

30th July, 2012

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Reforming housing assistance in Queensland
Housing Services
Department of Housing and Public Works
GPO Box 690
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To whom it may concern,

RE: Reforming Housing Assistance in Queensland

We are writing to express concern regarding the proposed *Reforming Housing Assistance in Queensland* reforms developed to address the social housing crisis in Queensland.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is the premier professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 20,000 members. Psychology is a discipline that systematically addresses the many facets of human experience and functioning at individual, family and societal levels.

From a psychological perspective, adequate safe and secure housing (tenure) provides a foundation for individuals and families to develop a sense of identity and belonging. It is essential to individual and community wellbeing. By contrast, not having a stable base (or home), denies people fundamental human right to shelter and safety, disrupts the connections they have with their family and communities and is associated with a sense of social exclusion and poor mental health and wellbeing.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) acknowledges the current crisis in housing affordability, social and public housing availability and the challenges associated with appropriately responding to this crisis. We commend the Queensland Government for recognising this as a priority issue and exploring a range of options to address housing and homelessness.

We are concerned however that the range of proposed options (such as introducing fixed-term tenancies, getting tougher on those who 'abuse it' (social housing), addressing under-occupancy and identifying undeclared household members) unfairly target an already disadvantaged and vulnerable group (public housing tenants). These proposed reforms may exacerbate existing mental health issues and do not recognise the important role of housing for individual health and wellbeing.

Indigenous people, young people, migrant and refugee communities, single parent families and those who have experienced family violence are known to be over represented in public housing, insecure housing, and among those who are homeless. A significant number of public housing residents experience mental health issues, and those without secure housing are likely to have multiple and complex needs which usually include several of the following: chronic ill-health, mental health issues, acquired brain injury, mild intellectual disability, externalising behaviour problems, history of

chronic substance abuse, and social isolation with few if any family supports. We are concerned that the proposed measures could exacerbate these existing conditions as well as compromise future mental health by creating uncertainty about housing tenure and taking away residents' decision making ability regarding their housing options.

Housing is about more than shelter. It provides a sense of stability, belonging and is associated with access to services and supports. Research has shown that access to permanent independent housing for people who are homeless and have a mental illness is linked to increased residential stability and participation in treatment services. Similarly, evidence suggests that maintaining a connection to existing school and community reduces the impact of homelessness among families.

In relation to older residents, the Productivity Commission highlights the importance of ageing in place as a broader concept of supporting older Australians to remain in their place of residence of choice with available health, psychological, social and environmental support. Research with older residents has specifically found that they have a strong desire to 'Age in Place', which means living independently in the community, in their existing home; that they usually express satisfaction with their current home and its location; and that access to familiar local medical, health services, transport and community facilities is important.

Specifically in regard to the use of existing space, while current measures point to high rates of 'spare rooms' or excess space, older residents themselves are rarely likely to identify 'excess rooms or space'; rather they have been found to make use of this space in ways that are crucially related to their health and wellbeing.

For example, older people spend more time in their home than younger working counterparts and use their home for part-time work, hobbies, and pastimes. Spare bedrooms are often used to accommodate temporary residents or visiting family and friends - particularly people with family overseas. So housing becomes even more important to people as they age, and space is used for a range of other activities important for positive and active ageing.

Any proposed measure to target under-occupancy therefore, needs to understand housing utilisation and the social and cultural contexts within which housing is linked to health and wellbeing. This includes taking into account the various ways in which older residents utilise their spare rooms, and ensuring that older residents remain in age-friendly communities, that is they are close to public transport, facilities and services, and maintain links with their existing community/neighbourhood.

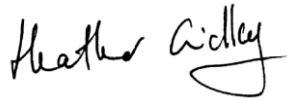
The APS commends the recent announcement by Minister Flegg (10 July) that public housing tenants will not be forced to share their homes. If the Government continues to explore the option of shared tenancies however, ongoing and genuine engagement must occur with those affected by the changes. Standards, such as those stated in the NSW Government's Accreditation Standards Manual, should be developed that clearly define and identify under-occupancy and develop strategies to manage this - with the underlying principle being that any instances (of relocation) would require the tenants full, informed consent and be totally voluntary.

There is a pressing need for reforms to address homelessness and improve social housing, and to develop flexible, intensive, long term and innovative responses. It is important however, that these responses acknowledge that access to housing and secure tenure is a human right, that housing is inextricably linked to health and wellbeing and that already vulnerable people should not be further disadvantaged in any reforms.

The APS encourages the Queensland Government to explore innovative models that would improve the supply of quality public housing, as key to housing reforms.

If you wish to discuss this further please feel free to contact me on (03) 8662 3327 or h.gridley@psychology.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Heather Gridley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'H' and a long, sweeping underline.

Heather Gridley
Manager, Public Interest