

**Submission
No 94**

**INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL, PUBLIC AND AFFORDABLE
HOUSING**

Organisation: The Junction Neighbourhood Centre Inc.
Date received: 28/02/2014



The Junction Neighbourhood Centre would like to make a submission to the Legislative Council Selective Committee inquiry on Social, Public and Affordable Housing.

The Junction Neighbourhood Centre Inc. (JNC) is a community based not for profit organisation which has been providing a range of services to the local community for 40 years. These services are provided from centres located in Maroubra Junction, Randwick and Bondi Junction and include:

- Families Program providing support to families in crisis, parenting classes and workshops, playgroup and mentoring programs for girls and young women
- Aged and Disability Services providing respite, shopping assistance and social support to frail aged and disabled people and their carers, social activities such as the knitting group, day away group and social shopping
- Information Program providing information about and referral to local support services and a range of social and craft activities. English classes, facilities for the general public to use such as computer, phones and meeting rooms, Harmony Group – a social and self-help group for people with anxiety, Broadband for Seniors – tutoring for older people on using the internet are also some of the services provided
- Community Capacity Building Program providing programs and activities for people who are socially isolated such as a Writers Group, Walking Randwick Parks
- VAST (Volunteer and Support Training) recruiting, training and placement of volunteers for HACC funded services

The centre at Maroubra is located across the road from the Housing NSW office and consequently many people visit our centre with questions and issues about their housing needs and their issues with Housing NSW. In addition the Families Program

provides assistance to women escaping domestic violence and assists their clients with their housing issues including applying for Housing NSW assistance. It is estimated that nearly 90% of Family Support clients have housing issues and many are Housing NSW tenants. The information in this submission is based on the experiences of the clients of the Junction Neighbourhood Centre.

1. Inadequate Security

Many clients report the lack of security at their Housing NSW home. They may feel or be threatened by their neighbours, hear violence or have concerns about robberies. Requests for security screens on doors and windows are usually turned down by Housing NSW. This is a particular concern of our older clients or clients with small children.

Case Study 1:

A woman in her late 40s with a 10 year old child came to JNC Maroubra for assistance. Her neighbours are constantly harassing her and have kicked and damaged her front door. She is worried about her child's safety as she doesn't have adequate security. She spoke to Housing NSW but they would not assist her so she came to the Junction Neighbourhood Centre to see if we could do something to help her.

2. High Density of Tenants with High Needs

There are now very large numbers of people with high and complex needs living very closely together in social housing with no or limited access to support services. In particular there is a lack of support services for people living with drug and alcohol addiction and those with a lived experience of mental illness. Many of these tenants are very vulnerable and not coping and often their behaviour is inappropriate and/or frightening to their neighbours.

Case Study 2

An older single woman, with a history of alcohol abuse lives in a unit on the 2nd floor of a Housing NSW apartment block. She comes home late at night drunk. She is noisy, abusive and disruptive to other tenants. The other tenants regularly find her passed out at the top of the stairs and have to call an ambulance. They also have to clean up after she has vomited and become

incontinent because when they call Housing NSW they are told that the cleaners won't do it. Apparently the cleaners only come once a month or once every 6 weeks to clean the common area. This is totally unacceptable especially when the other tenants have small children so they clean up the mess themselves.

Recommendation: 1

That Housing NSW once again provides support services to their more vulnerable and high needs tenants.

3. Maintenance

Many clients who are tenants complain about the lack of or slow response to maintenance requests by Housing NSW. The maintenance issues can range from mould in bathrooms and carpet to lack of lighting outside and in common areas.

Case Study 3

A family with 4 children aged 2 to 16 years, live in a Housing NSW property that has mouldy carpet. The children have numerous health issues including respiratory problems such as asthma. In February 2013 the family applied to Housing NSW to have the carpet replaced. They had numerous support documents from their doctor, social workers, the hospital and an immunologist stating that the mouldy carpet was exacerbating the children's health problems. In May 2013 they were informed that the request had been approved. However in September 2013 when the family had not heard anything more, they contacted Housing NSW and were informed that the request had not been approved. The family then appealed the decision which was successful. However to date (February 2014) the carpet has still not been replaced.

4. Applying for Housing NSW Assistance

Many clients struggle with the application process for Housing NSW assistance. The form is long and complex. Although we are of the understanding that Housing NSW staff are meant to provide assistance in completing the application form it would seem that this rarely occurs. The Junction Neighbourhood Centre receives many requests (approximately one or two a week) from people who are unable to complete the form

usually due to low literacy levels, lack of English or have reduced capacity due to a disability or injury.

Recommendation 2

That Housing NSW provide assistance with completing their application forms

5. Customer service is poor

Many of our clients and staff complain about the poor customer service at Housing NSW. These complaints include:

- front line staff at Housing NSW being rude or showing a lack of understanding of the situation our clients face
- the high turnover of staff so that each interaction with Housing NSW can be with a different staff member. JNC staff have reported that they can end up speaking to a different staff member every time they ring Housing NSW on behalf of their client. This high turnover of Housing NSW staff makes it hard to advocate for clients, hard to develop networks and makes it hard for organisation to work in partnership
- clients and JNC staff both have experiences of being told different information from different staff about the same situation or issue
- Housing NSW staff often don't know about other services Housing NSW provides
- JNC staff reported that Housing NSW staff often don't return calls or respond to emails
- Housing NSW staff don't seem to be replaced when they go on leave and vacant positions are not filled

Recommendation 3

That better training is provided for all Housing NSW staff, in particular the front line staff

6. Temporary Housing Service

There are major problems with families with small children who receive the temporary housing service including having to move every 3 days including packing up and dislocating children from school. The other issue is the requirement to demonstrate that they have been actively looking for housing. The number of rental properties clients are expected to apply for is very high. Applying for private rental is now a very

complex procedure and requires not only a huge amount of documentation which clients, especially those fleeing domestic violence, may not have but also access to and skills in using a computer.

Case study 4

An older woman, age unknown but probably in late 50s early 60s was using the public computer at JNC Maroubra to apply for private rental housing using domain.com. She had limited English and very little experience in using a computer and needed a great deal of support from JNC staff.

7. Long Wait for Transfers

Clients often report that they have been offered housing that is inappropriate or their situation changes so they need to apply for a transfer. Some clients have reported that they feel pressured to take the property offered as they are threatened by Housing NSW that they will be taken off the list. Sometimes the property is filthy, is in poor condition or inappropriate.

Case Study 5

An older couple are the primary carers for their 4 year old granddaughter who has a physical disability and can't walk. They live in a first floor Housing NSW unit and have to carry the child up the stairs. The child is becoming too heavy to carry and there are grave concerns that the grandparent will fall injuring the child and themselves. They have waited for over 2 years for rehousing.