

news **letter**

March 2000

Housing Report to the United Nations

An article on the **COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS REPORT ON HOUSING IN WA**: A Response to the Australian Government Submission to the United Nations on its Cultural, Economic and Social Responsibilities by Camille Inifer.

BACKGROUND

In January 2000, the *Community Organisations Report on Housing in Western Australia* was completed for inclusion in a national report. The WA Report is part of a national effort by the community sector to respond to the Australian government report to the United Nations Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (referred to as the Committee). The government report was completed in August 1999 as part of its obligation as a signatory to the International Covenant on Cultural, Economic and Social Rights.

Since 1975, Australia has been a signatory to the Covenant. In a 5 yearly review process, the government is obligated to provide a written report to the United Nations and to appear before the Committee with an oral presentation to be followed by questioning from Committee delegates. As part of the preliminary review

process, pre-sessional working groups will be hosted by the Committee in May 2000 followed by the presentation, which will occur at the earliest in May 2001.

NATIONAL COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS REPORT

The Australian Social and Economic Rights Project (ASERP) has been liaising with the non-government sector in bringing together State reports on cultural, economic and social issues. ASERP has some 50 non-government organisation (NGO) members nationally.

Using the State reports, the Human Rights Council of Australia under the guidance of the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), will oversee

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the development of a national community report and the collation of the list of community issues or questions attached to the national report.

The deadline for completion of the national community report is April 2000, for presentation to the Committee in May. This report will then be forwarded to the Australian government for a response. The government's response to the list of issues will form the basis of the oral review of Australia in 2001. The national community report will also be tabled at the UN session.

As stated in our August newsletter, the aim of COHRE is to ensure the economic, social and cultural rights of all people throughout the world are met. COHRE, based in Geneva with an office in Melbourne, reports to the United Nations on matters relating to the International Covenant on Cultural, Economic and Social Rights. Article 11 of the Covenant relates specifically to '*The Right to Adequate Housing*'.

MORE ABOUT THE WA REPORT

The WA Report is a coordinated effort of approximately 25 NGO's who, following the three ASERP forums held in July 1999, agreed to form the ASERP WA Working Group.

The aim of the WA Working Group was to develop a report with a focus on the state of social housing in WA for inclusion in a national report.

With such limited public data available on the state of social housing in this State, the WA report is also a useful resource for the social housing sector in that it provides statistical data and case studies to support the issues raised.

Co-edited by Paul Whelligan and John Ballard, the WA Report specifically addresses Article 11 of the Covenant with respect to the rights of housing. To assist in understanding the points raised in the report, it is worth quoting the Article:

' The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right ...'

In addressing Article 11, the Committee have produced Fact Sheet No 16 which states: "... *the right to housing should not be interpreted in a narrower restrictive sense which equates it with, for example, the shelter provided by merely having a roof over one's head ... Rather it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity ...*"

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE WA REPORT

The WA report refers to the shift by government towards the provision of public housing on the basis of the most in need rather than as a right for all Australians.

The report notes an increasing reliance on the private rental market to house low income households . It refers to the difficulties faced by many tenants in accessing the private rental sector due to discriminatory practices, particularly for Indigenous Australians whose housing options are seriously affected when access to both public and private rental housing is denied.

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In referring to the CSHA and the shift since 1989 from housing provision to housing assistance the report states '*...the government is neglecting its human rights obligationswith respect to the right to housing*'.

Aboriginal Housing

In identifying the issues for the report, a common theme being presented was the increasing seriousness of the housing situation for Indigenous West Australians. Statistical data in the report supports ongoing claims that Aboriginal families are living in substandard, overcrowded housing with figures showing the numbers of Aboriginals being homeless increasing by 13% in the period 1991 to 1996.

Reference is made to the Australian government report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination which states '*...over 20% of Indigenous families live in dwellings that are in need of repair or do not have basic amenities such as toilets, bathrooms and running water*'. It queries why the government has not acknowledged this fact

in its own housing report to the UN Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The operations of Homeswest in providing housing for Indigenous people is also highlighted in the WA report with figures showing the disparity of applications versus allocations which suggests need is not being met.

Included in the report are case studies showing discrimination in terms of access in the private and public sector. Highlighted are the excessive rental payments for Aboriginal tenants and discrepancies between regional and metropolitan practices. A concern raised was that of Homeswest reserving the right to draw more than 30% of a person's income in rent and tenant liability. The report emphasises this is resulting in housing related poverty and the risk of eviction due to arrears if the payments cannot be met.

Public housing tenants evicted for arrears, regardless of the reasons for the arrears have little or no housing options available to them, reinforcing

Housing Report to the United Nations continued...

the concerns raised in the report of Indigenous people living in circumstances in contrast to the recommended standards set out by the United Nations Covenant.

Other points raised refer to the cultural appropriateness of housing designed for smaller nuclear families, and also the issue of providing Fund 6 houses (Aboriginal housing) which, with wear and tear by larger families, can cause high maintenance issues as well as neighbourhood conflict. This often results in social exclusion of Aboriginal people.

The report stresses that the Committee, in its General Comment 4, has acknowledged the link between housing and the rights associated with health and education, employment and the justice system.

AUSTRALIAN SYSTEM OF FUNDING - CSHA

In referring to the Commonwealth/State Housing Agreement (CSHA) the WA Report refers to the guiding principle of the 1989 Agreement: *'The primary principle of this Agreement is to ensure that every person in Australia has access to secure, adequate and appropriate housing at a price within his or her capacity to pay...'* It goes on to compare those principles with that of the 1999 Agreement which states: *'The purpose of funding is to assist those whose needs for appropriate housing cannot be met by the private market.'*

In comparing the two Agreements, the report emphasises the move from *'...an approach where housing was regarded as a human right to an approach where housing is now seen only as a welfare issue ...'*

The change in policy from a 'rights-based approach' to a 'limited safety net', and the inability of the private sector to meet need, further support the claim that there is a general decline in living and housing conditions for already disadvantaged Australians accessing housing. Thus reinforcing the concerns raised that the Australian government is neglecting its human rights obligations in terms of housing.

HOUSING PROFILE – IS HOUSING SUPPLY MEETING NEED?

The WA Report provides a profile of housing in WA detailing figures on tenure and household types as well as the level of public housing stock and waiting lists. The data is supported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures of 12,252 homeless in WA on census night (1996) which rates WA homelessness as the third highest level in Australia. Anecdotal evidence in the report on youth homelessness further supports the claims that there is a reduced commitment by the Australian government to ensuring the rights of all Australians are met under Article 11 of the Covenant.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996) housing tenure figures in WA show the following breakdown:

- ◆ Home ownership – 68%
- ◆ Rental – 22.3% private; 5.1% public
- ◆ Community housing, cooperative housing, lodging and boarding houses – 4.6%

These figures show that public housing in WA represents only 5.1% of all dwellings, falling below the Australian average of 6%. In the period 1993/4 to 1999/8/9, the report shows Homeswest's stock numbers decreasing by 694 or almost 2%.

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Redevelopment Conference

Shelter WA is presenting a one day **Conference** on **Thursday 25 May** on the **redevelopment of public housing estates**.

Throughout Australia public housing estates are being redeveloped and regenerated. The Conference is an exciting opportunity to hear about **approaches to redevelopment** from around Australia.

The Conference has been initiated by the Redevelopment Working Group which is coordinated by Shelter WA. It aims to promote discussion and debate on redevelopment in Western Australia, focusing on the areas of:

- ◆ Research and evaluation
- ◆ Policy development and implementation
- ◆ Community and tenant participation.

A diverse program of **local and interstate speakers** has been developed including :

- ◆ Professor Bill Randolph, Director, Urban Frontiers Program, University of Western Sydney
- ◆ Ross Woodward, New South Wales Department of Housing
- ◆ Trish Hensley, Sector Development Officer, Shelter SA
- ◆ Balga Action Group
- ◆ Community Arts Network.

Conference program and **registration details** will be sent to you in the near future. If you would like more information please contact Catriona Cameron at Shelter WA on 9325 6660 or email sheltwa@opera.iinet.net.au

Women's Refuge Group Housing Working Group

Women's refuges in W.A have identified significant and problematic issues surrounding housing for women and children. After spending time reflecting and collecting data on the housing options for women and children, it is evident that these issues are seriously affecting the effectiveness of Refuge services.

The lack of suitable housing options for women and children contributes to longer term impact on women's efforts to establish a safe, secure and appropriate family environment.

The types of issues identified by women and Refuges include:

- Limited and decreasing availability of the public housing stock
- Inadequate responses to women's safety needs in public housing
- Ineffective handling of small debt collection (i.e. under \$500)
- Increasing attention needs to be given to the impact of domestic violence on women and children in relation to housing needs.
- The development of appropriate housing models to address the needs of Aboriginal women and children
- Identification of the distinct housing needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse women and children.
- The invisibility of the needs of single women in relation to housing
- Discrimination experienced by women when attempting to access the private rental market
- The high cost of private rental relative to the low incomes most women receive.
- Limited suitable and safe housing stock available

in the private rental market.

- Insufficient options available to women and children in the types of housing available. This includes separate dwellings, shared housing, night shelters, boarding houses etc.
- Ongoing need for the development of sound working relationships between housing bodies and direct service providers.
- Length of wait for women and children listed to priority housing.

Women's Refuge Group is giving priority to working with other housing groups and has established a Housing Working Group. The purpose of the working group is to begin raising awareness and addressing these issues. An ongoing working group has been formed to work on these issues. Membership of the working group includes women's refuges, housing bodies and direct service providers. The group has identified a number of strategies which include raising awareness of issues facing women and children; contributing to relevant newsletters and journals; developing sound links with other housing providers (government and non-government) and undertaking research in this area.

It is identified as important to include a broad cross section of people and services in this project. Relevant groups are invited to join the working group to further the needs of women and children in relation to housing. It is anticipated that the working group will continue to operate until women and children experience a positive difference in housing.

If you are interested in contributing to the working group and this vital issue please contact Angie Hartwig at the **Women's Refuge Group of WA** on Phone 94207264.

WESNET National Research Project

Preventing Homelessness for Women (with or without children) Experiencing Domestic Violence

“We need to hear views and ideas about how to better meet the accommodation needs of women and children experiencing domestic violence.”

We believe that **women who have experienced domestic violence** and **workers** are most able to provide information and feedback on what is effective and what needs to change and develop to better meet women’s and children’s needs.

WESNET is interested in knowing more about the best options or strategies and what new ideas and strategies could be developed to assist women to retain suitable accommodation following domestic violence.

The research findings will be used to inform government decisions regarding future directions for domestic violence policy and program development.

A group of researchers from the University of South Australia (Donna Chung, Rosemary Kennedy, Bev O'Brien & Sarah Wendt) and Shelter SA (Sam Cody)

are undertaking the research across Australia.

If you are willing to participate in the research by sharing your ideas and views you can be involved in any of the following ways:

- a telephone interview
- a focus group with other workers
- putting women in contact with us for a telephone interview or focus group.

As researchers we have previously worked in domestic violence and have developed strategies that respect and protect women’s rights throughout our research process. We would be happy to talk to you about these processes. **Our experience indicates that women often find it empowering to provide feedback and give their suggestions on how to improve future services.**

We do not require workers to provide any information about clients. We ask only that workers tell women about the research and that if they are interested assist them to get in contact with us.

Please contact Donna Chung on 08 8302 4347 or **donna.chung@unisa.edu.au** if you are willing to participate in some way or have any questions about the research.

All information provided to the researchers is **confidential**. Your involvement would be greatly appreciated.

Stronger Communities

Shelter WA was recently contracted to undertake research on early intervention and prevention strategies aimed at building stronger communities.

The project came about following contact from Curtin University who had been engaged by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services to complete a meta-analysis.

RESEARCH PROJECT

The overall project brief was to

- ◆ *Review relevant national and international literature on community-based approaches to responding to family and community problems*
- ◆ *Report on the financial implications of prevention and early intervention approaches with reference to the five Stronger Communities indicators identified by the Department of Family and Community Services, namely: knowledge and skills including volunteering; networks and partnerships in communities; leadership in communities; local solutions to local problems; and community capacity to use best practice; and*
- ◆ *Where appropriate, extrapolate the benefits of particular local projects to estimate what the costs and benefits would be if that approach, or a similar one, were to be applied nationwide.*

Shelter WA was contracted for a four-week period to undertake the literature review and to work with the other project team members, namely Professor Peter Kenyon and Professor Richard Hugman, to

complete the project. Shelter also contracted the Tenants Advice Service to work on the Project.

The report provides a summary of relevant literature and program examples, along with an analysis of the extent to which these programs achieved the Department's Stronger Communities indicators and a range of social indicators including:

- ◆ reduced unemployment;
- ◆ reduced crime;
- ◆ better health outcomes;
- ◆ reduced long term unemployment;
- ◆ increased social capital; and
- ◆ strengthened local economic capacity.

In addition, an overall cost-benefit analysis is provided. The report focuses on the following areas:

- ◆ Healthy Communities;
- ◆ Early Childhood and Families;
- ◆ Youth; and
- ◆ Seniors and Intergenerational Programs.

REPORT CONCLUSIONS

There are a number of conclusions drawn in the report, including the following:

- ◆ The consistent elements in all of the materials cited relating to stronger/healthy communities, is the importance of a sense of connectedness between people, and between people and their community in an environment in which all people are able to participate to their full potential.
- ◆ A large number of poor social outcomes are preventable and there is increasing emphasis

....the role of early intervention and prevention programs

“It is consistently argued that the disadvantages experienced by various members of the community will not be solved by ameliorative programs alone and that structural causes must also be addressed”

on early intervention and prevention strategies which are cited as being successful both in terms of the dollar value of programs as well as building stronger and healthy communities.

- ◆ Despite the success of a range of prevention and early intervention programs, it is consistently argued that the disadvantages experienced by various members of the community will not be solved by ameliorative programs alone and that structural causes must also be addressed.
- ◆ Available data varies enormously which can often prevent direct comparisons between programs. There is clearly a need for recording of more detailed information and for evaluations to be explicitly linked to the early stage of project development and implementation.
- ◆ In an Australian context there is a need for more accessible evaluations of a range of programs, particularly those relating to Aboriginal communities.
- ◆ Further examination of prevention and early intervention as specific strategies for community building, that focus on strengthening communities as a means of developing social capital is warranted.

Along with other work being undertaken by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, this research may lead to the development of programs specifically aimed at building stronger communities. For further information, contact the Western Australian office of the Department of Family and Community Services.

A copy of the report is available in the Shelter WA library or if you would like more information, please feel free to contact Erin Gauntlett at Shelter WA on tel: 9325 6660 or email: sheltwa@opera.iinet.net.au

Housing Advisory Committee Update

HAC is an independently chaired committee with representatives from a number of peak consumer organisations, the Ministry of Housing, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, the Minister's office and the Aboriginal Housing Board. The committee advises the Minister for Housing and the Executive Director of Homeswest on Homeswest policies and programs as well as identifying housing needs in the community.

Shelter WA is a key member of HAC and is funded to provide some research and resource capacity for HAC members. Some of the key issues dealt with by the committee since the last newsletter include:

POLICY

Bond Assistance

In previous newsletters we have reported on a number of changes to the Bond Assistance Policy. An update on outstanding issues is as follows:

- The proposal to establish a bond guarantee scheme with the Ministry of Fair Trading is still being pursued. However, a legal question has arisen regarding whether a guarantee falls within the definition of a bond for the purpose of the Residential Tenancies Act.
- The proposal to implement a credit check for all applicants for a Homeswest bond loan will not be progressed. The Ministry of Housing reported that the decision was based on a couple of factors. Firstly, under Federal Privacy Legislation, Homeswest cannot conduct a credit check on applicants applying for public rental accommodation and it is therefore not appropriate to apply a credit check to bond assistance applications. Secondly, it would be

likely to result in a reduction in the level of assistance provided and therefore would limit accommodation options for Homeswest customers which contradicts the purpose of the bond assistance policy.

- Homeswest was intending to conduct a survey for existing bond account holders who are in default to see whether repayment through the direct debit scheme is an option. Given that at least 60 to 70% of bond loan clients are already paying their loan through the direct debit scheme, Homeswest has decided not to pursue this proposal.

Privacy

The Ministry of Housing has redrafted the policy and will be seeking comments from the Public Sector Standards Commissioner.

Waiting List Management

The Equal Opportunity Commission's report will be circulated to HAC members prior to the April meeting.

Refurbishment Program

Nothing further to report at this stage other than the working party has continued to meet but the guidelines have not yet been finalised.

Aboriginal Tenants Support Service (ATSS)

Funding for ATSS has been approved and a consultant appointed to develop the program. We'll keep you posted as details become available.

Bond Accrual

There has been discussion at HAC regarding expenditure of the interest from bond accrual. This

is to be further discussed at the next meeting – we'll keep you posted.

Rent Charging Practices

As some of you may be aware, there has recently been an issue about the Ministry of Housing charging tenants in excess of 2 weeks rent in advance on sign up of the tenancy. Following submissions from HAC, the Ministry of Housing has agreed to implement procedures to ensure compliance with the Residential Tenancies Act that stipulates that tenants cannot be charged in excess of 2 weeks rent in advance.

SUB COMMITTEES OF HAC

CSHA Sub-Committee

The bilateral has been signed by the State Minister and forwarded to the Commonwealth for signing.

Community Housing Advisory Sub-Committee

Issues considered since the last newsletter include:

- The committee will produce a regular update that can be distributed with various newsletters in the sector;
- A forum will be convened to discuss Community Housing providers use of section 64 of the Residential Tenancies Act;
- The Community Housing Coalition gave a presentation to the committee on modelling completed regarding viability of community housing providers;
- The committee has developed policies relating to quorum and conflict of interest;
- Discussion regarding access to bond assistance by tenancies covered under the Crisis Accommodation Program;

- The committee is now represented (through Cathcart Weatherly) on the National Community Housing Forum Policy Advisory Committee;
- It has been agreed to expand the committee to include representation from a CAP provider – expressions of interest are currently being sought;
- The Community Housing Programs Policy and Procedures Manual steering committee has overseen the finalisation of the manual which was launched in February;
- The Ministry of Housing has advised that as a result of the GST, funding for community housing providers is to be increased by 10%.

Customer Service Executive Council

Issues considered in the February meeting include:

- HAC (through Shelter WA) will be represented on a steering committee formed to establish a complaints handling mechanism for the Ministry of Housing;
- A draft of the Customer Service Charter was distributed for comment;
- A paper was presented on quality control for zone maintenance contractors – recommendations are to be progressed by a working party;
- A summary of results from the recently completed National Customer Satisfaction, staff satisfaction and risk management surveys were tabled. A meeting of senior managers was held and an action plan is being developed to address issues raised.

Home Finance Advisory Committee

A focus group meeting was held with members of the committee, retailers, financial counsellors and

HAC Update continued...

Keystart to obtain feedback on the draft report and develop recommendations. The report has now been finalised and was tabled at the February meeting. It was agreed that the committee will make a decision about distribution of the report at the April meeting.

The committee has also agreed that it needs to revisit its objectives and the appropriateness of the current structure in terms of meeting these objectives. As a result, the committee will meet for an extended time at the April meeting which will be dedicated to these issues.

Rental Services Policy Sub-Committee (RSPSC)

The inaugural meeting of the RSPSC has recently been held with subsequent meetings to be held on a monthly basis. The Sub-Committee has been established to advise HAC on operational policy issues affecting people who come into contact with Homeswest rental housing programs, and to assist HAC in advising on the development of new operational policies related to Homeswest rental housing programs.

The Sub-Committee members are Joanne Walsh (Tenants Advice Service), Karel Eringa (Council to Homeless Persons Working Party/Community Housing Coalition), Catriona Cameron (Shelter WA), Shane Edmonds (Ministry of Housing), Astrid Chapman (regional representative) and Anne Harman (Aboriginal representative). In addition to the Sub-Committee Members, contact will be made with other individuals and organisations around specific policy issues. The next meeting will be held in April where policy issues will be prioritised

for consideration. An update will be provided in the next newsletter.

OTHER ISSUES

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI)

As some of you may be aware, AHURI has been restructured with a research node being established in each State and Territory. In WA, a joint tender by Murdoch and Curtin universities was successful. HAC is seeking a meeting with representatives from the consortium to discuss the research agenda in WA and options for the community sector to participate in it.

Meeting with the Minister

The second quarterly meeting with the Minister is scheduled for April and will be attended by the Chairperson, WACOSS and Shelter WA.

Chairperson

We are delighted to announce that Ian Carter has taken up the position of Chairperson of the committee. As most of you would be aware, Ian has had a long involvement in the community sector and is currently the Chief Executive Officer at Anglicare.

Planning Day

A planning day will be held in April to:

- Review the Terms of Reference;
- Discuss the committee's relationship with the newly formed Office of Policy;
- Identify key priority areas for the committee;
- Establish future directions for the committee and its subcommittees.

Homeswest Page

(The page where Homeswest has it's say)

RENTAL SUBSIDY REVIEWS

For Homeswest tenants who receive a rental subsidy, two common questions regularly arise:

- ◆ how often does Homeswest review rental subsidies; and
- ◆ why does it conduct reviews as soon as Centrelink increases its rates?

Under the terms of the agreement between Commonwealth and State Governments, the housing authority must carry out a review of an individual tenant's eligibility for a subsidy on an annual basis.

Homeswest carries out a review annually, with the date of the individual tenant's review based on the anniversary date of their occupation of the property in which they reside. Approximately six weeks before the anniversary date a review form is forwarded to the tenant. To take away any stress associated with supplying verification of income for Centrelink recipients, Homeswest has come to an arrangement with Centrelink.

Under this arrangement Centrelink forwards income details to tenants to coincide with their receipt of a subsidy review form from Homeswest. The tenant then needs only to complete the subsidy review form, attach the Centrelink income details, income verification for other household members and return it to Homeswest. Early return of the form ensures it is processed well before the date of subsidy expiry and avoids any difficulties that may occur due to late return.

A common misconception surrounding rental subsidy reviews is that Homeswest reviews a tenant's rent

immediately they receive an increase in their Centrelink income. Centrelink reviews its rates of payment at least once a year and in the case of the Age Pension, every March and September.

As some tenant's anniversary of occupation falls around these months they may be misled into thinking that Homeswest is reviewing their subsidy to take advantage of the Centrelink increase. As explained above this is not the case.

Other circumstances that result in a rental subsidy review, other than the annual review, are where there is a change in household income of more than \$10.00 per week, additional people take up residency of the house or a household member receives a compensation payment.

In the event of any change in household circumstances it is advisable to inform Homeswest. Where the changed circumstances lead to an increase in rent Homeswest reserves the right to backdate the increase to the actual time of the change.

Under the provisions of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement all tenants are required to remain eligible for public rental housing. From April 2000 Homeswest will undertake annual eligibility surveys of tenants not receiving a rental subsidy. Survey forms will be sent annually to tenants based upon the anniversary date of the occupation of their dwelling. Details of Homeswest's Eligibility Policy are available on the Ministry's Website at www.housing.wa.gov.au

National Shelter Update

As reported in the last newsletter, National Shelter received additional funds from the Cavill Foundation. This will enable us to both extend the project and fund ongoing administration costs including the National Council meetings.

The Project

Following discussion amongst the reference group and Executive, it was agreed that Stage II will focus on the implications of the key findings from Stage I in the context of post 2003 housing.

The project will have both a national and state perspective. At the national level, it will focus on income support and employment related issues. At the state level, activities will be centred around identifying the links between state and national issues as well as identifying issues that might be more appropriately addressed at the local level.

Meanwhile, the Stage I report will be published in the near future – we'll let you know when it's available.

Library Additions

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The following publications have recently been added to Shelter WA's Library & Resource Collection. If you would like to access the Library please contact Shelter WA to make a time to come in. Unfortunately we are not able to loan publications out of the office.

- ◆ Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (1999) *Australia's Welfare 1999: Services and Assistance*, AIHW
- ◆ Ballard & Wheligan (Eds) *Community Organisations Report on Housing in Western Australia: The International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, WA ASERP Working Party
- ◆ Baum, Stimson, O'Connor, Mullins & Davis (Eds) (1999) *Community Opportunity and Vulnerability in Australia's Cities and Towns: Characteristics, Patterns and Implications*, AHURI
- ◆ Berry, Dalton, Engels & Whiting (Eds) (1999) *Falling Out of Home Ownership: Mortgage Arrears and Defaults in Australia*, AHURI
- ◆ Chamberlain, R. (1999) *Counting the homeless: Implications for Policy Development*, Occasional Paper, ABS
- ◆ Gauntlett, Hugman, Kenyon & Logan (2000) *A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Community-Based Prevention and Early Intervention Action*, Curtin University
- ◆ HREOC(1999) *New Country, New Stories: Discrimination and disadvantage experienced by people in small and emerging communities: A report by the Race Discrimination Commission*, HREOC
- ◆ Luxford, L (1999) *Newly Arrived Migrant And Refugee Housing Issues Paper*, Queensland Shelter
- ◆ National Housing Conference (1999) *Papers from the First National Housing Conference*
- ◆ Office of Multicultural Interests (1998) *Ethnicity-Related Demographic Data for Statistical Areas in Western Australia*, OMI, Perth
- ◆ Shelter WA (2000) *Housing for a Sustainable Community: The State of Housing in Western Australia A Discussion Paper*, WACOSS Poverty Commission
- ◆ Yates, J. & Wulff, M. (Eds) (1999) *Australia's Housing Choices*, AHURI

Promoting Excellence Funding Program

The Lotteries

Commission seeks

applications from

community groups for

funding under its

'Promoting Excellence'

Program.

Under the program grants of up to \$5,000 for individual organisations, and up to \$20,000 for peak organisations and joint applications, are available to help develop the management skills and practices of community service organisations in Western Australia.

Grants may be available for organisational development and staff training activities such as:

- The development of strategic, business or management plans.
- Training in areas such as human resources, industrial relations, occupational health & safety, financial management, committee management and information technology.
- Planning and training in marketing, promotions, fundraising or public relations.
- Attendance at training workshops or seminars.
- Purchase of resources such as training manuals and videos.

To date the Commission has assisted approximately 300 community groups with grants totalling over \$1.2 million.

A recent beneficiary was the WA Deaf Blind Association. Sharon Barrey Grassick, Senior Officer of the Association said "We received a grant to make our training video on 'deaf blindness'. Our staff and volunteers are now better trained and feel more confident".

Community Organisations wishing to receive the information packages are asked to telephone the Lotteries Commission's Community Funding department on 9340 5270.

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In referring to Homeswest's wait turn statistics, a key issue identified was that the suburbs in greatest demand are those areas which provide better access to employment, health services and public transport i.e. inner city suburbs. However, the wait time figures for Perth for example is up to 8 years with the shortest being 5 years. Thus low income people are often located in areas where their needs in terms of breaking the welfare cycle are not being met.

HOMELESSNESS

As stated and backed by the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) statistics, the report identifies homelessness as being a serious problem in WA. For example, 70% of homeless people have been without secure accommodation for 6 months or longer. The majority of SAAP clients were female (64%) with two thirds being under 35 years. The Report, in referring to the SAAP figures, notes these are not a true reflection of homelessness in WA as with homeless transience, data collection is difficult.

Reference to youth homelessness suggests serious problems for youth accessing housing quoting the 1999 Judge Jackson Report which stated up to 83% of youth seeking accommodation were unable to receive assistance due to services being full.

People with mental health issues experience high levels of homelessness as identified in a national human rights inquiry of 1993. This is attributed to the policy of de-institutionalisation. However, few resources are being made available to assist the assimilation process into the community. The Salvation Army Hostel, Lentara, identified in the WA report a rise from 6% of people with mental illness in its care in 1995 to 33% in 1999. Long term,

appropriate accommodation with care and support is not available to many of these people.

OTHER ISSUES

The report explores the availability of alternative housing (to public housing) and the issues of affordability, security of tenure, maintenance and evictions with several case studies to emphasise the points raised.

It also raises issues specific to the redevelopment of public housing in WA. Key issues are:

- ◆ Homeswest have made no statistics available on the number of people being relocated.
- ◆ The apparent lack of consideration for the impact on planning and delivery of local services.
- ◆ The redevelopment of estates has lead to an overall reduction of public housing stock .
- ◆ Households having to relocate more than once as they are moved to areas which are also assigned for future redevelopment.

People with disability are often disadvantaged in accessing appropriate and affordable housing, as are women and children experiencing domestic violence. Particular problems raised are the lack of exit points from refuges, discrimination in the private rental market for people with disability and/or people of ethnic or Aboriginal backgrounds.

REFERENCE TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT REPORT TO THE UN

In responding to the United Nations on housing provision and the rights of Australian citizens, the Australian government's Report *Australia's Report under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1990 – 1997* (Aug.1999)

Housing Report to the United Nations continued...

comprises two pages on housing. This includes three State reports each of approximately one paragraph in length. WA was not represented by a State report.

Whilst the UN in its Guidelines requested detailed data from the Australian government, the response provides limited detail on housing programs, legislation, impact on tenants as well as a lack of statistical data.

The WA community report is consistent with criticisms raised nationally of the government report. It highlights these inadequacies, stating '*...the report (government) blatantly disregards the request in the UN Guidelines for information on the numbers of homeless persons, the numbers inadequately housed, the numbers evicted, the numbers unable to afford housing, the numbers on waiting lists ...*'.

OTHER SUBMISSIONS

Whilst WA has focussed only on the right to housing, other NGO submissions also provide a broad overview of key economic and social and cultural rights issues facing Australians. These include:

- ◆ Redfern Legal Service and Rentwatchers Report, April 1999;
- ◆ ASERP Victorian Working Group Report, January 2000;
- ◆ A Paper prepared by Dianne Otto and David Wiseman titled 'In Search of Effective Remedies: A framework for assessing Australia's progress towards the implementation of its obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights';
- ◆ ATSIIC Paper on discrimination submitted to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, February

1999; and

- ◆ Women's Rights Action Network Australia (WRANA) Report prepared by Barbara Palmer and Dianne Otto, December 1999.

Whilst issues raised on housing are consistent throughout these reports there are unique differences. For example, well known is the extreme shortage of affordable housing in the Sydney area due to the forthcoming Olympics.

For example, the Redfern Legal Service and Rentwatchers paper provides the following feedback on NSW:

- ◆ 'Homelessness has increased by over 50% in the last decade';
- ◆ 'Evictions are the primary reason for people seeking support from homelessness services';
- ◆ 'DV is the most common cause of homelessness for women and children'.

The Victorian Working Group formed as a coalition of NGO's to streamline the process of identifying and reporting on the Victorian situation. Key points highlighted in their report include:

- ◆ Lack of government estimates of poverty in its report. In looking at poverty and children the Working Group state 'After housing poverty rates range from 16% to 23% for children under 15 years'.
- ◆ Homelessness statistics – 'In 1997/98 only 1 in 10 people experiencing homelessness in Australia were accommodated by Australian government funding services'. '...with an increased request for assistance of 11.4%'.
- ◆ Affordability – 'Private tenants in the lowest quintile pay an average of 59% of their income on rent'.

The Paper prepared by Dianne Otto and David

Housing Report to the United Nations continued...

“The key point being that the Australian government should be looking at fully realising the rights in the Covenant rather than the framework of a minimum level.”

Wiseman discusses the obligation of government to the Covenant with reference to the concept of minimum core obligations of all signatories to the Covenant.

Concerns are raised in the Paper regarding the UN assessment process. That is the process of the poorest developing nations having to comply to the conditions of the Covenant equally with a country like Australia with a higher level of resources available in a fast growing economy. The key point being that **the Australian government should be looking at fully realising the rights in the Covenant rather than the framework of a minimum level.**

The WRANA Report also raises issues relating to the right to an adequate standard of living stating ‘... despite Australia’s first world affluence, the majority of Indigenous Australians do not enjoy the minimum core of subsistence rights that the Covenant guarantees’. The report queries

government transparency and accountability practices in terms of public scrutiny of agreements.

The report also comments on the increasingly inequitable distribution of wealth in Australia and how that impacts on housing. Other issues raised are consistent with various State reports in terms of access and equity.

Finally, the report comments on the shift by government from provider to purchaser of services resulting in: a tightly controlled commercial relationship between the State and Federal governments; centralised service delivery and output-oriented performance indicators; and the privatisation of the public sector. It considers this to be an abrogation by government of its responsibilities under the Covenant.

QUESTIONS FOR THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

State community organisations in their reporting processes have been asked by COHRE for a list of questions to be responded to by the Australian government. Those questions will be included in the national community report.

The UN in its review process requires the Australian government to provide a response to queries outlined in the Covenant Guidelines.

With some thirteen questions as well as several sub points, the WA Report queries government commitment in the provision of housing to meet need. Questions also raise the option of the government releasing annually, detailed information and statistics on housing provision as per the guidelines set out by the Covenant.

In addressing discrimination and housing, the list of

Housing Report to the United Nations continued...

questions also cover whether the Australian government would be committed to dealing with discriminatory practices by developing a nationwide code of conduct for real estate agents, or willing to fund test cases to ensure that the illegality of discriminatory behaviour is clearly established.

Issues relating to ensuring access, affordability, security of tenure and housing appropriateness are also covered.

Other reports request a response to a range of questions including the lack of minimum housing standards in tenancy legislation, the impact to housing of the GST, lack of caravan park legislation, discrimination in the private sector, and housing cost in terms of the average Australian paying 10% of income whilst 1 in 3 private tenants pay in excess of 30%.

The reduction of funding in 'real terms' of 50% since

1989 under the CSHA is also queried with reference to the issue of the provision of rent assistance simply pushing up rents thus providing benefits for landlords and not tenants.

CONCLUSION

Shelter WA will provide an update on the progress of the National Community Report to Government as well as the government response in future newsletters.

The WA Community Report is currently available for reference in the Shelter WA office library. Queries on obtaining a copy can be made by contacting Catriona Cameron on 08 9325 6660 or by email at sheltwa@opera.iinet.net.au.

It is anticipated the National Community Report will be available from May 2000. Details will be advised in the next Shelter WA newsletter.

Role of Shelter WA

Shelter WA is a peak community managed housing organisation established in 1979, which seeks to represent the views of consumers and community groups on major housing issues. Shelter WA aims to ensure that every person has access to affordable, appropriate, secure and safe housing that is free from discrimination.

It does this through:

- Coordinating and representing community sector views to government;
- Developing and responding to policy
- Providing education and information; and
- Promoting alternative housing models.

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Publisher	Shelter WA
Contributors	Camille Inifer Women's Refuge Group WESNET Ministry of Housing Louise Ruyg (artwork) Pat Weston (artwork)
Production/ Layout	Catriona Cameron

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