



Australasian **Housing** Institute

MARCH 2007

Housing PEOPLE

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Social Housing Allocations seminars come to Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide

The AHI is pleased to present Dr Kath Hulse of Swinburne University of Technology, and Director of the Swinburne-Monash AHURI Research Centre in a half-day seminar for housing professionals. In these informative sessions she will share her experience and findings from her recent research, which involved the review of allocations policies and practices in the Australian social housing sector, comprising public housing, community housing and an emerging affordable housing sector.

Dates have been confirmed for Melbourne (17 April), Sydney (1 May) and Adelaide (5 June) — with other locations to be advised.

Social housing allocations systems, policies and practices are a hot topic for policy makers and social housing professionals. What we do and how we do it can have a major impact, not only on individuals, but also on the broader communities. Decisions about allocations can affect individuals wanting housing assistance, the communities in which social housing tenants live, communities poorly served by social housing and, of course, social housing workers going about their day-to-day work.

Social housing organisations are implementing major changes now, such as tightening the eligibility criteria and increased targeting of limited housing resources to those in greatest need. Additional policy and practice changes are proposed or in the research phase.

For more details, venue and registration info for these seminars please visit our website at:
www.housinginstitute.org.



Dr Kath Hulse of Swinburne University of Technology, and
Director of the Swinburne-Monash AHURI Research Centre

YOUR OPINIONS

In this edition of *Housing People* we introduce a new column, giving members the opportunity to express their opinions about social housing policy and practice issues. We first of all turn our attention to the negotiation of a new **Commonwealth State Housing Agreement in Australia**.

Eleri Morgan-Thomas – National Manager of Community Services, Mission Australia. These are her private views.



"There has to be a continued commitment from Commonwealth and State to housing. The next Commonwealth State Housing Agreement is our opportunity to think outside the square.

Many of us who have worked in housing for decades have been passionate about our support for government support for public, and latterly community, housing.

We've argued for government investment in bricks and mortar, we've done the numbers. We've even got the Industry (Productivity) Commission to argue for public housing as being economically rational. Increasingly our arguments have fallen on deaf ears.

Governments of all persuasions are no longer interested in the growth or even maintenance of public housing. It's as much a rejection of "the welfare state" as it is a disinclination to spend on bricks and mortar.

Rising interest rates and emerging pressures in the private rental market are starting to cut through. Public opinion is starting to establish a need for greater government involvement in finding a solution to high housing unaffordability for renters and purchasers. It is both gratifying and distressing to see housing on the front pages of the newspapers.

This new found crisis is both an opportunity and a necessity for us to think differently about how governments can take leadership in housing and to continue to invest. But this is the time to change our tactics. Even if we could convince governments to invest in capital, the cost and time taken to deliver sufficient quantities would be too great a barrier.

The next CSHA could provide an opportunity. It could be a vehicle to fund market based strategies to increase the supply of affordable housing for low income earners. At the very least, we should investigate the possibilities of taking a new (and brave) approach. Maybe it's time to be pragmatic and at the very least, to seriously look at market based alternatives.

A quiet moment with Paul Vevers

Deputy Director General of NSW Department of Housing

Paul Vevers is typical of many of his colleagues working in Social Housing. He's passionate about public service and understands what it takes to be in service to his community. "I enjoy my job enormously", says Paul, "and in particular, the impact I can have on the development of strategies to improve public service. There are many career opportunities in the current market, but most of us choose public service because we enjoy exactly that; being involved in serving the public!"

Paul officially took over the role in December 2006, however he has been Acting Deputy Director General for over a year now. Prior to this, he was the General Manager of the Sydney Region, the GM of Northern NSW, and Acting Executive Director of Policy and Strategy — all jobs that have allowed him to test his mettle in the areas of policy development, core performance and service delivery.

"I've had a few mentors and role models during the span of my career, mainly the high calibre Directors General that I've had the good fortune to work with and a range of colleagues. It's always interesting and enlightening to observe how they have achieved results and progress; it's a tremendous opportunity to work on strategies for improving one's own style. Yes, I must say, great bosses have made a difference in the way I now work today.

"I have found that in the more senior management roles, the differences in status are small, and that the whole organisation is so much more effective if the executive works as a team. When there are lots of day-to-day pressures it isn't always easy to put aside the time to develop that team work, but without it, the organisation works in silos, which can result in duplication and internal tensions, which consume a lot of unproductive time.

"We presently have a good group of middle managers who will succeed into senior roles down the track. We have been putting effort into giving them career opportunities. What we are looking for now is the front line staff who will move into the middle management roles.

"We've been doing things like working with the AHL on tailor-made professional development courses. These will broaden the skills of our front-line people

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Paul Vevers, Deputy Director General of NSW Department of Housing

enabling them to take on management roles. It's not only professional development that we are looking at with these courses, ultimately, its strategies across the board that will assist in improving core service delivery performance.

"My present role has a combined challenge in leading a significant program of change. These are improving service delivery and improving core performance. The sorts of issues that we are dealing with are service

delivery policy changes, time limited tenure, charges for water consumption, and new services assisting clients into the private rental sector. We have introduced telephone access to some of our services, including financial assistance for the private rental market over the phone.

"As of December 1, 2006, there has been a significant improvement in service with the implementation of a service delivery call-back program. We are now making 260,000 outbound calls to tenants following up on repair and maintenance delivery as part of the initiative that will have a major impact on the quality of service delivery in the future. Not only are we improving the performance of our contractors, we are improving service to our tenants. We've had tremendous feedback so far, as the tenants are experiencing a caring attitude to their needs.

"Part of a responsive and efficient social housing system includes assisting people into the private sector. Right now we are working with the 'people barriers' to the private sector. The problems are not always dollar-based, sometimes it's more a matter of assisting someone in presenting well to real estate agents, and understanding what they have to do to sustain a tenancy. The bottom line is that if we can provide some practical assistance for a tenant moving into the private rental market, they get choice and it takes the pressure off the social housing system.

"Part of our operational policy changes includes working with Community Housing to improve access. People in need of housing, often in housing stress, cannot be expected to work out how to get access to a range of different housing providers. The challenge for all of us in social housing is to deliver an access system which is easy to understand and use for people in housing stress and make sure our resources are used effectively to help people most in need."

ASBOs and Australia – Anti-social behaviour, housing and the law (1/2 day seminar - University of Tasmania, HOBART)

Friday, 31 August 2007, 12.00-4.30pm

Judy Nixon (Principal Lecturer in Studies into Anti-Social Behaviour, UK)

Michele Slatter (Flinders, School of Law)

Caroline Hunter (Senior Lecturer in Housing Law)

An event for housing professionals, policymakers, police and legal workers, this event will consider the use and application of socio-legal instruments, including Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), in the UK and developments in Australia.

Cost including lunch: AHJ members are entitled to a discounted rate of \$200. Non-member rate: \$400.

For more details and to book a place please visit www.utas.edu.au/sociology/HACRU/



South Australia's Sally Langton tells us her housing story

Sally Langton is Executive Director of Housing Spectrum, managing community housing for people with disabilities. This is her personal story, written not only as a reflection, but also as an opportunity for social housing professionals to reflect on the future of affordable housing for all Australians.

"I've always been interested in houses. As a small child I memorized every house on the way to and from school and imagined what they might look like inside. I used to imagine the floor plans and the back yard, who lived there and what they did inside. I had favorite houses and the houses I hated. Some I would imagine painted different colours and would transform them into beautiful buildings in my imagination. Little did I know that this passion and interest would inform my career many years later.

Even though I had lots of different jobs after I left school, the 'housing bug' didn't bite until I joined a Housing Co-operative in the mid 80's. I was hooked, all my interests from those formative years took hold and I was involved in designing, building and administering co-op housing outcomes. I developed a passion for design, affordable housing options, security for people on low incomes and an interest in the homeless and those disadvantaged in the housing market.

I completed some studies, worked with disadvantaged youth, homeless people and in crisis intervention and emergency assistance. Wherever I worked, housing loomed as the most pressing and stressful issue for most of my clients. And while housing was emerging as a passion for me, so too was my commitment to working with the most disadvantaged people in our community; those who were poor, homeless, sick, disabled or with a mental illness. I can't begin to describe how working with these people has enriched my life and driven me to make a career commitment to work in the sectors of housing, disability and mental health.

To say that my working life has been varied is no understatement, but every step has led to improved knowledge and experience. One of the most confronting experiences of my life was managing a Supported Residential Facility. Working with societies' most forgotten, overlooked individuals, who lived in terrible conditions and had health and mental health issues that were largely being untreated or ignored.

My ultimate ambition was to work in housing and mental health, so I applied to the SA Housing Trust to gain some experience in working for a large social

housing provider. Here I took my time to learn about housing management systems, service delivery and asset management within a large social housing system. Two years later, Housing Spectrum advertised for an Executive Director. I was ready to take the leap and actually manage social housing for people with disabilities. I am passionate about what I do; I 'think' housing all the time; buildings, vacancies, waiting lists, tenants, acquisitions, the politics of housing locally and nationally. I love my job and I love our tenant group.

My job is certainly not an easy job. Sometimes the lack of resources, our long waiting list, inflexible systems and the dreadful despair our tenants and applicants face really bring me down. But every day someone creates a moment of joy and light relief in my work. Mostly it's the tenants, but my team also make me laugh and between them and the tenants they keep me believing in why I am here.

I sometimes despair over the future of housing for those Australian's who can't afford to buy their own home. I wonder what solutions will be available and how ordinary Australians, let alone the disadvantaged, will fare in the years to come. I take heart that housing is now moving back onto the political and economic map, and I want to be a part of the debate and movement toward fair and affordable housing outcomes for all.

I often say that any government that fails to put affordable and social housing squarely on their agenda will be committing political suicide. But if our colleagues in government fail to accept this challenge I will be out there finding other solutions to the issues. I have seen over and over again the value that good housing outcomes add to people's lives. I have no end of 'success' stories I can share and I really believe that appropriate and affordable shelter is critical in reducing social cost, building community, increasing participation and restoring dignity to the most vulnerable people in our community. Housing is a human right and it is this declaration that inspires and motivates me to keep working for housing outcomes for people who can't fight for their rights or are so invisible that no one thinks to fight for them."

Fran Dodson talks to us about managing rent arrears

Fran Dodson, Team Leader, Moree, had a strong background in arrears management when she became a Team Leader seven years ago, but conveying this philosophy to the team was one of her first priorities.

She had to get clear about what the issues were. "Understanding the culture behind the attitude that rent arrears is acceptable practice, to not only the tenants, but to us, as providers, was my first step." Fran's words are that she "stumbled into accuracy" in her career path and her background ensured she knew exactly what needed to be done. Her challenge was in sharing that vision with her team.

"My agenda has been to fully communicate WHY rent arrears are not acceptable if we are to continue to provide housing for our tenants. Essentially we operate as a business; we are in the business of providing housing. In order to maintain our assets and run a viable operation, which includes paying wages and providing maintenance on our properties, we need to get the rent in – on time. It's my job to communicate and share the bigger picture with my team," says Fran.

Fran continues: "It's also about understanding that we are not doing our tenant's any favors by allowing them to fall into debt. History tells us that if we don't take appropriate action, in a rental arrears situation; which includes direct contact with the tenant, and then have to continue to eviction, they experience shock, and then quite often will feel betrayed because we haven't communicated clearly enough the consequences of non-payment of rent. Good practice suggests that we

maintain open lines of communication in order to sustain the tenancy. Providing support by determining what the blockages are to paying the rent goes a long way in this process. Maybe we can help by providing referrals to other agencies. Sometimes just getting an understanding of what's going on in a household can make a difference."

Moree rental arrears have gone from \$219.20 per tenant in July 2001 to \$26.20 per tenant in April 2006. In that time the team has worked on developing team professionalism, expertise and stability. Fran and her team have increased productivity by managing arrears proactively rather than reactively.

In May last year, the Director-General Mike Allen, launched the first Operations Showcase Workshop in Ashfield. Good practice examples were put forward by client service teams from across the state of NSW. Fran Dodson was there to share her challenges and experiences in Arrears Management.



Upcoming events: Diary dates

April

Working with complex and demanding clients	4 April	Sydney
Social Housing Allocations seminar	17 April (am)	Melbourne
Working with complex and demanding clients	17 April	Brisbane

May

Social Housing Allocations seminar	1 May (am)	Sydney
Working with complex and demanding clients	16 May	Hobart
Working with complex and demanding clients	17 May	Melbourne
Working with complex and demanding clients	23 May	Auckland
Working with complex and demanding clients	24 May	Wellington