

**Submission to:**

Standing Committee on Health,  
Community and Social Services

Email: [committees@parliament.act.gov.au](mailto:committees@parliament.act.gov.au)



**Submission to the Standing Committee on  
Health, Community and Social Services:  
*Provision of Social Housing in the ACT***

**Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc.**

**November 2011**

The Women's Centre for Health Matters 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.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

Submission to the Standing Committee on Health, Community and Social Services on the  
*Provision of Social Housing in the ACT*  
Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc.  
November 2011

*This document was prepared by WCHM Staff members*

*Enquiries on this submission may be directed to:*

Executive Director: Marcia Williams

[ed@wchm.org.au](mailto:ed@wchm.org.au)

PO Box 385, Mawson, ACT, 2607

Phone (02) 6290 2166

Facsimile (02) 6286 4742

[admin@whcm.org.au](mailto:admin@whcm.org.au)

[www.wchm.org.au](http://www.wchm.org.au)

## **Introduction**

The Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM) is a community-based organisation that works in the ACT and surrounding region to improve women's health and wellbeing.

WCHM believes that health is determined not only by biological factors, but by a broad range of social, environmental and economic factors known as the 'social determinants of health'. We acknowledge that the environment and life circumstances that each woman experiences have a direct impact on her health, and in many cases, women's poor health is rooted in social disadvantage. For these reasons, WCHM is committed to taking a whole-of-life and social approach to women's health that is also firmly situated within a human rights framework.

WCHM focuses on groups of women who experience disadvantage, social isolation and marginalisation (women with disabilities, institutionalised women, women living with mental health issues, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), and older women) and uses social research, community development, advocacy and health promotion to:

- Provide women with access to reliable and broad ranging health-related information which allows informed choices to be made about each woman's own health and wellbeing
- Advocate to influence change in health-related services to ensure responsiveness to women's needs

## **Response to the inquiry into the *Provision of Social Housing in the ACT***

WCHM welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee on the Provision of Social Housing in the ACT, and to support our responses with evidence published by the Centre and its partners on the specific needs of women living in the ACT and surrounding region. In writing this submission WCHM has chosen to limit its comments to those areas in which it has the most knowledge: ACT women's preferences, views and concerns.

As an organisation that works to make the views of women experiencing or at risk of experiencing disadvantage known, we are keen to ensure that the vision for social housing in the ACT represents the needs of our community's women, particularly those women who are most vulnerable. Housing is very important for women and their families and their health and wellbeing—not only can housing costs take up a high percentage of household budgets and cause significant financial stress, but the accessibility and quality of the housing we live in can influence our health and well being.<sup>1</sup> For example, housing affects women's access to vital services including health and wellbeing services, transport and education or work opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Selina Tually, Professor Andrew Beer, Dr Debbie Faulkner, *Too Big To Ignore - Future Issues for Australian Women's Housing 2006-2025*, AHURI, 2007, p. iii

## **Fair Social Housing for All**

*The Provision of Social Housing in the ACT Terms of Reference (TOR)* sets out six key areas of focus in preparation for development of policy and actions. The one key area of focus from this TOR that WCHM would like to comment on is 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*

## Homelessness and Social Housing

Although this public submission is about social housing, it is important to be clear how homelessness fits into this, and how this can impact on women and girls' health and wellbeing. The United Nations (UN) definition of homelessness includes two categories of people:

1. The absolute homeless—referring to those living on the streets, in emergency shelters or hostels
  
2. The relative homeless—referring to people who live in homes that do not meet basic UN standards. These standards include five essential requirements
  - a. Adequate protection from the elements
  - b. Access to safe water and sanitation
  - c. Affordable prices, secure tenure and personal safety
  - d. Proximity to employment, education
  - e. Access to Health care <sup>2</sup>

The second category outlining 'relative homelessness' provides a pertinent point to our input to this submission because of the high percentage of women of disadvantage in the ACT being excluded from housing due to unaffordable prices, insecure tenure and threats to personal safety.

## Poor Social Housing Support Links to Domestic Violence

A high emotional cost of entering and maintaining social housing (potentially resulting in increased stress or mental health issues) due to complicated systems, high costs and red tape may contribute to a rise in the incidence (and impact) of both violence against women in the home and homelessness.<sup>3</sup> Difficulty accessing appropriate and affordable housing may also impact on women's decisions not to leave homes in which they are experiencing

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<sup>2</sup> Fallis & Murray, 1990; Hulchanski et al., 1991 in Gloria Geller, PhD & Joanne Kowalchuk 2000, *Supportive Housing Needs Of Women with Mental Health Issues*, Social Policy Research Unit And the Regina YWCA, University of Regina, Canada, p.4

<sup>3</sup> Dr Selina Tually, Professor Andrew Beer, Dr Debbie Faulkner, *TOO BIG TO IGNORE Future Issues for Australian Women's Housing 2006-2025*, AHURI, 2007, p. iv

violence. This vulnerable group of women have specific needs that need to be considered with a sense of urgency by social housing managers when allocating social housing.

#### Affordability and Accessibility in Social Housing

For vulnerable women living in poverty or experiencing health conditions which place them at a disadvantage in the ACT, social housing needs to be affordable, assessable and provide adequate conditions to ensure a woman's already difficult situation is not perpetuated. Responding to these women's needs with social housing include:

- Ensuring considerations around physical access and proximity to health services and public transport
- Sufficient light in the public areas around the social housing
- Assurance of proximity to other people of the same age (in particular for older women) and to services
- Maintaining special consideration of placement of women on priority housing lists (for example those women who have experienced, or who are at risk of experiencing domestic violence and are at risk of absolute homelessness, and those transitioning from prison).

#### Supporting Vulnerable Women through Trained Staff

There are growing pockets of poverty and significant disadvantage amongst vulnerable groups of women in the ACT, including women with a disability, women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (especially refugees), women who are victims of violence in the home, women with care responsibilities, women living with mental health issues, older single women and women unable to secure long term employment.<sup>4</sup> In order to ensure these women who are tenants or potential tenants receive the most adequate support to break from their disadvantaged situation, sensitivity and directed training is needed for all social housing staff and advocates. Social housing managers, staff and their advocates should have extensive knowledge and understanding of the difficulties these women face when planning, sourcing potential tenants and occupying social housing in the ACT. This includes understanding the social and emotional impact of barriers to obtaining and maintaining social housing such as eligibility requirements and long waiting times.<sup>5</sup>

#### Accessible Information for Tenants and Prospective Tenants

WCHM advocates for the need for sensitivity around the life circumstances of disadvantaged women living in social housing - case managers and social housing staff need to be considerate and responsive to these needs in their planning and work. This includes having clear and simple information, support and procedural assistance around applying and requesting a review of social housing applications for women accessing social housing,

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<sup>4</sup> AIHW, *A Profile of Social Housing in Australia*, released 23 Sep 2010, accessed 14 November 2011, <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=6442468393>>

<sup>5</sup> WWD Australia 2008, *Shut Out, Hung Out, Left Out, Missing Out - Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) Submission in Response to the Australian Government's Green Paper on Homelessness*, accessed 3 November 2011, <<http://www.wwda.org.au/homesubjune08.htm>>

housing entrant requirements, housing rights for tenants and complaint procedures accessible to all women. Information should be presented in a manner that clearly advises the female applicant of the social housing applications procedures and is supportive of the new or returning applicant and their specific needs rather than being exclusive, bureaucratic and unclear.<sup>6</sup> Supporting this staff who handle complaints, reviews and requests for changes to their circumstances or file should have a focus on customer services versus housing compliance so that issues are resolved in a sensitive manner.

### **Recommendations**

1. Social housing needs to be affordable, assessable and provide adequate conditions to ensure a woman's already difficult situation is not perpetuated.
2. Social Housing staff and advocates needed to be trained up to understand the barriers facing vulnerable women that present for social housing
3. Information, including housing entrant requirements, housing rights for tenants and complaint procedures needs to be accessible for all women users, ensure women at risk of disadvantage or already disadvantaged women as considered when developing this information.

### **Conclusion**

Social housing in the ACT must remain affordable, accessible and consider women's specific and individual needs in a caring and supportive manner. Social Housing Managers and staff need to be trained in gender specific ways to ensure they understand the issues facing women living in, or at risk of, disadvantage in the ACT. This submission highlights issues disadvantaged women in the ACT experience in regards in social housing. WCHM looks forward to participating further in the *Provision of Social Housing* consultation process.

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<sup>6</sup> Allen Asher, ACT Ombudsman, *Assessment of an Application for Priority Housing*, Report Number 1, ACT Ombudsman – Housing, Canberra ACT, 2011.