



Ms Grace Concannon  
Secretary  
Standing Committee on Health, Community and Social Services  
ACT Legislative Assembly Secretariat

*18 November 2011*

To the Standing Committee on Health, Community and Social Services,

On behalf of the Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition), I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Health, Community and Social Services, (the Committee) for the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry into the Provision of Social Housing in the ACT (the Inquiry).

### **About the Youth Coalition of the ACT**

The Youth Coalition is the peak youth affairs body in the ACT. Comprised of 100 members, programs, and individuals the Youth Coalition is responsible for representing and promoting the interests and wellbeing of young people aged 12 to 25 years and those who work with them.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

The Youth Coalition is represented on many ACT Government advisory structures and provides advice to the ACT Government on youth issues, along with providing information to youth services about policy and program matters.

A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions for young people and youth services. The Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT.

### **Response to the Inquiry**

The Youth Coalition has reviewed the Terms of Reference, and commends the Committee on seeking feedback from the community on such an important issue in the ACT.

This submission is one of many made over a fourteen year period by the Youth Coalition and is based on the following:

- The policy positions outlined in the *Youth Coalition Policy Platform*;
- The views of participants of the Youth Coalition's Biennial Policy Forum;
- The issues raised at consultations on the 2011/12 ACT Government Budget;
- The issues raised at consultation on the 2009 – 2014 Young People's Plan;
- Previous Youth Coalition submissions to the ACT Government;
- One-on-one consultations with member services and organisations; and,
- Current and topical research on youth affairs.

The Youth Coalition will be making direct comment on key points in the Inquiry Terms of Reference, as well as addressing broader issues relating to social housing in the ACT.

Housing is one of the fundamental determinants of the wellbeing of young people, and should be given extremely high importance in any government policy development. Safe and stable housing is also a basic human right. These human rights are protected by a number of international human rights treaties, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As a party to these treaties, Australia is under both legal and moral obligations to promote, protect and realise the human rights of all people.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these treaties and an ACT Human Rights Charter, many young people in Canberra still experience housing stress or homelessness. On any given night in Canberra, data indicates that 1,364 people are homeless. 60% of those people are under 25 years of age. Whilst the topic of youth homelessness can invoke images of 'street kids', many homeless young people are invisible. 47% live with relatives and family, or even complete strangers, often couch surfing, while another 47% are in boarding houses or refuges. Of particular concern is that 22% of all the homeless people recorded in Canberra are under the age of 12.<sup>2</sup>

Many young people report difficulty gaining entry to the private rental market in the ACT, due to cost, availability and discrimination. The Youth Coalition argues that more work needs to be done by the ACT Government in the area of housing affordability, and supporting young people to rent privately.

#### **Terms of Reference Item 1:**

#### **The findings of the 2011 ACT Ombudsman's Report in relation to the ACT Housing priority housing waiting list, *Assessment of an Application for Priority Housing*, June 2011**

In principle, the Youth Coalition agrees with the recommendations of the ACT Ombudsman's Report. In particular, we agree that any housing assessment must take into account public tenants' vulnerabilities such as anxiety, limited literacy and numeracy

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2008) Homelessness is a Human Right

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) Counting the Homeless Report, Australian Government, Canberra

skills and judgement and decision making skills in some instances (e.g. disability). This makes it imperative that housing applicants' right to appeal is clearly spelled out and their options explained if they are not happy with a decision or wish for their application to be re-assessed. In particular, this may involve staff members taking initiative to point out these avenues to the client, rather than purely relying on factsheets and other written policies. The Youth Coalition supports a centralised service that would be responsible for this, but would recommend that time is taken to provide the appropriate training to its staff to ensure that the needs of clients are taken into account during the referral and assessment process.

#### **Terms of Reference Item 2:**

##### **The demand for social housing including an examination of the current waiting lists and eligibility criteria for priority and high needs housing.**

The Youth Coalition has some concerns relating to the referral of young people by agencies. The requirement for a young person to be a client of a service in order to be put on the waiting list is disempowering, and forces young people into a cycle of need. Young people should have the opportunity to access social housing independently – this would require application information to be more readily and easily accessible.

There is also confusion around whether ACT Housing sees its role as a 'human service'. This confusion leads to applicants highlighting negative circumstances in order to be classified in the highest level of need possible. As there are restrictions on the number of people permitted on the waiting list, organisations may be tempted to exaggerate a client's negative circumstances in their support letter in order to gain access to housing. This also increases the risk of setting them up to fail, or not realistically being suitable for the property they are given.

The Youth Coalition would recommend that ACT Housing make it very clear what the criteria is for each level of need and detail to potential applicants the steps they must take to gain access to each level. Also, potential applicants must be encouraged to apply for housing and be given appropriate feedback as to how their application may progress up the chain to a higher level of classification. If the client is not seen as suitable for public housing, they must be given advice as to what other alternatives are available.

#### **Terms of Reference Item 3:**

##### **The management of waiting lists, innovative strategies to reduce waiting lists and the development of the Social Housing Register (the new centralised waiting list for social housing in the ACT).**

The Youth Coalition believes that the fastest way to reduce the waiting list is to provide more public housing. However, other strategies include faster processing of applications, and providing relevant personal development and training to applicants on the waiting list, such as living skills. This would encourage clients to remain positive and hopeful about their prospects and keep developing practical skills while they are waiting. In a best-case scenario, this type of training may abrogate their need to remain on the waiting list, therefore freeing up space for other applicants.

The distinction between the housing and homelessness sector is also important, as crisis housing will always be necessary. This needs to be available within much shorter

timeframes.

The complexities and issues faced by young people experiencing homelessness are still in need of more attention. For many young people, simply providing a place to live is insufficient to addressing the root causes of homelessness, and does not always end the potential pathways to homelessness in later life. Issues such as mental health, employment, education, alcohol and other drug use can be barriers to stable housing. There remains a need for more early intervention services that are able to best address these issues, whilst also being able to coordinate to meet the needs of the client.

**Terms of Reference Item 4:**

**The current range, availability and suitability of social housing stock, including new models of social housing (such as the intentional village model designed for people with a disability and sustainable housing models) and any financial implications.**

The Youth Coalition commends the ACT Government for its increased level of public housing stock being built in recent years. However, many young people remain homeless and much more is needed to address this need. The new range of housing models such as 2 and 3 bedroom houses must house tenants with an appropriate level of skills in order to maintain their tenancy. For example, group living can be challenging at the best of times, and young people must possess negotiation and problem-solving skills, as they are integral in the maintenance of personal relationships in a functioning household. There must be support and strategies in place to deal with a breakdown in communication or tenancy.

The Youth Coalition is looking forward to the ongoing implementation of the foyer-like program 'Our Place'. It is important to evaluate the effectiveness of new programs like this, and allow for the specific needs of clients to be addressed in the context of the needs of the ACT region. In particular we appreciate the opportunity for young people to live in brand new houses, as well as linking their tenancy to education and employment. There is a need for evaluation of models and local context, and the active involvement of young people in this process of design, planning and evaluating policy and service delivery.

For many young people, living out of home for the first time can be an extremely difficult, as they may lack the necessary living skills, experience isolation and feel disconnected from their peers. Innovative, responsive and evidence-based models of supporting young people through various transitions, such as from experiencing homelessness to crisis accommodation, to supported medium term housing to independent living, are needed to ensure these transitions are successful.

**Terms of Reference Item 6:**

**The needs of social housing managers and all social housing tenants, including but not limited to: current tenants; prospective tenants including those on waiting lists; and people socially and geographically affected by social housing allocation.**

The Youth Coalition is concerned about various issues to do with the maintenance of public housing properties and the effect this has on young people. In particular, the safety of residents should be paramount in placing young people in housing properties.

This includes considering the demographics of the potential neighbourhood and providing appropriate lighting, locks and sealed windows.

With youth housing models moving towards young people being housed in shared accommodation, it is important to consider the impact of these changes on young people's capacity to attend education and the workplace. In addition, the changes to laws regarding the school leaving age in the ACT mean that young people need to be given the best opportunity to engage in learning. This requires housing close to libraries, schools, public transport routes and hubs. For example, the Youth Coalition's submission to the *Inquiry into the Accommodation Needs of Tertiary Students in the ACT June 2011*, highlighted the fact that young people engaged in education are often forced to sleep in their cars or at friends' houses due to the lack of options available. These students possess appropriate skills to maintain tenancies, however the lack of capacity of the housing sector forces them into poverty. A solution to this problem would be ensuring that young people have incentives and pathways into the private rental market, which would alleviate the pressure on the already over-utilised public housing waiting list.

Specific needs of certain groups of young people must be taken into account when being placed in housing properties. For example, young mothers need access to support, medical facilities, transport and local shops, as well as a property that is safe, quiet and has appropriate lighting and access.

The needs of young people exiting rehabilitation must be taken into account by providing them with every opportunity to succeed, and avoiding 'trouble spots' for crime and drugs. Attention needs to be paid to their development and personal circumstances such as work and school.

Young people's capacity to sustain tenancies relies on them possessing certain skills, classed as 'living skills'. These include skills such as cleaning, cooking, budgeting, maintenance and communication skills (such as assertiveness) required to negotiate and solve problems. It is important that these factors are taken into account when assessing young people's applications, and in giving them the best opportunity to demonstrate these skills whilst undertaking a tenancy.

The ability to maintain a tenancy is integral to their sense of community connectedness. Stability and support are required from around them in order to foster a neighbourhood that involves young people and allows them to contribute in their own ways. A strategy to address this could be the implementation of a sustaining tenancy program, or an expansion of the current Housing for Young People Program. This program is a positive way to increase young people's capacity to become independent and navigate the housing system. It would also provide consistent support and an integrated approach.

Young people require a certain standard of respect from ACT Housing managers when housed in a property. This includes an appropriate level of communication and standard of service from housing managers such as answering calls, returning calls in appropriate timeframes and being able to address enquiries. Housing residents also can expect maintenance requests to be actioned in appropriate timeframes.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on (02) 6247 3540 or [director@youthcoalition.net](mailto:director@youthcoalition.net) if you wish to discuss this letter further.

Sincerely,

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