

Social Work in Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG)

By Ena Ahern

My social work role in HAAG is the Intake, Referral and Housing Options coordinator assisting older Australians who are renting in the private market and living in insecure housing. All communication is underpinned by the values and aims and objectives of the organisation and by the AASW Code of Ethics.

My social work practice commences with contact usually over the telephone, to engagement with the client in a respectful working relationship; assessment of the housing problem and other issues and also their strengths; intervention and working together and review and finishing the work together (Harms, 2007). I commenced my Social Work studies, part-time, in Victoria University St. Albans Campus in 1999 whilst working as Division 1 Reg Nurse, a Registered Midwife and Neonatal Intensive Care RN in Melbourne. The BSW course focus is anti-oppressive structural; and encourages lifelong commitment to fight oppression; a focus for "change of structures in society and not on personal characteristics of individuals victimized by social problems; is concerned with all forms of oppressive dominant-subordinate relationships" (Mullaly, 1997, p.ix). In 2008 I completed Master of Social Work in Melbourne University.

Intake, Referral and Housing Options Role

Many distressed older people contact HAAG as they are unable to maintain their private rental accommodation due to the rental increase above income – some rents up from \$250 per week to \$400.00 per week – way above the fixed aged pension. Also it is not uncommon to receive calls from men and women in their mid 80's who have been issued 60 days Notice to Vacate (NTV) as the landlord is selling or is moving back in or 120 days NTV for no reason. All state how insecure and highly anxious this makes them feel. Harms (2005) writes structural contexts, "like social networks, can be both a source of adversity or a vital resource in the face of adversity" (Harms, 2005, p. 10). Having a place to call home with security of tenure enables a person to build social networks which leads to emotional and psychological wellbeing. Insecure accommodation denies people access to community ties and impacts negatively on their functioning in society.

Within the Intake, Referral and Housing Options role is advocacy. Ife (2004) advises advocacy needs to be practised within an empowerment framework with the active involvement of the client in this process, as it "is geared towards the skilling of the client" (Ife, 2004, p. 36). Unexpected conversations occur during telephone contact such as two conversations with older men, one of whom was in his late 80's who had a NTV his home and the other in his 70's with similar issues, telephoned and one discussed a failed suicide attempt and the other discussed knowledge of his medication which would "fix the problem for good". Their isolation in the community fuelled anxiety and depression and a feeling of being invisible and alone without anyone to listen, to hear and to assist them.

Housing stability and affordability

The greatest impact of the housing affordability problem is on low and moderate income earners in the rental market (Federal Government, 2008). Naufal (2009) highlights the problems of housing affordability for older people is the increasing number of older people retiring to fixed incomes without owning their home (Naufal, 2009, p.3). The

Federal Governments White Paper "The Road Home" has identified housing stress amongst older Australians when a household spends more than 30% of gross income on housing costs and their income is in the bottom 40% of household incomes. Also highlighted in the paper is the number of households headed by a person over 70 in housing stress in 2008 which had grown to 112,000 compared with 56,000 in 2004.

The housing vacancy rate in Melbourne is at a low figure of 1% which reduces options for private renters. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2007 showed 6.5% of Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) recipients older than 65 years of age, pay more than 50% of their income in housing costs after receipt of the CRA payment on rent (AIHW 2007 cited in Federal Government, 2008).

The effect of home ownership decrease from 54.4% in 1995-96 to 35.8% in 2005-2006 is having a major impact on older Australians. Twice as many people aged over 60 are now paying off their homes, up from 4.2% to 9.5%. Home ownership has shrunk from 74% to 54% in 2008 in the ages 55 – 64 years and people paying off their mortgage jumped from 13% to 27% (Colebatch 2008 cited in Naufal, 2009).

Homeless people ages 55- 64 (ABS 2001- 2006) increased in numbers from 7,883 to 10, 708, a difference of 36% and in the 65 age group and older up from 5, 995 to 7,

400, an increase of 23% in that time. Over 18,000 people aged 55 or over were homeless on Census night in 2006, 4,000 more than in 2001 (Federal Government, 2008).

HAAG aims to alleviate housing related poverty by providing housing support services to disadvantaged older Victorians. The aims and objectives of HAAG are from a community development approach, a human rights social justice approach which aims to maximise human potential. AASW Code of Ethics (2002) clearly sets this out when articulating the purpose of social work as "working with and enabling people to achieve the best possible levels of personal and social well-being" also working to achieve social justice through social development and social change" (AASW, 2002, p.5). Housing is a Human Rights issue with criteria detailed by Ife (2004) which must be met if claiming on grounds of human rights:

- "The claimed right is necessary for a person or group to be able to achieve their full humanity, in common with others
- The claimed right is seen either as applying to all of humanity, and is something that the person or group claiming the right wishes to apply to all people everywhere, or as applying to people from specific disadvantaged or marginalised groups for whom realisation of that right is essential to their achieving their full human potential
- There is substantial universal consensus on the legitimacy of the claimed right ; it cannot be called a 'human right' unless there is widespread support for it across cultural and other divides" (Ife, 2004, pp10-11).

Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG)

HAAG is a non-government Victoria wide organisation which commenced twenty five years ago in Westport Victoria when a group of older Australians living in private rental met to demand more

public housing and draw community attention to this desperate shortage and their plight. HAAG functions in an Australia in which Naufal (2009) has found housing affordability in cities is now amongst the worst in the world; in which seven of the eight major housing markets are rated as severely unaffordable by a 2008 International Housing Affordability Survey; where it has become increasingly difficult for older people to gain access to public housing (Naufal, 2009).

The organisation is a collective, based on feminist theory and has a flat management structure. Feminist approaches focus on "empowering individuals facing adversity to change their circumstances externally, rather than internalising them as private problems; inner worlds are influenced by wider social and political contexts" (Harms, 2007 p.62). HAAG has a Committee of Management which guides the focus of community awareness campaigns and oversees the organisation as a whole. Many of the organisation service users become members once their housing crisis has been allayed; they are eligible to be elected to the Committee of Management and

steer the direction of HAAG. HAAG is funded for one full-time position by Consumer Affairs Victoria (CAV) and two part-time positions by the Federal Government's Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged Program (ACHA). There is also a part-time administration manager and a part-time financial officer in the organisation. All positions are funded under the SACS Award.

The aims and objectives of HAAG

The aims of HAAG are to provide effective tenancy, information and support services to older tenants. These services are accessible to all, comprehensive and work to enhance older tenants' ability to have control of their own life choices. Services are accountable to the organisation's membership, to service users and funding providers. HAAG objectives are to provide accessible, equitable, appropriate and quality tenancy support and housing and tenancy information services to the broad range of older tenants living in Victoria, particularly those identified as most in need. HAAG also has objectives to:

- To assist frail, financially disadvantaged older people living in Victoria, who are renting or who are homeless, to meet both their accommodation needs to allow them to remain in the community.
- To provide a state forum for aged people to raise and act upon housing issues affecting them and fostering opportunities for mutual housing support and information sharing among group members
- To work towards heightened community awareness of the rights of the aged, to secure low cost rental housing and to lobby for these rights.
- To work for policy changes and projects which enhance the supply and quality of low cost rental housing for the aged such as the freedom to choose between one bedroom and two bedroom units
- To work for policy changes in tenancy related areas such as access to information and tenants rights.
- To provide a link with other relevant groups, bodies and individuals in Victoria in respect of aged housing issues.
- To liaise with local, regional, state and federal agencies working for income and housing justice (Housing for the Aged Action Group, 2008).

The ACHA Program

The Federal Government's ACHA program is designed to assist frail, low income older people who are renting, in insecure housing or who are homeless, to remain in the community. This is a flexible program set up to meet the differing needs of older

people in housing stress and assist them to remain living in the community. It assists people to access community care services by referring to ACAS (Aged Care Assessment Services), to HACC services

(Home and Community Care Services) through their LGA (Local Government Area) and negotiating with service providers (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2009)

These older Australians have not been documented in the Federal Government's White Paper on Homelessness. They have not been homeless on the streets, or if they have it has been short-term; they have reared families whilst renting, are unable to continue to pay massive rental increases whilst on fixed income; and in the current housing crisis are experiencing difficulty being rehoused appropriately due to lack of Office of Housing aged specific stock and the lack of rental Independent Living Units. Whereas the Commonwealth Government's White Paper on Homelessness, The Road Home focuses on older people who have experienced mental illness or cognitive impairment, often as a result of alcohol and substance abuse.

Clients drop in to the office or if unable to come to do this an appointment to visit them in their home is made to assist them navigate through the copious application form filling required of them. We give face to face assistance with frail older people by assisting with removalists; assisting them into their new home and case, managing until the local Home and Community Care (HACC) services or Community Aged Care Packages (CACPs) services have commenced. Some older people need to be assisted in VCAT. In my role I also assist with referrals to an ACHA worker in the person's local community or internal referral to HAAG ACHA outreach worker and internal referral to Consumer Affairs Victoria worker if required. I also refer to the Community Connections Program workers; to Hanover or Homeground services; and to ACAS (Aged Care Assessment Services) if necessary.

All roles in HAAG support the aims and objectives of the organisation and at all times

HAAG seeks social justice in Housing for the Aged through lobbying governments and through submissions for changes in housing policy. HAAG argues housing for older people must have security of tenure, be affordable, available, accessible and well-maintained, have universal design standards in energy efficiency, linked to accessible services and public transport, linked to aged care services and have tenant/resident participation.

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