

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 9 February 2010

#### Members

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#### Witness

Mr D. Wright-Howie, acting chief executive officer, Council to Homeless Persons.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for being here today.

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — It is a pleasure; thank you very much for the opportunity.

**The CHAIR** — This hearing of the Family and Community Development Committee is part of its inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by 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 reciprocal legislation in other states and territories. Any comments you make outside this hearing 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 the transcript if necessary. This is a multiparty parliamentary inquiry, it is not a government inquiry. Please make your submission now, to be followed by our questions.

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — I am David Wright-Howie, acting chief executive officer of the Council to Homeless Persons, and I will read a statement based on our submission, and then I will take questions.

Established in 1972 the Council to Homeless Persons is the peak Victorian body representing individuals and organisations with a stake or interest in homelessness. Our mission is to work towards ending homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy and sector development.

Defining homelessness can be complex, but for CHP homelessness is broadly defined as having the following key characteristics: people with little or no income; tenuous, temporary or no accommodation; limited or no family and social networks. The 2006 counting-the-homeless census recorded 20 305 people as homeless on census night, and a further 3408 people were recorded as marginal residents in caravan parks.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — What date was that?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — That was the 2006 counting-the-homeless census. In 2007–08 more than 36 000 people in Victoria were assisted by homelessness supported accommodation services.

People experience homelessness from the cradle to the grave, and this includes families with children, young people, single adults, older people and indigenous people. People experiencing homelessness are in a range of living circumstances including staying temporarily with friends and/or family, living in inappropriate private rooming houses, living in short-term or transitional accommodation, sleeping rough or living in an improvised dwelling, living in a caravan park.

The Victorian and Australian governments have committed to a national partnership on homelessness, combined with other housing and support initiatives. The Victorian government has also committed to a cross-government strategy to address homelessness, and an action plan is currently being produced and is informed by consultation with a range of stakeholders. The key goal of these arrangements is to halve the level of homelessness by 2020.

Whilst there are many causes of homelessness, the lack of affordable housing is a major one. Affordable housing combined with access to a range of support services and engagement in employment, training and education are the critical ingredients to reducing homelessness.

The lack of affordable housing supply for low-income people is well documented. Australia, particularly Sydney and Melbourne, has some of the highest house prices in the world, making the purchase of a home difficult for many low-income people. The supply of affordable private rental housing is also diminishing. The Office of Housing rental report as at the September quarter indicates that only 22 per cent of private rental dwellings are affordable for people on statutory incomes. In 2004 this was about 40 per cent. Vacancy rates in the private rental market have also declined to be just above 1 per cent. Long-term social housing stock, including public housing, in Victoria has only increased marginally over the past decade whilst the number of new housing allocations for direct public housing rental has been in decline. Given this context the new social housing initiatives being implemented by the Victorian government in partnership with the Australian government are welcome.

I want to make a few comments about the waiting list section of the inquiry. With the supply of affordable housing not meeting the demands of low-income people and with large numbers of people in desperate housing need or homeless it is important and necessary to administer a prioritised social housing allocation system. The current segmented waiting list prioritises homelessness, which CHP supports. However, it does have a number of difficulties, including: it is overly complicated and difficult to understand; for those applying under the recurring housing segment it requires substantial additional evidence regarding personal support needs, which is unnecessary; it overemphasises personal support and health needs, as opposed to housing need, as the basis for application approval; and it does not adequately establish the support agency or program requirements or arrangements in the post-tenancy phase.

CHP is aware that the Office of Housing is examining and reviewing the segmented waiting list and consulting a range of community and sector stakeholders. CHP supports the general emphasis of draft proposals provided to it to date.

Apart from people supported in short-term or transitional housing programs, most interim accommodation is inadequate. Locating and accessing interim accommodation for clients is a constant challenge for homelessness services as demand is high and options are thin. Services provide funding for short-term private accommodation through in the Housing Establishment Fund for many clients as an interim measure. This includes hotels and motels, rooming houses and caravan parks. The wait for public housing is often longer than the time sustained in short-term private accommodation. It is often difficult for people experiencing homelessness and those assisting them to keep in touch with how the application is progressing as they need to move between temporary living circumstances.

The important factors in the interim period before housing allocation are an ongoing support relationship with a key worker, accommodation that is safe and meets a basic minimum standard and to maximise stability and limit the number of moves. Responsive programs and initiatives that engage and support people experiencing homelessness with a range of issues, including assistance in determining housing and accommodation options, are an important part of the homelessness response. CHP recommends increased flexibility in transitional housing stock management to enable the capacity for some transitional housing to become long-term tenure where individuals, families and children have settled in a suburb and/or at a school. Security of tenure is a vital and important principle for all long-term housing, including public housing. Accessing and maintaining long-term, affordable, appropriate and secure housing is an essential part of preventing and reducing homelessness and should be a major policy principle. It is important therefore that public housing as part of a broader domain of social housing remains long-term tenure.

I will now make some comments on the adequacy, quality and standards, safety and location of public housing. The adequacy of public housing can vary considerably between location and place. Many public housing units have good access to transport and other public facilities and services. Neighbourhood renewal projects have assisted in generating a greater sense of community wellbeing and providing residents with some control and autonomy over their surrounds. The location of public housing can mean that in order to access housing some people are living away from their family and support networks. Housing should not be viewed in isolation from other social needs, community and public planning. Long-term affordable housing, including public housing, should be part of enabling social inclusion and participation in community. Ideally, Victorian communities should be a mix of people from different socioeconomic cultural and age backgrounds. While this cannot be engineered, a greater spread of social housing between regions is desirable. Naturally, this housing should be located near public services and infrastructure as well as employment opportunities.

The Office of Housing has a substantive job in maintaining the quality and standards of public housing stock. Over one-third of public housing stock is more than 20 years old. Whilst the quality of public housing properties varies, there has been considerable effort by government in recent years to maintain and improve housing, and this is to be commended and also continued.

Resources for Office of Housing staff are inadequate. Current staff are responsible for large numbers of tenants, many of whom have substantive social needs. In terms of expertise and training for Office of Housing staff, CHP would like to see a greater emphasis on building relationships with relevant support services and a focus on tenant need. It is our understanding that the Office of Housing has been working to improve this and has implemented some new training opportunities.

Responding to antisocial behaviour and ensuring safety of public housing tenants can be a difficult issue. The cause of this varies but is often related to appropriate care and support. The preferable solution is increased support for all tenants, especially those experiencing high and complex needs, to endeavour to sustain and maintain tenancies. Whilst there are limits and a need for clear guidelines, an overly harsh or legalistic approach will only lead to increases in the number of people experiencing homelessness.

In conclusion, affordable, safe and secure housing is essential to both prevent and reduce homelessness. Housing is an important and vital element in meeting the social health and wellbeing of low-income people, including those who have experienced homelessness and in meeting social inclusion and community policy objectives. Despite resource constraints and other difficulties, public housing has played and does play a critical role in delivering good housing outcomes for many people who have experienced homelessness.

The development, improvement and enhancement of public housing, as part of a broader social housing agenda, is highly important. People experiencing homelessness are not homogenous and come from a range of backgrounds and age groups. Affordable, safe and secure housing is a fundamental part of enabling and enhancing the support needs and care to be met for a diverse range of people. Preventing and reducing homelessness should be viewed as a shared cross-government and intergovernmental responsibility in partnerships with non-government services and the community. In the future, there should be greater integration between housing and other policy areas of government to prevent and reduce homelessness.

The implementation and development of a mix of social housing projects and initiatives, designed to meet a diverse range of social, health and wellbeing needs, is a key part of the way forward. Some of these initiatives are under way, and the current policy environment, with both the state and territory governments making commitments to homelessness and housing, provides further scope for this to be developed further.

**Ms KAIROUZ** — Thanks for that, David. You touched on the Neighbourhood Renewal project. Would you be able to tell us a bit more about that and, if you are able to, the benefits or maybe the disadvantages that that project had and whether it was able to improve the standard of living for people who lived in housing estates.

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — I could only comment on it in a broad way. I do not have the evidence or information about specific projects. But my broad comment is that overall Neighbourhood Renewal has been a positive thing. It has involved more participation by public housing tenants in their own communities. It is something that has had to take place over a considerable period of time. It does vary between different locations, so it has been more successful in some locations than others. As I say, I do not have specific information on particular sites.

**Ms KAIROUZ** — You were probably the first person that I heard mention that today, and I was quite interested to hear your views.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — Thank you, David, for your presentation. I note that you recorded that according to the census there are still 20 000 homeless people, at a snapshot, in Victoria. I want to ask you about homeless strategy. There was a previous homeless strategy; I am not sure what years it ran, but you would be aware of it. I would like to ask you what the outcomes were of that previous strategy in Victoria and how the new 2020 strategy is different from the previous homeless strategy.

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — It is true that in about 2000, various state governments around the country embarked on homelessness strategies, including Victoria. Ours was announced in 2002 and ran to about 2006 or so. That was a positive strategy in the sense that it was a driver for more investment for homelessness services, led to some important service reform in the homelessness sector and the provision of an enhanced workforce to respond to homelessness.

I think the difference with this new strategy is, firstly, that the federal government committed to the strategy as well, but as well as that it is a clear outcome-focused strategy with those goals of halving homelessness and actually reducing homelessness numbers. So a clear emphasis of this new strategy is going to be on that and meeting particular outcome measurements, which was not really as much a feature of the previous strategy.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — There were some targets, though, weren't there?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — There were some broad targets; this is getting a bit more specific. The other positive thing and emphasis is that there is a cross-portfolio ministerial approach to homelessness this time. My understanding is there is a range of ministers that have met on homelessness, so that homelessness, in intent at least, is going to be more of a cross-government responsibility. It is not just located in housing.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — Do you mind if we explore that a little bit, because there was a pilot program a number of years ago with the commonwealth and state governments and Hanover Housing, I think, was part of it and some other housing organisations? The program brought buckets of money together to identify people who were at risk of homelessness and that was done through Centrelink — they were tagged. Then money was brought together to more or less case manage those people, recognising that unemployment can be a driver of homelessness, and apparently the outcome was quite successful. Is this doing the same sort of thing, building on that pilot that was done a few years ago?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — The themes would be similar, yes. It is being more strategic about it.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — It was a pilot.

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — Yes, so moving away from pilot projects to some real strategic action plan on homelessness is probably the difference this time.

**Mr NOONAN** — David, thanks for your submissions, both verbal and written. They are very enlightening. I have read ahead. We have representatives of other organisations coming to us both later today and Thursday, and one of those organisations promotes the potential of having a homelessness commissioner in the state. I gather, whilst they have not explained themselves verbally in terms of their submission, the issue of homelessness is obviously a very complex one.

To go to Helen's point about an all-of-government response, this is something that we have seen in the disability services area, where now we have a commissioner. Could you make some comments about the cross-sector collaboration on homelessness and whether something like that might be worthy of the committee's consideration in terms of government response, particularly given that a lot of the things you have said indicate that we are in an unprecedented phase in terms of investment, if you like, but investment in terms of facilities and support, but essentially whether that requires some level of independence around the monitoring of the execution of a lot of the initiatives that are currently in the pipeline, if you like?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — I think if there is going to be a homelessness commissioner, CHP would be open to that, but we would want it to be investigated fully and thoroughly and reflected on carefully. It is certainly true that many services from different realms on the ground are working in partnerships with each other to achieve outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

What we have not had so much are the higher level strategic links between various realms of government to address homelessness. There can be partnerships at a strategic level from time to time but I guess the potential of the strategy is that that could be more broad-ranging and more equally shared between different parts of government to provide the framework for how services might be more effectively delivered on the ground. I know I am answering that question in a broad way.

**Mr NOONAN** — You raised a couple of matters about the under-utilisation of properties, for example. I wonder how you get that on the agenda or whether in time, on behalf of all those involved in the area that you are working in, that could be referred to a commissioner to try to respond to?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — I would like to think that those who are currently responsible for investigating those issues are doing so to the best of their ability, and I am sure that mostly they are, but as I also mentioned, those people can be under severe resource constraints and there is only a certain number of existing properties. It could be useful to have an independent person investigate that.

**Mr NOONAN** — You would want to give it some more thought?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — I would want to give it some more thought and reflection and look at the current system more closely.

**Mrs POWELL** — David, you have said in your submission that public housing should be accessible to those on low incomes, and you talk about disadvantage. You went on to say that it is important that the eligibility criteria for public housing remains focused on low incomes. Given that that is not part of the criteria now and we have 40 000 people on a waiting list, is there a concern that that would add years on to a waiting list.

You also mentioned the misuse of current housing stock. We also hear evidence of houses that remain vacant for up to six months and become vandalised because there is nobody in them and they are not looked after. Is that an issue with your organisation, that you are trying to rehouse people and there is housing stock available with nobody in the houses but you cannot get access to them?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — We receive anecdotal evidence about that from time to time. It is probably not the focus of what we do. We are probably looking more at assisting people who are homeless with support and to access housing.

In terms of the first part of your question, where you were talking about low income, I guess we use that term 'low income' in a broad sense. We all do it and do not clarify what we are actually meaning. The reality is that the demand for housing by people in the bottom quintile, if you like, is high, and there is only so much housing available. As I said in my comments, that it is necessary to have a prioritised system does mean that there may be other people who need to explore other housing options than social and public housing. We think it is a necessary condition, if you prioritise homelessness and those in need for public and social housing.

**Mrs SHARDEY** — I know it is not my turn, but can you just finish off by saying how this meshes with housing associations, where the criteria are broader in terms of people qualifying?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — Housing associations I would see as a form of social housing. They are relatively new in Victoria. They are designed to have a cross-tenant portfolio where those on 'higher' low incomes can cross subsidise those on the lower incomes. It is an important social housing development, and to house those on the lower end we need to grow a bit more, I think, to house those people.

**Mr SCHEFFER** — My question really follows on from the last three. You say on page 8 of your submission that a larger pool of stock will assist in both the turnaround of properties and the wait times, as well as access to more adequate housing. Among the witnesses we have talked to earlier today there is one view that clearly there are many difficulties with the waiting list, and the Office of Housing has acknowledged that and is undertaking a review of it, as you would know; but some witnesses have said that the waiting list should be a common waiting list and then there is the general call for more housing.

What are you referring to here? Do you have a view that there should be a common waiting list? And then my question would be: how would that assist?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — You are right, that with the pure demand-supply conundrum whatever system you have you will still have more demand than supply. I think we have to ensure that those who do have some support needs are housed as well as others. So I am open to a common waiting list, but what I was referring to is more that I think what the Office of Housing is planning to do is a step towards improving the current priority system.

**Mr SCHEFFER** — That is interesting, because other witnesses in their submissions have indicated that while it is a step, it is not really much of one. That is stated in the options paper. They say it is not really much of a step and that it still really leaves the same problems of the current significant waiting list alone without them being touched much. You think it is better than that?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — We are yet to see. It is certainly an improvement on what we have had.

**Mr SCHEFFER** — The last thing I want to ask, which I have been asking the last few witnesses, is: you, like others, have talked about the problem of silos, where one part of government — be it federal or state — does not know enough about what other service parts of government are doing, and so there is not a holistic common view, and I have put to witnesses that A Fairer Victoria was the Victorian government's attempt to tackle that very serious problem. I have asked witnesses to reflect on whether they think that that is a positive way to go or whether they think that there are better ways of doing it?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — I think having planned strategies, frameworks that are about linking up those silos is really important, but the reality is that implementing them is a challenge, but we need to be up to meet the challenge; and where there are some real objectives and goals that are measurable and where various areas of government are committed, I think it can achieve really good outcomes.

**The CHAIR** — You mentioned that when assessing the situation of the applicant on the waiting list, you should not go into personal circumstances such as health and other sorts of arrangements. If that is the case, how do you prioritise, given that we have a short supply?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — It was a question of emphasis that the current system requires extensive support letters and documents about someone's support needs and support situation, which is a little excessive when a smaller amount of evidence would be sufficient. It is really a question of emphasis.

**The CHAIR** — You do not have anything against evidence to support that a person should be on the priority list on the basis of health, for example?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — I have heard it referred to by some people applying for public housing, that in the higher segments it is a bit like sitting an exam, and it should not necessarily have to be like that.

**Ms KAIROUZ** — My question was very similar to that. You were saying that the system is quite complicated and onerous on the applicant. Do you have any particular suggestions or ideas as to how we can make it easier for the applicant?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — I think one of the key benefits of the recommendation or proposal by the Office of Housing will be that it will be easier for applicants and those supporting them to complete the applications, at least from what I have seen so far. There will not be such onerous support requiring evidence. Clearly there has to be an application form and information provided, but from what I have seen so far it is certainly an improvement.

**Ms KAIROUZ** — It has improved, has it?

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — What has been proposed is an improvement.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for being here today, and for your submission.

**Mr WRIGHT-HOWIE** — Thankyou very much.

**Witness withdrew.**