

A Home at Last

Anne Maher, Outreach Care and Housing Worker,
Shane McGrath, Tenancy Advice Worker, Home at Last Service, Housing for the Aged Action Group Inc.

This article demonstrates one of many remarkable outcomes achieved by Housing for the Aged Action Group's Home at Last service and the creative integration of services funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, Consumer Affairs Victoria and the Commonwealth Department of Social Services. A small percentage of Home at Last clients have very complex needs, and this case study, demonstrates the importance of intensive and dignifying case management that can help clients living in housing poverty realise a long-term housing outcome with ongoing service supports.

Kathy and Bob

Kathy and Bob were referred to the Home at Last Service in early January 2015 by a community service agency. Their presenting issue was that they had received a 120 day Notice to Vacate from their landlord. The outcome saw them re-housed in long term social housing in July 2015.

Kathy and Bob were a couple in their 50s living in a private rental property in the western suburbs. This was their first tenancy in many years, having bounced around various rooming houses and crisis services. They had dealt with all the services you would expect in that time and become jaded, if not hostile, to the idea of social housing and community services generally.

Their home was a rundown older-style flat with the bedrooms and bathroom located upstairs. Kathy was on a long hospital waiting list for hernia surgery and struggling to manage the stairs or step over the bath rim to use the shower. Bob, her carer, was finding it extremely difficult to assist Kathy with bathing. Also, the flat was located a long distance from public transport

and local shopping centre. They had to use taxis to get to the shops and their medical clinic, and this was very expensive. Overall they were having trouble managing their bills and rent on their disability support pensions and carer payment. They both had significant intellectual disabilities, mental illness and histories of trauma, making their problems even more difficult to deal with.

Matters came to a head in January when a neighbour broke their front window and they called the landlord to fix it. His response was to drop by

and sticky-tape a thin piece of plastic over the hole. Kathy and Bob were, unsurprisingly, unimpressed by this and successfully applied to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) for an urgent repairs order. However, the same day of their VCAT hearing the landlord sent them a 'no-reason' notice to vacate.

This was the critical point where Bob called Home at Last. The intake worker made an internal referral to Shane, Home at Last's Tenancy worker. However, Bob did not want support to find other



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accommodation. He was a proud guy and was worried they would be pushed back into a rooming house scenario that they had experienced previously.

Shane helped Kathy and Bob apply to VCAT for an order that the notice to vacate was invalid because it was given in response to them exercising their rights. Such challenges are always difficult because while a landlord can concoct a slim pretext the Tribunal often chooses to evict the tenants rather than accuse the landlord of lying. Fortunately for Kathy and Bob, their landlord was so self-righteous he more or less proved their own case and the notice to vacate was dismissed. Shane warned Kathy and Bob it was very likely the landlord would try to evict them again and he tried to convince them to let Home at Last help them find another place. However, they were still unwilling to take this step and they returned home.

A couple of months later the stove started leaking gas. The landlord ignored Kathy and Bob when they reported this (in fact, he told them it was probably just dirty and they should clean it!) so they called Shane

again and after some discussion with the estate agent, the repairs were soon completed. However, the landlord again sent them a notice to vacate, this time saying he needed them out so he could demolish the property.

This notice to vacate appeared invalid due to some irregularities with the landlord's demolition permit. The real problem was not this particular notice, though — it was clear that sooner or later the landlord would figure out how to draft a valid notice to vacate, which would leave Kathy and Bob vulnerable to homelessness. Fortunately, Shane had now built enough trust that Kathy and Bob agreed to let him refer them to Anne, an Outreach worker at Home at Last, to help them find a new home.

Shane and Anne completed a home visit and Anne assisted Kathy and Bob with a public housing application. The application was approved for priority housing. Anne also advocated on behalf of the clients with social housing providers and they were placed on multiple waiting lists.

In late May Shane attended a VCAT hearing with Kathy and Bob,

challenging this latest notice to vacate. Despite the landlord arguing that he was kindly trying to help the tenants find a more suitable property by evicting them, the tribunal again ruled the notice to vacate was invalid. After the hearing, the landlord complained about how hard this all was on him — it was his business to collect rent from pensioners until he was ready to evict them! — and how well he thought he had treated his tenants.

In June a property became available through a social housing provider. Kathy and Bob were interested, but also tremendously stressed by the prospect of moving. Their concerns were compounded, on the one hand, by unforeseen delays with the housing provider, and on the other, by Kathy's case manager who seemed to constantly succeed in making things more difficult, and at one point almost managed to rescind the whole property offer. All this left Bob calling Home at Last at least once a day for the three weeks leading up to moving day — generally angry or upset, often insisting that one or both of them had decided not to move and preferring to end up on the street. It was obvious that the stress of the whole situation was getting too much for them. However, with a great deal of patience and a lot of legwork, Anne and Shane assisted the clients to move into their new apartment in early July 2015.

Their new apartment has lift access and the bathroom is modified with a step-less shower. Public transport is at their door and there are shops and a medical clinic close by. Anne has made a referral to a local community health centre for Kathy and has provided transport for Kathy to attend several medical appointments. Anne has also arranged a referral to an Occupational Therapist for assessment for Kathy to get a motorised scooter.

Anne and Shane have remained in touch with the couple following their move to ensure that they have settled in and require no further assistance or referrals. Kathy and Bob are very happy in their new home and have been busy decorating and are now, for the first time in their lives, proud tenants in their safe, secure, affordable home for life.