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Soaring rental costs placing extra stress on older people facing homelessness

Older residents in New South Wales are facing a fresh wave of housing and homelessness vulnerability with increased rental costs compounding pressure on growing waitlists for social housing.

Representatives of community housing and welfare providers will give evidence to the Upper House inquiry into Homelessness Amongst Older People Aged Over 55 in NSW today, calling for urgent action to address a growing homelessness crisis facing older people.

In Greater Sydney and the Illawarra, less than one percent of available rental properties were affordable to a single person receiving the aged pension as recently as March 2022 – that number only reaching as high as 4 percent across the regions.

New data from Domain reveals Sydney rent prices for houses have jumped almost 20 percent since the pandemic began, while rent prices for units have had their steepest annual increase in 14 years at over 10 percent, adding further rental stress to those on a fixed income such as the Aged Pension.

CASE STUDY

Marie Sillars became homeless following a marriage break up. She then lost her home and community in 2014 after the NSW Government sold off the Ivanhoe Estate she was living in. Marie advocated for safe and suitable housing for many of the tenants – meeting with politicians from both sides, attending committee meetings and engaging with community housing providers. Marie is now a resident with community housing provider, Link Wentworth.

Marie has experienced the trauma of housing stress as a single senior woman living in Sydney. In her submission to the Inquiry, she urges for change in policies and funding that will provide much needed service intervention and crisis support.

“The number of stories I hear through National Alliance of Seniors for Housing with senior women being homeless is heartbreaking,” Marie said.

“These women have raised children and been caregivers throughout their lives and find themselves alone, no superannuation or savings and cannot receive priority housing until they reach 80 years.

“There is no option for many of these women and can end up in insecure and unsafe housing or becoming homeless with no hope for the future,” Marie said.

Marie has made a submission to the inquiry and will appear at the hearing on Tuesday 19 July.

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Many older people are becoming homeless for the first time later in life, especially older women. There was an 88 percent increase in older women accessing homelessness services between 2013-14 and 2016-17 for a range of factors including divorce or a relationship breakdown, lower lifetime earnings or domestic violence in the home.

The number of older people who are homeless in NSW has been growing at an alarming rate in recent years. From 2011 to 2016, there was a 43 percent increase in the number of people aged 55 and over experiencing homelessness (from 4,475 to 6,407).

The situation for older people is likely to have deteriorated further since 2016, due to the pandemic and its associated economic and employment impacts, as well as the current cost of living and worsening housing crisis across NSW.

Community Housing Industry Association NSW (CHIA NSW), Community Housing Limited (CHL), St Vincent de Paul Society, The Salvation Army Australia, and Women's Community Shelters have called for urgent action from the State Government to address the increase in older people facing homelessness in NSW.

Quotes attributable to CHIA NSW Head of Policy Caitlin McDowell:

"People are spending so much of their aged pension on rent that they are going without food, medicine or heating and those are the ones who aren't couch-surfing, sleeping in their cars, or homeless.

"These people should not have to pay the price for decades of severe underinvestment in social and affordable housing by successive governments, and it is not too late to help them.

"We need a significant and long-term investment in social and affordable housing where the NSW Government partners with the community housing and not-for-profit sectors to deliver more housing and support services to older people.

Quotes attributable to St Vincent de Paul Society *enter spokesperson's name and title*:

Quotes attributable to the Salvation Army Australia Dr. Jed Donoghue, National Homelessness General Manager:

"Older people, like others experiencing homelessness, cope in different ways including by sleeping rough, finding temporary supported accommodation, living in boarding or rooming houses, caravan parks, hostels or other temporary lodging, squatting and living in over-crowded dwellings or staying temporarily in other households, for example 'couch-surfing'.

"Within our family and domestic violence and homelessness services, it can be difficult to identify and collect data about older people in need as many people do not present to our services until they are in crisis and have very often exhausted all other options.

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“Our family and domestic violence teams, in particular, report that client data on housing and specialised homelessness services for older women does not reflect the true demand for these services.

“Older women facing homelessness due to family and domestic violence will more often sleep in their cars, move between family members and friends’ homes, or may not even identify themselves as homeless.”

Quotes attributable to Women’s Community Shelters CEO, Annabelle Daniel OAM:

“Women’s Community Shelters have been working with older women experiencing homelessness since 2009.”

“We have warned of a tsunami of older women’s homelessness for over a decade, with over 450,000 women over 45 across Australia on low incomes, and who don’t own their own homes.”

“We have supported women through our crisis and transitional housing who have been tipped into unexpected homelessness through sudden illness, rent increases in a long-held property, an accident in an uninsured car or the loss of one shift of work per week.”

“Rental vacancy rates are extremely tight across Australia, with high levels of competition for each property. It’s not uncommon for women we support to attend property inspections, only to find they are competing against fifty to sixty other people, many of whom offer to pay over advertised rent or up to twelve months rent in advance. Women on government payments and on low incomes face a ‘Hunger Games’ competition everywhere they look.”

“Our ‘meanwhile use’ projects, Beecroft House, Mosman House and Allawah House, provide affordable transitional housing for women at risk of homelessness in partnership with Aged Care facilities and wonderful Community Housing provider partners. Over the next decade, we will need to be innovative with more meanwhile use and adaptive re-use programs as social housing takes time to build and competition for rentals will only increase.”

Quotes attributable to Community Housing Limited (CHL) State Manager, Megan Davidson:

CHL NSW State Manager, Megan Davidson, said urgent action is needed to provide essential housing infrastructure to ensure everyone has access to a safe, affordable home.

“At CHL we have seen a significant increase in the number of older people at risk of homelessness as a result of being priced out of the private rental market. Housing must be seen as critical infrastructure,” she said.

“State and federal governments should urgently develop a national strategy to increase supply of housing for older Australians and people on low to moderate incomes.”

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Each of these organisations will appear today at the Inquiry into homelessness amongst older people in NSW. [Their submissions can be found here.](#)

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