

**INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS AMONGST OLDER
PEOPLE AGED OVER 55 IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Ms Jodie Harrison MP, Member for Charlestown

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Jodie Harrison MP

MEMBER FOR CHARLESTOWN

25 May 2022

The Hon. Scott Barrett
Chair
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Scott,

I write today regarding the Committee's inquiry into Homelessness amongst older people aged over 55 in New South Wales. The Charlestown electorate has seen significant increases in the price of both property and rentals during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has coincided with shortages in private rentals and long social housing waiting lists, which has resulted in vulnerable groups, including those over 55, facing the risk of homelessness locally. That is why, in consultation with homelessness support service Our Backyard, I am making a submission to this inquiry.

To put the housing problem in context, the median house sale price in the suburb of Charlestown has increased 31.9 percent in the last 12 months and is now \$910,000. Units had a similar rate of growth and now have a median sale price of \$610,000. The average rental is \$500 a week. This is all well out of the reach of people on low and fixed incomes.

To add to this, like other locations in NSW, applying for a rental property is highly competitive.

The Charlestown electorate office has recently provided assistance to constituents who have been displaced by rising rents, or who have been served no-fault eviction notices as property owners plan renovations and rebuilds to capitalise on the housing boom.

One single woman in her 50's, who had lived in a rented property for 29 years, found her options on the private housing market limited. Despite earning a full time wage as an aged care worker, she was unable to secure a private rental that was affordable for her.

A 70-year-old single woman became homeless after couch surfing with family. She reported to our office that repeated requests for documentation that had previously been supplied,

and which she now did not have easy access to, slowed her application process through Housing NSW.

Affordable private housing in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie is at a crisis level with less than 1 percent of housing stock available for those living in poverty and on lower incomes. For access to social housing, Lake Macquarie has waiting times of between 5-10 years for a one-bedroom property. For anything larger, it is more than 10 years. For community members who rely on Government pathways, Our Backyard clients reported feeling hopelessness and despair, which in turn affected their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Our Backyard is a voluntary homelessness service and ministry of Macquarie Care, which has been operating in the car park of Macquarie Life Church for 8 years. It provides a safe parking space for community members who are experiencing homelessness and sleeping in their cars. As well as an onsite kitchen, bathroom, laundry and toilet facilities, it also provides casework support to provide accommodation pathways.

Our Backyard has seen a steady increase of people over the age of 55 accessing the service, especially those with pets. The service reported the three main reasons why people accessed Our Backyard in 2021 were family violence, mental illness and (the number one reason) lack of affordable housing.

The Charlestown electorate office and Our Backyard have supported Jenny, a 75-year-old single woman with two small dogs. Pets have been identified by Our Backyard as an aggravating factor in lack of accommodation options for those over 55, with clients insistent that their pets are necessary for their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Jenny contacted Our Backyard after a failed shared accommodation arrangement. She had agreed to share a lease due to lack of affordable rentals and no access to support from family or friends. The housemate perpetrated violence against Jenny and severely damaged her shoulder, leading Jenny to pack what possessions she could into her car and fleeing with her two small dogs.

Despite continuing to pay the rent after leaving, the lease was eventually terminated due to rental arrears, which created another barrier to Jenny finding alternative accommodation. This was the start of 9 months in and out of temporary accommodation for Jenny through the Link2home program. Jenny told Our Backyard this was a "nightmare" process which required her to tell her story "hundreds of times" to different caseworkers, as well as feeling increasingly vulnerable and unsafe in her car.

She was aware that her dogs would make it more difficult to find a property, but maintained that her pets gave her the will to live, telling Our Backyard "if they euthanise my dogs, then they may as well do me at the same time".

As well as the emotional toll of living in a car, Jenny suffered from severe physical issues including a broken back, kidney failure, gastric antral vascular ectasia and diabetes. Jenny found it almost impossible to sleep in her car as it was too small to allow her to lay down. She

also needed to be near a toilet as she would need to use it at least 20 times through the night due to her kidney health issues.

Sleeping in her car left Jenny in excruciating physical pain. Although Jenny still has multiple health issues and trauma after her experience of homelessness, Jenny is determined to share her story in order to help others. Jenny eventually was provided a three bedroom property with a yard for her dogs through Enlarge Living, which Our Backyard has recently partnered with to provide new housing options in our region.

Our Backyard shared the case of Brandon (55) and his partner Lee (41), who are both on a disability support pension and own a small dog. They had rented a property for 8 years with a good rental history and references but found themselves without a property they could afford in Newcastle or Lake Macquarie when their landlord decided to knock down the property and rebuild. They were referred to Our Backyard by their local Centrelink office after sleeping in their car out the front of their local police station.

Both Brandon and Lee have multiple health issues. Brandon's include hereditary angioedema of his legs, which causes severe swelling and at times requires hospitalisation. Brandon has been told by doctors that this is a life threatening condition and that he would need to reside within a 30 minute drive from a major hospital. Sleeping in a car caused severe swelling on Brandon's legs as he was unable to sleep flat with his legs elevated. Lee has a brain acquired injury and acrophobia as well as anxiety and depression.

They applied for hundreds of private rental properties without success and were on the waiting list for social housing when Our Backyard secured accommodation for them through housing partner Enlarge Living.

Another of Our Backyard's clients (who uses the pseudonym Sharon) left her accommodation due to domestic violence at age 68. An arrangement to board in a home with unrelated adults in which she would clean and assist a person living with disabilities in the home became untenable due to multiple rent increases and a lack of a formal lease arrangement. In the end, Sharon left and slept in her car.

It became very difficult for her to maintain employment as she had no access to a bathroom and laundry facilities. When she began her association with Our Backyard, Sharon described how some public toilets were so dirty that she would have to place aluminium foil on the toilet seat to be able to use them hygienically.

Sharon stayed at Our Backyard for four weeks, allowing her to access shower and toilet facilities and maintain her work, before moving on to a friend's home. However, this was likely to be a temporary solution, as she was only able to park in their driveway and she was still sleeping in her car, homeless.

Our Backyard highlighted one of the biggest issues it encountered in clients was gendered inequality for women in terms of financial resources. They found women generally experienced more household violence and financial abuse and also had a significantly reduced superannuation compared to men of the same age. Women generally were more

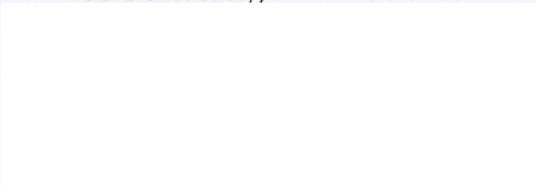
vulnerable when facing a homelessness situation and found it very difficult to manage without access to toilets, bathroom, kitchen and laundry facilities.

During the lockdowns of 2020-21, Our Backyard saw an average 80-100 people per year. The service stated it holds grave fears that the Census conducted on 10 August 2021 would not reflect the true numbers of homelessness in the over 55 age bracket, as the organisation received phone calls from people in their cars on Census night who were unable to navigate the Census on their own.

Our Backyard is advocating for Government departments to work together for a collaborative approach to find solutions for people facing homelessness, and accessing community resources.

Housing insecurity is the area of fastest growing concern among people contacting my electorate office. It is also highlighted among stakeholders I interact with as Shadow Minister for Seniors, Women, and Prevention of Domestic Violence. It was listed as a top three area of concern at COTA's recent 50+ Report launch and is top of mind for stakeholders providing services to victim-survivors of domestic violence. As it becomes more and more likely that older people will be renting throughout their lives, or navigating the social housing system, more needs to be done to ensure the needs are being met for these key populations of significantly greater vulnerability in our community.

Yours sincerely,



JODIE HARRISON MP
Member for Charlestown