the result will be a residualised, welfarised, unsustainable and unmanageable public housing system.

Consistency across allocation procedures, rent setting, rental arrears management, property standards and tenure are also crucial to maintaining viable public and social housing sectors and achieving consistent and positive outcomes for tenants.

**6. More attention needs to be paid to achieving consistency between public housing and social housing to ensure parity for social and public housing tenants.**

**Q. Are current accommodation options open to individuals or to families on waiting list suitable in the interim? What other options could be appropriate?**

Accommodation options open to households waiting for public housing range from staying with family and friends, renting private – e.g. boarding houses, or, if very fortunate, being accommodated by homelessness services such as in transitional housing. While the level of appropriateness, safety, affordability and comfort varies between the options, they are all short-term and insecure.

Transitional housing represents the most secure of all the options, however, procedures differ between organisations; while one transitional housing manager (THM) may allow tenants to stay until they have had a public housing offer, others will issue a Notice to Vacate if tenants do not agree to certain conditions – e.g. placing themselves on broadband waiting lists with shorter waiting times that are usually undesirable or unsuitable to tenants’ needs due to location and density.

One way of alleviating the insecurity of waiting in transitional housing, as well as to enable tenants to begin and maintain community connections, is for the Office of Housing to transfer the property managed by transitional housing to Rental General Stock (i.e. to make it public housing). This has been done successfully in the past – the only limitation being the time taken to provide a replacement property to the THM.

**7. Stock should be transferred from THM to Rental General Stock to ensure a seamless tenancy transfer from transitional housing to public housing and the maintenance of community links and supports.**

**Q. Is security of tenure an important aspect of public housing?**

Security of tenure is a **crucial** aspect of public housing. If there is a need to move people on from public housing, this should only be done by developing programs to assist tenants to move into home ownership, private rental or Aged Care. MCSW **would not** support any moves to force tenants to leave public housing.

Furthermore, the introduction of fixed term tenancies, presumably based on income, would provide a disincentive to tenants gaining employment.

**Q. Should public housing be made available on a short to medium term basis so it can be accessible to a greater number of people?**

**No.** Public housing was developed as an alternative to home ownership with the aim of providing the same benefits and opportunities provided by home ownership for households who could not afford to buy their own home. A crucial aspect of this is security of tenure, which enables households to participate as members of a community, have a stable life-style, better health and confidence.

This argument is further exemplified when directly applied to women and children affected by family violence seeking security and safety, as well as those suffering from mental illness who are already challenged with the life-style inconsistencies their illness presents.

Moving people on from public housing would create greater turnover but would not necessarily assist a greater number of people, as many people would be at risk of returning to homelessness. Restricting security of tenure of public housing will also further marginalise tenants and the public housing system.

**2.3. Adequacy**

**Q. Is the current system for ensuring that people are allocated appropriate public housing working?**

The limitations of the current allocations system relate mainly to the available stock and the allocation process. In outlined in section 2.1 there are issues with the location and quality of public housing stock that has implications for the health and wellbeing of tenants and the sustainability of the tenancy. This is

compounded by the process whereby applicants are forced to accept their one public housing offer or lose their place on the waiting list.

As outlined in *Improving access to social housing: ideas for reform*,<sup>13</sup> mandatory allocations as practised by the Office of Housing, leaves “little opportunity for active household choice”. The ramifications of this are vast, including exacerbating problem neighbourhoods, restricting employment opportunities, perpetuating safety concerns (especially for women who have experienced family violence) and limiting access to resources (especially for women with a mental illness). This report recommends greater flexibility for applicants and a system that advertises all available housing options to clients.

MCSW advocates for more flexibility in allocation, to ensure balanced and healthy communities. Allocation could be done in consultation with Support Workers who understand the needs and capabilities of clients. This would assist tenancy management for Housing Officers and tenancy sustainability for tenants.

**8. Greater flexibility in the allocation of applicants to properties should be exercised. In particular, MCSW would like the Office of Housing to return to the policy of offering applicants 3 properties. To reduce the associated increase in work load for Housing Officers, assistance could be provided by the applicants Case Managers – i.e. in coordinating property inspections.**

Inappropriate allocations are also the result of the broadband areas; better outcomes for tenants would be achieved if more choice was given in terms of areas – the current broadband areas are too large.

Another factor in inappropriate allocations is the lack of information provided to applicants (and support services) of available stock and waiting times for different broadband areas according to property size and exemptions. Providing this information would assist the Office of Housing, as many applicants will chose areas with shorter waiting times to expedite their housing allocation. This information is currently available to Housing Officers in the form of the Informed Housing Opportunities database, however it is not available to support services or applicants (to gain such information the Case Worker must call the relevant local Housing Office; even a centralised system – e.g. the Policy Hotline, where information from across Offices would be preferable).

Furthermore it is possible at present for a person to be granted location and/or property exemptions to sit on a waiting list when the stock type does not even exist in that location.

**9. The Informed Housing Opportunities database should be made available to applicants and support agencies.**

**Q. What changes could be made to the way in which available public housing is provided which adequately respond to the differing needs of people in Victoria?**

There needs to be more public housing stock. The quantity of available public housing stock is patently inadequate to respond to needs.

<sup>13</sup> Kath, Neske and Burke’s (2006) In *Improving Access to Social Housing, Ideas for Reform*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute 2006.

To assist those with greater needs the Office of Housing should re-introduce Specialist Housing Support Officers into Housing Offices to work with Housing Officers to assist tenants with complex needs, to link tenants with support services and to intervene if tenants are at risk of losing their tenancy. To be effective this program needs to be properly resourced – e.g. at least one SHSO per medium sized office. This will enable a working relationship to develop between Housing Office staff, the Specialist Housing Support Officer and local support agencies. This model has been trialled previously to differing outcomes. It was most effective in offices which were well resourced and there was strong support from Housing Services Managers and Housing Managers – e.g. Reservoir Housing Office (See Case Study 1).

This model is preferable to SHASP support in that SHSOs can be more proactive within the office to pick up on referrals and monitor tenants. They are also more in tune with the culture of the office.

#### **10. Specialist Housing Support Officers should be re-introduced into local Housing Offices and resourced and supported accordingly**

### **2.4. Quality & Standards**

#### **Q. Are the quality and standards of public housing in Victoria adequate? If not, what measures do you think would be appropriate to address the main concerns?**

In general the Office of Housing standards for tenancy and property management as documented in the policies are adequate.

Customer service standards however are inconsistent across housing offices and Housing Officers. This may be due to resourcing or cultural reasons. However it is not assisted by the narrow Key Performance Indicators on which Housing staff performance is measured – e.g. rental arrears and vacancy management. There is no incentive for Housing Officers to deliver tenant-centred practises.

Property standards have been let down by aging and inappropriate stock (e.g. bedsitters), lack of monitoring of housing standards, maintenance and upgrading of properties. Greater resourcing is required to inspect properties regularly, rather than relying on tenants to report maintenance issues.

#### **11. Housing Officer Key Performance Indicators should be reviewed to include indicators that will lead to positive tenant outcomes, such as timely referral to support for clients with support needs.**

#### **Case Study 1**

A tenant approached the front desk of a local housing office to report that there were holes in her walls that she wished to have fixed. The Housing Officer questioned how the holes came about, at which point the tenant began to cry. She disclosed that her partner was violent and had pushed her into the wall so hard her head had gone through the plaster. She also showed the Housing Officer stab wounds to her back that he had inflicted. The Housing Officer raised the maintenance order and as the woman was extremely upset called on the Specialist Housing Support Officer (SHSO).

The SHSO took the woman into an interview room and spoke to her further about her situation. It transpired that her partner had been living with her and that she had had a baby three months ago but had not notified her Housing Officer. The tenant was anxious about this as she knew she would have to repay the rent owed. The SHSO gave the tenant the details of the local Family Violence Outreach Service and encouraged the woman to contact them.

She then brought in the woman's Housing Officer and explained the situation. The Housing Officer listed the paper work that the tenant would need to recalculate her rent rebate and told her that she could enter into a repayment agreement at an affordable amount.

The SHSO visited the woman in her home two weeks later to check that the maintenance had been carried out, that she had connected with the outreach service and that her new rebate and arrears agreement were in place. The SHSO continued to contact the tenant's to monitor her situation and provide support where required.

**Q. Is there any need to set out more clearly minimum standards to be applied to public housing properties?**

No. The issue relates more to monitoring and implementation than documentation.

**Q. Could current procedures for dealing with complaints be improved? If so, how?**

The actual procedures as documented are adequate, however, they are not always well implemented (See Case Study 2). At a very minimum this could be improved by staff giving consistent information to applicants, tenants or support agencies on the complaints process or alternative solutions. Where the issues or complaints are complex they should be referred to a senior Housing Officer.

**Q. How adequate are Office of Housing staffing levels and expertise?**

Although the Office of Housing has attempted to improve staffing levels and expertise, they are still inadequate to provide more than a basic level of housing and tenancy administration. One barrier to an improvement in the way that staff assist tenants with complex issues are the Key Performance Indicators that they are required to achieve. These are centred on administrative tasks such as rental arrears management and property allocation.

**Q. How responsive are Office of Housing staff to complaints about public housing tenants by neighbours?**

Responses are very inconsistent and vary from office to office and staff member to staff member. Better training for staff on complaints should be implemented and better information for complainants should be provided.

**Case Study 2**

A MCSW client was recently allocated a unit in a high density public housing estate. She was constantly harassed by other tenants and visitors who loitered near her unit. People were knocking on her door and she felt very unsafe. The Case Worker reported the situation to her Housing Officer and was told that it was not their problem; that it was a matter for the police. The Case Worker spoke to another Housing Officer and was advised that it was an inappropriate allocation that could be appealed and that she could be eligible for a transfer.

## 2.5. Safety & Location

**Q. What are the most important factors that need to be taken into account in deciding where public housing should be located? How well are these needs being met currently?**

To achieve positive outcomes for tenants, public housing needs to be located close to services, especially transport, employment opportunities, schools, health providers, etc. It is also essential that public housing is not clustered. For the most part public housing is well located.

**Q. Have there been measures to improve the safety of public housing which have been particularly effective?**

The concierge model which has been used on some public housing estates is reported to be working well. In addition, community facilities and gardens that assist in the development of strong communities, help to increase safety on estates.

## 2.6. Impact of Specific Groups

### **Q. Are there ways in which public housing can be improved to meet the specific needs of women?**

Female, single-headed households (i.e. single women and single mothers) often experience significant disadvantage in regards to obtaining and maintaining housing. This is due to their reliance on low and statutory incomes and the difficulties obtaining private housing – both home ownership and private rental.

Two of the main concerns for women in public housing are safety and access for them and their children. Access relates to physical access to properties and other facilities. For example, the allocation of “walk-up” flats to women with young children is greatly concerning. This creates safety problems if a woman has to try to negotiate steps with prams and toddlers along with shopping bags. The location of communal laundries in walk-ups also creates safety issues.

Access can also relate to the size of properties and family reunification. Unless there is strong evidence that a woman will gain access or custody to children in care they will only be allocated a single bedroom property. However, if circumstances change and access or custody is a possibility, it is unlikely to occur if the property is inadequate. A transfer to a larger property currently requires women to wait for a number of years – this is patently inadequate and not conducive to possible outcomes for the woman or her child/ren.

### **12. Women escaping family violence should be afforded the highest priority regardless of tenure – i.e. if they are in public housing or not. Women who are (re)gaining access or custody of children should also be afforded the highest priority.**

Public housing is not flexible and does not cater to the needs of people who wish or need to move i.e. for safety reasons for women escaping family violence. Other than applying for a transfer, the only method of moving properties is through a “Housing Swap”. This program is under-promoted and not well managed.

### **13. The Housing Swap program should be reviewed to look at strategies to improve utilisation – e.g. to develop a web-based system for tenants to use or contracting to a support provider to deliver.**

### **Q. Have there been initiatives which have been successful in addressing the living arrangements and support needs of seniors?**

The Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) program has been successful in assisting older public tenants to remain in their homes.

### **Q. What could be done to make it easier to adapt and upgrade accommodation to suit the needs of people as they age?**

Older people need security of tenure, access to services as needs arise and properties that can be upgraded as required – e.g. with step-less showers and provisions for grab-rails to be installed.

**Q. How has the priority allocation system impacted on public housing need of people at risk of or experiencing homelessness?**

The allocation system prioritises those who have experienced recurring homelessness and complex needs. In some cases applicants are not equipped for long term housing, or “housing-ready”, when they are offered a property. This places their tenancy in jeopardy from the beginning.

**14. In consultation with Case Managers and the Office of Housing, applicants should be able to defer an offer for a limited time, especially for those in transitional housing, so they may continue to work on the issues, above and beyond a lack of housing, that have led them to becoming homeless.**

While the waiting time may be lengthy, the time for allocation – from when a letter of offer is received to an applicant accepting the offer and signing up is very rushed. This is difficult for applicants who do not own household goods and furniture and places pressure on support workers to assist clients to furnish and equip houses. This is exacerbated if offers are made over Christmas or Easter and emergency relief agencies are closed.

**15. Public holidays should be taken into account when giving time frames for applicants to sign-up.**

**Q. Are there ways in which this could be improved to better address the needs of the homeless?**

The needs of the homeless could be better addressed through:

- More flexibility in the allocation of housing, particularly the granting of exemptions,
- Better communication and information for both tenants and their Case Workers to assist Case Workers to support clients through the transition – e.g. of maintenance call centre numbers, of public housing processes – e.g. rental rebates, etc.
- More intensive tenancy management in the first three to six months to ensure that any issues that have the potential to jeopardise the tenancy – e.g. the falling through of support arrangements, are addressed, and
- Greater prioritization of women who need to transfer for safety reasons.

**Q. What are the main barriers to the ability of refugees to access appropriate public housing and how can these be addressed?**

Refugees experience many barriers to accessing housing as a result of language difficulties, a lack of knowledge or understanding of public housing and other systems (e.g. utilities, schools), a lack of support networks and often an experience of social and cultural dislocation and trauma.

These may be addressed through:

- An increase in large properties for large families,
- Ongoing continuous support for refugee women,
- Programs that educate refugees on the Australian housing system including private rental and public housing

**Q. What are some of the other barriers for people with mental illness, substance abuse issues and/or disability in accessing appropriate public housing? How could these issues be better addressed**

Housing is a crucial factor in enabling people with a disability to have opportunities for general social participation, including in education and employment. The lack of suitable housing serves as one of the many barriers that leads to the continuing exclusion of people with disabilities.

Such barriers exist for people with disabilities and a mental illness not only in accessing public housing but with maintaining. These barriers may not just be physical or procedural but also cultural. To improve access there needs to be a consideration of the practical needs of women with a mental illness, coupled with an individualised approach. This includes:

- Better staff training in order to understand mental health and the needs of people with a mental illness,
- Better choice and housing options in terms of location and type of housing,
- Housing to be located close to transport and other services, and
- Comprehensive information about policies and processes to enable informed housing choices, and
- Consideration of the difficulties in accessing and maintaining housing for women with a mental illness on an ongoing basis.

### **Children**

A group that has not been mentioned in the submission is children. While the Office of Housing has a role to play in supporting tenants, there are also opportunities to assist their children.

**16. More support programs for children who have experienced homelessness and those residing in public housing should be investigated and resources, in conjunction with the homelessness sector.**

**Q. The Committee is interested in hearing views on future directions of public housing. Have these or other new initiatives been successful?**

Public housing has a critical role to play in providing a safety net to people who are on low incomes or are otherwise disadvantaged. It also has a significant role to play in strengthening local communities. As such the Office of Housing should look at expanding tenant support services as well as Neighbourhood renewal.

Public housing should not be overlooked in the attempt to grow the Housing Association sector. To do so would risk creating a residualised, welfareised, unsustainable and unmanageable public housing system, that stigmatises and disadvantages public housing tenants.

**Q. Are there alternative models which may have benefits for Victoria?**

Community-based, supported housing models have benefits for people (mainly singles or couples) who have varying support needs that may not be catered for by the public housing system – e.g. Foyer models, Common ground models, Wintringham for older people.

Programs to sustain tenancies from within the Office of Housing – e.g. the Specialist Housing Support Officers, also have benefits for individual tenants.

**Prepared by:** Marnie Lyons, Service Development Manager & Julia Quixley, Policy & Advocacy Officer