

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria

Melbourne — 9 February 2010

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Ms L. McKay, manager, and

Ms L. Downing, coordinator, Social Housing Advocacy and Support program, Wesley Homelessness Services, Wesley Mission, Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon. The Family and Community Development Committee is conducting this inquiry into advocacy and future directions of public housing. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided for in the Constitution Act 1975, and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of the reciprocal legislation in other states and territories.

Any comments you make outside this hearing, to a journalist or so forth, will not be afforded such privilege. We are recording these proceedings and you will be sent a copy of the transcript. You will be able to make minor adjustments to it, if necessary. Please make a short verbal presentation, which will be followed by questions from the panel.

Ms McKAY — My name is Linda McKay, and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address the Family and Community Development Committee inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria. We did submit a written submission, and I am here to talk to you today in my role as manager of Wesley Homelessness and Support Services in Ringwood, which manages both the homelessness crisis service and also the social housing advocacy and support program, which you have heard, as part of your inquiry, termed as the SHASP program; so we are the administrators of the SHASP program in the eastern metropolitan region.

With me today is my staff member and coordinator of the social housing and support program, Linda Downing. You have two Lindas here, but I assure you that not everybody who works in homelessness has to be called Linda — it just happens to be the way it has happened in our organisation!

I will talk to you more broadly about what we do, and Linda will obviously address, more specifically, the social housing and support program in her presentation, and the functions and roles of that program.

Wesley Homelessness and Support Services works with 4500 to an excess of 5000 people per annum who are experiencing homelessness, who are at risk of homelessness or who are experiencing family violence. We are all funded under the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Act 1994, and the majority of the funding is provided by government. We receive funding from both commonwealth and state governments to provide the services that we provide.

We have obviously submitted a written submission and have covered quite a number of the key issues and questions you have asked in your terms of reference, and we have addressed those to your submission guide. I suppose today for me it is really about trying to look at a bit of a broader context in terms of the role and function that we fulfil within the sector and the work we do with people who are both homeless and who are preparing for public housing and who live within the public housing framework.

Obviously I heard you say earlier, Chair, that you have heard loud and clear that we are seeking greater investment in infrastructure and in accommodation and housing and basic houses that are being provided, and I think that is a message that we want to get across very loudly and clearly.

I suppose for me, I can look at yesterday as a prime example. We had a meeting with the state housing minister, Mr Wynne, who came out to visit one of the public housing estates that we manage in the Nunawading area, to meet with some of the tenants, and as a process of having afternoon tea there he talked with some of the tenants about their experiences of living on the estate.

One lady, in particular, comes to mind and she talked about having lived in this estate for 10 years and it being the best 10 years of her life. She is on a disability support pension and she is in an environment where the neighbours there do care and have concern for each other. She has had stable, affordable housing, which has allowed her to focus on the other areas of her life that have needed to be dealt with, which is around her health and disability issues.

She has had support from the social housing program that manages the community facilities, and for her she has not had to worry about bills, about paying excessive rents and about having a very low income to meet all of her needs and requirements; so she is a prime example of what we believe public and social housing is about.

I think we recognise that the more successful tenancies approved under the segmented waiting list are those that are approved under segment 2, which is for people who have disabilities; and the reason they are very

successful is because they come with a support package that is attached, to make their tenancies successful. So what happens is they come into public housing, they have needs and complexities, but they have support that goes along with that housing and as a result of that, these are the most successful tenancies that the office of housing can attest to, and I think that that package of support and housing together is a key issue that we need to consider when we consider public and social housing.

We also need to look at working with the Office of Housing staff on some training around who their tenants are and how the demographic of their tenants has changed over the intervening years, and we attempt to do that by placing our workers with office of housing staff or having office of housing staff placed at our office, and that way it builds that understanding and relationship of what is needed for people who are going to be approved into public housing or who are currently residing in public housing.

One of the things we really need to pay considered attention to is that for most of the people who are in public housing this is their last housing option. There is no other housing option available to them, and if they are evicted from public housing they are evicted into homelessness and they become part of the cycle again, only next time around they probably experience more trauma and crisis than previously, and for people to have to move, from a psychological perspective we talk about that as being as traumatic as having family and relationship breakdown and experiencing divorce; so we know that a cycle of evictions on families can have a detrimental effect, but we also know that for most of the people in public housing this is the last housing option.

They would prefer not to be there, to be able to choose the area that they live in, the area that they send their kids to school in, choose the areas where they can go to the doctors and the health professionals and hospitals that they would like to attend, but they do not have that choice. So their housing option in public housing is really the only option that they have left. We actually tried to get some of the public housing tenants that we have interviewed to come with us today. I think the fact that they found it too intimidating is indicative of where they are at socially, emotionally and psychologically. It gives you an idea of the people who are actually residing in public housing, the people whom we work with, and how they feel about the events that have impacted on their lives.

One of the issues that I think is really important for us to consider is I feel that the Office of Housing has to be part of the work that we do in ending the homelessness cycle. We have to be working proactively together to prevent and end homelessness for some people who are currently in public housing and not actually being part of a process that facilitates that.

We have had lots of people talk about models around punitive measures, but I think from our perspective we want to look at models that around restorative measures and not punitive. We want to look at social and community investment for those who need it and help them to get a message from us and from government that life change for them is something that we are all invested in and consider to be important and also look at how we partner with Office of Housing to do that. I think one of the key issues is around things like key performance indicators.

Key performance indicators should include things like preserving tenancies, having good housing outcomes, seeing family stability and change, keeping children engaged in education and keeping families engaged in employment and training. That to us represents a good housing outcome. If we look at housing as a basic human right and we see that as the centre of what we do, then we are able to assist families to work on the other issues that they need to work on, whether that is training or retraining, whether that is education, whether they deal with social and emotional issues, whether they have financial management issues, family violence issues, the whole spectrum of issues.

If we can develop a system that offers support to those people and puts some investment into them and if we can display to other members of the community that that is what we see as important, then I think we can find that balance between working with people who do not have such high and complex needs as well as working with those who do and have a framework in place so we can actually deal with them. I think they are supposed to answer some of the questions about neighbours being asked to let people know if there are neighbourhood issues, or significant issues or behavioural issues.

If we are then able to go in and put some plans and some frameworks around that, we can give a very clear impression that we are dealing with it, managing it and meeting the community expectations and delivering on

government, economic and social expectations as well and doing something that is transformative for these families.

There is overwhelming need for public and community housing out there. I think public and community housing should represent our community, so it needs to be made up with people who have multiple and complex needs as well as those who do not. We have to put mechanisms in place to help these people to coexist and cohabitate in a way that is responsible and reflective of our community.

Currently we have got people who are living in private rental housing and paying in excess of 55 per cent of their income. We know if people are paying more than 30 per cent of their income on mortgages, they are considered to be under stress. Most of the people who are in this situation are in receipt of a pension or benefit or some kind of family supplement. So we know the demand for public housing is huge, but these people are not going to be housed because they are currently sitting on segment 4 of the waiting list.

We also know that there is a whole lot of complexity of need among people in our community who do require a public and social housing response. As we have heard earlier, a separation between public housing and social housing is not a helpful construct. We need to look at it all as social housing, and there are varying degrees of need and eligibility for people to access that kind of housing.

To finish what I have to say — I think that, for me, the basic need for housing is seen from a human rights perspective. If we look at it from that perspective, then we can then focus and help families work on the other things that they need which are going to benefit the community into the future and also benefit their families into the future.

I think Linda will give you some detail on the social housing program.

Ms DOWNING — Thank you. As Linda said, I work with the SHASP program, which at Wesley is called ‘Wish’. So if I slip and say ‘Wish’, that is why: it is called the Wish program there. The SHASP program was established in 2005, I suppose largely to address two issues in particular. One was to allow an easier transition from the homelessness into public housing. The other was to try to reduce the number of the exits from social housing into the homelessness sector. Really there is a range of ways that we have been set up to address those two issues.

First of all, we assist certain groups with their early housing applications — that would be segment 3 that we assist with. We can offer that support to get people on the waiting list. Just to talk very briefly about wait time — currently in the east your average wait time for a segment 3 would probably be 3 to 5 years; that is for an early housing application. For your segment 4, which is your general wait turn, you are probably looking at between 15 and 20 years. That was just to give you an idea that they are the sorts of time frames.

If you have got somebody on the early housing list and they are waiting for 3 to 5 years, they are homeless for 3 to 5 years and they are in the homelessness sector. Choices are limited; they are lucky if they get a transitional property or something like that. If they are single, chances are they will be in a series of boarding houses, couch surfing, caravans, tents, in parks, under bridges — whatever they can find until their housing comes up. Very often we assist those people who have actually dropped off the waiting list because of lack of contact. We will do appeals with them and get them back on the waiting list. That is a fairly common problem as well.

That just gives you an idea of wait times. We also assist with what is called establishing successful tenancies for new tenants — anyone that the Office of Housing considers might have considerable need. They might have come from the homelessness sector and had SAAP support when they made the application and require some sort of support when they first start their tenancy. In that we are funded to do 1.5 hours per week for six months. In that time we try to refer out and address needs, try to establish them within that community, get them to feel some sense of connection with their local community and try to ensure that their tenancy continues.

We also have intervention of tenancies at risk, obviously for people whose tenancies are at risk. There is a range of ways that we deal with that. It might be that it is at risk because of rent arrears, it might be antisocial behaviour — which I will talk a little bit more about — it could be the state of the property, damages, a whole range of things. So we try to intervene as early as possible to prevent them going back into the homelessness sector.

Basically there was a SHASP program evaluation done last year which showed that the program was very effective. However, we are quite tightly bound by our funding agreement at this stage. Their suggestion was that we perhaps look at two distinct components but more broadly allow us just to work within either advocacy or support. They are two main elements of what we do, and at the moment we are fairly limited in what we can do and how we can address the issues that come up. Basically it is to allow greater flexibility so we can do whatever is required to keep tenants in their tenancies.

Just moving onto the antisocial, which has come up with the VPTA and with Justice Bell before, there is a pilot program, the antisocial behaviour initiative, at the moment. The east is actually part of that pilot program, so we are involved. That is to address the increasing numbers of antisocial cases that are coming up in public housing, and it is becoming quite a problem. As the woman from VPTA was saying, it often affects a large number of tenants. We are not just talking about the tenant whose behaviour we are addressing.

Mrs SHARDEY — When did it start?

Ms DOWNING — I think the official date was September 2009.

Mrs SHARDEY — How long is it going for?

Ms McKAY — It is being piloted and at this stage it looks like for a period of 12 months across a number of regions, and then there will be an evaluation and some recommendations come out from the pilot which then might be adopted across a statewide perspective, and implementation might occur from there.

Ms DOWNING — One of the things that this initiative allows for the Office of Housing to flag or recognise any tenant that has been evicted in the past based on antisocial behaviour, and if they are to be rehoused, they need to demonstrate that they will engage with supports. So they need to have linked with supports already before they will be made another offer with the Office of Housing.

They need to make a commitment to stay engaged with those supports, and they are placed on a 12-month fixed-term tenancy, so their tenure is for 12 months. If they demonstrate that their behaviour has changed, they will be given a long-term tenancy.

That is a pilot at the moment. I suppose from my perspective I would like to see that come in prior to that first eviction. They still have to be evicted and go through the homelessness sector to come back into that. It would be good if that flexible tenure and the commitment to supports were brought in early in somebody's — anybody's — tenancy with the Office of Housing. I think it is a good pilot. There is a range of interpretations as to what antisocial behaviour is, and I suppose that can be open to personal judgements and interpretation.

There are some concerns that maybe the Office of Housing might use this initiative to manage their stock, so anyone who is perhaps a little bit of a problem might be moved on. I think part of having the SHASP program involved is to ensure that the tenants' rights are protected and that we can advocate on their behalf. But as I say, personally I think it would be good if that were brought in for every tenant who demonstrated antisocial behaviour early in the initial tenancy without having to cycle through the homelessness sector.

I suppose just to wrap up, as Linda said, segment 2 applications are the most successful. We are not involved with those, but they are supported applications. The SHASP program demonstrates that support makes a big difference to tenancies. We can actually help tenants to engage with the Office of Housing and help them to understand the processes. We attend VCAT with tenants so that we can empower them and help them through that process. I think there is a higher need for a SHASP-type program to exist with private rental.

A lot of people entering the homelessness sector now are low-income private renters, and part of the problem is that to go onto an Office of Housing priority waiting list at the moment you need to leave your private rental and become homeless. So people who are really on the edge, as Linda said, over 55 per cent of their income goes on there rent, they cannot afford to sustain it, they become homeless, they wait however many years until they are offered a property. We would like to see that changed so that people are not having to become homeless to access the Office of Housing.

In regard to neighbourhood disputes, which I think Mrs Powell was talking about with the VPTA, one of the issues when there are neighbourhood disputes and somebody is demonstrating antisocial behaviour and

neighbours around are making complaints and having difficulties staying there, the process at the moment is that the Office of Housing requires the tenants around that family or that individual to record in detail everything that happens over a significant period of time, but then those tenants must present at VCAT.

That is often the sticking point. As Linda said, we had a number of tenants that we interviewed for the submission who at the time were saying, 'Yes, we might be able to stand before', and not one of them could attend today with us. Standing up against your neighbour at a VCAT hearing is terrifying, especially if there are intervention orders in place and they are quite scared of their neighbour already, so that process does make it very difficult for the Office of Housing to act, and it makes it very difficult for the neighbours to do anything if they are in that position. That was just to address that. I think a key factor is having to attend VCAT and speak against the neighbours.

Mrs POWELL — On that issue about the recording of detail, it comes through my office, as other MPs, a lot of times where there is a complaint by a neighbour about a tenant and that person is required to phone either the police or the council but also to document everything. That is very time consuming for them and then nothing happens, and, as you have said, the neighbour finds out that the person is doing this and it actually escalates, sometimes into threats and intimidation. Where do you think that can change? What do you think the Office of Housing should do to make it easier for mediation and complaints dispute resolution?

Ms DOWNING — Certainly those options are available. Unfortunately sometimes you are dealing with a situation where the tenant who the complaint is made against will not enter into a process. They often do not see that they have a problem. I think bringing the SHASP program in early, which Office of Housing tries to do, in these circumstances so that we can try and engage with that person and work on some of the bigger issues about why their behaviour is like that, and I think probably if they are not going to engage and if there are no changes, that is where I see that maybe they look at the antisocial behaviour initiative coming in at that point, so that they are almost — I was going say 'enforced', but that is the wrong word — basically that tenant would be told, 'Your tenancy is at severe risk. Your behaviour does need to change. These are the things you need to do. Are you willing to comply with that?', and maybe that might engage them to actually link with services, look at the issues. It might be drugs and alcohol, it might be mental health issues — whatever it is that is driving them — and to actually do something to address those issues.

Ms McKAY — We as a service can then be involved in developing a care plan or case plan that is going to address and identify issues. But if I can go one step back from that to your original question as well, Mrs Powell, I think we need to look at perhaps introducing a system like that we have in relation to child protection where people can notify anonymously and an investigation and inquiry can be undertaken under the fact that somebody has made a complaint about someone who is disturbing the peace and quiet enjoyment of neighbours, and if the SHASP program could come in at that stage, do the assessment, do a care plan to address the issues, present the care plan to the Office of Housing and then the Office of Housing could report back to the neighbours who have made the complaint to say, 'This is what has been undertaken', I think that would suffice to bring about a better result than seeing people being affected and people having to stand up at VCAT, which they just do not want to do, and we can totally understand that.

Ms KAIROUZ — I am glad to hear that you think that the antisocial behaviour pilot initiative is working. In terms of the antisocial cases, you said that this affects a large number of tenants, so the people who have this antisocial behaviour, are they all placed in high-rise concentrated areas so that even in the areas where houses are dispersed — —

Ms McKAY — In the eastern metro region, which is the area that we cover, there are no high-density properties. They are all in medium-density properties. However, we do have small estates and we do have estates where people live very closely together, and they live next door to neighbours, but I think that even in the region that we live in and we administer our support services to we get people who are coming to us from real estate agents as well to say that they have been breached because they are disturbing the peace and quiet enjoyment of their neighbours, so I think that antisocial behaviour as a way of dealing with things comes through private rentals, it comes through Office of Housing and it also exists where people are buying and purchasing and mortgaging their houses. So it is an ongoing issue within our community; it not just confined to high-rises or high-density housing, low or medium-density housing. It is an issue where people are living in closer proximity to each other and are expected to follow the norms of society and living in that environment.

Mrs SHARDEY — I have two questions. The first relates to people dropping off the waiting list, and the other one relates to the process for addressing rent arrears. You talked about people dropping off the waiting list because of lack of contact. Every now and then you see the waiting list drop by a few thousand. Is that because there has been a process of people being written to asking if they are still available or still interested and there is no response because they do not have an address and then they fall off the waiting list? Is that the process we are talking about?

Ms McKAY — Yes.

Mrs SHARDEY — Some people call it the cleansing of the waiting list.

Ms DOWNING — That is one way to look at it.

Mrs SHARDEY — It is one way to look at it, but firstly, is there way around that, and secondly, when we heard from VCAT this morning and we were talking about rent arrears I asked if there is a process conducted by the Office of Housing to try to address the issue of people falling into rent arrears before there is an application to VCAT for them to be evicted, and maybe you can tell us about that under your program.

Ms McKAY — Under our program what currently happens is people do drop off the waiting list because they are transient and they have no fixed address. One of the things that we have instituted is the people who are homeless and transient use our office as their mailing address, so we know that we have contact with them. We have relationships with them. They will come in to collect the mail.

Mrs SHARDEY — Does that help?

Ms McKAY — Yes, it does because they can respond to not only Office of Housing applications but any breaches to Centrelink or any legal documentation or requirements that have to come through that they must adhere to. I think trying to provide a postal address for people who are homeless and on the waiting list is a significant issue that we need to address. The other thing we have, too, is a brokerage program which assists people with rental arrears if they are falling behind. But where it does fall down is the early identification of rental arrears and the Office of Housing not letting it go too far, because you have to remember that these people are on very low incomes and they do not have any disposable income at all. If they are getting to more than two weeks behind in their rent, it is very difficult for them to catch up with that. It is about putting some checks and balances in place and early identification around rental arrears and allowing services like us to get in and look at supports for them and look at the option of some agreements that tenants are willing to enter into to pay off those arrears and trying as much as possible to prevent it from going to VCAT, rather than after an order of vacant possession has been granted, and that is open for a six-month period, and us getting involved at that point and then trying to address the arrears. Is there anything else you want to — —

Ms DOWNING — Yes, and I think with most of the tenants we work with whose tenancy is at risk because of rent arrears we actually do not go to VCAT. A lot of the tenants who appear at VCAT for rent arrears have not made contact with us or have not responded to a referral that the Office of Housing has made. There is certainly a process — the Office of Housing is far more lenient than private rental tenancies, so there is a long process, usually. A lack of engagement and a lack of contact on behalf of the tenant tends to be the main reason things go to VCAT. Often tenants who we work with will have mail from the Office of Housing that they will not open. It just goes in the drawer or in the bin because there is a terror associated with it — ‘I’m going to be evicted, so I just won’t look at it’. So often by the time we are involved it is late in the tenancy. Sometimes the Office of Housing is not reticent, I suppose, but tardy in referring because they are very busy and under the pump. Sometimes we do come in very late and end up going to VCAT, but with most of the tenants we work with in those situations we manage to avoid VCAT.

Ms McKAY — If they have been referred appropriately to us and we can get involved in it. It is also very difficult for this client group, too. They see the housing that they are in as being government housing, and whether we like it or not there is a misbelief out there that the government will not evict them into homelessness. So there seems to be an attitude by which they do not recognise that it is as urgent an issue as it actually is, and we have to find a means of trying to get that across to people.

Mr NOONAN — Thanks for your submission; it is very good, particularly as it comes with recommendations. One of the issues that I have an interest in is the segmented waiting list, and you have put in

a section on that on page 7 of your submission where you essentially support the intent of a new system and give three areas where you believe, broadly, this could be captured. But you also make the point that this should be the start of a broader overview of the system to the creation of a common waiting list, and you also make points about the 39 registered housing agencies in Victoria providing social housing and the way they have their own application processes and waiting list system in place. There is a fair bit in what you have said. Can you make a few comments, particularly given that this is the first item under our terms of reference to look at, in terms of a future direction around waiting lists?

Ms McKAY — I think that, as you say, we did address this question in the submission. We look at it from the point of view of not seeing it as public housing, affordable housing, housing association housing, housing provider housing — whatever way you want to term that. For us, housing association housing and public housing is social housing, and social housing has to be for the whole population. The eligibility criteria might be slightly different in terms of how they allocate it and sensitive allocations, but we believe the majority of people who enter into social housing should come off the common waiting list that is currently there — not just come off of segment 4 but actually be allocated tenants from the other segments within the segmented waiting list — and that consideration should be given to them for public and social housing, bearing in mind that most of these tenants will come with commonwealth rental assistance.

That rental assistance can be used by housing associations to build capacity which currently cannot be used by government. It can also be used for maintenance of properties. We actually think the people we work with who are sitting on segment 1, segment 2 and segment 3 should be just as equally considered for access and equity to the housing that housing associations are providing as anybody else. We think they should be considering having at least 50 per cent of their tenants coming from these segmented waiting lists, looking at sensitive allocations, looking at balancing and actually making social housing reflect what exists in our community. We all have neighbours who have might have drug and alcohol issues, mental health issues, family and relationship issues and family violence issues, and we think social housing should reflect exactly what our community is and find mechanisms to make that work and not have a signboard to public housing or affordable housing. We think that perpetuates the stigma and actually is not at all representative of our community.

Mr SCHEFFER — Just very quickly because we are over time, leaving aside the segmented waiting list area which I think you have already canvassed and just taking a big picture view, we are probably in one of the best situations we have been in for the last few decades in terms of public housing and affordable housing initiatives from both the federal government and the state government. What is your general sense of the policy settings? Are they facing in a direction you think is going to give us a good housing complement for low-income people who are searching for housing now, or do you think there are some significant directions which need to be picked up which are not being looked at?

Ms McKAY — I think having housing and homelessness on the agenda as we have currently is probably the best place that I have known the sector to be in for the 15 years I have been working in it. I think the policy direction is a good one. I think we probably need to look at more joined-up initiatives. We need to look at a whole-of-government approach — commonwealth, state and local government — and I think we have to look at the initiatives in the policy frameworks that we are rolling out at the moment so they are far more joined-up than they are currently. I think we really need to consider that in any policy and strategy and any direction we bring out we offer a seamless system. I think at the moment it is coming out through Nation Building, it is coming out through stimulus, it is coming out through the Victorian homelessness strategy, it is coming out through homelessness 20/20 — the white paper and the green paper — and all of the things we have. I think we need to make sure they are all complementing and are all interfacing with each other. I think that is what will make the difference.

Mr SCHEFFER — Lastly, just picking that up do you think — —

Ms McKAY — I know it is a big challenge, but we need to do it.

Mr SCHEFFER — I just want to ask you about that. Do you think the Victorian government's A Fairer Victoria — I think we are up to iteration five at the moment — is a sound approach? It is certainly not the last word in it, but do you think it is a positive way of bringing in a more joined-up response?

Ms McKAY — I think it is. I think that is one of the factors we need to consider, but I think more overarching and more broadly we really need to look at the whole idea of social inclusion and belonging, and we really need to look at whatever strategies and frameworks we put in place so we try to create an Australia or a Victoria or whatever it might where all belong, and to do that all the initiatives need to — —

Mr SCHEFFER — But everyone would agree with that.

Ms McKAY — Yes, of course.

Mr SCHEFFER — I do not think there is a person in Australia who would not agree with that. The difficulty that governments and large organisations and large communities face is that inevitably we have silos because we need specialisations and we need people to be able to deliver particular things in different places. The challenge is how we put all that together, and the effort the Victorian government has made is in trying to package that up into A Fairer Victoria. The objective is to get the sorts of things you are driving at in a structure, and I guess what my question to you, as one of the really key agencies working in this area, is: do you think — and it is not perfect, I accept that — it is facing in the right direction?

Ms McKAY — I think it is facing in the right direction, and it certainly offers us some strategies we can adopt. I do not think we can stop at that.

Mr SCHEFFER — Absolutely.

Ms McKAY — I think we have to look at enhancing that, and I think we have to look at adding to it and using the learnings from it. I think it is certainly taking this in the right direction, but we are still very early in the process.

Ms KAIROUZ — You mentioned that the minister went out and spoke to a woman who said this had been the best 10 years of her life. I assume she was in social housing before this period. Are you able to identify what the difference is between the last 10 years and the period before?

Ms McKAY — From her discussions with me it has been the security of tenure. It has been the stability, it has been the affordability, it has been being surrounded by a service system that has offered her support when she has needed it. It has been allowing her to focus on the issues of her life that are paramount to her so she does not have to think about her housing and her security of tenure. She can focus on the other things.

Ms KAIROUZ — Is that because there have been new initiatives in the last 10 years, or is it just because somebody has led her to tap into these services?

Ms McKAY — I think there have been a number of new initiatives that she has been able to tap into. I think she is also situated in a housing estate that is a lovely housing estate which works very well. I think there are a combination of factors for her. I think she has stopped cycling through the system. She is not having to move every 12 months. She is not having to come up with money for removalists costs and all the rest of it. That cycling has stopped.

Ms KAIROUZ — She has some security.

Ms McKAY — Because of that she is able to deal with other things in her life like her health.

Ms DOWNING — In addition to that, this woman is in an older persons estate which is for people who are 55 years and over, so maybe her eligibility at the time led her to that estate. Also, I think the community there is a particularly strong one, and again that support is really important. Ideally a community facility such as that estate and with the support that is attached to it would be in every Office of Housing community. But she identified that community as being important for her.

Ms KAIROUZ — Thanks.

The CHAIR — I have one last quick question. In your submission you recommended that the committee examine better ways to publicise programs such as the SHASP program. Do you have anything to add, and do you have any recommendations about an effective funding model for the SHASP program?

Ms DOWNING — Here is your opportunity.

Ms McKAY — In a recent evaluation in which we took part, which was undertaken by Health Options as an external provider, they said that the program in the main had been successful. They talked about the funding levels, and obviously the unit cost funding needs to be looked at. I think the duration of support and capacity for support are some things that need to be considered, and the early intervention of a SHASP-like program for people while they are in public housing and before they are evicted needs to be considered. Also, the enhancement and expansion of it into even a private rental market is important because that would stop the pressure on waiting lists. For us there are key areas where we think we could publicise and enhance this program but mainly it will require greater funding from government to provide it.

We would be happy to put any recommendations you would like down in writing for you and explore them a bit further, if that would be helpful.

The CHAIR — All right. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.