



**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE PUBLIC
HOUSING RENEWAL PROGRAM**

SUBMITTED BY THE SALVATION ARMY

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The Salvation Army, Australia Southern Territory – State Social Command (Victoria): Submission to the Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program

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Introduction

For many people who come to The Salvation Army for support, public housing plays a vital role in an increasingly unaffordable and insecure housing market. Housing shortages, more households renting, for longer periods and high rents coupled with stagnating incomes all contribute to the ever growing demand for public housing. With more than 33,000 Victorians already on the public housing waiting list,¹ and 22,000 homeless,² Victoria's housing situation has become dire and must be addressed, not just with short-term, ad hoc programs and funding, but with a clear strategy, measurable goals and a long-term vision.

It is clear that Victoria's current level of social housing is inadequate and as the state's population continues to grow, even more social housing will be needed to cater for those who can't afford or sustain tenancies in the private rental market.

The Salvation Army is concerned that despite the overwhelming need for public housing, successive governments in Victoria seem to be distancing themselves from the responsibility of providing it. Years of neglect and chronic underfunding have created a crisis in the Victorian public housing system that is defined by a growing operating deficit, ageing and inappropriate housing stock and a maintenance backlog that leaves too many homes empty despite enormous waiting lists. The Salvation Army is deeply concerned that if the Government doesn't invest in public housing, even those who are currently reliant on an increasingly inadequate system will be forced into a more costly crisis accommodation system or homelessness. Increased reliance on crisis accommodation is particularly concerning given that this system is already at a breaking point. Without adequate pathways to affordable and sustainable housing, clients are kept in crisis accommodation longer and, in turn, waiting lists blow out to impossible lengths.

Access to affordable, secure and sustainable housing should be considered to be a basic human right. Public housing should be delivered as a public service similar to the provision of roads, health and education. These public services are not expected to generate a financial return that covers the cost of their own provision. Instead, Victorians expect that it is the Government's responsibility to continue to invest in these services and provide them regardless of cost. The Government should take its responsibility towards public housing seriously and fund it at a level which delivers a quality service to Victorians experiencing the most disadvantage.

The Salvation Army welcomes efforts to upgrade existing public housing stock, especially stock which is in disrepair, is substandard and does not meet the needs of tenants and prospective tenants. In this submission, we will raise some issues of opportunity and concern within the Public Housing Renewal Program in three key areas:

- Housing supply in Victoria (TOR 1) p4;
- Public housing that meets the needs of Victorians (TOR 2 & 3) p5; and
- The role of public housing in creating healthy communities (TOR 4) p6.

Further information about The Salvation Army is found on p7 of this submission.

¹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Managing Victoria's Public Housing*, June 2017, p.16

² 2011 Census: <http://abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/2049.0Main%20Features22011>

Housing supply in Victoria

This Inquiry seeks comment on **“the adequacy of a proposed 10 per cent increase in public housing (or 1,100 public units) on the sites given the size of the waiting list for public housing (TOR 1)”**.

However, The Salvation Army believes that this is too narrow a focus, and reflects the lack of strategic investment in housing for many years. Considerations of public housing within renewal programs should be part of a broader approach to increasing housing supply. Only a clear strategy, measurable goals and long-term vision will address supply and affordability in Victoria.

The Salvation Army welcomed the Victorian Government’s *Homes for Victorians* package in 2017, which represents an investment of more than \$2 billion in social and affordable housing.³ While *Homes for Victorians* acknowledged the desperate need for more social housing in Victoria and committed to “around 6,000 new social housing dwellings”,⁴ there is still much more that needs to be done to address the current and projected shortfall. While the strategy wisely spread a series of investments across a range of immediate and medium term needs, it lacks the long term ambition required to solve a problem of this scale and consequently much needed clarity around the goals and mechanisms that would get us there.

A report commissioned by DHS in 2013 projected the need for a further 65,796 social housing dwellings by 2021.⁵ The following year, another source suggested that social housing demand could be expected to increase by 38 per cent in Melbourne and 26 per cent for the rest of Victoria by 2024.⁶ In 2016, a report commissioned by the Family Violence Housing Assistance Implementation Taskforce estimated that it would take up to 3,400 new social housing dwellings per year until 2036 for Victoria to catch up to the national average.⁷ The most recent report by Infrastructure Victoria suggests that already 75,000-100,000 “vulnerable, low-income households are not having their housing requirements appropriately met”. This figure reflects over 30,000 on the public housing waiting list and almost 120,000 receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA), of which 50,000 are in the lowest income bracket.⁸ Projections by Swinburne University in partnership with the Community Housing Federation of Victoria (CHFV) suggest that by 2031 an additional 101,592 social housing dwellings (or 6,000 per year) will be needed.⁹ Assuming that current numbers are also maintained, this would place Victoria’s social housing at just under 6 per cent of total dwellings. Just to meet the needs of those eligible for priority housing requires an investment at approximately half of this rate.

Addressing the chronic problem of public housing waiting lists inevitably requires new social housing builds, not just renewal of existing estates.

³ <http://www.sarmy.org.au/en/Social/vsppu/News/Social-Housing-Fund/>

⁴ Victorian Government, *Homes for Victorians: Affordability, access and choice*, 2017

⁵ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Managing Victoria’s Public Housing*, June 2017, p.16

⁶ CHFV et al, quoted in Deloitte Touch Tomatsu, *Infrastructure Capability Assessments*, 2016, p.116

⁷ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Managing Victoria’s Public Housing*, June 2017, p.18

⁸ Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria’s 30-year infrastructure strategy*, December 2016, p.98

⁹ Community Housing Federation of Victoria, *Quantifying the shortfall of Social and Affordable Housing*, November 2016, p2-3

Public housing which meets the needs of present and future Victorians

This inquiry asked whether the program has **“the ability to cater for all demographics including families, couples and singles within the proposed social housing mix (TOR 2)”**.

We understand the renewal program will diversify current public housing stock in order to meet the needs of public housing tenants. The Salvation Army welcomes diverse public housing stock which caters to needs including access, health and social support, transport and other needs beyond family size.

It is vital to have housing that matches the needs of tenants – including physical needs, location, social environment and family size. Too many people on low incomes are presently residing in rooming houses that don’t meet basic community standards and public housing stock is ageing, in disrepair, located in already struggling communities and lack the support services that are needed to sustain positive connections among disadvantaged cohorts. Designing housing that is suitable for a diverse range of tenants must recognise the distinct needs of groups that are currently over represented in homelessness services – those affected by family violence, young people (especially those who were previously in the care of the state), people who have exited prison and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. These groups also need to be involved in the planning and design of housing that can meet their needs.

Public housing has historically been built in neighbourhoods with high amenity, including access to public transport and education, health and social services. This amenity has increased the value of the land on which public housing is built.¹⁰ The attraction of generating revenue from the sale of some of this land to build private housing should not take precedence over the provision of public housing. Indeed, it is essential that public housing be retained and increased in these high amenity neighbourhoods.

The Salvation Army provides support to people who are offered public housing properties which do not suit their needs, who are not provided with alternatives when they do not accept. They may then be forced into inappropriate housing or homelessness. Diversifying stock is a welcome response to this problem.

This Inquiry asks about the **“effects on current public housing tenants (TOR 3)”**, including the effects of displacement, disruption and prospect of return.

While urban renewal may have positive outcomes for place and community overall, this is not enjoyed equally by all tenants.¹¹ Indeed, renewal may pose significant risks for some individuals and families, especially current tenants, who may be geographically displaced as a result of the renewal process. Many public housing tenants have long established connections to place and community. Displacement, whether temporary or permanent, as a result of this renewal, may disrupt or sever these connections.

¹⁰ AHURI, *Public Housing Renewal and Social Mix*, September 2017

¹¹ Flanagan, K, *There are people living here: Exploring urban renewal and public housing estates*, Social Action & Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania, September 2010

Considering the public housing waiting list and the general shortage of affordable housing across Victoria, it is unclear where tenants will be temporarily housed should they be displaced by the renewal process. The program should include and communicate clarity about this, as well as how people's diverse housing needs will be responded to if they are temporarily displaced. There should also be clear timelines around their temporary housing and return to long-term housing once renewed.

The role of public housing in creating healthy communities

This inquiry seeks to consider **“the allocation of parts of the sites between the proposed new public and private housing units (TOR 4)”**.

A stable home is the foundation for healthy communities. Without a stable home, any other problem people might face is exponentially more difficult. For many, public housing is the only genuine option for stable home, so the adequate provision of public housing is necessary for healthy communities across Victoria. There is also the need to disrupt some pockets of concentrated disadvantage, antisocial behaviours and the stigma associated with public housing in order to improve the wellbeing of individuals and families living in public housing.

Disrupting concentrated disadvantage has been a key principle of urban planning since the 1890s,¹² and mixing public and private housing units is one strategy which attempts to realise this. However, there is little evidence to demonstrate that mixed tenure achieves this.¹³ Rather, disrupting concentrated disadvantage requires intervention at the neighbourhood level, not just the site level. The Salvation Army has also seen benefit of a community development approach in estates, where connection and engagement is fostered between households, their neighbours and the broader community.

The Salvation Army welcomes renewal which would disrupt pockets of concentrated antisocial behaviours such as violence and substance use. Some people who come to The Salvation Army for support are in the process of restoring their lives post-crisis of violence or addiction. They are sometimes forced to accept housing offers in such areas because there are no other options, despite knowing that this might impose on recovery. Disrupting concentrated antisocial behaviours in neighbourhoods can only occur with targeted interventions which support people in their communities. There is no evidence that this disruption occurs simply by mixing tenure types in these estates.

We understand that mixing tenure types within estates is also a strategy aimed to remove stigma attached to public housing estates. The Salvation Army supports efforts to address problems of stigma and the impact that stigma and exclusion has on individuals and households in public housing estates. However, there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that mixing tenure types will address this.¹⁴ Evaluation into the Kensington estate renewal project demonstrates that even where a community is publicly supportive of the need for more public housing, families in private tenures have deliberately avoided the prospect of their children mixing with children from public housing by

¹² AHURI, *Public Housing Renewal and Social Mix*, September 2017

¹³ AHURI, *Public Housing Renewal and Social Mix*, September 2017

¹⁴ Flanagan, K, *There are people living here: Exploring urban renewal and public housing estates*, Social Action & Research Centre, Anglicare Tasmania, September 2010

enrolling them in different schools.¹⁵ The Government should explore other ways in which stigma might be addressed beyond mixing tenure types in estates.

¹⁵ McCalman, J & Warr, D, *Class divide defies social mixing and keeps public housing stigma alive*, The Conversation, August 2017

About The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army is an international Christian movement with a presence in 128 countries and a reputation built on more than 150 years of compassionate care and advocacy. In Australia, the Salvos are widely known and relied upon to deliver practical responses to individuals, families and communities in crisis. While we interact on a daily basis with people from all walks of life, we recognise a particular calling to those who are slipping through the cracks of our society, those who find themselves on the margins of our communities and those who struggle to have their voices heard.

Today Salvation Army churches, community centres and social service networks provide more than 350 distinct social program activities in urban, regional and rural areas across the state. These activities range from frontline emergency support services and targeted interventions, through to more generalist responses. Programs include:

- Youth, adult and aged homelessness and housing services;
- Family violence support and accommodation services;
- Drug and alcohol support and treatment services;
- Material aid and emergency relief;
- Financial counselling and assistance, including Gamblers' Help;
- Community managed mental health services;
- Personal counselling and support;
- Aged care services;
- Youth and children's services, including out-of-home care;
- Education, training and employment services;
- Disaster response and recovery services;
- Chaplaincy and support services in courts and prisons; and
- Services for asylum seekers and refugees.

This support for disadvantaged Australians is driven by our values: integrity, compassion, respect, diversity and collaboration. We share our community's belief in a 'fair go' for all, which grounds our commitment to social justice and a particular interest in the health and wellbeing of those who are most vulnerable in our society.