

17 September 2021

To The Social Housing Regulation Review Panel,

RE: The Salvation Army Tenancy Plus Submission

The Salvation Army Western Metro Homelessness Tenancy Plus Program would like to submit feedback items to consider during this regulation review on social housing.

- **A review and update of both public and community policies and procedures.**
 - New RTA laws have occurred in March 2021. We believe that the policies and procedures need to be reviewed to account for the legislation changes.
 - Public and community housing has been grouped together under the social housing umbrella, but it does lead to confusion with clients due to the discrepancies in the policies and procedures between the two.
 - There is also a diverse way on how community housing providers functions and manage their properties due to the providers having different visions, missions, and approaches to their consumers. Therefore, when support agencies work with community housing renters the Tenancy Plus Support Workers find they need to research each community housing agency to ensure that they can communicate effectively to the provider and the renter.
 - There are more understanding and advocacy groups for public housing renters than community housing renters. The public housing renters has the Victorian Public Tenants Association where they can seek free information about tenancy issues.
 - Another discrepancy between public and social housing is that Tenancy Plus can seek brokerage funds from Support for High-Risk Tenancies Program but not for community housing properties.

- **Quality of Properties.**
 - When new renters are offered a social housing property some of them are from old stock which means the property can be out of date. Whichever property is offered to the individual or families; they will consider it their home base, where they will make most of the important decisions in their lives. If they feel that their home base is not safe the renters will not thrive which may put their housing at risk.
 - Also, some clients have advised that they do not invite friends or family over to their property because they are embarrassed by their home or due to the unsafe neighbourhood. This feeling can create isolation and hinders their link to the community. This can lead to poor property condition and can place the tenancy at risk.
 - Another possibility with lower quality of properties means that there may be a potential increase in renters requesting a priority transfer application.
 - It can also mean that there may be more maintenance requests which will costs the department more money.

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6/147 Harvester Road, Sunshine, VIC, 3020 | PO BOX 784 Sunshine, VIC, 3020

Phone: (03) 9313 4300 | Fax: (03) 9312 5573

www.salvationarmy.org.au

- Lastly, some renters have very complex needs and therefore involves specific accommodation requirements. Therefore, some older stock properties are not suitable for these complex people on the prioritisation list.
- **Review of Support** - The Homeless to Home (H2H) support model is fantastic where they will get two years of case management support where they can get assistance with establishing their tenancy and get connected into their community. However, what about those individuals who do not have the support of H2H case management?
 - The Tenancy Plus Programs are the service who can work alongside the social housing renters who have not gone through the H2H program. However, there is a lack of resources for Tenancy Plus with number of staff and funding. We have seen an increase in referrals for renters whose tenancy is already at risk. We have seen more notice to vacates and VCAT hearings occurring due to rental arrears. When we dive deeper into why those arrears are occurring the answers could have potentially been addressed if they had the support when they first established their tenancy. To aid the renters in having successful and maintained tenancies we should be coming from a proactive standpoint rather than a reactive standpoint.
 - What also needs to be looked at are the complex individuals who require additional, such as people who have a long history of homelessness and/or may be coming out of an institution. Some of these people may need to relearn or learn for the first-time basic living skills such as budgeting, cleaning the house, setting up utilities, getting to know the area. They will need a higher level of support.
- **Client based and housing-based worker collaboration**
 - We have noticed that the collaboration during home visit with renters between the social housing officers and tenancy plus workers create better outcomes. We relate this to the fact that the renter has someone who they know is client based and has the knowledge to explain and suggest options to avoid NTV's and breeches. They also get the housing perspective of why they are planning or thinking about serving a NTV or breach. This way both agencies have great communication of the issues, they renter hears the perspective of both parties, and there are no blurred lines between the roles of support workers and the housing officers.
- **Hoarding and squalor**
 - This issue has become more apparent over the last couple of years. There does need to be more understanding, regulations, and more funding to assist the individuals and families who live with a hoarding and squalor disorder. When working with these clients it is not a quick case management response. This is a deep-rooted issue that takes time and brokerage to assist these clients.
 - This can be a health, safety, and fire issue. The councils are breaching these individuals and fining them because the condition of their property is not in line with the council. The cleaning and disposing of items at the property can be very costly between \$5,000 to \$10,000 depending on the severity of the hoarding and squalor. The mental health supports costs can also be very high when they are seeking out support if there is no NDIS plan in place.

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- Tenancy Plus can seek brokerage funds from Support for High-Risk Tenancies Program to assist with hoarding and squalor payments but only for public housing not for community housing properties.

- **Maintenance**
 - The tender process needs to be evaluated. Many renters have been upset about the delay in getting the maintenance request fixed, how well the job is done, and the maintenance workers attitudes. Many clients have said the maintenance workers have been very rude and the renters have felt intimidated by some of the workers.
 - Another issue is that it clearly states in the maintenance policy at DFFH that the first option should be a band aid repair rather than replacement. In many cases if the replacement was considered as the first response, it would require follow up calls for further band aid repairs. This policy is ultimately costing the department more money and time to keep fixing the issue.
 - A huge barrier that has been noticed is when the renter's first language is not English. They struggle to call or write requests for maintenance. This language barriers raise the question of: how will they continue to have a successful tenancy one supports such as tenancy plus close? What information is given to the maintenance crew about language barriers?
 - The screening system and escalation process of maintenance requests also need to be reviewed. If a job is not being fixed what is the process to get it raised? Clients and support workers have spent hours waiting on the line to make their request with the maintenance office. Housing officers can raise a request, but it is still a very lengthy process.

Thank you for taking the time to read these feedback items. We look forward to following the process of this regulation review.

Sincerely,

The Salvation Army Tenancy Plus Program

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