



Housing management practice and support

THE POLICY OBJECTIVE OF TARGETING PUBLIC HOUSING TO THOSE MOST IN NEED HAS CHANGED THE JOB OF HOUSING MANAGERS. TENANTS INCREASINGLY NEED DIFFERENT KINDS OF SUPPORT IN ORDER TO SUSTAIN A TENANCY BUT PROVIDING OR BROKERING THIS SUPPORT CAN CHALLENGE TRADITIONAL SERVICE DELIVERY, FUNDING AND WORKPLACE CULTURES.

KEY POINTS

- Increased numbers of priority and special needs allocations into public housing have changed the profile of this tenure and thus the job of housing managers.
- Research finds that tenants with complex or special needs often require particular forms of support to sustain a tenancy.
- There are constraints on the capacity of housing authorities to routinely adopt or broker support interventions as core housing management practices.

BACKGROUND

The 1996 Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) included provisions that required priority of assistance to be given to those with the highest needs, a policy known as 'targeting'. Among other responses, housing authorities implemented changes to priority allocation policies. The result was that over the 1990s, the proportion of new tenancies allocated to priority tenants increased almost three-fold nationally, from 17 to 49 per cent.¹

Priority applicants are considerably less healthy, have much lower incomes for the same household type, suffer greater financial hardship and experience higher rates of mobility.² These factors reinforce the likelihood that a priority tenant will need additional support if their tenancy is to be sustained.

A condition of the CSHA that first appeared in the 1996 Agreement is that housing assistance should be coordinated with any support services that a household might require to live in the community. This condition was not attached to any means or funds for "coordinating support" and between 1990/91 to 2000/01, real capital funding for public housing fell by 25 per cent. This reduction of funding led to authorities selling off 12,000 public housing dwellings from the mid 1990s to 2000/01 to adequately maintain existing ageing stock.¹

*This bulletin by **Anne-Marie Heintjes** synthesises the evidence from a range of AHURI and other research on housing management practice and support.*

Definitions:

Housing management practice: *the range of operational tools or service delivery interventions for assisting households in public housing.*

Housing Stress: *people who pay more than 30% of their income in rent are said to be experiencing housing stress.*



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Another driver of change for housing practice that has grown over a longer period of time has been deinstitutionalisation and a move to community-based care. By 1998, 39 per cent of public housing tenants were known to have a disability. Although high, this figure probably under-represents the real number, given that people may not wish to disclose disabilities.³

The shift towards targeting, deinstitutionalisation, diminished funding and a reduction in public housing have all occurred in the face of increasing numbers of low-income households suffering housing stress. In the years from 1986-96, the number of households regarded to be suffering **housing stress** increased across the seven capital cities by approximately 90,000. In 2002-03, 862,000 households were in housing stress.⁴

Taken together, these factors have had the effect of increasing waitlist lengths across Australia. They are also changing the composition of public housing, as greater proportions of people with multiple and complex needs enter and remain in public housing.

Tenants with complex needs may need extra time and care with everything from understanding their tenancy agreement, to finding a suitable house in the right neighbourhood, to learning living skills. This has put pressure on the previous rule-based, one-size-fits-all approach to housing management practice.

There are costs of not catering to the needs of these tenants. When tenancies fail and evictions occur this costs Housing Departments lost rent, litigation and staff time. It costs tenants personally when they suffer instability and potential homelessness. It costs public housing in the longer run when estates of disadvantaged, unemployed tenants add to the stigma of moving into public housing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT

The challenge of responding to tenants with high and complex needs calls for more than an extension or modification to existing practices; it calls for a comprehensive attempt to integrate a responsive support structure into housing service delivery.

Support is a broad term for any assistance, provided through either formal (government or community service providers) or informal channels (family, friends, neighbours) that has a positive impact on an individual's physical, mental or emotional health. Support that increases the likelihood of a tenancy being sustained is a primary concern for housing departments, but any support that enhances well-being can indirectly make tenancy management easier, and lead to more sustained tenancies.

Support can include talking, arranging modifications to a dwelling, case management, advocacy or skills training. Some of these supports can be provided directly, while others such as case management or skills training may require brokering from across programs, agencies or community organisations.

The benefit of support across a range of special need groups is well documented. Support has been found to be beneficial to:

- the physical health and emotional well-being of older tenants.⁵
- rehabilitation, and sustainability of tenancies for those struggling with drug addictions.⁶
- rehabilitation, and sustainability of tenancies for those with mental illness.⁷
- Ex-prisoners, for whom support increases the likelihood of remaining out of prison.⁸

Other groups like Indigenous women and people with broad ranging physical disabilities speak of the importance of, and their desire for, more support.⁹ For Indigenous women in particular, it is difficult to know how useful support might be, as existing supports have been found to be inadequate or culturally inappropriate.¹⁰

Baldry found that, amongst ex-prisoners, those tenants that regarded their support as "helpful" were significantly less likely to return to prison, while the converse was true for those who found their support "unhelpful". This outcome is reflective of the interplay between individual needs, and the type of support required. Quite simply, what works for one person may not work for another.

Research indicates that the most helpful support is individualised, flexible, and well-integrated across government and community so as to ensure that the diverse needs of tenants can be met.⁵ Recognising, responding to and monitoring a diverse support package requires specialist support.⁷

Some jurisdictions have engaged specialist staff who can liaise directly with tenants, while others use the specialists to train housing staff how to carry out assessments. The latter model is likely to be more useful in the longer term, better equipping housing staff for the job they are doing.

Interestingly – and unfortunately – a recurring theme across the research is the need for support in dealing with bureaucracy. Whether it is help with application forms, advocacy, referrals or transfers, there is evidence that the systems established to 'help' people, may be too complex and disconnected for many that really need it.⁵

In the current system, support tends to be provided once a tenant is manifestly experiencing difficulty upholding the requirements of a tenancy. An ideal situation would see housing staff equipped with clear procedures and the skills and

knowledge to systematically identify and proactively respond to support needs, to prevent such difficulties arising.⁵

CONSTRAINTS ON ADOPTING SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS

Lack of integration is recognised as the key constraint, among a range of other service delivery, funding and cultural constraints, on linking effective support to public housing provision. A central reason is the division of housing from many health-based support interventions such as mental health, aged care and disabled services.

Although there are examples of jurisdictions where health and housing are delivered by the same department, the point of relevance is the degree of coordination achieved between the areas, regardless of where they reside. While models that improve linkages with support such as Victoria's Housing Support Coordinators are evident, the general depiction in research, across a range of client groups, is that linkages and coordination across housing and support are either poor or non-existent. A lack of coordination between housing and support systems for tenants with mental illness¹¹ is identified and Baldry, when considering the support available for released prisoners, states that, "there is almost a total lack of coordination/ integration amongst appropriate government/non-government agencies."⁸

Without a systematic way of identifying or monitoring tenants who may require support, many tenants struggle on in silence, either unaware of available supports, or reluctant to seek it for various reasons.⁵ Indigenous women have been found to often distrust and have difficulty understanding formal support services and systems, coupled with feeling shame in asking for help.¹⁰ This has been mirrored for older tenants who failed to receive needed help.⁵ They reported "being too proud" to ask, and having difficulty accessing and understanding information about support. For many tenants, asking for help is a delicate balance between dependency and pride. This reinforces the need for support interventions to be introduced with concern for individual needs.¹²

Funding is another important constraint on the effective provision and coordination of support. While the CSHA of 1996 offered the capacity to apply funds with greater flexibility, decreasing funding levels at that time and since, have made it difficult for housing authorities to keep up with growing support needs.

There are indicators of the impact of these changes in increased numbers of evictions¹² and increased operating costs¹. As an operating cost, overhead expenditure has increased by an average of 58 per cent from 1990/91 to

2000/01. This is regarded to be because of "the considerable supporting services of a 'non-housing' related nature" that housing authorities now provide.¹

The divestment of stock that reduced funding levels has also impacted on the availability of appropriate housing for targeted groups. Dalton⁶ refers to the difficulties for housing staff of allocating housing within an "inadequate and constrained stock portfolio."

As CSHA funding has decreased, funding in other areas critical to support provision such as disability, aged services and supported accommodation assistance has shown modest increases. Given the overwhelming and growing need evidenced in the research, however; this support funding has been insufficient, or has been insufficiently linked, to respond to growing needs within the social housing system. But a simple boost of funding will not solve the 'problem' because of other service delivery and cultural blockages.

Perhaps the most difficult constraint on effective support provision is a culture in housing agencies that struggles to accommodate the shift from properties and tenancies, to homes and individuals with support needs. It has been suggested that public housing authorities are "essentially landlords... that can only provide for... people capable of living independently."⁵ Such a landlord-tenant relationship based on simple interactions around application, rent and transfers suited public housing for its original family oriented purpose of growing post WWII industry. But for today's high and complex needs households, a bureaucratic, landlord approach will struggle to identify and respond to tenant needs.

Housing authorities have and are, working to accommodate the requirements of the changing environment. New jobs that specifically link housing and support have appeared, and jurisdictions often have formal agreements or protocols across government and community for the provision of different forms of support. Operational policy manuals have been re-written using a language of discretion and flexibility, where every "tenant" has become a "client" and the aim has moved to tailoring the housing product to client need – at least within the confines of the bureaucratic, political and financial environment. The specific attributes of 'supportive' housing managers in terms of knowledge, resources and approach to policy, are usefully detailed in O'Brien's report on the links between mental illness and support.⁷

These changes are underpinned by knowledge that allocations that are sensitive to location, privacy, housing design and amenity issues, are more likely to last.¹⁴ Providing a suitably modified house, or accommodating changing household composition, can be critical not only to sustaining a tenancy, but helping an individual to stay out of prison or overcome drug addiction or mental illness. The extent of

this change has varied across jurisdictions depending on local costs of service delivery and other social and political factors.

THE PATH AHEAD

Future thinking around the effective provision and coordination of support would be assisted by a closer understanding of the changing role and duties of housing managers and the impact that this has had on staff turnover and job descriptions.

Another focus for future research could be determining the level of unmet support need in public housing. This would require an agreed understanding of what 'in need', or 'at risk' means, but would provide an invaluable basis for both identifying and responding to support needs effectively.

While there are acknowledged difficulties in understanding the prevalence and trends of eviction, a comprehensive national attempt to record evictions reliably and consistently would assist in understanding the significance of the problem and possible responses.

This paper has not addressed the degree to which community housing assists tenants with support needs. It would be useful to compare the tenures in terms of support provision, particularly given the affordable housing agenda and one of its possible pathways of transferring ownership or responsibility for housing management to the community sector.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Reports on housing management can be found on the AHURI website (www.ahuri.edu.au) or contact the AHURI National Office +61 3 9660 2300.



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