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**Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program**

Submission from the Social Work Team at Banyule Community Health Service - Bridget Kelly and Rebecca Millard

To: The Secretary

Legal and Social Issues Committee Legislative Council Parliament House

Spring Street East Melbourne VIC 3002

Via email: [pgrp@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:pgrp@parliament.vic.gov.au)

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. This submission primarily addresses Term of Reference 1: the adequacy of proposed 10% increase in social housing.

We work with a large number of people, in the last year we have received 217 new referrals for Social Work assistance and 1100 appointments to provide emergency relief. A vast majority of the clients we see are either homeless, waiting on long waits for transfers to other public housing properties, struggling with the high costs of private rentals and struggling generally due to unaffordable and insecure housing options in Victoria.

There are hundreds of real life stories we could recount about people who suffer daily due to the chronic lack of affordable housing. Local community members are suffering on a daily basis due to the current substandard public housing stock and lack of available solutions to meet the needs of homeless and at risk of homelessness presentations. Our clients have asked us to represent their stories in this Inquiry due to the direct impact that public housing renewal programs have in the West Heidelberg area. We have taken this opportunity to deliver a few real life scenarios of people struggling to navigate the homelessness and public housing sector within the past year. (All names and identifying information have been changed).

John, Stacey and Matty

John, a 30 year old father of a 8 year old Matty, called me yesterday saying his next plan was to buy a tent and set it up in his mates backyard whilst he saves up enough money to pay a hefty bond for a bedsit at a hotel in Preston where the rent will be over 50% of their combined income. The tent would house him, Matty and John's partner Stacey. John and Stacey are currently paying half the costs of a \$120 a night motel in the northern suburbs, the second one they've moved to since leaving the one that the local homelessness service first set them up in, which was too dangerous for their son to be at so they had to literally flee. The money to pay for the motels from the Housing Establishment Fund and the family have been at motels for 3 weeks since becoming homeless again after John's partner Stacey's mother suddenly died and they were hastily evicted from the over 55's public housing property Stacey's mum had.

John and Stacey fled a bikie gang up in Queensland in January this year, one of them punched Stacey in the head several times in front of Matty and threatened to kill John, so they left for Victoria to stay with Stacey's mum. John and Stacey both left school early. Stacey is illiterate, which proved unhelpful when she had to sign the paperwork to relinquish the tenancy her mum had. The couple have lived with relatives over the years and once in a community housing property in QLD, so don't have private rental references to make them competitive in the market, even if they could afford private rental. Stacey's on DSP and John gets Newstart, but in the last few weeks got a full time job. It's a casual job, so has no job security and his mental health is unstable, so he might

not have the job long term particularly if he moves out of the area and loses contact with his mental health nurse, GP and counsellor. Stacey and John have applied for 20 private rental properties in the last 2 months and been knocked back each time, even when John was employed and had employer references. The local homelessness service have told them they can't afford to keep paying for the motel for the family and that they have prioritized them on the list to get a housing worker to assist them more with getting private rental - the number of people on the list to get a housing worker is 600 currently – I was told this by a worker at the local homelessness service a few weeks back. I've tried to get the family some short term rentals through the homelessness service but they were assessed as not eligible, even though John has a job now. It was more because they don't have rental references, even though the whole point of the short lease program is to help people get rental references for future private rentals. Meanwhile, Matty is loving the local school, has a great chaplain and attends the after school homework program. This is the 5<sup>th</sup> school Matty's attended and he's only in grade 3. John and Stacey have an Office of Housing application in currently, they are some of the 30,000 people on the wait list.

#### Fatima and Salman

Fatima and I spoke last week after her counsellor approached me stating he'd set her up with the GP here to look at medication management as she had been feeling suicidal and had plans to end her life by walking in front of a car. Fatima is 28 years old and 6 months pregnant and currently sleeping in her car most nights of the week with her husband, and some other nights stays with family friends in their overcrowded Office of Housing property. Fatima's from Syria and her husband Salman is from Iraq and both have traumatic histories, relating to war and family related trauma. Fatima is a refugee and Salman has come out on a spousal visa recently, has no income or working rights but this was his best bet to get to safety. Fatima gets the Carer's Allowance, as she cares for her mother who lives with her brother in public housing but Fatima can't live with them as her mother is abusive to Fatima, but no one else in her family will look after her mother who suffers from serious mental illness and physical health issues. Fatima lived with her mother and brother for a while in private rental, set up for them by the settlement worker when they arrived in Melbourne, but the rent was increased and increased over the year until it became unaffordable and the family were also experiencing serious issues regarding family violence which led to a breakdown in this tenancy. Since Fatima left the private rental she has applied for numerous other private rentals and even tried applying for bungalows at properties or share-houses, but has been rejected every time, often due to her being on Centrelink even though her payment is enough for the rental costs. Fatima was reportedly diagnosed with pre-eclampsia and has been informed by medical staff that she is likely to have a premature birth most likely towards the end of this month. Fatima has an Office of Housing application in and it's at the top of priority list with all the documents and letters sent in from the Women's Hospital and many other services involved. Fatima has been rejected from other application for short term leases through the local homelessness services and is on lists at Community Housing providers. Fatima has tried to live in two rooming houses before her husband came over (the only crisis housing available to single people) but it made her mental health worse as there was drug use, violence and she couldn't sleep due to her anxiety being so heightened. Every possible avenue for getting affordable and secure housing has been tried so Fatima waits for her public housing offer and continues to sleep in her car.

#### Jenny

Jenny was sleeping in her car in January this year with her violent partner in a local park when an outreach homelessness service got involved in addition to us. She'd been seeing me for a while and told me she had a public housing application in for years and was waiting as she couldn't afford private rental properties as she is on Newstart so gets around \$500 a fortnight and her partner had just lost his job. Jenny has traumatic history and has struggled with addiction problems for years and became homeless after separating from her ex-partner who has full custody of their young daughter. The homelessness service got her Office of Housing application upgraded to a higher priority and they set her up in motels which were paid for by the Housing Establishment

Fund for crisis housing. Jenny stayed in a motel in the local area and told me it was one of the most frightening places she ever stayed and the rooming houses suggested were expensive and outside of Melbourne, which was hours away from all her supports and methadone prescriber. Jenny is still homeless 10 months later and the Office of Housing cannot give her a time frame for when she'll get an offer. She is told – the wait list is so long and they are just waiting for a property to be vacated. In my professional opinion. Jenny won't ever be able to afford or maintain private rental due to her long term addiction problems and lack of employment history, history and current experience as survivor/victim of domestic violence and serious mental health issues. Jenny needs the safety net support that public housing offers, but yet she waits whilst living in dangerous and unsafe relationships. Cheap hotels, expensive unregulated rooming houses and other short term options costing her a majority of her Newstart allowance means that her life is a day by day proposition. In an effort to survive, Jenny will risk having some money to live on and staying with men who will use her for sex and drug deals, instead of having no money left for the fortnight to stay in an unsafe and unhygienic rooming houses that are too far away for her to see her child or pick up her methadone. Jenny would start to prosper if given the benefit of strong supports, stable affordable public housing and an opportunity to make positive and purposeful links in the community. Getting a public housing property would also assist Jenny to achieve her core goal of being a mother again to her young daughter, a goal that is unachievable currently due the chaotic nature of homelessness and lack of stability in her life.

#### Ayaan and Ibrahim

I spoke with Ayaan a few months ago about her transfer for medical reasons, it's on the priority list for medical reasons and has been for many years. In fact her transfer was first approved 12 years ago. The couple live with their teenage son in a 2 story unit and require a 1 story, and have for 12 years. Ayaan has serious physical health problems resulting from the civil war in Somalia. There is still shrapnel in her limbs from bombings. Ayaan is nearing 60 and her husband Ibrahim is 72 and also lives with various serious physical health problems that make using the stairs really difficult and dangerous and doctors have noted in letters that the stairs make this couples health problems worse. Ayaan has fallen down the stairs twice this year and once ended up in hospital. The toilet is upstairs so this elderly couple have no choice but to use the stairs several times a day. The family have always been good tenants and paid their rent on time and ensured that all information regarding their health conditions and safety issues regarding falls have been lodged with the office of housing. Unlike many younger people in her community who can speak the language and have studied to become professionals so now can afford private rental or a place of their own, Ayaan and her husband will never be able to rent privately as they have no private rental history and will also always be on a low income. The office of housing cannot give Ayaan and Ibrahim a rough estimate of when they may be moved and never have been able to. The couple are told that the office of housing are just waiting for a property to be vacated and that there are many others on the transfer list too and that Ayaan and Ibrahim just have to wait.

These are just a few of the thousands of stories of those who are suffering and will continue to suffer due the chronic lack of adequate public housing in Melbourne.

Yours Sincerley,

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