



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE  
Mr Alistair Coe MLA, Mrs Vicki Dunne MLA, Ms Tara Cheyne MLA,  
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA, Ms Caroline Le Couteur MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

COVID-19 pandemic response

**Submission Number: 013**

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5 June 2020

The Committee Secretary  
Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response  
Legislative Assembly for the ACT  
GPO Box 1020  
Canberra ACT 2601  
via email only: [LACommitteeCOVID19@parliament.act.gov.au](mailto:LACommitteeCOVID19@parliament.act.gov.au)

Dear Committee Secretary,

**RE: PARSA submission to inquiry**

The ANU Postgraduate and Research Students' Association (PARSA) is the democratically elected representative body for all postgraduate students at ANU. Our membership is comprised of over half the total students at ANU, or approximately 10,000 postgraduate students. PARSA exists to ensure the interests of postgraduates at ANU, namely through representing postgraduate student rights and welfare. A huge number of our members are international students.

There have been many incredibly positive changes made by the ACT Government in response to COVID-19 that have benefitted our community. These include the establishment of a fund for temporary visa holders in the ACT, the recent changes to the Residential Tenancies Act, the establishment of the Jobs for Canberra Fund, and the extension of COVID-19 related public health services to temporary visa holders.

Unfortunately, however, this crisis has exposed some of the worst behaviour of real estate agents and landlords when it comes to treatment of their tenants. While the government has brought in changes that theoretically protect tenants from eviction, and incentivised landlords to reduce rent in the form of land tax credit, these measures are not enough to protect tenants from some appalling behaviour. Students have experienced terrible, and sometimes illegal, behaviour from landlords and property managers in this time of crisis. This is especially the case for international students. Landlords and property managers often rely on the tenant not knowing how, or not being able, to bring these issues to ACAT. These behaviours include (but are not limited to):

1. Decreasing rent temporarily but marking tenant as being in arrears (and therefore affecting their ability to rent in future)
2. Bullying tenants into moving out and breaking their leases (effectively evicting, but doesn't look like that on paper) and keeping their bonds
3. Requiring tenants to be responsible for paying rent for others who have moved out when the tenants are on separate leases
4. Renting out other spaces in the house like living rooms
5. Asking for huge bodies of proof before processing any request for rent reduction (such as asking tenants to declare whether they have applied to access superannuation)
6. Suggesting that people access their superannuation to pay rent and/or refusing rent decreases if they won't
7. Refusing to respond to emails or calls about housing stress in a reasonable timeline
8. Entering the premises without gaining prior consent and giving adequate notice
9. Threatening eviction as soon as the moratorium has lifted
10. Refusing to return bonds and not responding to complaints about bond refunds



#### 11. Renting out a room that is being paid for by a student who is overseas and couldn't return

We have received many anecdotal reports of this behaviour to date, and we are currently conducting research into the prevalence of these issues. Students in Canberra are currently vulnerable and at risk of homelessness, and there are further changes needed to the Residential Tenancies Act, which can swiftly be implemented through Section 156, that will better protect us.

In addition to the recommendations made by the Tenant's Union ACT in their submission dated 28 April 2020, which we wholeheartedly support, we recommend these further changes:

1. Establish a service similar to the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria to provide dispute resolution services in the case of a rent reduction negotiation, **with the power to make a binding dispute resolution order.**
2. Create explicit guidelines about what proof of financial hardship can be asked of tenants which is limited to income, expenses (without asking for copies of bills or bank statements) and proof of change of income such as a separation certificate
3. An extension to the eviction moratorium
4. The provision for fines to be issued to landlords or property managers who breach the terms of the lease (e.g. entering the premises without sufficient notice or permission, renting out other spaces in the home) or do not respond to requests in a reasonable timeline
5. Legislation that waives the right to compensation for landlords when tenants are leaving a property due to proven financial hardship

The changes above are necessary to ensure that some of the most vulnerable members of Canberra society are not driven into poverty and homelessness.

PARSA is grateful to the Select Committee for the opportunity to provide submissions and would welcome the opportunity to provide further input on these important issues. Should you have any questions in relation to the above, please do not hesitate to contact us on

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**Elena Sheard**

Vice President

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