

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

**Inquiry into the provision of supported accommodation for Victorians with a disability
or mental illness**

Geelong — 23 October 2008

Members

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Witnesses

Ms P. Norman, and

Ms J. Lonzarich, Geelong South Public Tenants Group.

Ms NORMAN — We are from the Geelong South Public Tenants Group. Our story is countrywide basically. It is not that there are necessarily problems with people with high needs or mental health problems going into public housing, but when there is a recognised problem with people who are not managing in public housing, there is no system in place that helps other tenants cope. There has been a government policy to put people with high needs in with the elderly. We have had one death in Geelong; we have had old people assaulted; we have had people saying, 'I am hungry; give me something to eat', and pushing past elderly residents and going into their homes. Elderly residents live under stress and anxiety, and their own health needs are getting worse.

We have people who are not bathing, who cannot cook; if people give them food baskets, they cannot cook the food unless they can open a can and eat it. In places like high-rises we are starting to see some health problems, like people getting bed bugs. My husband worked for a building company which went up to the 15th floor of a high-rise — they were doing a refurbishment. They knocked on the door and the lady opened the door. She was a 50-year-old woman from Kew Cottages and had got herself some cats for company.

She could not cook but she discovered that she could shop down the road, so she would buy herself a cooked chook and she would go up to her room, and she would eat what she needed to eat and then throw the rest of the carcass on the floor for the cats. So when they went in the door they were ankle deep in carcasses in various states of decay. So they backed out of there. They called housing. Housing came in and pulled the carpet out, put a new carpet down and sent this woman to the 17th floor, and I presume it is all happening again. There was no person, no case worker, nobody looking after that lady. I do not know who got the 15th floor flat but I would not like to put the heaters on or be there in the summer and smell the rancid fat that has gone into the concrete.

We are finding that some people who have case workers need them longer than 9 to 5. They attract itinerants, they attract drug addicts, they attract a whole host of other people, and there is fighting that goes on until 5 o'clock in the morning, or from midnight until 5 in the morning. There are fights, there are all kinds of things. There are people who cannot budget.

Bethany, the social worker, tells me they are only contracted to work for six months, and then those people are on their own. When you ring up housing you have a real problem. You may have had the police turn up to the residents, you might have had five residents complain but housing will say, 'Yes, you will have to get the report'. You cannot get the report; the Privacy Act says you cannot get the report.

So they live with this problem constantly, and if they do get enough evidence to go to VCAT to get this person removed, because they cannot sleep, they might get told the person will be warned. You cannot expect 80 and 90-year-old people to be on a treadmill to VCAT. I know that out of 21 people in a group of 9 units, 4 people had mental health problems, 3 of them bad mental health problems, and these old people were living like that. It is really not on.

There has to be some body that will take responsibility and say, 'This type of housing is not suitable for these people; they have high needs, they need to have constant supervision'. A lot of people are living quite happily in the accommodation, and the other tenants are not against people with high needs or mental problems. What they are upset about is the people who, it is recognised, cannot live like that. I will leave it to Janet now.

Ms LONZARICH — My case is similar to where Tricia's mum lives, but this is where I live. We had three supposedly sobered-up alcoholics, who were not sobered up. They were sobered up by the Salvation Army, put into housing and then left for dead and told, 'Don't drink

again'. That does not work with alcoholics. They got on fine for a while and then all of a sudden all hell broke loose.

One of them we think — we do not know — has a mental health problem as well as alcoholism. In the space of three weeks we had the police there 16 times and the fire brigade 3 times, because this man was just running amok. He was threatening our lives, he was threatening the children — he threatened that he would kill this child, or that she should be dead, and did the same with an elderly lady. The outcome of that when we complained to the Office of Housing was that it ended up at VCAT and the man was evicted. But he has still got a mental health problem, and he is still an alcoholic. We did not want him evicted. We just wanted peace back in our lives. This man, as I said, is a victim now and has no home, but is still out there.

Ms NORMAN — And he will get back into the system, unfortunately.

Ms LONZARICH — He will. This is the only way that housing can deal with it. They evict him so that he can get back into the system. There has got to be a better way.

Ms NORMAN — Also the priority list is now being skewed so that people with mental issues always have higher priority because they are usually homeless — and it should be an immediate warning sign that these people might have a big problem settling into public housing — they are homeless because they have ongoing issues living with other people.

So the families that are on the priority list are getting shunted aside as more people with mental health issues take over the priority list. There was one house with aged care, again in Corio, where a lady ran amok. She smashed every door, window and every bit of furniture and wall in the place that she could smash. Then, for good measure, she went outside and cut the telephone line of the chap next door. They moved the woman out, they fixed the place up and they moved her back in.

Considering they had to rehouse her and all the work involved we are getting up to about \$25 000 to keep this woman in this public house. We are seeing resources from the police, resources from housing being used; so much money is being spent to try to maintain people who cannot live without supported accommodation.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.