To Whom It May Concern

My experience of Supported Accommodation for individuals with a disability and/or mental illness is as the Proprietor of a Supported Residential Service (SRS) in regional Victoria for 10 years. Our SRS is a pension-level facility, with 30 beds. Our client base is exactly the people referred to in this inquiry. As a pension-level facility our fees are limited to the amount a person receiving a full disability pension and rental assistance can afford, while still keeping enough funds to meet their personal and recreational needs, such as medications, toiletries, clothing and cigarettes. This amounts to up to $40 per day. Up until June 2007 our residents did not receive any government funding to support their accommodation, but we now receive SAVVI funding. From July 2007 to June 2008 this amounted to about $4.95 per resident per day, but increased in July 2008 to about $8.40 per day, for eligible beds. In our case 28 of our 30 beds were deemed eligible. As a consequence of SAVVI funding pension-level SRS’s are subject to a high level of scrutiny, and must establish clearly to the Department of Human Services that the receipt of this funding has led to an improvement in resident care and quality of life. The guidelines on how the funding may be spent are very clearly defined, and all relate to improved outcomes for our vulnerable and disadvantaged residents. On top of this our facility is visited monthly by Community Visitors representing the Office of the Public Advocate, who ensure that our resident needs are being met, and regularly monitored by Authorised Officers from the Department of Human Services to ensure regulatory compliance. In the vast majority of facilities the result of all of this is a quality environment for our residents. This is achieved in most cases by dedicated proprietors who put people ahead of profit. Unfortunately despite this apparently high level of monitoring some facilities manage to provide a terrible service that can put the whole sector into disrepute.

Many of our residents come to us because it is absolutely impossible to access any sort of government provided supported accommodation in the Geelong Region, where we are told that the waiting list is several years for someone categorised as urgent. We find though that once they have been with us for a while most do not want to leave. We are told by our residents and their families that we provide a very supportive, caring and homely environment, and most would not leave even if a government provided option became available.

From time to time I have had occasion to seek alternative accommodation for residents whose care needs cannot be met by our facility, and have come up against a brick wall. It is very difficult to get any support from any government body when we require them to take over responsibility for a very complex individual whose care has been cost free to the public purse as a result of the existence of SRS’s. The message we get is that, even for the most difficult people, with a variety of challenging health needs and behaviours, there is simply no alternative. In a couple of cases where the client had a intellectual disability, and was already registered with disability services a place in a Community Residential Unit was found when we took the step of evicting the resident. However if a disabled person was not registered prior to the age of 18 with Disability Services they seem to have
no hope of obtaining any assistance with accommodation, I am not sure if this is DHS policy, or simply a decision by particular staff members. For people who have a mental illness there is simply no suitable alternative, and some of our residents in the 40 – 50 age group have been accommodated in Nursing Homes, this being the only option. If some-one is unfortunate enough to have a dual disability the main focus of service providers seems to be arguing about what is the primary disability, and buck passing responsibility, rather than assessing and meeting the care and accommodation needs of that person.

Having said all of the above I would like to add that providing a high quality of service, subject to all of the regulatory requirements of DHS, and the numerous other pieces of legislation we are covered by is extremely onerous on an income of less than $50 per resident per day. It is made even more difficult by the fact that the focus of our monitoring by the community Visitors and the Authorised Officers seems to be the state of the paintwork on the walls rather than the happy, healthy, well-fed and well-groomed residents who reside here. We seem to be expected to provide a pristine environment for people who are, due to no fault of their own, clumsy, careless and consequently quite destructive. This is impossible on the funds available without money being taken from areas such as staffing, food and resident activities. Loss of these would have a much greater impact on resident well-being that a few scuffs on the paintwork. Provision of much better quality care and an immaculate environment would be possible if funding levels were much more realistic.

Provision of care in Supported residential Services is an excellent alternative to fully government funded residential units. Our regulatory framework, if adhered to, ensures resident focussed care in a safe and homely environment. Residents and their significant others are required to be involved in planning of care for our residents, and we are constantly and thoroughly monitored and evaluated by several different bodies. Even a marked increase in the funding provided, leading to even higher quality care, would prove much more cost effective to the government than wholly government funded facilities.

In conclusion I would like to say that many Victorians with disability and mental illness are currently happily and safely housed and cared for in SRS’s, with a very small financial cost to the government, and this type of accommodation should be encouraged and given much greater financial support.

Yours Faithfully

Karen Eccles