

**‘Do we want ghettos?’
Implications of targeting from the perspective of public housing tenants.**

Good morning, everyone. I hope you are all enjoying the conference.

First, allow me to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we are meeting today.

My name is Merrilyn Rowler, and I am the President of the Queensland Public Tenants Association, the peak body for public housing tenants in Queensland. QPTA is made up of delegates elected by our Regional Tenant Groups, which operate within the boundaries of Department of Housing Area Offices. There are approximately 170 local tenant groups in Queensland, which link with our 15 Regional Tenant Groups. Tenant groups are funded under the Department’s Tenant Participation Program.

The impact on the lives of existing public housing tenants of the increased targeting of public housing to tenants with high and complex needs is enormous. It has been a ‘top 3’ issue identified to QPTA by almost every Regional Tenant Group for the last 3 years. I say this so that those listening to me know the information which I present to you comes to me directly from tenants.

I would like to open this discussion on the targeting of public housing, by also saying clearly that this debate is not driven by prejudice nor a desire to exclude people with complex needs from the public housing system, nor is this a criticism of de-institutionalisation.

Targeting is the process by which public housing is allocated to those in highest need, and our experience has been this means increasingly those with mental illness or psychiatric disability. This process began officially in Queensland in 1997, with the introduction of a priority housing policy, and has continued and indeed increased almost parallel to the policy of de-institutionalisation.

The Queensland Department of Housing’s Public Housing Strategy 2003 - 2008 states that a key direction is to “increase the focus of public housing on people in high need of assistance and look at how their access to public housing can be improved”¹.

There is no strict definition of who has the highest needs, though priority housing in Queensland has the following criteria for eligibility: homelessness; disability; child returned to care; persistent harassment; victim of major crime; exceptional circumstances; medical condition; violence or at risk; foster care; natural disaster; and people involved with the Crime and Misconduct Commission. It is clear from this list of priority housing criteria that people who fall into any of these eligibility categories could have a range of complexities surrounding their housing need. These could include mental health issues, general health issues, and be complicated by drug and alcohol, or domestic violence issues.

Separate from the rhetoric, the reality of a ‘high needs tenant’ for many public housing tenants is a neighbour who, when not on medication and/or without a support worker, makes life unbearable for themselves and everyone in their vicinity

¹ P. 9, Queensland Government, Department of Housing, ‘Public Housing – A secure future’ Public Housing Strategy 2003-2008

During this discussion, I would like to share with you just a few stories which have come to QPTA, and which indicate for us the importance of tackling this issue sooner rather than later. When listening to these stories, try to put yourself in the shoes of the affected parties!

One tenant lives in a 22 unit complex of public housing units in a major regional centre. Within that complex there are approximately five de-institutionalised mental health tenants. One of these tenants screams most of the time, including at night, making a good night's sleep a major drama. A second tenant calls emergency services to attend up to 5 or 6 times a day. Emergency services must come because in the event the call is genuine they can't take the chance of not attending. A third, a male tenant, frequently urinates in the open garden area. And recently, this tenant walked out his front door and found his neighbour had hung himself off the balcony rails immediately outside his front door. The emotional impact for this particular tenant was devastating. Then there were the legal issues which arose, and dealing with police and their questions. Then the guilt set in: "I should have seen this coming, I was only talking to him yesterday"; "Could I have helped more?"; "Did I do enough for him?". This tenant needed counselling to help him sort through all the emotions, including the self recriminations. To the credit of the Department Area Office, they arranged and paid for this service. But despite the counselling, he is still emotionally in turmoil. The Regional Tenant Group in this major regional centre in Queensland has reported to QPTA that they have had five suicides within their region since the beginning of this year. In each case, these suicides affect those close to the person, and that includes their public housing tenant neighbours.

Another common situation is reflected by the story of a tenant in a smaller regional centre who had been homeless for years before moving into public housing. He began taking medication to manage his health issues, and had successfully managed his public housing tenancy for almost 2 years. As is often the case, he began to feel well and felt he no longer needed the medication and stopped taking it. He began yelling at neighbours accusing them of spying on him, He would hose them through open windows to stop them 'spying'. He also stopped paying rent and told his area office staff that he went in each Friday and paid his rent, but the girls in the office stole the money. Attempts by area office staff to provide additional support for the tenant were met with resistance from him, because he felt he didn't have a problem and wasn't ill. He simply refused all support.

As this person had maintained their tenancy for close to two years, the Area Office is now in the tough position of deciding whether they take action against him i.e. evict him, because of his neighbour's complaints and failure to pay rent. Or do they continue to sustain the tenancy at all costs, knowing that an eviction will mean adding one more homeless person with mental health issues to the streets.

These are common stories repeated to me almost daily by public housing tenants, and raised constantly by our tenant groups throughout the state.

Implications

Public Housing tenants aren't the only ones under great stress managing a targeted public housing system. The Department of Housing has a responsibility to all its tenants, under the Residential Tenancies Act. In situations such as these, the Department of Housing has to balance two competing obligations: the obligation to support a tenant to maintain their tenancy; and a conflicting obligation to ensure neighbours of a high needs tenant have quiet and peaceful enjoyment of their property.

Area Offices and their staff, struggle with the complexities of managing tenancies such as these. Expectations of neighbours and the wider community is that Area Office staff manage these tenancies more strictly, in order to provide quiet peace and enjoyment to neighbours. Privacy and confidentiality laws mean that staff trying to manage these difficult tenancies, are not able to discuss possible contributors to a tenant's behaviour with their neighbours. Some times this information may give those neighbours some insight into what is happening, greater understanding could encourage neighbours to provide greater informal support. The lack of ability to discuss these issues, could lead neighbours to think Department staff are doing nothing, or not taking them seriously.

In some states, managing these difficult tenancies, has seen some states heading down the track of forcing tenants to sign anti-social behaviour agreements, which tenants may or may not understand, or may not reasonably able to meet.

We are encouraged that Queensland has not adopted this method of dealing with these issues, preferring to work across Government to increase the levels of both formal and informal support for high needs tenants.

Implications for existing tenants with Mental Health Issues/Complex needs:

Tenants with mental health issues normally have limited options for stable accommodation outside of public housing. Other options may include community housing providers, boarding houses, hospitalisation, or the streets. As you are all aware from the statistics, a very high proportion of homeless people have mental health issues.

For tenants with mental health issues, public housing gives greater security of tenure than they would have anywhere else. However, there is limited support available to meet their needs, especially when they stop taking medication or have a re-lapse. Department of Housing staff, particularly staff on the front counter, often find it difficult to deal with high needs clients: they are increasingly well trained in mental health issues, but are not experts. Also, many tenants do not declare they have mental illness, or are undiagnosed.

How much support is enough for a high needs client? A visit from a support worker to check on how well a person is doing might be only a few hours before an episode, which leaves that same person completely unwell and causing chaos for those around them.

Many tenants regularly provide informal support to their neighbours: unpaid and untrained. However, this is often making the best of a bad situation where no formal support is being provided to the tenant. It often seems to some tenants that this informal support is expected. I have friends in a public housing complex near me, with a neighbour who constantly leaves her stove on. My friends go into this person's unit each night and turn the stove off. If they don't do this, the inevitable fire might mean they all lose their homes. They have been happy to do this for some years now. The problem for my friend is that her husband has been diagnosed with inoperable throat cancer, and they are no longer able to provide this simple informal support. What happens then if the stove causes a fire? Does the Government pay a worker to come every night and turn the stove off? Is there another neighbour who would take on the responsibility? How would they feel if the night they forget, or they night they go out, is the night the units catch fire?

The wider community

QPTA has been working since its inception to ‘improve attitude towards public housing and through positive publicity negate perceptions often held by the wider community’ (QPTA Constitution).

With more and more high needs tenants in public housing, it is becoming harder to promote a positive image of public housing. Local communities don’t want public housing in their area, and the attitude is that all public housing tenants are going to be ‘neighbours from hell’. We regularly write Letters to the Editor to combat Mr Citizen’s comment that public housing in his area will cause house prices to fall!

We now have two pieces of legislation in Queensland that are being reviewed, that may end up causing significant impacts for public housing tenants. Both pieces of legislation already have proposals that, if enacted, would allow action be taken more easily against high needs tenants in public housing. This may be directly as a result of the wider communities concerns about unsupported tenants in public housing.

The *Peace and Good Behaviour Act 1982* is being reviewed. QPTA provided feedback to the Queensland Law Reform Commission around possible changes, including whether Peace and Good Behaviour Orders should be made easier to obtain.

One of the key issues we considered was whether Peace and Good Behaviour Orders would stop behaviour in a public housing tenant situation. Our response was that we felt Orders may often be taken out against a tenant with a mental disability or mental health issue. These tenants are often the ones perceived as being ‘troublemakers’, and are often incapable of changing their behaviour.

At the end of this year, the *Residential Tenancies Act 1994* will also be reviewed. Already there is a private member’s proposal to amend the legislation to allow neighbours to evict tenants.

For QPTA, the proposed legislation suggests using eviction as a solution for problems that may not be strictly tenancy management problems, such as mental health issues. Many public housing tenants have issues that rely on stable housing to help them address.

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| What are we doing now? |
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QPTA has been working long and hard to form closer links with other Government Departments, such as Health and Disability Services, to try and encourage co-ordinated support for people with high needs in public housing.

Representing tenants’ concerns widely, QPTA believes that quality support for high needs tenants will make life better for everyone. Some of our members provide individual informal support, as do some Regional and local tenant groups, with some groups moving to more formal arrangements.

An example of a tenant driven initiative involves our North Moreton Regional Tenants Association and the 6 other partners who have established a formal set of protocols to address the issues of complex tenancies.

The Deception Bay Neighbourhood Centre and the North Moreton Regional Tenants Association were often being asked to help public tenants facing immediate eviction, almost as a last resort. Tenants were referred to a variety of services in the region, but often the solution came too late to save the tenancy.

Seven community based organisations came together with the Department of Housing area office. The Protocol process begins with the area office of the Department of Housing, identifying an 'at risk' tenancy i.e. a tenant who is issued with a notice to remedy breach which threatens the sustainability of their tenancy. This tenant is then asked if they would agree to being referred to the network of supporting organisations for help. Of course tenants retain their right to privacy, and have the right to refuse help. The network of organisations then provide the tenant and their family with the support necessary to resolve whatever issue is threatening their tenancy.

This protocol has been an amazing success, with an 80% reduction in evictions from public housing over a two year period. The tenants who have been involved in this positive support process become more stable and more permanent members of the community, and in turn are able to give back to the community.

There are other formal supports happening for tenants with challenging behaviours, and in many places these work really well.

Department of Housing

The Department of Housing has a commitment to sustaining tenancies, and over the last 5 years has been directing resources into training staff, case conferencing, and interagency collaboration.

In 2004-2005 a joint-work plan was signed between Disability Services Queensland to allow staff in both Departments to work together to assist mutual clients. At the same time, there was an evaluation of local partnership agreements between Area Offices and Queensland Health community mental health services, and work towards a state-wide agreement to allow both Departments to work together to assist mutual clients.

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| Where to from here? |
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Why does our public housing system have to be targeted so tightly to those most in need? It is because governments of all persuasions no longer consider building public housing a priority. Funding to the states through the CSHA has reduced 54% in the last 10 years. I am also told constantly that public housing is dead: the new way is affordable housing models and partnerships with the private sector. I am sure you can see the private sector jumping up and down to become involved in deals which meet the needs of tenants with complex challenging behaviours. I fear we face a future which includes a social housing system where tenants with challenging and complex health issues are housed in public housing, while other affordable housing models, and partnerships manage the tenancies which provide affordable housing to those in need but without the complex challenging issues.

With the density and numbers of public housing units in any one place, this means that the majority of tenants with challenging and complex issues, will reside all together in one easily identifiable suburb or estate. This won't help people to maintain personal privacy, regarding their health issues, and it will certainly increase the sense of fear amongst the wider community. This is the recipe for ghettos which I mentioned earlier.

If you don't live with neighbours like I have already described, then you might be able to justify, from a safe distance, the need to further target the public housing system. But, if like

my friends and I, you live with this residualized public housing system, every day and every night, don't be surprised our opinion might be somewhat different.

There are some solutions. The big one, of course, is to increase the size of the public housing system, allowing capacity to have a social mix as part of the system. I can just hear the pollies' responses to that one. Can you? The challenge to political ideology of government actually providing a service to someone! My GOD, that would break the economy and wreck the new Australia.

The reality though, might be that if we don't want to create the ghettos we fear the most, the burden of housing the most complex and challenging tenants will have to be shared across the whole of a new social housing sector: Public Housing; Community Housing; Affordable housing; and, yes, even the private sector.

Dreamer that I am I know !
THANK YOU