

INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AND LOW-COST RENTAL ACCOMMODATION

Organisation: UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families
Name: Ms Clare Blakemore
Position: Policy Officer - Social Justice, Partnerships & Communication
Telephone: 02 9407 3219
Date received: 19/03/2009

**Submission to: The Parliament of New South Wales
Standing Committee on Social Issues**

Inquiry into homelessness and low-cost rental accommodation

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into homelessness and low-cost rental accommodation. An effective service delivery system to address the issues of homelessness, housing supply and housing affordability will be based on a continuum of care that spans from prevention and early intervention services to supported accommodation options and low-cost rental accommodation.

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UCCYPF) is a service group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT and is part of the community services work of the Uniting Church of Australia. Our concerns for social justice and the needs of children, young people and families who are disadvantaged inform the way we serve and represent people and communities. UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families is made up of UnitingCare Burnside, UnitingCare Unifam and UnitingCare Harris Community Centre. Together these organisations form one of the largest providers of services to support children and families in NSW.

UnitingCare Burnside's services include wrap-around crisis and support services for children, young people and families at risk of homelessness in Dubbo, the Central Coast and South West Sydney. We deliver three Reconnect programs in NSW that aim to prevent family breakdown and youth homelessness by providing support, advocacy and mediation for young people and their families where the young person is homeless or at risk of homelessness. We are the sole provider in NSW of the pilot HOME Advice Program (Habitat) operating in Wyong on the Central Coast. We also run The Drum Youth Resource Centre in South West Sydney which is currently working with other homelessness service providers in the region to develop a comprehensive place-based approach to supporting children and young people who are at risk of homelessness. Our Family Centre in North Campbelltown has also been working closely with the Minto community during the redevelopment of the public housing estate.

UCCYPF welcomes the Federal Government's White paper on homelessness, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* and will support any commitment by the NSW Government to implement the White paper's strategies. These strategies include providing support alongside housing, developing early intervention projects, and increasing government investment in housing. We strongly support the goal to reduce the numbers of children and young people who exit into homelessness from out of home care and the White paper's focus on the impact of homelessness on children's well-being and life outcomes.

UCCYPF acknowledges the Commonwealth and state governments' work on the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). The NAHA is a key opportunity to unify and strengthen the roles of the State in expanding the numbers of affordable housing units and reducing the overall number of households that are experiencing housing stress. We believe that improving outcomes through the NAHA for people who are homeless or are at

risk of homelessness also requires resources for a broad mix of prevention and early intervention services.

In order to most effectively introduce the strategies in the White Paper and the NAHA, the government must consult with the non-government organisations in developing an implementation plan. Non-government organisations will play a key role in the delivery of a broad range of services across the continuum of the housing and homelessness service system. The experiences and voices of services users should be heard during the planning and implementation process and the non-government sector is well placed to ensure that service users are involved in consultation.

This submission focuses on the importance of a continuum of care for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This continuum needs to be a comprehensive network of services designed to meet the needs of people, including children, young people and families, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Please see Attachment One for a diagram of a continuum of care service system.

This submission responds to:

- Term of reference a. models of low cost rental housing outside of mainstream public housing, including but not limited to co-operative housing and community housing
- Term of reference e. strategies to avoid concentrations of disadvantage and grow cohesive communities

Term of reference a. models of low cost rental housing outside of mainstream public housing, including but not limited to co-operative housing and community housing

There are a number of alternatives to public housing spread across the continuum of care, particularly where the aim is to support people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. As outlined in the White Paper, low-cost rental accommodation is only one element in a suite of services required to provide the necessary support for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

For young people, it is important that services include both support and accommodation across the service system. This must include prevention and early intervention services, crisis support and accommodation, transitional and semi-independent support and accommodation and low-cost rental housing. From this point of view, low-cost rental housing is better placed to be a stepping stone to permanent, stable and independent living for young people.

A successful supported accommodation model for young people that is worth consideration by the NSW government is the Foyer model. The Foyer model, as discussed in the White Paper, provides accommodation and support to young people who agree to participate in education, training or employment. It is an example of effective housing for disadvantaged young people who need support to maintain their accommodation. However, the Foyer model is effective only to the extent of the individual's commitment to change, therefore it is not appropriate for all young people.

If the Foyer model is introduced as a form of supported accommodation for young people in NSW, it must be within the broader continuum of care alongside other prevention and

early intervention services, crisis, transitional and semi-independent support and accommodation services and low-cost accommodation options for young people.

Term of reference e. strategies to avoid concentrations of disadvantage and grow cohesive communities

Long-term policies of broad-acre public housing have been identified by researchers and government as contributing to inter-generational disadvantage and social exclusion. It is believed by post-war urban town planning theorists that creating neighbourhoods which do not cater to a mixed socio-economic demographic increases the 'concentration of disadvantage'. This concentration is perceived to create a feedback loop for poor outcomes in education, workforce participation and other indicators of social disadvantage such as domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse. Professor Tony Vinson's research on locational disadvantage, *Dropping Off The Edge: The Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia* 2007, provides insight into the multiple risk factors that may exist in Australia's most disadvantaged communities. These concentrations have led to the move in Australia and the UK to redevelop public housing with a more balanced 'social mix'.

We recognise that the NSW Government seeks to address the social issues in certain public housing communities through its reforms such as *Reshaping Public Housing 2005* and *A New Direction in Building Stronger Communities 2007-2010*. Strategies in these reforms aim to break up public housing estates and create a more balanced social mix of private and public housing in these communities. However, these reforms also narrow the eligibility for public housing to those people 'most in need'. The reforms create a tension between the targeting of resources to those people with the greatest need while also seeking to reduce the overall 'concentrations of disadvantage' within particular communities. To reduce overall concentrations of disadvantage requires a broader approach than reducing the overall numbers of public housing units in a community. It will also include 'social inclusion' strategies to ensure that all residents can participate in the social and economic life of the community.

A recent example of public housing redevelopment is the Minto Renewal Project. The aim of this project is to create a mix of public and private housing in the Minto area. This involves rehousing the majority of public housing residents from Minto to neighbouring areas. Consultation with our service providers in the Minto area has indicated that before the area was redeveloped due to the 'concentration of disadvantage', community members felt there was a strong sense of community and many community members supported and looked out for each other. This indicates that there are strengths within the community that can be capitalised on in any broader policy to avoid concentrations of disadvantage. It may be that other factors, such as lack of access to transport, education and employment opportunities, contribute more significantly to poor outcomes and social disadvantage than the 'concentration' level.

There are several lessons to be learnt from the Minto Renewal Project. Most importantly, community engagement during the redevelopment process is critical. The community felt ignored from the outset due to the quick announcement of redevelopment and limited dialogue or consultation with the community. Also, a focus on the transition process in order to avoid disruption is crucial. Children were disrupted at school as they were moved to new communities or lost friends, and families had to leave neighbours that had provided them with support over the years. Since then, we have been encouraged by Housing NSW's use of the Place Management Approach. This approach calls for 'local solutions to

local needs' and it allowed for the development of community action groups that worked with Housing NSW to identify the community's needs and the solutions that would work best for the community. The Place Management Approach needs to be consistently implemented in communities undergoing redevelopment.

The experience of the Minto Renewal Project must inform future public housing redevelopment so that children, young people and families have a less disruptive experience. In seeking to avoid concentrations of disadvantage in established communities it is important that the policies and approaches do not seek a 'quick-fix' by imposing sanctions on the communities such as moving members out without appropriate community consultation.

'Concentrations of disadvantage' in communities can be effectively addressed by NSW Housing using a long term approach to design and redevelopment. This must be based on consultation and engagement with local communities and capacity building within these communities so that they can draw from local resources to ameliorate social exclusion risk factors. Two important strategies that are long term in their reach are:

- (i) redevelopment based on natural attrition of houses and
- (ii) resourcing of disadvantaged communities with Integrated Child and Family Centres; early childhood education centres; public transport options and local employment options that are connected with education and training programs.

We would like to thank the UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families staff who participated in consultations and made other contributions as part of the preparation of this submission.

Prepared by Clare Blakemore, Policy Officer

Contact Person:
Clare Blakemore, Policy Officer
Social Policy and Research Program
Social Justice, Partnerships and Communication
UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Services
PO Box W244, Parramatta NSW 2150
Phone 02 9407 3219, Fax: 02 9687 6349
Email: cblakemore@burnside.org.au

Attachment 1

