

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Ballarat — 2 March 2010

Members

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Witnesses

Mr G. Colgate, president, and

Mr R. Castley, secretary, Semmens Court Residents Association.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon and welcome. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee for this public hearing. My name is Jude Perera, and I am the Chair of the Family and Community Development Committee, which is conducting this inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria. This is not a government inquiry; it is a bipartisan parliamentary 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, and you will be sent a copy of the transcript. You will be able to make minor adjustments to it if necessary.

I invite you to make a verbal submission. Please restrict it to about 5 or 6 minutes, because then the committee will have ample time for questions. Before you start, please introduce yourselves and then speak to the terms of reference.

Mr CASTLEY — We have prepared a written statement because we have only 5 minutes. First of all let me thank you for enabling us to come here today to present our statement. My name is Russell Castley. I am secretary of the Semmens Court Residents Association Inc. Together with Gordon Colgate, who is president of the association, we wish to present the following submission.

I might just talk about the name of our organisation first because I heard Mr Finn make a comment about it. The Semmens Court Residents Association was established 18 months ago initially to incorporate the elderly tenants who live in a cluster of public housing units in Creswick — there are 32 of them — that used to be called Semmens Court; it is no longer called that. When we set up our association it was just to represent those tenants, and that is why we called it the Semmens Court Residents Association Inc. After that we subsequently found out that you could get funding from the Office of Housing for public housing tenant groups, but in order to do that we had to represent public housing tenants in the whole of Creswick. We changed our constitution to allow us to do that, but we did not change our name. That is why we are still called Semmens Court Residents Association Inc. I will now proceed with our written statement.

The Semmens Court Residents Association is an incorporated association which represents public housing tenants living in Creswick. Creswick is an old goldmining town of around 2500 residents, located on the Midland Highway 18 kilometres north of Ballarat and 129 kilometres northwest of Melbourne in the shire of Hepburn. The Office of Housing has around 66 public housing units and houses in Creswick, 32 units are in a cluster designated as being for the use of elderly persons.

Our association has put in a written submission to the inquiry — which goes to seven pages, I might add — in which we respond to most of the issues and questions raised in the submission guide. Today we would like to expand on our comments in our written submission about the need for the Department of Human Services and the Office of Housing to make provision for ongoing support for those public housing tenants who need support to enable them to live independently. I now want to focus on the story of one person.

One tenant living at the elderly persons complex at Creswick is 80 years of age and he has lived in his unit for 17 years. This person lives alone. His health is deteriorating. He does not look after himself properly. He does not feed himself properly. He does not look after his unit at all. He does not have any immediate family. He cannot read or write. He does not have a telephone.

Ten years ago a neighbour, a nearby elderly female tenant, started looking after his dog because he was not looking after his dog properly either. This elderly female tenant effectively then became the elderly male tenant's only carer. She has performed that role now for 10 years.

The male tenant's unit has a severe mouse infestation. Mice droppings can be seen everywhere — on the kitchen benches, in the kitchen cupboards, on the dining table, on the floor. This is a health hazard. The carpet in the lounge room was probably a beige colour. Where this male tenant sits in his lounge room there is a 2-metre circular jet black area on the carpet where he has obviously dropped cigarettes, cigarette ash, food and alcohol over many years. Cigarette butts litter his unit along with the mice droppings. Behind his lounge chair is a 2-metre high pile of disused furniture tossed there like a bonfire ready to be lit! This elderly male tenant has a heart problem and may have lip cancer. He has started going down to Melbourne to have it looked at.

The elderly female tenant, who is now 82 years of age and who has kept an eye on this now 80-year-old male tenant over the past 10 years, is listed on doctor and hospital records as the person to contact. She occasionally does shopping for him — she said occasionally, but I think she does it more than occasionally. She makes telephone calls for him and she receives telephone calls for him. On rare occasions when a community nurse phones to arrange to visit him, she takes the phone call and then goes around to his unit to clean up as much of the mouse droppings as she can before the community nurse arrives.

She checks his refrigerator monthly and throws out the mouldy food he leaves there. Every couple of weeks she asks him whether he has taken his tablets — although when I talked to her the other day she said she asked him daily, but when I questioned her again yesterday she said, ‘No, it is not daily’. He rarely washes any of his clothes. He wears them until they are unwearable and then throws them onto a growing pile in his bedroom. He then goes to the Salvo’s op shop and buys a few more items of clothing.

This 82-year-old female neighbouring tenant should not be keeping an eye on him or cleaning up for him or running around after him — which she has to do on foot because she does not own a car. This 80-year-old male should be in care because he cannot look after himself. The Office of Housing must be aware of his situation, because two and a half years ago there was an upgrade of the units in this elderly persons complex. They all received new gas heaters, stoves and hot-water services plus new carpets where carpets needed replacing and walls that needed to be repainted were painted.

The 80-year old male tenant got the gas heater, the gas stove and the gas hot-water service, but because of the state of his unit the Office of Housing obviously decided not to replace his dirty carpets or paint his shabby walls. This 80-year old male tenant needs help and proper care, and he needs it now. It is the responsibility of the Department of Human Services to do this. It is not the responsibility of a neighbouring 82-year-old elderly female tenant.

If you want us to elaborate more on any of our submission, we are happy to do that, but I felt it was important to raise this one-off single issue as an example of a tenant who is living under these conditions today. I live in the same elderly persons complex and generally speaking most of the tenants are reasonably happy. They like their units, they like the upgrade and they like the area we live in, but there are always things that can be done better. One of the things we obviously need because we are elderly is air conditioning during the summer.

Our president, Gordon Colgate, who does not live in the complex — he is one of those who lives elsewhere in Creswick in a house — is not in good health. He had to cancel a blood test to come here today; he is having that done tomorrow. Gordon’s wife is in worse health than Gordon, and they are some of those elderly people who we believe should have air conditioning for the summer periods. I just want to make that point to you.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Regarding the gentleman in question, did you have a conversation with him about whether he wants to move out of supported residential accommodation?

Mr CASTLEY — No, I did not have that conversation with him, and he probably does not want to; but I take the view that that is not the point. He really cannot live on his own. I have seen him around; I met him once. The lady who looks after him took me into his unit on Friday under the pretext that I am a new tenant there and I help people where I can, but he obviously did not want me there. That was the first time I had seen his unit, although I had heard about it.

It is appalling. I am not criticising the man, because when you get to that age and you are unwell you do not look after yourself. He drinks, and every pension day, because he cannot walk very well, he always goes by taxi and this lady has to ring the taxi. The taxi comes and picks him up at his door, takes him up to the hotel and he might spend most of the day there. No, I did not ask him if he wanted to leave, and I suspect he does not. I am simply saying that if you were to go in there and see him, you would agree that he could not live there in those conditions and that he should be in care.

Mr FINN — Obviously this gentleman is in a pretty bad way and it is not an ideal situation under any circumstances. Is this a one-off? Are there other people who are perhaps in not as bad a way but in a similar situation where they should be in some form of care but are reliant on neighbours or friends to get them through?

Mr CASTLEY — He is the worst case in this elderly persons complex.

Mr FINN — I thought he probably would be.

Mr CASTLEY — I am 70 years of age, but there are other people there who are a lot older than me, in their 80s; this lady is 83. Some use walking frames. There are about four or five people who use gophers (motorised scooters). Their stages of disability vary. Most of them cope, but some require more help than others and some people ask for help from time to time.

Mr FINN — Who do you believe should be stepping in and making the judgement as to who can live independently and who should be in care?

Mr CASTLEY — It certainly should not be the elderly tenants who are living in those complexes. It has to be some government department. I would think the appropriate body initially would be the Department of Human Services, which the Office of Housing is part of. It is our belief that some government department, whether it is the Office of Housing or the Department of Human Services, should be providing support for the different kinds of people who are living in public housing.

You have people with mental problems. We have one lady living in our complex who is not getting the government help she should get. She is very good at ringing up the community groups and asking for food and asking for money, but she has caused some problems and we have drawn that to the attention of the Office of Housing. Whether it is a situation like that or a noisy tenant or a tenant who is being a nuisance, the Office of Housing will always say, if it is a criminal matter, ring the police; if it is a noisy tenant or a noisy dog, ring the council; if it is a bad noise problem, ring the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Mr FINN — Are you suggesting that DHS is using public housing as a dumping ground for problems that may be a little too difficult for them, or problem people?

Mr CASTLEY — Let me answer the question this way and first say that people have to live somewhere. That is the first thing. You cannot get into public housing unless you have less than \$30 000 cash investments — you can have a car — so Gordon and I fit into that category and so does everybody else who lives in public housing. Generally speaking the people in this country who end up living in public housing are at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. That is the reality of it.

The job of the Office of Housing is to put them in a house. Most of those people cannot afford private rental. I was renting privately at a pretty low rent, but then the time came when I was living 10 miles away from Creswick and the car broke down. You cannot live out there if you have not got a car, so I had to apply for public housing. I have only been living in public housing for two and a half years. It has been a bit of an eye-opener to me, I suppose, to see some of these issues.

Mr SCHEFFER — I wanted to thank you for your submission and also for sharing with us the particular circumstances of the gentleman you were talking about, but also to say from a personal point of view it is a difficult issue to deal with in a forum like this because, as we all know, situations like that are unique and they have a range of factors around them, and it would not be right for a committee like this to form a judgement on it, much less to tender advice.

Mr CASTLEY — No, I understand.

Mr SCHEFFER — But I wanted to come back to more general issues. You mentioned in your response to Mr Finn that when the Office of Housing is contacted about a range of matters, rather than deal with it, they refer the caller off to an appropriate area. In one way that sounds like a reasonable approach, that the Office of Housing is the landlord, the Office of Housing deals with the facility, and then they take up the role of referring people back and forward to wherever is appropriate. On the other hand — and I think this is the point you are making — they are not taking sufficient responsibility for moving a person through to the right area where they could be dealt with. Is that a fair sort of appraisal?

Mr CASTLEY — Yes, this is the point I am making.

Mr SCHEFFER — I think that point is understood and appreciated. You have got the *Semmens Court Residents Association. Could I ask you how you operate and what is your role in the range of issues that you mentioned in assisting your members to process those matters?

Mr CASTLEY — Gordon is president; I am the secretary. We are an incorporated association. We have about 23 members at the moment. I am only guessing, because we are not provided with the addresses of all public houses and units in Creswick, but there may be 70 or 80 people living in public housing in Creswick. I am in this elderly persons cluster where there are actually 33 people living in those units.

Mr SCHEFFER — What do you see your role as being?

Mr CASTLEY — Our committee of management meets monthly. We take up general issues such as this, so we have presented this document to you and we have submitted that from the committee. I and another member of our committee are on what is called the Grampians Regional Tenant Council, which is an organisation which consists of Office of Housing staff and officers and public housing tenants, which covers the whole of the Grampians region. We are involved there on a wider scale.

In this area we are just looking locally at Creswick to try to help people as issues arise. A number of them are personal issues, individual issues, where people really should be ringing the call maintenance centre, and they do not. They feel that we can help them, and they come to us, so we write letters to the Office of Housing in Ballarat. Because you have access to the call centre online, there are a few people I have helped. I have got on the computer and put their submission in that way. We help individuals, and we help people on a wider scale within the area of Creswick.

Mr SCHEFFER — Just one last question, if I could, Chair. When you, as part of the residents association, contact other agencies or individuals who you think might be able to assist, are they responsive to you?

Mr CASTLEY — No, not always. Another member of the committee rang the council last week about this gentleman, and the person she had to talk to was not there, so she briefly told the story to the person on the phone, and she said, 'This lady will ring you back'. She did not ring her back, so I take that to mean the council does not even want to know about it.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presence today. We will send the transcript to you. At that stage, if you want, you can make minor changes.

Witnesses withdrew.