



Housing for the Aged Action Group

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The Road Home for Older People? Meeting
Tuesday 9 June 2009

Present: Francesca Reid, Western Region Health Centre; Bernice Mathers, The Salvation Army Community Aged Care; Julianna Glavimans Eastern Region Mental Health Assoc; Fran Moloney, Yarra City; Sahndra Nelson, HAAG member; Anne Gartner, Moreland City Council; Liz Harvey, Moreland City Council; Dion Mould, Knox Council; Lauren Siegmann, Brotherhood of St Laurence; Kerrie Scanlon, Wintringham; Ruth Gordon, Resolve; Colleen Marsh, Wintringham; Sue Leigh, Matrix Guild of Victoria; Nadereh Edwards, Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre; Peter Johnston, City of Darebin; Richard Gallacher, Access Care Southern; Maria Cozzi, NHMRC; Clare Mackenzie, NHMRC; Lindy Parker, Women's Housing Ltd; Branka Kalamari, SASHS Western; Marian Doyle, City of Port Phillip Sth Melbourne; Kate Incerti, City of Port Phillip; Linda Yemm, RSL.

Apologies

Elaine Smith, Wintringham; Anne Sgro, UAW; Sharon Daley, ACHA Nambucca; Cheryl Avent, NE Housing Services; Dalene Salisbury, WAYSS; Kerry Ashley

1. Meeting opened:

Welcome by Jeff Fiedler, Tenancy Advice worker at Housing for the Aged Action Group.

2. Purpose of meeting

While governments at the federal and state levels are focusing on housing and homelessness for the first time in decades, this meeting has been called to take action to ensure that the needs of older people on low incomes who are struggling to survive in expensive, insecure and poor quality housing receive some priority assistance.

A number of initiatives and events have occurred in recent times that have raised the need for older persons housing action. These include an Older Persons' Housing Summit at Old Parliament House on July 1 2008, local government forums at the Cities of Yarra and Moreland, and a coalition between HAAG and the Cities of Port Phillip, Darebin, Knox and Maribyrnong organised a forum at the Melbourne Town Hall in June 2008.

More recently National Shelter held a series of consultations across Australia on older persons housing issues.

The Rudd Government has made a series of announcements on housing policy since it was elected that have provided the impetus for improved community engagement on housing issues. Between the Nation Building Plan that intends to spend \$6 billion on constructing 20,000 social housing units (\$1.5 billion in Victoria for 5000 units) and the White Paper on Homelessness called The Road Home, there is considerable opportunity to begin to address the needs of older people in housing poverty. This meeting intends to start a community

based process to be able to engage with government about the issues that housing agencies face in trying to assist older people.

The Victorian Government has also announced a partnership with the Federal Government to work on homelessness. They are re-vamping their Victorian Homelessness Strategy and have given a commitment to work more closely with the community sector to address the needs.

3. Background to older persons' housing issues and the White Paper on Homelessness

Jeff raised concerns about the White Paper in regards to Older Persons and Homelessness:

- The White Paper identifies a significant increase in the numbers of older people in housing difficulty (23% increase in homelessness amongst older people between census night 2001 and 2006. The Paper also documents that housing stress for older people has increased by 30% between 2003 – 2007. This represented the highest category of increase of homelessness of all 'high need' groups).
- While stating the problem for older people, The White Paper fails to articulate a plan for addressing these needs. Government has set interim targets for improvement in housing conditions for a number of the stated 'high need' groups by 2013, only a few specific initiatives have been announced: Priority residential aged care places for homeless older people, construction of one specialist aged care facility for older people each year for four years, and a modest increase in the budget for the Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged Program (ACHA). Whilst these initiatives are welcome and much needed, they address a fraction of the need. For example, the aged care programs are focused on targeting older homeless people who are 'street sleepers'. The ACHA budget increase of 25% provides a catch-up for under-funding this program over its 15 year life. The national ACHA program is a highly successful scheme that provides support for frail older people in housing difficulty, yet still receives a pittance for a national program: \$4.5 million per year.
- The White Paper offers a very limited definition of older homeless people: "Older people experiencing homelessness have a different profile to that of other older Australians. They are more likely to have experienced mental illness or cognitive impairment, often as a result of alcohol and substance abuse"(p.49).
- This definition fails to acknowledge the plight of many older people who are at severe risk of becoming homeless, or are in interim housing with family or friends. The vast majority of this group are older people who cannot afford to live in insecure and expensive housing that is often in very poor condition. NATSEM has calculated that there are 112,000 older people in this predicament in Australia.
- Jeff stated that HAAG has seen a huge 'spike' in client cases, many caused by huge rent increases with a number of older clients reporting rent rises of \$300 per month in one hit. A recent HAAG client who is 89 years old and had lived in his flat for 18 years was served with a rent increase of \$600 per month, leaving him no option but to leave his home and community, causing him considerable loss and grief with consequent health impacts.
- HAAG is meeting with representatives from the State Government on Wednesday 10 June 2009 to begin dialogue about these issues.

4. Discussion on major issues

- Fran (Yarra Council) discussed the issue of broadening the definition of 'aged' who are homeless using data analyses and using the census.
- Maria (ACHA Stonnington) stated the collating of information on older people in housing stress was scattered and disjointed. She added that it was very difficult for older people in her area to access public housing. Some older people are living with their children because no housing available in certain areas.
- Kate (Port Phillip Council) stated that poor quality rooming houses are developing fast due to the housing shortage and unscrupulous operators.
- Peter (Darebin Council) commented that the situation is getting much worse and older people are paying high rents and have no money to buy food. He encouraged advocates take the issue of housing affordability to the sitting member to discuss issues like the failure of negative gearing and the need for rent controls, a protection that is already in place in California and many places in Europe. He stated it is a human rights issue.
- Lindy Parker (Women's Housing Ltd.) talked about the barriers in accessing their own housing in the Western region due to the specific age requirements of the Office of Housing policies (must be over 75 years or over).
- Fran raised the Home Share Scheme run by Wesley Mission which matched younger people with older people in their own homes.
- A participant raised the uneven provision of HACC services, in particular to homeless people and people in transitional housing due to safety issues.
- Linda from RSL Aged Care discussed services provided to returned soldiers through VASEY RSL and CARRY ON (Victoria) and she is happy to accept referrals.
- Ena (HAAG Housing Options Service – partially funded by ACHA) spoke about taking referrals from a wide range of sources such as the Magistrates Courts, The Seniors Australia newspaper, Seniors Information Victoria, residents in Caravan Parks etc. She highlighted a client she had worked with recently who spoke openly of suicide attempts after being forced to move from his rental property of 46 years.

Other issues raised from the meeting:

- Working with clients who had moved to black market accommodation – shared houses, sheds, rooming houses, garages. People were being forced into these as vacancy rates were very low (1%) and rental is costly on the open market. Black market accommodation created additional issues if councils took action to close down facilities which were deemed to be a fire trap, uninhabitable etc as tenants could be served a 24 hour notice to vacate and made homeless once more.
- Severe rental stress was observed by single older pensioners who were going without food in an endeavour to keep a roof over their head.
- Security of tenure was needed for people to stay in rental for long periods, ie work towards 5 year rental agreements.
- Superannuants with lifetime savings of \$40,000 – \$100,000 were not eligible for public housing and are further locked out of affordable housing.
- The Office of Housing needs to re-introduce a priority category for older persons.
- There is a great need for a funded 'Options Service' such as the one being offered by HAAG to assist people to navigate their way through the myriad of systems and options.

- Social Housing was provided at a level of 5% of all housing stock compared to as high as 30% overseas – it was a false economy to not invest in social housing.
- Explore the use of the Victorian Human Rights Charter for breaches with regards to housing. The Charter was being reviewed in the next few years – this presented an opportunity for inclusions on housing.
- Lack of awareness within the community and even government departments of the ACHA program – Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged.
- Difficulties of providing accommodation for carers – older people who were carers for even older parents or older persons caring for an older child with a disability.
- Dependency on another person is a big problem for some women who are in relationships that have broken down or are violent. They may not be able to leave due to the lack of other housing options.
- Ageism continues to be a general problem – even from GP's towards elderly people.
- Within the ACHA program there is no data collection that can be converted into useful reports on the problems and needs of older people.
- The ACHA program remains underfunded for the intense level of client interaction and assistance.

IDEAS, STRATEGIES, POLICIES

- Fran from the City of Yarra spoke briefly of a forum “21st Century Neighbourhoods – Innovative Housing for Older Adults in Yarra” held on Wednesday 18th February hosted by the Council earlier in the year which was attended by 80 people – largely local residents and workers. The forum agreed to adopt 6 recommendations. These are included as an attachment to these notes.
- It was reported by Dion from Knox Council that National Shelter has released its main findings from a national consultation on older persons housing. These need to be included as further evidence of the problems faced.
- We need to campaign for more public housing.
- Kate recommended that the notes from the **Ageing In Place? Melbourne Town Hall** be included for future ideas and strategies (see attached).
- It was recommended that explanation of case studies was an important part of communicating the issues.
- At rural forums where Jeff Fiedler had recently participated, there were requests from older persons for smaller units of accommodation to be available in small communities to allow them to age-in-place.
- At a recent forum held by the Moreland City Council, there was a call for an affordable, accessible, flexible mix of housing and care facilities along with shared facilities for all levels of users. This is similar in concept to the *Humanitas* model developed by Hans Becker (Article circulated during meeting).
- There is concern that in recent times Residential Care Facilities have been left vacant due to lack of financial viability. These properties have the potential to be converted into other housing models.
- In Sydney, the Apartments for Life (Ocean Street) Project has been garnering considerable publicity including a segment on The 7.30 Report: See <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/s2540330.htm>
- In Wantirna, Villa Maria is developing a large housing site on similar lines to the Ocean Street model.
- There is a need to broaden the definition of ‘older homeless persons’.

- There is a need to redefine the age for eligibility to OoH older persons housing units.
- There is a need for the government to target older persons in private rental with the 5,000 new dwellings that are to be built with the Nation Building funds. This may be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to access new housing.

OVERALL STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE THE IDEAS SUGGESTED

- Meet with State and Federal Government representatives
- Hold local forums on Older Persons and Housing
- Invite radio stations to participate in forums, broadcasts etc
- Include VCOSS in activities
- Formulate coherent and consistent strategies
- Initiate discussions with COTA, Office of Senior Victorians and the Office of Housing
- Keep pressure on State and Federal members
- The University of Western Sydney is making a short film with HAAG and AHURI to highlight the issues raised today. The film will be available in the next few months to be used for lobbying purposes.

5. Future Action

The forum resolved to request a meeting with the government representatives of the White Paper, such as Deb Tsorbaris, who has been seconded from the Council to Homeless Persons to co-ordinate the response.

HAAG will notify meeting attendees when this can be arranged. People interested in continuing to be involved were asked to leave their email contact details.

6. Meeting closed at 12.40pm

ATTACHMENT 1

Recommendations from the City of Yarra through the activities of their Active Ageing Advisory Group

Suggested Recommendations

That the City of Yarra through the activities of the Active Ageing Advisory Group:

- Advocate on behalf of older Yarra people who have not yet achieved home ownership to be provided the opportunity to 'age well' in Yarra.
- Identify housing cooperatives and market sector industries as key providers of housing for older people and consider a range of ways to encourage and support these groups to build affordable housing in Yarra.
- Gather together key representatives from Housing Associations, Commonwealth, State and local Governments, the corporate and private sector to explore ways to develop Yarra's capacity to expand the housing options for older Yarra people.
- Collaborate with other older person's services like the Council of the Ageing (COTA) and Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) and support the effective dissemination of information to older people under the umbrella of a One Stop Shop initiative.
- Support processes for older peoples housing that emphasise the development of collaborative networks amongst public, community and private sector providers, including consumer representation.
- To initiate a Homeshare pilot in Yarra, accessible to all older persons, including those living in public housing.

ATTACHMENT 2

Closing statements made, and issues raised, by participants at the end of the Ageing In Place? Forum held at the Melbourne Town Hall June 28 2008.

A motion was agreed by participants that approaches be made to the Federal Housing Minister that more housing for older people must be provided and based on the principles contained within HAAG's Older Persons Housing Charter. The Minister must also be asked that she ensure that public housing be restored to centre of the housing policy agenda as it provides all the benchmarks of good housing.

Other comments raised:

- Long term leases must be provided in all rental housing. If a person receives a 60 day NTV how do they find housing within that time? The leases must be at least 5 year in length.
- We can't age in place if we don't know from year to year where our home will be
- The State Housing Minister must be approached to ensure there are minimum housing standards in private and public housing
- We need a system of checking the appliances and facilities of accommodation when places are let
- We need some rental limits as rents are often fixed between agents to ensure they continue to increase
- We older people have paid our taxes, we deserve more dignity
- Assets test to get into public housing prohibits many people to get access who are struggling in the private rental market
- Rents should be set at no more than 20% of income to ensure they are affordable for older people on pensions
- Many people are getting 60 day NTVs and there is nowhere for them to go within such a short notice period
- The housing shortage is right across the metropolitan region
- It is hard to people to survive on a disability pension and the only way they can manage is by also working
- A participant warned people to always plan ahead and watch out for that 'bump in the road' where things can go wrong
- Rents in caravan and residential parks are too high, even though residents may own the houses. Rents in the order of \$220 to \$310 per fortnight are being charged
- In Ireland 20% of private developments go towards affordable housing. Why not in Australia?
- Tenant workers should be returned to public housing estates to provide the support older tenants need
- People get better with their health when they enter public housing
- \$1 billion per state should be provided just for housing for the aged
- Everyone should write to their local politicians about these issues