

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 11 February 2010

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Ms D. Parnell, manager policy development, Council on the Ageing Victoria.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon. You are most welcome to this public hearing inquiring into the adequacy and future directions of public housing. This is a parliamentary, not a government inquiry.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided 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 reciprocal legislation in other states and territories. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. We are recording the proceedings. You will be sent a copy of the transcript, and you will be able to make minor adjustments to it if necessary.

We have a 45-minute session. I invite you to make a verbal submission, and if you can please stick to about 25 minutes, we can follow up with questions. Please introduce yourselves.

Ms WOOD — Thank you for this opportunity. I am Janet Wood, and I am president of the Council on the Ageing Victoria.

Ms PARNELL — I am Debra Parnell. I am manager of policy at COTA Victoria.

Ms WOOD — Clearly the objectives of COTA are to support, protect and encourage the rights and capacities of older people, so I thought I might start today with a little bit of history, a very small chunk, which goes back to 1955 when the Council on the Ageing was called the Council on Aged Welfare. Even in 1955 we had a housing subcommittee, and — guess what! — in 1955 that subcommittee was following up issues from the social survey of the aged, which was a government report in 1953. The recommendation at that time was that our subcommittee should work in cooperation with the then Housing Commission, so we bring you something like 55 years of history of thinking about housing and cooperating with state governments in various ways.

We do not come as experts in the specifics on building; we come as a council which obviously has a major concern with how older people age in our society. In fact in our introduction, as you can see there on page 1, we have a two-line statement of who we are. It reads that our mission is to enable older people to age well in a just society, and we are committed to human rights, social justice and the eradication of ageism.

Those things link back so clearly into this issue around housing. We are particularly interested in housing of older people. There are many areas in which seniors or older people — we never know quite what term to use — are sort of left out of the equation. We do not see ourselves competing with others, but we are asking that we be joined with other groups which are named. So we were very happy to find seniors being named in the terms of reference here, because quite often we find there is no particular place for seniors.

What we are particularly interested in is housing for those seniors who have particular needs. It is not a desperate plea for housing for all seniors. A very large percentage of seniors are housed well, happily and contentedly and expect that habit to continue for the rest of their lives — it probably will. Our major emphasis is on those seniors who have particular needs. We are talking about low-income people and quite particularly pensioners who are in rental housing. It is rental housing and low-income people.

You have probably been hearing about the difficulties confronting all folk looking for rental housing at whatever stage and age they are. We are saying this is particularly so for older people. Older people dropped off the priority list for access to public housing in the late 1980s. I would think it was when, for very good reasons, the doors of institutions which housed people, particularly those with mental difficulties, opened, so there were new priorities for public housing. Older people simply dropped off as having any priority at all. We wish today to address the question of putting them back into the priority list not as competitors against those disadvantaged families and people with a whole range of illnesses and disadvantages, but rather that they formed themselves a group of people who, if they are not housed well, then a whole range of things will happen.

The intergenerational report recently issued has a lot of parliamentarians and bureaucrats going around with furrowed brows — economists are having more furrows I think — worrying about us and worrying about what older people are going to do and how everybody else will pay for them. We want to keep saying over and over again that commitment to ageing well in our society includes a whole host of things. In particular at the moment it includes housing, because to age well is to age in a place where you are secure and where you are housed so as to maintain your health, maintain social inclusion and maintain your own capacity for choice and so, in a sense, assist the rest of society by staying out of those fairly expensive forms of care.

We see this question of disadvantage and older people as all-inclusive, I suppose, particularly in rental accommodation and fitting into the whole program. The commonwealth and state and communities all want older people to age well and to age in place, and housing is absolutely crucial to that.

Fortunately, Debra knows a heck of a lot more about this than I do and will speak to our particular recommendations and specifics.

Ms PARNELL — By all means, I am sure you will be able to contribute.

As Janet mentioned, no doubt you have been hearing a lot about the scarcity of affordable housing and how this impacts on access and waiting lists for public housing. Low-income older people are presenting a significant issue to housing providers and are one of the largest growing groups that are going to place demands on the need for affordable housing into the future. Low-income, sole-person households will have the most significant increase, and older sole women are going to be one of the largest groups within that growing population.

Insufficient affordable housing in the private rental market or through other forms of housing is adding to that housing stress that older people are experiencing. That housing stress has enormous implications on how people age and their experience of ageing: it has an impact on their health and it leads to poverty. They are unable to afford rent in the private market. The rent that they can afford means that they are living in poor and inadequate housing, and often people are having to make choices between paying rent and using their income for other things such as nutrition, heating their homes, accessing medicine and so on. Older people are in a very dire situation because of the paucity of adequate and affordable housing.

There are a number of models. I know that this inquiry is focusing specifically on public housing, and in some ways it is difficult to isolate public housing from the wide range of housing opportunities, initiatives and developments that are available. Public housing and social housing are packed as just one strategy in the raft of strategies about how we house our growing population.

There are some models that are good. Independent living units are a good model for older people. A lot of people enjoy living in those types of housing developments, but the existing independent living unit developments are very old. Many of them were developed in the 1950s and 1960s and are now extremely run down. While independent living units are a good model, their providers are unable to maintain them to a standard. A lot of organisations are getting out of the provision of independent living units and so we are losing access to them as a model. The people who are continuing to live in them are in inadequate housing situations.

If we look specifically at public housing, there are a number of issues for older people that we have identified in our submission. Put simply, the lack of housing stock in public and social housing means that low-income older people are unable to access the housing they need that will meet their needs as they age, that will enable them to age well and that will enable them to age in place. The need to manage this scarce resource has meant that low-income older people have been left off the priority list. The focus increasingly has been on people with multiple and complex needs, particularly mental health issues, but also families at risk.

Increasingly, families are identified as units with dependent children. Even though older people constitute their own family, they are not identified as being in that high-risk group. Older people are really excluded quite often in those definitions of who is at risk because they are not seen necessarily as having multiple needs. The low-income component is not seen as being sufficient, but this leaves people extremely vulnerable to homelessness and, as I said, longer-term health implications because of their housing standards.

Waiting lists, which was identified in the inquiry's terms of reference, are very difficult. Some older people have identified that they have been on waiting lists for 20 or 30 years, which is not terribly good if you are 60 or 70 years old and are not expecting to be housed for another 20 years. The current situation of segmentation is obviously an issue because it puts older people lower down in the prioritising of need. As I have said, the most significant impact of these waiting lists is the uncertainty and the health implications of living under that housing stress and lack of finances, and then needing to be able to juggle your discretionary income amongst the number of pressures that are on you.

We have identified issues in relation to the current housing stock. It is good that a lot of people when they are in public housing find it quite satisfactory. They find that the security of tenure is an enormous relief for them. Many of the redevelopments and new initiatives that are being carried out by the state government are in fact

very good and people enjoy living in those new dwellings. They say they are fantastic for older people and there should be more of them.

There is still a great deal of old and existing stock, and the things we have identified in particular are around energy efficiency of existing stock. With the current focus on climate change and the already increasing costs in utilities, there is an urgent need for public and social housing to be upgraded so that it becomes much more energy efficient and reduces the vulnerability of older people to heat and cold, because we are identifying those things as having serious consequences.

Maintenance is generally always a problem and in our submission we have identified the sorts of things that people report to us through their calls to our seniors information service. They find that maintenance is not carried out in a timely way and they have problems in dealing with the Office of Housing and getting maintenance undertaken. We do hear the bad stories; that is not to say there are not good things happening in public housing.

The final area that we know the inquiry is interested in is safety. Certainly safety and that sense of risk — the vulnerability of older people — is something they do talk about when they talk about public housing, but there does seem to be something of a mismatch between the perception of risk and the actual risk that people are experiencing.

One of the issues is the increasing social mix that is on housing estates. This does create, I guess, some anxiety for older people, even though they may not be specifically at risk of violence, harassment or other difficulties. But that social mix needs to be dealt with, I guess, with some sensitivity and consideration. We do not want to see older people isolated into older people's enclaves.

Old people themselves do not want that: they want to be part of diverse communities. But how you get that balance between people who may have clear psychological or behavioural problems, vandalism, young people who are living on estates, and then mixing them with older people who do feel vulnerable is an issue.

The other area of safety that should be considered is the physical environment. This is something that needs to be addressed: the risk of trips and falls around the estate, the stairs that people need to climb, the fact that often lifts are not working, how people are able to access help and assistance in the housing estate. So it is not just safety in terms of the risk that people are at from other residents on the estates, but it is also the environmental considerations.

In terms of the recommendations that COTA has made, one of our recommendations is really that the housing stock needs to be addressed. There needs to be more housing, more development of appropriate housing. We really welcome the commonwealth government initiatives in terms of the housing affordability schemes, but we see that the state government needs to work with the commonwealth government in terms of the housing agreement and needs to work with local government to ensure there is an integrated policy framework that addresses the needs of older people.

As we have already identified, we want to see older people reintroduced as a priority on the waiting list. We would recommend that older people of pension age with assets below \$100 000 should be prioritised into the waiting lists. We would also recommend that there be a major program of investment so that public housing units are retrofitted to highest standards to address energy efficiency and accessibility issues.

That probably covers the gist of what we have presented in our submission. We would be happy to take questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that detailed presentation. Families and people grow old in the public housing environment and in the local environment to which we are connected, then the kids leave home, probably one partner passes away, and then when the Office of Housing has to relocate that person, what are the strategies that the office should have in mind to relocate that person appropriately?

Ms WOOD — Yes, because there you are talking about an outside authority, if you like, determining that you have reached a stage where you do not need that housing. That does not happen, of course, to people who are able to have their own housing provided for themselves. So the external authority has to accept that it is in fact intruding on the human rights of that person.

You have to start with the basic sense of the human rights of that person and then work out the strategies. But no strategy ought to be about, 'How do we keep the old dear quiet?'; it has to be one which values that person's self and that person's sense of their own locality. We are not pretending this is simple, but surely it is also about providing varieties of housing.

I come from a beautiful little place called Gisborne. We rather hope nobody else ever goes and lives there, because it was a village, but now it is getting a bit connected with other places. But what we are finding there is that as people age, they are looking to stay there, but in the smaller place. They are happier to move to a smaller place than to move out. So location, which you have in your terms of reference, is a really important thing.

If all that can be offered to that person is something 40 kilometres away, then we have a dislocation problem we have added to. It is understandable that that house now ought to be available to those who can use all the rooms, but that is not a standard that we apply to everyone else in the community, so we have to be very careful about how we apply that.

Mr NOONAN — Thank you very much for your submission. I really appreciate both your verbal submission and the work that has gone into your written submission. I wonder if you can talk a little about your call for a national older persons housing strategy and how wide-ranging you see that being, particularly in the context that we are looking at public housing.

Separately to that, I am interested in whether you think enough is going on in terms of support services to help people live independently in their homes and, perhaps because there is not enough housing stock, whether it is putting pressure on people to relocate into another arrangement.

Ms WOOD — We do recommend in fact increasing linkages between all those agencies which become associated with an older person and their care. One of the identifiable things is how fragmented that can look to and actually is for the older person themselves. We have in fact recommended the development of better linkages between — whatever the housing is, public and social — housing providers and community aged-care and support services to in fact encourage a linking of these things, so it is not that you have seven different people who somehow have a part of your life. That ought not to be the cost of staying in your own home.

I think we will get better at this. Commonwealth, states, the not-for-profits and university researchers are all working on how to optimise. So it does seem to me that in some ways we ought to be optimistic about this but we can do better in making these linkages. As you will know, HACC services have been looking very much at a more active model for care so that we do not encourage ourselves to sit in a chair while somebody comes and vacuums but we encourage an interaction and encourage the person themselves to be active in their own care for as long as they can be.

There is a whole lot of ways and it does seem to me that in some ways we are really getting there. We can see what needs to be done. I do not know if that is a bit vague.

Mr NOONAN — That is good. Thank you.

Ms PARNELL — In relation to the query you had about a call for an older persons housing strategy, this has arisen because it is not just a Victorian issue, obviously, and we are identifying that housing across Australia for older people is a growing issue. We see that there are roles for all levels of government to be involved in an integrated approach to housing for older people and there is an absolute lack of focus on older people and looking at what strategies need to be put in place to address the housing needs of older people.

Very often the housing strategies are much more broad ranging and older people, as we often identify, are really left out of the equation. Even though they are sort of identified as one of the groups, they are not specifically addressed.

We are quite concerned because the current approach to the affordable housing schemes actually leave pensioners out in the cold because a lot of the initiatives are looking much more at middle-income people and providing affordable housing for them. Again, the focus is on families. So pensioners are still not going to be able to access affordable housing through those schemes.

The rental schemes are similar, in the sense that the identified groups and the approach to those schemes really leave low-income older people, who have very limited income; they have no way of increasing that income; they cannot go out and get employment; they are on set incomes. They will not be able to access those types of schemes.

We are seeing the need for the commonwealth government to work with state governments in terms of the housing agreements, with state governments needing to have a focus around older people in the implementation of their housing schemes and that local government has a real role in terms of being able to drive the planning and developments at the local level.

We are really calling for an integrated approach and a much stronger focus on older people. It was before my time, but I believe that the Office of Housing — or the ministry of housing, as it once was — did in fact have a unit around people's housing and that was disbanded. We would actually be keen to see the re-establishment of a policy focus within the Office of Housing on older people's housing.

Mr NOONAN — Do you know when it was disbanded, just for our research?

Ms PARNELL — No, I could not tell you. I think it was quite a long time ago. Again, it was probably in the 90s, I would think, when older people were effectively removed from the priority listing.

Mrs POWELL — Something that I guess people do not like to talk about but I have seen it reported over a number of years is the issue of elder abuse. Anecdotal evidence is that if a person cannot find a home, then they go to live with families and there is abuse from families, whether it is physical abuse or mental abuse, saying, 'You've got to give us money, or we'll kick you out'. Is there truth in that?

Ms WOOD — Yes. That is an excellent question to ask company coming from COTA, because we are the lead agency in Seniors Rights Victoria.

Mrs POWELL — That is why I asked you, and nobody else has mentioned it.

Ms WOOD — Thank you very much. Seniors Rights Victoria, as you might know, was established obviously with government funds and government initiative and we have three partners in the legal sector. What is emerging is a very high percentage of financial abuse, which links with exactly the sort of thing you are saying.

The abuse can take the form of keeping the older parent at home when in fact they need care, because the offspring does not want the house sold because then that goes into the bond, of course, to pay for the older person's care. There is a whole range of those things and we are happy to provide the committee with any information it wants anecdotally. SRV is a year old now, so obviously the information we are collecting is now but a year old, but it gives us some sense of where those things are going.

There is also abuse that follows from our rental housing. An older person might be in rental accommodation. They have a fall, say. They go into hospital and they are in hospital for quite some time, having a hip fixed or whatever. In that period of time — and these are real cases — they do not have anybody taking care of their affairs and paying their rent. They therefore fall behind in their and the landlord is within rights to close the door and say, 'You haven't paid your rent for six weeks'. That person has nowhere to go. We are not talking hundreds of cases but we are talking enough cases to make us quite anxious that in a period in which rental accommodation is so scarce and in which we know that people will pay extra — they will pay money on the side to get that accommodation — then an older person with no real support systems in terms of finances or people does not really have any way out. So poor housing does go together to some extent, with abuse of older people. Again, we do not want to exaggerate it, but it is there.

Ms PARNELL — A real issue that has been identified through our advocacy workers is the fact that older people find it so difficult to access public housing means that when a crisis does arise and the person needs to be removed from an abusive situation — just as you were talking about, where they are living with their children, the children are inflicting abuse and the person has nowhere to go — they are unable to access public housing even in those circumstances and it is a real problem about where those older people can be housed.

Too many organisations say, 'We can't and it is not appropriate; they need to find somewhere else'. Often the last resort is to put that person into residential care, which is really not a satisfactory outcome.

The CHAIR — The committee would like to see some anecdotal evidence if you can provide it.

Ms WOOD — If that is okay, we will certainly be very happy to provide it.

Mr SCHEFFER — You talked about the special category on the waiting list for older people seeking accommodation. I wanted to ask you how might that work because you also said in passing, I think, that you would not want that to start taking places away from the categories. Given the pressure on the waiting list I cannot see how that would be possible. I am not saying that what you said is unjustified; I would just appreciate you perhaps explaining, if you have had time to give thought to it, how that might work practically.

Ms PARNELL — At the most simple level it is a matter of increasing housing stock because the prioritisation and the waiting list really will not be addressed until that scarcity of housing has been addressed. The data shows that to keep pace with the demand on housing, significantly more dwellings would need to be provided than is currently the case so the demand and the pressure on waiting lists is only going to grow.

Over the next 20 years we are going to be facing an accommodation crisis for low-income people, not just older people. The fact that we will not have enough housing for low income and vulnerable groups is going to continue and older people are going to be a significantly vulnerable group within that demand.

I do not know what the answer would be in terms of waiting list management and how that can be dealt with without there being a greater investment in housing stock. That is why we are calling for an integrated approach because there are other schemes in place that could reduce some of that pressure on waiting lists but it needs to address the needs of older people and the most vulnerable people. If they are not able to access affordable housing through those schemes then public and social housing is the only place they have to go or they are reliant on a private rental market that is really beyond their means.

Ms WOOD — Could I just add, although this sounds a little bit sermonic, that the group against whom it is most easy to discriminate are older people. We must not measure the rights of one against the other but it is the case, I think, that there are assumptions that older people's needs are never as urgent as the needs of a family, a younger family with children or the needs of somebody with another sort of problem.

We really want older people to be put back into a category where their needs are really seriously important as well. I suppose we are always battling ageism. As I said, I do not want to sound too sermonic but ageism is still the 'ism' you can get away with and nobody said anything much about it except us.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presentation. We really appreciate it.

Committee adjourned.