

Submission to Standing Committee on Health and Disability
ACT Shelter
GPO Box 927
Canberra 2601

ACT Shelter appreciates having the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into current levels of access to safe secure and affordable housing for people with mental illness. As the peak housing organisation we are well aware of the difficulties faced by many people in our community in accessing safe, secure, appropriate and affordable housing. As pointed out in ACT Shelter's budget submission (Jan 2005) to the ACT government, according to *Housing People Building Communities* (ACT Government-Sept 2004) it was estimated that:

- 8400 low income households experienced housing stress (2002 estimates)
- around 1200 people are homeless-lacking secure permanent accommodation with around 100 of them suffering primary homelessness and sleeping on the streets (2001 estimates).

The groups in our community who are particularly vulnerable to serious housing stress have been well identified through numerous task forces and inquiries. They include older people, people with a disability, young people, people with a mental illness, students, refugees, single parents, people leaving custody or who are involved in the criminal justice system, and ATSI people. Housing stress and homelessness are directly related to socio/economic status/disadvantage/poverty and are experienced by vulnerable members of our community.

There have been broad commitments made by the ACT Government to address this serious social failure. Responses to the *Poverty Task Force*, the *Gallup Inquiry* and the *Affordable Housing Taskforce* all include commitments to increased affordable housing. Furthermore, *The Canberra Plan/Social Plan*, the *ACT Women's Plan*, the *Action Plan Addressing Violence and Safety Issues for Women in the ACT*, *Addressing Disadvantage in the ACT (NATSEM)* *Future Directions (Disability ACT)*, the *Homelessness Strategy*, the *Policy for Sustainability* all clearly articulate the need for action.

ACT Shelter is very concerned that in this years budget the Government failed to deliver on its election promise to expand the stock of public housing by accessing capital funds at a cost of \$10 million a year for three years. As stated above the Government has acknowledged in most of its Plans and Reports the importance of improving supply of affordable housing. The previous Minister, Mr Bill Wood's suggested in his report on his UK visit in 2004, and in particular his visit to Glasgow that if we were to do as well as Glasgow, that at least an additional \$30 million each year for 9 years would be a suitable target.

With access to capital funds now accepted, the Government should now accept the principle of an annual injection of capital into ACT Housing. It is well understood (see John Hall and Mike Berry-Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute research on sustainable financing for public housing authorities) that the current situation for housing authorities is that revenue is

increasing more slowly than total costs, moving them from a position of moderate operating surpluses into rising structural deficits. This reality must be recognised by the ACT Government by significantly increasing funding of this essential and basic human service.

It is also true to say that there has been little progress in developing ways to provide incentives through housing market regulation, or planning mechanisms which will deliver affordable housing in the private market. A number of the recommendations of the Affordable Housing Taskforce related to this area. As ACT Shelter noted in our Budget submission, there is a commitment in the Social Plan (p55) that the Government will "release an implementation plan to accompany its final response to the recommendations of the Affordable Housing Taskforce".

However, no such plan has been produced and ACT Shelter understands that the view of Government now, is that the May 2003 *ACT Government Response to the Final Report of the Affordable Housing Taskforce* and the August 2004 *Progress Report*, can be seen to be an Implementation Plan. They have also committed to releasing a progress report in June of this year.

ACT Shelter has serious concerns about this, as an analysis of the two responses shows that there has been little if any progress in a number of important recommendations and that the responses do not attempt to establish targets or timelines through which progress can be monitored and evaluated, arguably an essential component of any Implementation Plan.

We note in *People Place Prosperity : a policy for sustainability in the ACT* (p17) there is a commitment to monitoring and reporting progress. ACT Shelter supports this as essential for transparency and accountability.

There is only one target in *Measuring our Progress Vol 2* (p33) under the headline indicator of homelessness. This target is to reduce primary homelessness to be as close as possible to zero by 2013. While ACT Shelter commends this target there are no targets (or time-lines) for any other headline or supplementary indicators. Regarding the subject of this inquiry for example it could be useful to have indicators specifically dealing with housing stress/homelessness and mental illness, evictions and mental illness, incarceration and mental illness. For an Implementation Plan to be meaningful, these and other yet to be developed indicators need to be recognised as critically important and time lines and targets developed. This not only informs the community of progress through improved transparency and accountability, but will assist the Government to evaluate and monitor its own work. It is also important that any analysis of costs and benefits of particular initiatives must be informed by a recognition of the links between economic and social aspects of housing policy.

Recommendation

ACT Shelter recommends that there be an implementation plan, with time lines and targets, to accompany the Government's final response to the recommendations of the Affordable Housing Taskforce as committed to in the Social Plan (p55) and that further indicators be developed which include indicators particularly dealing with the provision of secure and appropriate housing for people living with mental illness.

As stated above, people with mental illness are one of the groups of people clearly identified as being particularly vulnerable and at risk in terms of homelessness and housing stress. Research shows common areas of agreement coming out of consultations with the people experiencing mental illness and those who care for them. There are specific needs in crisis, transitional and secure long term accommodation.

According to AHURI Positioning Paper *Linkages between housing support-what is important from the perspective of people living with a mental illness.* (Reynolds, Inglis, O'Brien)

While there is diversity in the nature of support people with psychiatric disabilities identify as important to support them some common themes emerge. The areas of support most commonly identified as important are

- assistance with practical and financial support to access housing*
- assistance with daily living skills*
- support to develop and maintain social networks*
- assistance to manage their health and well-being*
- transportation*
- assistance to live independently"*

The need to better coordinate and integrate mental health services has been recognised for a number of years through various Inquiries including the Legislative Assembly Social Policy Committee Report of the Inquiry into Mental Health Services in 1997. To support the well-being of people with mental illness and ensure their access to adequate and appropriate housing there needs to be a comprehensive strategy which ensures an integrated service model. The Turnaround program, managed by an Interdepartmental Management Committee including Office for Children Youth and Family Support, Department of Education and Training, Chief Minister's Department, Department of Disability, Housing and Community services, ACT Health, the Department of Justice and Community Safety, the Australian Federal Police and the Office of the Community Advocate is an interesting example of this approach. While it is particularly directed towards young people, the principles are transferable. It has pioneered new ways of agencies working together and has an inbuilt and funded evaluation strategy. The emphasis is on shared governance, a multi-disciplinary approach, common referral process supported by a cross-sectoral referral assessment panel and intensive case management. It allows the development of shared principles and practice across agencies and reduces the potential for complex clients to be lost in a fragmented system where ultimately no-one accepts responsibility.

Recommendation.

ACT Shelter recommends that the Committee gives consideration to the development of an integrated service model, such as that which underpins the Turnaround Project, for people living with mental illness.

The harsh reality is most people who are in poverty for any reason in Canberra are going to be in serious trouble in terms of accessing secure, affordable and appropriate accommodation. Without this base people are unlikely to be able to deal with the issues which confront them, whether they be related to mental illness, health, disability, lack of education/employment, social dislocation, abuse, domestic violence, family break-down or cultural disadvantage.

ACT Shelter urges the Committee to keep a watching brief on any agreed to recommendations which come out of this Inquiry. There are two key issues of concern which must be urgently addressed, the general lack of affordable housing in Canberra and the need to properly and appropriately support people living with mental illness to live safely in a home of their choice.

The first issue requires a whole of government and community response. The private market is failing to provide for people on low income, and Housing ACT is clearly struggling to even maintain current stock let alone increase it. The Affordable Housing Taskforce was established to address this social failure and its recommendations have not been adequately progressed.

The second issue requires improvement in the integration of services as much as it requires increased resources. It also requires a recognition that practice must be based on evidence and be geared towards maximising the well-being of people living with mental illness and their carers. This approach recognises there must be choices and not just one "right way" to deal with the challenges of living with mental illness. Central to achieving this is the full involvement of consumers and carers at all stages of policy and practice development as well as at all stages of evaluation and service improvement/complaints responses.

Recommendation

ACT Shelter recommends that people living with mental illness and carers are included in the development all policies programs and evaluative processes.

Kerrie Tucker
ACT Shelter
GPO Box 927
Canberra
ACT 2601
62473727
actshe@atrax.net.au