

**INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AND LOW-COST
RENTAL ACCOMMODATION**

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**NEW SOUTH WALES LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES**

INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AND LOW-COST RENTAL ACCOMMODATION

SUBMISSION FROM BARNARDOS AUSTRALIA

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Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to submit to this Inquiry as access to low-cost rental housing is critical to the protection of children and young people at risk of abuse and neglect or homelessness. Our submission is based on experiences of families and young people seeking assistance through our Children's Family Centres at Auburn, Penrith, Redfern-Waterloo, Orana Far West and Queanbeyan and our youth services, particularly those in south-eastern Sydney. Barnardos operates Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services and utilises community housing for our clients from a range of housing providers.

We wish to make two main points:

1. The critical need to develop more low cost rental accommodation. We note the lack of housing for families on low incomes and the enormous need in the Indigenous community.
2. The importance of ensuring a good mix of low-income and general housing.

A recent examination of the reasons 8,000 families and young people accessed Barnardos services between 1 July 2007 and 30 June 2008 indicates that 716 of these had family housing problems or that young people were homeless. When we counted improved housing outcomes at the end of interventions 196 people had been assisted.

A. Models of low-cost rental housing outside public housing

We will comment on two forms of housing of which we have direct experience:

Community Housing

Barnardos utilises a number of community housing providers including St George, Argyle and CTHA (Orana Far West). We find that we are able to work well with these agencies and can provide support to our clients. However, there are some issues which we believe need to be addressed.

We believe that community housing is a very important form of low cost rental accommodation. We have successfully re-housed young people and families whose only options would be homelessness. Barnardos currently supports 27 people with St George community housing. The following is an excerpt from a report by a Barnardos' Senior Manager on the relationship with St George:

Barnardos Australia and St George have enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship over the years bringing real stability to a significant number of challenging young people and families in crisis. Through the Port Jackson Project Barnardos has nominated selected challenging clients with poor tenancy histories and high support needs, and St George has responded by matching these clients to appropriate housing options, and maintaining them in their tenancy.

Despite these positive experiences our programs experience some difficulties in the following four ways:

1. Sometimes the situation of a tenant changes and we are no longer able to offer support services that are required for the individual to maintain their tenancy. When young people reach the age when we can no longer offer services (such as being too old for the conditions of government grants) Barnardos may have to consider withdrawing services. However, if this occurs the tenancy cannot continue. Families who may lose their children in child protection matters may similarly lose their support services and their housing. This creates a problem for future restoration of the children to their parents' care.
2. We have experienced problems with Indigenous families who may not understand that they must remain with the support service in order to maintain access to housing. Whilst we have been able to find accommodation for Indigenous families in the Redfern-Waterloo area there have been difficulties such as that described below by our local workers:

A fair percentage of families housed through St George avoid ongoing support from us. They have their house and believe this is enough. The staff struggle to maintain the contact. Ordinarily in a casework relationship if the family avoids contact we would undertake efforts to reestablish contact etc and depending on risks to children would close the service. However in the arrangement staff have felt compelled to remain involved somehow because if there is no support provider the tenancy would cease.

3. A number of clients are not eligible for community housing because they do not have permanent residency in Australia. For instance, a woman on a spouse visa living in Australia may need supported accommodation when the relationship breaks down (often due to domestic violence). If these clients are not approved for a residency visa while they are in crisis housing they then need to enter the private rental market. For many of these women this is not a viable option as their income at this stage can be as little as \$280 per fortnight (in some cases a Special Benefit may be granted which is \$480 per fortnight). Ideally community housing providers should allow greater flexibility in their criteria. This would allow for minimum disruption to children and the women are less likely to return to a violent relationship.
4. We have also noticed that the current model leads to some confusion for families—they often expect us to provide housing. Our workers report:

Word getting around in the community that Barnardos is a housing provider means much of our intake straight off the street or by phone (from individuals as well as services) is a request to provide housing. This has meant that staff have had to receive considerable support and direction in dispelling this myth and being consistent in our messages about the services we do provide. Also it has meant that many parents will refuse any further contact with our service if we say we don't provide a direct housing service.

We therefore believe that some re-examination of the model may be useful with consideration of eligibility for ongoing tenancy being subject to review of individual circumstances, with input from the support agency.

Other low-cost housing options

Barnardos runs SAAP accommodation and frequently has worked with other organisations. There is a variation in the level of support offered by some of these organisations and where community groups such as churches run these services, support of tenants can be variable.

B. Ideas for fast-tracking the capacity of providers of low-cost rental housing

Barnardos believes that provision of low cost rental housing is primarily an issue which requires Government funding. We note that the Federal Government initiatives on homelessness have not yet had the chance to be fully implemented. These include the Federal Government National Affordable Housing Agreement (Housing Affordability Fund, National Rental Affordability Scheme, National Rental Affordability Scheme Capacity Building Project, Housing Supply Council and A Place to Call Home Program). These initiatives are important and need to be supported by the New South Wales Government.

Organisations such as Barnardos are unable to enter this area of work. We note positive local initiatives such as:

- The local TAFE in Orana Far West which has provided a house as part of its apprenticeship courses.
- The Crash program in inner Sydney which provides accommodation in empty buildings for young people in exchange for maintenance.

However, these initiatives are too small to meet need.

Strategies to avoid concentration of disadvantage and grow cohesive communities

Barnardos Australia remains concerned about the continuing high concentration of disadvantage of families in local areas and the failure to provide services which support communities. Social unrest in communities in Sydney over the past few years attest to the need to develop local community strengths through the use of community workers. There have been good examples of local community development and support services over many years but these appear to be becoming fewer and fewer.

We believe that the focus of support services should be broader than individualised services such as that envisaged by the Foyer Model (in which approximately 80 families are in high rise accommodation supported by services located nearby). We believe that this will concentrate too many families experiencing the same problems together, will be inappropriate for families with children and will be a significantly limited model. Attempts to develop social opportunities and break down isolation of individuals need to be much wider in scope and proactively create social opportunities.

In New South Wales, Barnardos has been involved in tenancy support programs funded by the New South Wales Department of Housing in both the Cranebrook Estate (in an outer suburb of Sydney) and on the fringe of Wollongong. We observe benefits to tenants, particularly families experiencing difficulties in these areas. However, a recent use of a formal tender process resulted in the defunding of a decade-long program with a high reputation for results. Barnardos believes that the formal tender process needs to be slightly amended in human service delivery to allow for consumer participation and evidence of results.

Barnardos notes that there has been a decline in the last decades of funding for tenancy assistance especially for families with children where client needs may require early intervention to avoid homelessness. We believe that the review of the Wood Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection in New South Wales should inform the New South Wales Government's response to accommodation issues for families with children.

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