

**Submission Text:** Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers

I write this submission in my capacity as a [INSERT WORK AREA HERE] worker in the social and community services sector, concerned by the potential impacts of the Victorian Governments' proposed demolition of public housing towers. I strongly oppose the proposed redevelopment of 44 Victorian public housing towers.

I work with people experiencing homelessness who have been failed by successive governments of all levels; these people bear the physical and emotional cost of the housing crisis. Increasing public housing stock is essential for finding homes and improving the lives of those people we work with.

In this submission I will speak in my capacity as a worker in the field and will focus on the impact on those experiencing homelessness. Victoria urgently needs a significant increase in public housing – the proposed redevelopment does not achieve this. It places existing renters at risk of homelessness and will increase already extensive wait times for those on the Victorian Housing Register. Because of this, I oppose the proposed redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers.

I oppose the proposed redevelopment for the following reasons:

a) It is reported that there will only be a 10% increase of social housing stock on the sites of the proposed demolition. It has been regularly pointed out by experts that this net increase in social housing stock is vastly insufficient to address the housing crisis we are currently facing. It is clear that the private rental market is unattainable for those on Centrelink payments; Anglicare Australia's 2024 Rental Affordability snapshot reported that there were only three properties affordable on Jobseeker in Australia.

Government proposals around so-called 'affordable housing' are ill-defined and appear geared towards those in paid employment. Government-subsidised housing is the only pathway out of homelessness for clients I support. Concerning me greatly is the lack of detail from the state government around the breakdown of community and public housing in this 10% increase of social housing. What percentage of each site will be public housing? How much will be community housing? Or will social housing be relegated to the least desirable suburbs? The paucity of information from the Victorian government leaves too much such questions.

The people I work with every day – those couch surfing, rough sleeping, and in emergency

accommodation – are best served by public housing rather than community housing. Public housing offers renters greater tenancy protections, less monthly rental payments (as a percentage of income), and renters face less scrutiny and discrimination when applying for vacancies. The client group who I work with often have experiences of chronic homelessness and multiple, complex needs which are unmet by mainstream services. This often results in significant trauma, making it difficult to sustain a new tenancy and making a return to homelessness a distinct possibility. Workers in this sector can all speak to numerous examples of clients being seen as ‘too complex’ by community housing providers and, as such, have their housing applications declined. Whilst community housing does have a place in the response to the housing crisis, public housing provides our clients with the best opportunity to recover from homelessness, sustain tenancies, and enhance wellbeing.

b) Working in the community and social services sector, completing a Victorian Housing Register application is a key task and one of the primary pathways out of homelessness for many people. Public housing offers are becoming increasingly scarce for our clients, with existing public housing dwellings increasing by only 74 in the four years to 2023, whilst the waitlist sits at over 60,000.

The demolition of existing public housing stock requires the relocation of existing residents into other public housing stock. This will inevitably create a backlog of public housing offers and exacerbate the existing long wait times for an offer. This has a real human cost. More people will experience the trauma of homelessness for longer, which inevitably shortens the lives of the most vulnerable in our community.

c) Demolishing the homes of current public housing renters necessitates that these residents be re-housed, forcing these renters to move away from social connections and specialist support services. Clients who I support often have multiple and complex physical and mental health issues; they are often supported by specialist services in the area in which they reside and have built relationships with practitioners over many years.

These relationships are not easily replicated and many of these clients do not have the capacity to travel to their original service providers and will likely be out of catchment for such services when they do move. A disruption of the continuity of care to such an extent will result in widespread negative health outcomes for communities. It is worth noting as well that many of the sites listed for demolition are in inner city or suburban areas with a relatively high density of specialist support services, where there is no guarantee that they will be moving to an area with equivalent access to services. I believe it is likely that this

will result in the deterioration of existing physical and mental health issues, with limited opportunities for future issues to be addressed.

I see that tight-knit communities that have developed within the public housing towers slated for demolition. These informal, peer supports are often as essential for ensuring people's wellbeing as the accessible provision of specialist care. Breaking up these communities will force many vulnerable renters into isolation. The detrimental wellbeing outcomes for people experiencing loneliness and isolation are well documented. I believe it is highly likely that this relocation process will result in many people returning to homelessness. We know that recovery from homelessness is so much more than just giving someone a roof over their heads. It is a long process of rebuilding a sense of safety and trust that was taken away while experiencing homelessness.

d) Homelessness services are already not able to meet demand. We are already not meeting peoples' needs and turning them away daily. I cannot overstate my concern about the impact of further restricting the already limited opportunities for our clients to be securely housed in public housing tenancies, and the immeasurable impact of relocations on communities.

Finally, Victoria is in urgent need of additional public housing stock to address the housing crisis and increasing rates of homelessness. Public housing is the most secure housing and the best pathway out of homelessness for those people who have experienced chronic homelessness. The Victorian Government's proposed plan will cause immeasurable social, physical and mental harm to vulnerable communities who have already been failed by successive governments. As a frontline worker, I believe these harms are wholly predictable and preventable, and am therefore calling on the Victorian Government to not proceed with the proposed demolition of our existing public housing stock. Instead, the existing stock needs to be retrofitted, renovated, and re-invigorated, and more public housing - not community housing - needs to be built on other public lands where people will not be displaced.