

Older Tenants' Voice

Winter

2009

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HOUSING FOR THE AGED ACTION GROUP INC.

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23 September



HAAG's Residential Villages Working Group at a recent meeting

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***For more information on what we're up to have a look at
HAAG's website***

www.older tenants.org.au

Compassionate landlords?

HAAG Chairperson Doreen Rushby recently had a letter published in The Age newspaper after an article referred to some research that found that landlords had a compassionate attitude towards tenants and were aware of their social responsibility in providing housing. We thought it was important that the public were aware that there is another side to that story. Here's Doreen's letter:

"Peter Martin's report "Negative Gearing on the Way Out" (The Age April 15), based on new research on the private rental market, paints an image of benevolent landlords who are "aware of their role in providing a social service and took it seriously". Our organisation's experience is somewhat different to this view, particularly his quote that the research "paints a picture of landlords reluctant to raise the rent". Our Housing Options Service has had a number of calls from older tenants in recent weeks who are being evicted because they can't afford outrageous rent increases their landlords are demanding. Last week an 89 year old man who has lived in his humble flat in Brunswick for 18 years was informed his rent will rise by \$150 a week from \$250 to \$400. It seems that some landlords are trying to recoup their stock-market losses by stripping low income tenants of all their income. We are struggling to find housing alternatives for the growing numbers of older people in this increasingly dire situation."

Country visits

In the past few months HAAG has visited a number of country towns along the Murray River region to give talks on housing issues for older people. Held in conjunction with services like the Commonwealth Carelink Centres and aged care agencies, the talks provided an opportunity not only to inform people about housing options and their rights as tenants and residents, but also to find out how older people are coping in medium to small communities in the more isolated parts of Victoria.

HAAG found that there are significant housing problems that could largely be solved with some modest targeting of housing funding to assist these communities. For example, the township of Manangatang has a high proportion of older people who are concerned that they may have to move away from their lifelong community as there is not enough one and two bedroom housing in their town to enable them to downsize from the family home. This could mean they have to relocate to larger towns like Swan Hill or Mildura and leave behind their families, neighbours and friends.

HAAG is negotiating with the Office of Housing and the Loddon Mallee Housing Association to see if some funds can be found for this vital need. It just proves that housing is more than a home. It connects people to their communities and keeps them healthy and happy.

Welcome Ena

Hello everyone and those of the members who remember me from 2003 – 2004 when I last worked at HAAG on student placement. I am now working as Intake, Referral and Housing Options worker in HAAG – funded through the ACHA program. In this role I accept all referrals and then link people with an ACHA housing worker in his/her area if they currently reside outside HAAG catchment area.

During the initial contact I discuss all housing options.

I also refer people to their local Aged Care Assessment Service who may require extra supports in the community if they are feeling they are not coping with current supports which assist them to remain in their community.

Recently I have had the pleasure of interviewing, in the company of Molly Hadfield and Margaret O'Callaghan, Evie Wallace – an activist for social justice for older people – who will be 100 years old this Christmas. The topic was mainly about what is needed for older people to remain living independently in their homes and communities. If anyone would like to discuss this issue with me please call me at HAAG 96547389



Vale Bill

Long time bookkeeper at HAAG, Bill Crombie recently passed away suddenly. Bill had worked for our organisation for many years and was a most valued member of our staff. In recent years when HAAG's finances were in a dire state due to a lack of government funding, Bill had steered the organisation through the difficulties, keeping our heads above water for a considerable period of time. Our recently successful achievement of obtaining new government funds was in large part due to the forward thinking strategies devised by Bill.

Bill was also well known as a successful owner of English Sheepdogs and his recently successful breeding of a litter of pups from his beautiful dog Skye brought great joy to Bill and his family.

Our sincere condolences to Bill's family. He is greatly missed by us all.



Bill Crombie with past Treasurer Maree Bellett at our Annual General Meeting in 2008.

IS OFFICE OF HOUSING TENANT PARTICIPATION USEFUL?

Tenants' participation on public housing estates has been a long standing right fought for by public tenants. Bob Newey from the Raglan Ingles Tenant Association discusses how the reality can be different from the rhetoric.

What is Tenant Participation?

From the Office of Housing's own webpage, <http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/publications/brochures/public-housing-brochures/tenant-participation>, it is stated that the department will:

"consult locally regionally and state wide with tenants about decisions that affect their housing and their communities" and "encourage tenants from diverse backgrounds and abilities to be represented and engaged in these decisions".

Under "Our Help" it is stated:

"funding new and existing tenants groups to represent local communities".

When I moved into public housing in South Melbourne in April 1994, this improved accommodation was much appreciated by me and several years on, isolated from rumoured public housing co tenant problems, mine arrived in the unit above me, with a family of drug dealers who caused us other tenants, two years of chaos and death threats. Risking our safety, three of us tenants and a security guard went as witnesses to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, supporting the housing officer and a week later, peace arrived with the dealer's eviction.

Some years later, renovations commenced on our 15-storey block and because of cardiomyopathy, I often went to bed during the day and tried to endure jack hammers lifting tiles, concrete sawing and the skip for the waste was right outside my ground floor windows. I requested a transfer to a different quiet location. The OoH refused, so I went through the ardu-

ous process of gathering written evidence of my personal health, submitting documentation, and with the assistance of a conscientious tenant worker appeared at VCAT again. On the day, the OoH made an offer of another unit and I agreed. The year was 2005.

Self help and the OoH

In June 2006, at my new address, two students funded by the City of Port Phillip, sought tenant co-operation to start a tenant association. A core group of us estate-proud tenants met every week in a community room and our brilliant housing officer participating regularly implementing improvements on the estate. The students completed their placement, submitting a report to the CoPP and the OoH, stating the obvious advantages and success of their enterprise in empowering us tenants. I was encouraged by all participants, to step up to the mark and try to continue the good work. I supported our previous officer in a programme run by the OoH, named Tenant Participation but we seldom saw our replacement housing officer who was changed quite frequently. I arranged meetings, using my phone, stationary and computer, liaising with OoH and their appointed tenant community (HomeGround) worker. Financial support was refused by the OoH unless we combined with other estates in our area but dealing with issues around over 100 folk on this estate, we thought this unreasonable. We named ourselves "Raglan Ingles Tenant Association" (RITA might indicate that we had maternal feelings for our fellow tenants!) and we decided that with our combined personal health and other handicaps, Incorporation, was too difficult.

I felt quite depressed when in early May 2008, the manager of our OoH office, phoned the Victorian Public Tenants Association and asked by what right, we could use the letter-

head "RITA"? She received advice that we could call the group what we liked as we were not stating "Incorporated". Four of us tenants, battled on with only assistance from the Community Development person from HomeGround. Some weeks later, the same OoH manager remarked to me over the phone "When do you ever say thank you for what we do for you?" I replied, "When do you ever say thank you for what we do for you"?"

Assaults and OoH Response

On the evening of 16th May 2008, two tenants in their 80's were assaulted by a tenant, assisted by her children, in front of witnesses. We then had disturbing events on the 6th June 2008, when two of us noticed known vandals and recent attackers, illegally enter the estate community room. The police arrived quickly but we were threatened with violence and as a result, two valued woman volunteers in our fledgling association, felt intimidated and backed off. Then on the 11th July 2008, about eight youths tried to gain access to my own block in order to bash me. The investigation by the OoH into this incident was botched. In September 2008, in front of me, an innocent tenant was bashed by five of the same perpetrators and hospitalised. Our agitation for eviction was ignored by the OoH, **not even a meeting to discuss matters with tenants**. Our local police have always been excellent in their responses but of course, it is not their duty to evict.

It is difficult as a volunteer without funds trying to help tenants; many do not have a good grasp of English and basic Australian law. It is very time consuming offering advice and knowledge on how to access local support agencies for those tenants with serious social handicaps. A tenant association person may agree to go to meetings to update knowledge, but as soon as other agencies meet an interested volunteer, obligations become larger.

I remember the valuable assistance of the paid tenant workers we had prior to the Kennett government. These have never been reinstated, so I guess that the same bureaucrats

employed by Kennett still walk the corridors of the Minister for Housing, seeking bonuses for new cost-cutting initiatives. In place of these workers, HomeGround has been funded to basically deal with defending potential evictees and some community development.

Conclusion

The present OoH policies certainly discourage a safe and presentable estate environment. Perhaps there is not enough staff in OoH and that is why issues are sidelined? A member of the Victorian parliament, who has worked in public housing, stated that many of these housing officers are just not skilled enough. If this is so, why does the Minister not remedy this? Or is it the government's agenda to run the OoH down, hiving off estates (another issue, for another time) to Community Housing organisations?

Tenant participation is not a one way proposition, with tenants agreeing to OoH inaction over tenant safety, general estate problems and lack of consultation, with volunteer tenants doing the work of community service and the OoH boasting incorrectly that they stay on track with their own policies, when they do not. Reviewing my experiences, I wonder who in the OoH drives this so-called "Tenant Participation". Whatever the truth of the situation, I reluctantly offer myself as a hands-on public rental estate volunteer. As presently implemented, Tenant Participation is mere window dressing, so as the OoH can partially demonstrate an interest in public housing tenants.

Bob Newey

Homelessness Strategy

Recently an information session was held on the federal government's White Paper strategy on homelessness. Called The Road Home, the White Paper sets out a plan to halve homelessness in Australia within 10 years. The information session also provided an opportunity for the state government to announce that it is also developing its own plan specifically for Victorian. HAAG has since offered our commitment to contribute to the process to ensure that the needs of older people on low incomes are well represented. We have written to the state government offering our services to attend the proposed Ministerial Roundtable and any other consultative forums that will be arranged during the strategy. We have also offered the opportunity for the state and federal governments to have direct discussions with HAAG members to hear their stories about their experience with the housing crisis and offer their contribution to solutions.

However, while we support the current process we also believe there are some major gaps in the White paper regarding responses to older people that we would like addressed. The White Paper presents alarming data showing older people had the highest increase of homelessness between 2001-2006 (23%) with a 30% increase in housing stress between 2003-07. However, there are only a few specific initiatives for older people in the Options Paper such as a minor increase in ACHA funding, that had already occurred in 2008, aged care places for homeless older people and commitment to

one new specialist facility per year for four years. We commend these initiatives but they only address the needs of the most marginalised group of older people in society, such as those supported by the marvellous work of Wintringham.

HAAG's main concern is the large group of older people who are in housing stress in the private rental market. There are no specific initiatives in the White Paper to help this group, even though the Paper refers to them as high in need. The main reason they need considerable support is that they are often on the verge of homelessness. Recently we are hearing from a significant number of older people who are receiving rent increases from \$200-\$600 a month. These are often long term tenants who are suddenly forced out of their home as their rents become completely unaffordable. There are 40,000 aged pensioners in Victoria who rent in the private market who are paying on average more than 50% of their income in rent. Unlike young people, for whom shared private rental accommodation can be an option of choice due to it being a flexible shorter term form of housing tenure, older people generally need long term housing where the rents are affordable on the aged pension. Many of these private rental tenancies are unsustainable in the long term and organisations like ours spend the majority of our time assisting such people to move out of private rental accommodation. We try and assist older

people to move to affordable housing in the public and non-profit sectors.

Another Rudd Government initiative, the Nation Building Plan will benefit older people by increasing the supply of affordable housing. As part of the \$42 billion economic stimulus package to revive the economy, \$6.2 billion has been earmarked for affordable housing projects. This will build 20,000 new public and social housing dwellings, with Victoria obtaining \$1.5 billion to construct 5000 homes. 70% of the housing is planned to be built within the next year. This one-off building plan will no doubt provide housing for many older people, but we believe there is a strong case for older people to receive priority in such a scheme. Another initiative we think should be adequately funded is HAAG's Older Persons Housing Options, Information and Referral Service that we currently operate with limited resources. This service takes calls from the most critically affected older private rental tenants and provides them with advice and assistance to secure better housing outcomes. It is a brilliant service but we need government assistance to sustain and expand it so that all vulnerable older Victorians can access our support. The need for such a service only increases as the forms of housing supply from the non-profit and for-profit sectors continue to diversify and the options become more complex for older people to access.

One of our main roles is to help older people in housing stress to navigate their way through this complex range of options and link them with the most appropriate housing services available. To this end we have a strong working relationship with public

housing offices, Housing Association staff, up to 350 non-profit independent living unit providers, and are also tracking the development of new housing providers such as Seasons Supported Living, Lifestyle Communities, Garden Villages, Village Life and Sunny Cove Villages.

Interestingly, our service approach is also supported by the British Government who have, in the words of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, decided to "provide a new national information service to make sure that all older people have access to good housing advice" (Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods – A National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society 2008). To highlight our concerns HAAG has recently held meetings with our members and interested housing and support agencies who will be meeting with state and federal government representatives about our concerns.



HAAG members Evie Wallace (left), Molly Hadfield (2nd right) and Carmel McMennemin (right), visiting a tenant of Village Life accommodation in Moe. This photo appears on the cover of our funding submission to government for our Options Service.

New services for older tenants at HAAG

Many HAAG members will be aware that HAAG has been struggling with a lack of funding in recent years. The loss of support from the Office of Housing in 2006 put a huge dent in our service structure and made it difficult for us to continue to provide the level of support older people require. Well, after a lot of lobbying and continued provision of quality services, HAAG is pleased to announce that we have had some significant improvements to our funding in the last few months.

Increase in our ACHA Grant

One of our vital services is our outreach support service for frail older people who are in housing difficulty. Called the Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) Service, this funding allows us to help older people who are being evicted from private rental housing to be able to access affordable housing. While we have been providing this service for nearly 15 years, the funding has remained static, meaning that in real terms we have lost ground and reduced hours of operation over that time.

We are pleased to let you know that from July 1 this year we have been funded with a 25% increase in our grant. This has enabled us to employ Ena Ahern (see article) who is our Intake and Options Worker. We are also seeking another worker for 12 months to continue our outreach work while ACHA worker April Bragg is seconded to another new role.

Myer Foundation Commemorative Grant

This new position, that April will be starting shortly, is for 12 months and is a Commemorative Grant to celebrate 75 years of the **Sidney Myer Fund** and 50 years of **The Myer Foundation**. These grants have been provided to 37 Australian non-profit organisations in recognition of their work. project that will mainly aim to provide a better service to you, our members, as well as provide more information to the broader Victorian community about older persons housing issues and provide more assistance to older people in need. This will include more regular newsletters, suburban and country forums, general meetings, getting out to health and aged care services that assist older people so that we can provide them with housing information, and also improve our Housing Options Service.

Retirement Housing Information Worker

Consumer Affairs Victoria has provided funding to HAAG for a new position that will focus on the needs of older people living in retirement housing with a focus on the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged residents in retirement villages. Beginning as a 12 month pilot project, we aim to improve residents' knowledge of their rights and support them to take action when required. We will provide further information on this exciting development in our next newsletter.

Notices to Vacate

The impact on older private tenants and their families

By HAAG member, Sarah Lawrence

When I was served with a 60 day Notice to Vacate because the landlord wanted to sell my home caused a state of panic and fear of what the greedy, grasping real estate agents and their even greedier landlords can do to older private tenants.

Also, the constant visits by tradesmen was a shock as the landlord sent them in to do repairs before the sale of our home. This started about a month before we left our home of 10 years standing. They harassed and badgered me into letting them into my home on the pretext of giving quotes to the real estate agent. This did not stop until the day we finally left.

The ever greedy real estate agent wrote more and more demanding letters for more rent to be paid - money we did not have due to escalating high rents they were charging and because we had to find a huge bond to pay for our new home. So we have moved from one greedy landlords hands and into another's.

The move was just as traumatic as we had to apply for funds to help us to pay the rent-in-advance. We also had to borrow the bond money that we have to pay back at \$140 a month. This has created some severe hardship during some months.

To be met with the care and kindness of the HAAG workers was wonderful. I must thank Jenny Stewart for her care and guidance on the day of the traumatic move.

Moreover, we now have to put up with 6 monthly inspections of our home that puts us in a state of suspense as to what they may be dissatisfied with.

Our high rent has to be paid in cash at the greedy real estate agent's office. Some of the staff are disdainful of handling 'dirty' money, with never a thank-you for all the rent that is paid to them, and in full, every month.

All in all it is an ongoing cause of great anxiety, being an older private tenant. Where to next for this older woman and her adult son. We have no long term security of tenure, all our plans are only year to year, and you are at the mercy of the real estate agent and a greedy vindictive landlord.



I Am the Boss of My Own Life: Self Advocates Tell Their Stories

Reinforce Inc has produced a book of stories compiled by Colin Hiscoe.

The stories told in this book are about the personal life experiences of people with an intellectual disability. For some it was their first time ever to share their story. The energy, passion and strength shown by people was really inspiring and we were moved by the stories of challenges and difficulties overcome by people with an intellectual disability.

With funding from the Department of Human Services we have been able to create this book of stories that we collected as a way of inspiring others and as a record of the hard fought battle for rights by self advocates over the years.

If you would like a copy of this book you can contact:

Mr Colin Hiscoe, Reinforce Inc,
2nd floor Ross House, 247 Flinders Lane,
Melbourne 3000.

Phone 03 9650 8255 or 03 9650 7855

Price: \$5.00 for self advocates and people with disability plus \$2.50 postage and handling.

Price: \$20.00 for organisations, professionals and others plus \$2.50 postage and handling.

HAAG Committee

We don't often feature in our newsletter the most important people in our organisation, our management committee who run the show. So thanks to the hard work committee who give up their valuable time on a regular basis.



Molly, Joan and Sarah at a recent meeting

Also, our Annual General Meeting is coming up in October. If you are interested in becoming a committee member at this exciting time of our improved services, and at a time when we need members to lobby loudly for our issues, then please think about nominating. We will provide you with lots of support and you will get the satisfaction of working towards housing justice for older people. Interested, then give our office a ring for a chat about the possibilities! We also need country members for the committee, who are only expected to attend meetings every three months. We can help you with travel costs to attend. So ring 0396547389 (city) or 1800637389 (country) if you are interested.

Residential parks and villages reform

For more than 5 years HAAG has been campaigning for law reform for residents living in caravan and residential parks. With many caravan parks closing, causing great hardship for many older people forced to relocate, and new types of retirement village style developments occurring, the impetus for government action has intensified in recent times.

HAAG has had a working group of residents who have worked extremely hard at doing research, meeting regularly to discuss reform, lobbying and meeting with various Ministers for Consumer Affairs and government representatives to put the case for improvements.

Our main issues have been the need for security of tenure, rent control, and resident participation in the running of parks and villages.

The current Minister for Consumer Affairs, Tony Robinson, and his department, Consumer Affairs Victoria, have been very understanding of the problems faced by residents and have recently released an Options Paper seeking submissions about the 5 options presented in the Paper.

Three of the options propose amendments to the current legislation that covers parks and villages, the Residential Tenancies Act with the idea of enshrining the right to long term leases the most attractive of those options. Other pro-

posals include establishing a new Act or transferring retiree parks and villages across to the Retirement Villages Act. HAAG is conducting consultations with residents at a number of parks and villages, and the working group is meeting more regularly to develop our ideas. We have also received assistance from Middletons Solicitors who are providing legal expertise with our submission.

Submissions must be provided to Consumer Affairs by the end of July. If you would like to submit your views, or write a letter to Consumer Affairs, contact HAAG and we can give you details of where to send it (or see our website).

We hope that these current processes bring much needed protection for older people living in parks and villages



Residents in Inverloch met to discuss the Options Paper



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HOUSING FOR THE AGED ACTION GROUP

WHAT IS HAAG?

Housing for the Aged Action Group offers
free and confidential advice to older people renting their home.

There are four main aspects to our service:

- * **Private Rental/Public Tenancy/Rental Village/
Residential Parks Advice & Support**
- * **Housing Options**
- * **Outreach Service - Care & Housing**
- * **Community Education & Community Development**

Interested tenants are encouraged to join Housing for the Aged Action Group
Pensioners No Charge

So ring us on 9654 7389 (Melb. metro.) or 1800 637 389 (country callers)

Address: 2nd Floor Ross House 247-251 Flinders Lane Melbourne. 3000.

email: haag@infoxchange.net.au

web: www.older tenants.org.au