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Housing Insecurity and Homelessness



Contents

Council to Homeless Persons

Jenny Smith: Chief Executive Officer
Sarah Toohey: Manager — Policy and Communications Unit
Ian Gough: Manager — Consumer Programs
Lynette Deakes: Office Manager
Noel Murray: Publications Coordinator, Parity Editor
Lanie Harris and Catherine McGauran: Media and Communications Officers
Angela Kyriakopoulos: HAS Coordinator
Cassandra Bawden: Peer Education and Support Program Team Leader
Trish Westmore: Capacity Building and Policy Officer
Akke Halma: Bookkeeper
Address: 2 Stanley Street Collingwood Melbourne VIC 3066
Phone: (03) 8415 6200
Fax: (03) 9419 7445
E-mail: parity@chp.org.au
Website: www.chp.org.au

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Council to Homeless Persons,
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2014 Parity Publications Schedule

NB: Please note that this may be subject to change.

June: Housing, Homelessness and Disability
July: Education, Employment, Recreation and Volunteering
August: From Outputs to Outcomes: A New Approach to Ending Homelessness
September: National Homelessness Conference Edition
October: Homelessness and the Law Revisited: A Question of Justice
November: Asylum Seekers and Refugees: A Place of Greater Safety?

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Australasian Housing Institute

Donald Proctor: President
Kelly Badewitz: Executive Officer
Olena Sydorenko: Marketing and Member Services Manager
Donella Roberts: Learning and Development Manager
Address: PO Box 6100 Mawson ACT 2607
Phone: 02 6494 7566
E-mail: admin@housinginstitute.org
Website: www.housinginstitute.org

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Artwork

Cover art by Dean Briggs: *Window Girl*.

CHP Editorial | 3

Jenny Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Council to Homeless Persons

AHI Editorial | 4

Donald Proctor, President, Australasian Housing Institute

The Budgets: What the Victorian and Federal Budgets Mean for Homelessness Services | 5
Sarah Toohey, Manager Policy and Communications, Council to Homeless Persons

Update from Homelessness Australia | 7

Gienda Stevens, Chief Executive Officer, Homelessness Australia

Feature: Housing Insecurity and Homelessness

Introduction | 8

Professor Kath Hulse, the Swinburne Institute for Social Research

Chapter 1: Thinking About Housing Insecurity

Is the Concept of 'Housing Insecurity' a Useful One for Policymakers? | 10

Keith Jacobs, School of Social Sciences, University of Tasmania

'The next time I move, I'm moving out in a box': | 11

Mobility and Housing Insecurity in South Australia

Dr Natalie Greenland, Research and Policy Officer, Shelter South Australia

Housing Insecurity, Thy Name is Renting | 12

Net Cutcher, Policy Officer, Tenants' Union of New South Wales

Australia's Boarder Protection Policy and Homelessness | 14

Erika Altmann, School of Sociology, University of Tasmania

Not Waving but Drowning | 16

Michelle Waterford, Research and Policy Director, Anglicare Australia

Chapter 2: The Consequences of Housing Insecurity

Increasing Insecurity, Increasing Risk, Decreasing Quality, Decreasing Value | 18

James Bennett, Policy and Liaison Worker, Tenants Union of Victoria

Living on a Knife's Edge: Public Housing Insecurity in the Northern Territory | 20

Harley Dannatt

Arbitrary Evictions in Australia: | 23

A Breach of Human Rights or the Next Step in Government Policy

Benedict Bartl, Solicitor, Tenants' Union of Tasmania and University Associate with the University of Tasmania's Law School

Insecurity Within Public Housing | 25

Mark Feenane, Victorian Public Tenants Association (VPTA) Executive Officer

and Margaret Guthrie, VPTA Chairperson

Fighting for My Family | 27

Professor Kath Hulse

and Dr Andrea Sharam, Swinburne Institute for Social Research

Consumer Voices — Housing Insecurity and Homelessness | 29

Consumer Voices is a regular feature in *Parity*. Articles are written by and with consumers to ensure they have a say about the issues that directly affect them.

Young people Facing Increasing Housing Insecurity and Homelessness | 31

Chantal Roberts, Executive Officer, Shelter WA

Three Strikes Coming for Tasmanian Public Housing Tenants? | 32

What will it look like and are you next if not already there?

Tim Walter, Acting Principal Solicitor, Tenants' Union of Tasmania

Anglicare WA's Rental Affordability Snapshot: | 35

Low Income Earners, Housing Insecurity and Housing Stress

Desiree Nangle, Evaluation Manager

and Mark Glasson, Executive General Manager, Anglicare WA

Chapter 3: Responding to Housing Insecurity

Improving Secure Occupancy in Rental Housing | 38

Kath Hulse, Swinburne Institute of Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne and Vivienne Milligan, City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney

Supporting Families Experiencing Housing Insecurity | 41

Emma Shaw, Families Coordinator, HomeGround Services

When Public Housing Tenancy is at Risk | 43

Mim Dineen, Zoe Probyn, Mark Rayner, SHASP Manager's Network

Surviving or Thriving? | 46

Older People at Risk of Homelessness in the Private Rental Market

Jeff Fiedler, Manager, Education and Housing Advice, Housing for the Aged Action Group

Complexities of Homelessness Tackled Under One Roof | 49

Under 1 Roof Co-Chairs, David Cant, Brisbane Housing Company (BHC) Chief Executive Officer and Kent Maddock, Sagacity Consulting Managing Director

The Private Rental Clinic: | 51

An Innovative Partnership between the Hutt Street Centre, Red Cross and Housing SA

Ben Taylor, Education and Training Manager, Hutt Street Centre

and Lulu Cushway, Team Leader of Eastern Adelaide Homelessness Service

Expectation Gaps: How Well are the Goals of the NPAH | 53

Working for Tenants of Supported Accommodation Facilities?

Dr Julia Verdouw, Dr Michelle Gabriel

and Associate Professor Daphne Habibis, Housing and Community Research Unit, University of Tasmania

Opinion

Mark O'Brien | 55

Chief Executive Officer, Tenants Union of Victoria

Meet a New AHI Member

Bob Hardie | 57

Operations Team Leader, City Housing, Christchurch City Council

Australia's Border Protection Policy and Homelessness

Erika Altmann, School of Sociology, University of Tasmania

Many Australians cannot imagine living on a Centrelink payment. Others can and do. They know first-hand the hardships of trying to access stable housing while living below the poverty line. Asylum seekers living in the community access a payment equivalent to 89 per cent of the Centrelink Special Benefit, New Start or Youth Allowance. At the margins of society, their need for stable housing is significant. Asylum seekers need to report their residential address to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (IMMI) on a monthly basis, and prior to each change of residential address. Failure to do so may see them back in a mandatory detention, or their case for asylum adversely affected.

In July 2012, there were 2,418 asylum seekers who had arrived in Australia by boat living in the community on bridging visas.¹ By May 2013, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that there 7,256 people were living in the community on bridging visas that had no right to work attached to the visa conditions.² That is, the number of asylum seekers living in community detention tripled in less than a year. Moreover, asylum seekers were expected to meet basic living expenses (including housing) on 11 per cent less than the minimum amount for an Australian, and unlike Australians, they had no prospect of bettering their position through employment, since the right to work was excluded from their visa conditions. Numbers of asylum seekers living in community have since increased. The right to work is seen as a critical step in determining a person's ability to access and maintain housing. Without the right to work, negotiating stable housing becomes increasingly difficult on a number of fronts.

I am in favour of community detention over mandatory human warehousing in off-shore processing facilities. Yet the increase in numbers of asylum seekers living in community is putting pressure on housing at the lowest end of the market. I write here, not as an academic, but from my personal experience of visiting detention centres, volunteering, befriending and living in community with asylum seekers.

When the Department of Immigration and Border Protection release asylum seekers into the community, the first stop is usually a dormitory bed in backpacker accommodation. The stay is for between two and six weeks depending on the rules set by the accommodation owners. Often without English language skills, they are thrown into a semi-permanent situation that has no privacy and little security. It is inappropriately funded. During this time, their caseworkers work hard to find appropriate longer-term accommodation for them, either in hostel and boarding house accommodation or in share housing.

Because of their lower income levels, asylum seekers often lack money to pay for accommodation. They are reliant on friends, extended family contacts, free accommodation or in some cases rental payments made by community organisations. Homelessness and couch surfing is not uncommon among this group. I have witnessed payment take place for floor space only (no bed, mattress or blankets) in an overcrowded room that already had eight to ten people sleeping in it. I have also witnessed the kindness of those who provide free accommodation within a family situation and free English lesson

thrown in. Both were short-term solutions. The latter offered greater privacy, physical and emotional security and a sense of community connection. The former did not.

An asylum seeker's existence is one of uncertainty. They are in community detention and may be repatriated to other countries or returned to detention centres at any time. This uncertainty means that they are unable to access more stable long term housing options, for example through private or public rental leases. Asylum seekers do not know whether they will be in community for a six week or a six month period because their case for asylum is still being heard. This makes it difficult for them to enter into medium to long term lease arrangements within the private real estate sector. They are excluded from most state based, social housing initiatives until such time as their claim for refugee status is validated.

Access to crisis accommodation is likewise limited. Where accessible, language difficulties and a lack of knowledge of services, often means that such services are not used. Even the few with work rights, often find it difficult to sign for and access medium and long term leases because of the uncertainty of their situation. For this reason, many enter into private sub-leasing arrangements within the private sector. Sue Scull from the University of Queensland³ noted that asylum seekers may move up to 13 times per year in an effort to maintain shelter.

It is well understood that lower cost private rental housing is either in central locations but in poor condition or in reasonable

condition but in suburban areas that are dislocated from central services. The dislocation from central services affects an asylum seeker's ability to access social and support networks, particularly education networks which in turn affects the ability to learn the English language skills necessary for day to day life. The housing insecurity they experience is connected to the insecurity of their circumstances as asylum seekers, lack of employment opportunities and the right to work, and lack of personal, professional and family networks. These are all key indicators for the pathway to homelessness.⁴

Forced then, into short term, unstable housing options of boarding houses, crisis accommodation and couch surfing, they experience the same lack of security, privacy and physical comfort experienced by other members of the Australian community on the pathway into or out of homelessness. But it is not a level playing field by any means. Apart from the lower income support rates which relegate asylum seekers to the least favoured boarding houses, they experience racism from landlords and other tenants; anger that is directed at their statelessness and presumption Australia will take them, as well as generalised anger from tenants who just want to vent on someone less fortunate; difficulty in negotiating the anger while trying to build their English language skills; the unwanted drug and alcohol fuelled behaviour of others and often a general lack of cleanliness and hygiene within their designated accommodation. There may be no lease in place and accommodation can therefore be terminated without notice.

The above issues are well documented within Australian boarding houses, particularly unregulated boarding houses. The margins of homelessness are cruel, and yes more needs to be done to assist all people out of such situations. What remains unacknowledged is the fact that placing asylum seekers in community detention without sufficient funding and support mechanisms, limits housing

options to short term placement only. The traumatic and violent conditions that asylum seekers have often fled may then be replicated within the unregulated boarding house experience where violence and drug addiction often appear hand in hand. Within this context, asylum seekers may feel unsafe and insecure creating the need to move from one housing situation to another in order to improve their circumstances.

The increased number of people in community detention represents a significant portion of the 105,000 people currently reported as homeless.⁵ Community detention is a humane way assisting asylum seekers while they wait for their case to be heard. However, it also places pressure on the housing market at the margins of accommodation services such as the unregulated subletting of rooms and boarding house industry. It increases pressure for accommodation at the lowest end of the market.

IMMI and the Australian government have an obligation towards asylum seekers. Additional resources need to be directed towards this lower end of market if it is support not only Australians entering and leaving homelessness but also those in community detention. I therefore contend that IMMI has an obligation to be proactive and to fund an expansion in accommodation services at this lower end of the market in order to meet the needs of their client base and alleviate pressure on already overstretched short term accommodation services. I do not mean by head leasing existing housing stock either, a solution that merely shifts housing stress from one sector to another. IMMI need to invest capital funding into building new housing in central locations that is accessible to those seeking a pathway out of homelessness. The best case scenario would be for third sector organisations already working with asylum seekers to oversee the building and running of the new accommodation, thus guaranteeing that it is fit for purpose and provides a real alternative to the current options currently available to asylum seekers required to access short term accommodation.

Endnotes

1. Written communication from Department of Immigration and Citizenship to Australian Human Rights Commission, 1 May 2014
2. *Sydney Morning Herald* — Asylum Seekers Unlikely to receive work rights <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/asylum-seekers-unlikely-to-receive-work-rights-20130709-2pod9.html>
3. Scull S 2005, *Defending human rights: Community-based asylum seekers in Queensland*, University of Queensland, Brisbane.
4. Hulse K and Saugres L 2008, *Housing Insecurity and precarious living: an Australian Exploration*, AHURI Swinburne-Monash Research Centre, Melbourne, pp 1.
5. <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/index.php/about-homelessness/homeless-statistics>



Artwork courtesy of Mission Australia's Creative Youth Initiatives, artwork by Chloe