

CHIAVIC NEWS

THE VOICE OF THE VICTORIAN COMMUNITY HOUSING INDUSTRY

SPRING EDITION 2020



**SPECIAL
COVID-19 EDITION**



Community Housing
INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION **VICTORIA**

Wintringham CEO and 'virtual volunteer'
Bryan Lipmann AM and Jac.

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WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR

It's remarkable to recall that back in February this year, the CHIA Vic team were about to go to print with a newsletter focused on the bushfires that just devastated Victoria and NSW. Planning was also well underway for our conference, Housing Aspirations, to be held for the first time in conjunction with CHIA National over two days.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 had other plans and a postponed conference now seems like a small inconvenience compared to the death and havoc this unprecedented global pandemic has unleashed.

With community housing organisations working with some of Victoria's most vulnerable and disadvantaged people, having a rapid and comprehensive response to the pandemic has been essential to minimise transmissions in the sector.

The CHIA Vic team has been working at a feverish pace since COVID changed the way it provides services. It has focused on the support that members require around COVID to address issues and mitigate risks for tenants and staff, including the development and distribution of resources, such as a coronavirus checklist for CHOs, sample maintenance procedures and how to manage the first 24-hours after an outbreak.

A new, members-only section of the CHIA Vic website has been set up specifically to deal with COVID-19 issues and a new COVID-19 Sector Group has been created to discuss current and emerging issues and mitigation actions and provide feedback.

In addition to working closely with DHHS on the sector's behalf, CHIA Vic organised an infection prevention and control outreach that saw public health nurses conducting preventative assessments on 18 high-risk community housing facilities, which accommodate people with complex needs in high-density housing.

Feedback from the outreach visits have led CHIA Vic to successfully seek funding to employ an Infection Prevention Project Worker. The worker will help improve the sector's risk management and preparedness for potential outbreaks and will be available as an invaluable hands-on resource for our member organisations.

Importantly, CHIA Vic has also been laying the groundwork to support the roll out of the Victorian Government's \$500m investment in building and upgrading social housing through its Building Works package, and supporting calls for social housing to be included in the Commonwealth Government's stimulus package.

This edition of the CHIA Vic News is focusing on how our member organisations have been impacted, stepped up and responded to this crisis. Whilst daily welfare checks of those considered most at risk have been universally adopted, some organisations have looked at other ways to lessen the impact of the pandemic on staff and tenants with measures such as food parcels, education scholarships to assist those home schooling, and a virtual volunteer program.

We take a look at a day-in-the-life of staff who have been forced to adapt to the new norm, as well as the experience of community housing organisations overseas. Tenants, of course, have been hard hit by the pandemic and we hear how some have spent their time, including some of Wintringham's very talented artists, whose work has been displayed at a virtual art show for the first time this year.

Finally, our resident Adjunct Professor Terry Burke looks to the past to project how the pandemic could have a silver lining, providing opportunities for solid growth in social housing into the future.

Roberta Buchanan
CHIA Vic Chair

COMMUNITY HOUSING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Whilst no part of society was particularly relaxed about news of a new, potentially deadly virus spreading across the world, community housing was immediately on edge. As a sector accommodating people in medium to high-density housing, many of whom have physical and mental health issues, it was clear COVID-19 posed a huge risk to our tenants, staff and business model.

Despite precautions, several of CHIA Vic's member organisations have had tenants test positive and had to put their planning into action to prevent its spread. Housing Choices Australia is one of the community housing organisations that has dealt with a positive case. This is Housing Choices' story.

TEAMWORK DURING A CRISIS

It was late afternoon on a gloomy Melbourne winter Thursday. The day was bleeding into night as people started to switch off their computers and turn on their home lights. Then the call came, and the subsequent meeting invite - one of our residents had informed us that they had tested positive for COVID-19. We had previously provided information to residents in our medium-and high-density sites asking them to let us know if they tested positive as we were there to help with isolation supports. Some of the team already had spoons in pots on stoves and glasses of COVID's little helpers in hand, but into the 6pm meeting they went.

The core COVID response team had been working together since the first week of March and since then a further two teams had been set up as the virus morphed, changed and persisted. We all knew this was probably going to come... eventually.



The three teams were:

- 1. The National COVID Response team, led by our appointed COVID Controller**
- 2. State Response Teams**
- 3. Groundwork Teams**

The main COVID team had been meeting two to three times a week since March. In that time they had responded to the varying requirements as dictated by government and the virus. The team first worked on getting people working from home and other associated health and safety requirements and then moved on to positive tenant case response frameworks. The team developed multiple policies and procedures covering internal and external activities, including extra cleaning across our sites with a focus on high traffic areas, common usage areas and high use touchpoints such as handrails and lift buttons.

All documentation was hosted on a purpose-built internal digital platform (SharePoint) so all staff had visibility over policies and procedures and any communications that had gone out.

This groundwork put the team into a strong position to respond calmly and methodically to the positive test notification.

The meeting started at 6pm and the entire process was completed by 10pm.

Here's what happened...

The team had already engaged our state-based team and ground response team. The state-based team had gathered information and reported to the COVID Response team. The information was reviewed and next steps were defined. We had prepared lists in each of our medium-to high-density sites of resident information, communication requirements and support needs. We contacted every tenant by phone to let them know of our action plan and to conduct a needs assessment. Where necessary, the response was made available in the tenant's language with language support available. At the same time a burst SMS was sent out to all resident mobile numbers to advise them of the deep clean that was about to occur. The ground team were at the property erecting signs and putting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) into residents' letterboxes.

The ground team had pre-prepared Response Packs for high and medium-density properties equipped with onsite physical response requirements. The packs included tenant contact details, in-language supports, lists of support and food agencies, public health contact numbers, signage to roll out, property details (number of residents and needs etc.), utility details, such as lifts and stairwells, and PPE equipment.

Then there was the deep clean. Residents were contacted and asked to stay indoors while the deep clean took place, including surface disinfection and fogging. The whole process took less than four hours with things returning to normal at 10pm.

THE PROCESS WAS WELL MANAGED, HOWEVER, AS WITH ANY FIRST RESPONSE CRISIS, THERE WERE LEARNINGS.

The team met again first thing the following morning (this time with coffees in hand) to debrief and review the process. The process was well managed, however, as with any first response crisis, there were learnings. The burst SMS was the best way to immediately contact residents, and the follow-up and simultaneous phone calls were the best secondary touchpoint. It was decided that having a roster of on-call staff for the state-based team would guarantee we always had the right staff ready to go to cover off all required response functions if, and when, required.

Over the weeks after the event, two more residents were tested and the results came back negative. We continued to check-in with residents over the following week and the feedback we received was positive. Residents said they were thankful we were open and advising them of the activity in the building.

The response to this crisis demonstrated how teamwork and forward planning is important in any aspect of an organisation. It was a learning curve for all involved, especially understanding what a deep clean fog actually looks like. This is something we will all remember for a very long time, if not forever.

Ruth Heenan, Housing Choices Australia

CHIA Vic News is the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria's industry magazine. Contact the Editor, **Kate Robertson**, with story ideas or advertising inquiries - kate.robertson@chiavvic.com.au

ON THE FRONTLINE OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

It's not possible, or desirable, to have business as usual when the world is tackling a global pandemic, particularly when working with a cohort who are more vulnerable than most. CHIA Vic approached people in a variety of roles across the community housing sector to see how COVID-19 has changed their day-to-day working life.



THE CEO:
JAMES KING, Acting CEO, Unison and CHIA Vic Board Member

When COVID-19 hit, the first decision our Executive made was to focus on the wellbeing and safety of our staff, tenants and clients.

COVID-19 has definitely brought the Executive team closer. We meet first thing every morning to consider the latest information at hand, identify and assess any risks associated and plan for the potential impact on our teams and residents. The issues we consider daily include working arrangements (working from home or from site, depending on the restrictions and type of work), tenant welfare, the financial impact on Unison, any communications required, most recent government announcements and updates to government and sector guidelines.

I strongly believe regular and consistent communication is key. All staff get regular email updates from me. These were daily during the first weeks of the pandemic but, as the teams and Victoria in general settled into the new normal, we reduced them to weekly. In a constantly changing environment, these regular updates are critical.

We foster staff feedback and connection within teams and across the organisation (for example via Social Club activities and our internal e-newsletter), which staff confirmed was important to them in our recent staff wellbeing survey.

I am very proud of how our teams quickly adapted to the new environment and to delivering our services in new ways. There have been some great initiatives to ensure our tenants and clients continue to be supported. Our Place Managers phone vulnerable tenants regularly to check in on how they are going. Team members who were normally located within a community are now working from home, so these calls and extra attention are making a difference to our residents' lives.

Our homelessness services' workload has increased dramatically. Every week the number of households we are supporting to stay in motels increases and we recently passed the \$2 million Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) milestone.

The pandemic has been a great disrupter, but I believe some good can come of it. On a personal level, it put things in perspective for me and encouraged me to focus on what matters. Unison, and I'm sure other organisations, will also learn from this experience and consider activities, delivery models and approaches that will best serve the organisation into the future.



THE HR MANAGER:
MICHELLE LEE, Manager, People & Organisational Development, Common Equity Housing

One of the biggest challenges posed by COVID-19 in the context of human resources has been maintaining a strong sense of connectivity across the team and finding positive ways to support and encourage staff as they navigate factors such as isolation and juggling carer duties, home schooling and childcare.

Navigating a crisis under 'normal' circumstances is difficult enough without the added challenge of a remote working environment and a global pandemic. We are seeing the best and

worst in all of us at different times, as well as our varying abilities to cope with what we are navigating on a day-to-day basis. Some team members are thriving in the current environment while others may be feeling more disconnected or isolated. Understanding and communicating that these are normal reactions is important. Being available, responsive and providing a genuine level of care to the team and coaching managers to do the same, is a critical aspect of ensuring our team has what they need in order to cope as well as they can.

I AM REGULARLY HUMBLLED AT THE CAPACITY OUR TEAM HAS SHOWN TO GENUINELY CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER AND REGULARLY CHECK IN AND ENSURE THAT COLLEAGUES AND TEAM MEMBERS ARE OKAY.

Making everyone's mental health and wellbeing a priority and providing ample opportunities to discuss how people are feeling and ensuring they are well supported, has continued to be an important aspect of my day-to-day work.

Creating as normal a workplace as possible through regular meetings, celebrating team successes, attending virtual learning opportunities and social events, all help us to maintain a strong sense of connection. It is important to remember that everyone is feeling a range of different emotions and taking the time to acknowledge how team members are feeling empowers us to respond with kindness and compassion.

People have really valued opportunities to come together and we have introduced fortnightly all-team meetings with guest speakers on relevant topics, such as Managing Self-Care and Building Resilience, to give people a regular opportunity to see each other and share their experiences. We also have an established Wellbeing Group who coordinate a variety of virtual activities including meditation, karaoke, crafting, and our famous daily quiz to help keep the energy levels up. Our craft group have even been taking orders and making reusable facemasks for the team.

I have also commenced a regular end-of-week check-in 'blog' where I focus on a relevant theme or common issue that people may be experiencing. Giving the team a regular opportunity to hear from me; to know that they are supported by the organisation and are not alone, has been a positive outlet and well received.

I am regularly humbled at the capacity our team has shown to genuinely care for one another and regularly check-in and ensure that colleagues and team members are okay. We are communicating and supporting a strong message around the importance of self-care and managing our mental health and are openly talking about how we feel on a regular basis. If we continue to

normalise this kind of conversation and create safe spaces for our team to work through any struggles they are experiencing, this will be a positive legacy of our COVID-19 journey.

Another positive outcome has been the removal of any resistance and perceived barriers towards remote working and the development of a more trusting work environment that will continue once we return to the office. Fully flexible working has allowed teams to structure their workday around individual needs, while also allowing them to 'disconnect' when they need to, allow for regular breaks and give attention to other priorities such as home-schooling when required.



THE TENANCY MANAGER:
KARINA CARROLL, Tenancy and Property Manager, WPI

The COVID-19 crisis has presented many and varied challenges for Community Housing Tenancy and Property Managers who are on the sector's frontline in terms of maintaining tenancies and protecting their organisation's vital rental income. Their day-to-day activity has had to change significantly and continues to do so as we face new and tighter restrictions. WPI's Tenancy and Property Manager Karina Carroll gives us an insight into some of the issues.

In addition to the properties they own, Women's Property Initiatives manage 140 properties that are affordable for low to middle income earners on behalf of other organisations.

During the Stage 3 lockdown, all inspections of properties that became available had to be 'no-contact' to protect the health of prospective tenants and staff. 'This created logistical problems that are way out of the ordinary,' Karina says.

'Arriving really early to open up the properties in a way that streamlines the inspection and managing traffic without contact takes a lot longer and is more stressful for everyone.'

WPI recently completed a six-home development in Melbourne's South East and its defects inspections and settlement were made much more difficult by the need to limit the number of physically distanced people able to be present.

The Stage 4 restrictions, which prevent any in-person inspections, have also hampered WPIs ability to have the new homes occupied immediately by vulnerable women and children who are currently living in stressful situations.

'We are in the process of arranging videos and photography for tenants to view the properties, but obviously it makes people nervous to sign a lease on a property they haven't actually inspected. Leases and keys etc will have to be couriered. All of this really increases the pressure and costs,' Karina says.

There has also been some uncertainty about whether housing providers were able to lease properties at this time and if prospective tenants were permitted to move. It is clear now that they can, given their housing situations.

Having a new build remain vacant also presents obvious dangers, including the potential for vandalism and theft, so it is also a priority to push ahead with leasing to avoid risk to the property.

The crisis has also created complications for property maintenance, particularly during Stage 4 where only urgent maintenance can be addressed to reduce the risk of transmission by and to tradespeople, staff and tenants.

The pandemic has also made it even more important for WPI to keep a close eye on arrears and to work with tenants who may be struggling with rent due to lost income to ensure they are able to maintain their tenancies.

THE MAINTENANCE MANAGER: BRETT JARMAN, Asset Manager, CHL

Instead of flying to Melbourne from his home in Tasmania every two to three weeks, CHL's Asset Manager Brett Jarman is charging his mobile phone two to three times a day to cope with the strain of multiple calls and online meetings.

"IT'S DEFINITELY A DIFFERENT WORLD THAT WE'RE IN AND THERE IS NO TEXTBOOK FOR IT"

Brett, who is CHL's Asset Manager for both Tasmania and Victoria and lives on the Apple Isle, says the pandemic restrictions have had a significant impact on his day-to-day work.

'It's definitely a different world that we're in and there is no textbook for it,' Brett says.

'Things change daily, depending on what guidelines come out,'



Brett says, 'I'm forever trying to keep up with things from afar. In Tassie, it's pretty much business as usual.'

CHL has a small internal team and relies on contractors for most of its maintenance work. Brett says supporting his contractors with their cashflow during the restrictions has been a priority.

'We need to ensure that they are able to continue operating, otherwise we can't support our tenants,' Brett says.

'The start of my day is checking any media releases in Victoria based on restrictions and requirements that I feel would impact on us. Then I catch up with my senior field service officer in Victoria to ensure I'm across everything. If things have changed, I then contact the contractors to see make sure they know. If it is going to be a major impact, we pull our management team together and discuss what we need to implement.

'I've become very efficient in the use of the virtual meetings. I've had to. I've had days where I've had to turn my off phone three times because it's got that hot, but it's a new norm.'

To date, Brett says the impact on tenants requiring maintenance has been minimal with the call centre flagging the urgent calls and the others being logged to be reviewed when the restrictions are lifted.

'I think when it gets back to normal my travel to Victoria will reduce because of the technology that we've been able to use. I think it's given a lot of organisations the ability to rethink how offices work. I think definitely there is going to be some change and there will be companies that will adopt more flexible worker arrangements.'

Brett's expecting busy times post-restrictions, with the need to catch up with logged issues, as well bring forward maintenance when the promised government stimulus funding is delivered.

'I just hope that our contractors can still be there at the end of this, but we are working closely with them to try and support them as best we can,' he says.

RESIDENTS PASS ON LESSONS DURING LOCKDOWN

You'll hear about the impact of Coronavirus measured in case numbers, lives, and budget deficits. But you're less likely to hear - or see - the more subtle influence of another disease gripping residents of community housing: loneliness. Described as the social health pandemic of our time, COVID-19 has brought to light just how rough isolation can be. And for those in our communities who already experience social marginalisation, lockdown restrictions have highlighted just how important the most basic human connection can be, Servant's Jayden Battey writes.

As community housing organisations, we sit in the privileged position of working with many of Melbourne's most vulnerable people: and yet, there's something we can learn from residents who have pushed through the frustration of Stage 4 lockdowns to build and embrace new communities with people vastly different from themselves.

Moving from an affluent Melbourne suburb into Servants Community Housing residence Hamer Court as intermediate managers mid-lockdown, it has been incredible to experience the difference in how our community of residents have responded to significant global change when compared to the world at large. Quiet resilience, sober determination to survive, and sheer refusal to panic has characterised a community that knows all too well what it means to be sick.

Take one resident; a recent stroke survivor who, in 2019, weathered an induced coma after pneumonia gripped both of his lungs. Staring into a now-deserted main thoroughfare, he explained to me how he chooses to not be scared; 'I wear a mask, keep social distance, and put the sanitiser on every time I leave my room. If I get it [coronavirus] I don't think I'll survive it ... but I won't freak out like the others'.

He tells me how he's been through worse, how he's woken up in enough hospital beds to understand how frail life can be. He grins while making a joke that he should buy PPE with the list of diseases he's survived printed on the outside, as it might scare COVID-19 away, then returns to hanging out with residents he met just weeks ago.

Another resident misses the sounds of laughter and Greek music drifting in from the next-door seniors' centre - silenced since the



Servant's House Manager Jayden Battey with a resident, Ollie.

'I WEAR A MASK, KEEP SOCIAL DISTANCE, AND PUT THE SANITISER ON EVERY TIME I LEAVE MY ROOM. IF I GET IT [CORONAVIRUS] I DON'T THINK I'LL SURVIVE IT ... BUT I WON'T FREAK OUT LIKE THE OTHERS.'

pandemic started. He finds it lonely pacing the hallways - but has taken the time to dream what might come next for him. Driving lessons? More education? In a fast-paced world where it seems everyone is moving faster than you can, for residents who've seen the worst life can offer, slowing down provides an opportunity to dream about something more.

In the last few months we've seen residents find breaking point - snapping when the loneliness reached new depths. We've also seen residents flourish, finding new friendships with neighbours they'd never before taken time to really understand. Lockdown brings out our best and worst - but our residents have learnt through life to adapt to changing circumstances with a determination and resilience the world at large didn't know it needed.

In community housing, we often try to support - and sometimes, where appropriate, teach - the residents entrusted to our care. Perhaps, in a country lonelier than ever before, a global pandemic has provided the perfect opportunity for us to pause, listen, and learn.

Jayden Battey, Servants

YOU NEED A HOME TO STAY AT HOME

COVID-19 SHINES LIGHT ON HOUSING SHORTFALL

The need for people to stay at home to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has shone a light on Australia's housing affordability crisis - the result of decades of underinvestment in affordable and stable housing for low-income households and the absence of a national housing strategy, reports Haven; Home, Safe's Sue Masters.

Governments around the world have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a host of specific measures to protect mortgage-holders and tenants in addition to their existing social safety nets, as the United Nations urges governments to allow people to stay in their homes throughout the crisis.

'Temporary bans (eviction moratoriums) in many countries have ended or are coming to an end, and this raises serious concerns that a tsunami of evictions may follow,' Balakrishnan Rajagopal, the UN's special rapporteur on the right to housing, stated.

He didn't mince words: 'Losing your home during this pandemic could mean losing your life'.

HE DIDN'T MINCE WORDS: 'LOSING YOUR HOME DURING THIS PANDEMIC COULD MEAN LOSING YOUR LIFE'

Australia's response to help keep people housed, in addition to the new JobKeeper and increased JobSeeker payments, has included temporary suspension of evictions from rental properties, programs by the states and territories to provide emergency accommodation and support services to the homeless (totalling over \$89 million), and major banks agreeing to postpone mortgage repayments temporarily, with interest capitalisation.

Countries such as New Zealand, the UK, the USA and Canada have introduced similar measures.

But as economies re-open, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) warns that many of these short-term relief measures may pose longer-term policy trade-offs, in particular:

- Rental market restrictions, such as rent controls, tend to make housing supply less responsive to changes in demand, making it more expensive in the long term.
- Overly restrictive regulation of tenancy relationships is linked with lower residential mobility and therefore labour mobility, which will be undesirable during the recovery period.
- Tax support to mortgage-holders feeds into prices, eroding affordability and creating instability that can undermine economic resilience.
- The crisis-related easing of macro-prudential regulations on housing finance could hurt economic resilience if it is not reversed in due course.

The OECD has recommended that governments should gradually transition from immediate rescue measures to policy settings that can support the recovery and development of efficient, inclusive and sustainable housing markets, including:

- Easing land-use restrictions for environmentally-friendly development to expand and diversify long-term supply as well as speed up the much-needed renewal of the housing stock to higher environmental standards.
- Stepping up government capital spending on social and affordable housing to boost construction activity, while increasing the supply of housing and providing an opportunity to encourage greener construction techniques.

Across 'the ditch', New Zealand's community housing sector is ready and waiting to construct nearly 3,000 homes, but desperately needs public cash to get building. Housing providers have submitted their projects to the government in a bid to get investment through the 'shovel-ready' infrastructure project.

There are at least 15 NZ community housing providers that have identified 83 projects totalling 2,986 homes at a development cost of just over \$1 billion.

The Kiwis' COVID Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF) set out in the 2020 Budget earmarked \$3 billion for infrastructure projects. Of this, housing and urban development has been allocated \$464 million. This is in addition to the \$12 billion set out in the New Zealand Upgrade Programme to stimulate economic activity.

In Canada, the government is currently rolling out its National Housing Strategy, an ambitious 10-year, \$55 billion plan that will create 125,000 new housing units and lift 530,000 families out of housing need, as well as repair and renew more than 300,000 housing units and reduce chronic homelessness by 50 per cent.

In the United Kingdom, the National Housing Federation (NHF) has lobbied the UK government to transition to a longer-term plan and investment program to build a new generation of social and affordable homes as part of the country's coronavirus recovery. These would be high-quality, low carbon, accessible, and suitable for those who need them - including supported housing and housing for older people.

To kick-start this program, the NHF has proposed £20 billion in grant funding for 2022-32, to create a 10-year affordable housing fund. This would be used both to quickly extend existing strategic partnerships and to establish new affordable rental homes with funding for homes of all tenures.

In the United States, where 80 per cent of all affordable housing

PANDEMIC MEASURES MAP

CANADA

- program to ensure banks and mortgage lenders continue lending
- suspension of evictions
- doubling funding for the homeless
- new fund for Indigenous communities.

UNITED STATES

- suspension of evictions
- emergency housing for homeless people
- stimulus cheques to most households
- increased unemployment benefits
- forgivable loans to help small businesses meet payroll

UNITED KINGDOM

- Increased social security payments
- Job Retention Scheme
- Self-Employed Income Support Scheme

AUSTRALIA

- rent increase freeze
- suspension of evictions
- postponed mortgage repayments
- emergency homeless accommodation
- new JobKeeper payments
- increased JobSeeker payments

NEW ZEALAND

- rent increase freeze
- suspension of evictions
- homeless housed in motels

is owned and managed by for-profit companies, the situation for low-paid workers and those on benefits is much more dire, with the country on the verge of an eviction crisis that could displace up to 40 million people - or 12 per cent of the US population.

According to the Centre for American Progress, in the face of what most likely will be double-digit unemployment lasting through to 2021, creating jobs by expanding affordable housing would be a smart long-term investment.

'The lack of affordable housing is a matter of public policy because overspending on housing reduces the financial resources available to families for purchasing health care, investing in their children's futures, saving for retirement, and addressing the severe hardships associated with a pandemic, other natural disasters, and sudden economic downturns such as the current one.'

Meanwhile, the National Low Income Housing Commission has been lobbying Congress to address the underlying causes of homelessness and housing instability. Its stimulus package demands include \$45 billion in funding for the national Housing Trust Fund to build more than 231,000 affordable rental homes while creating 928,000 jobs in the process, \$70 billion for public housing repairs, and an expanded rental assistance Low Income Housing Tax Credit.

Back home, CHIA Vic has surveyed its Victorian members to determine the number of shovel-ready projects that could be included in a government stimulus package. A total of 3,901 units were identified as being possible to deliver in the next five years. Some of these projects were in partnership with private developers, and would deliver a mix of social, affordable and private market housing, with over three quarters (3,068) of the new units expected to be social or affordable housing. Members were confident that if funding was made available they could work collaboratively with development partners to deliver even more new social and affordable housing within the next few years.

CHIA National has also released modelling on a proposed Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP) in partnership with other national peak bodies, Homelessness Australia, National Shelter, and the Everybody's Home campaign.

SHARP would see the Commonwealth and state and territory governments capitalise on historically low bond rates through a \$7.2 billion infrastructure investment boost, which would have a focus on housing to deliver long-term economic benefits and begin to redress the intensifying shortfall in social housing across Australia.

SHARP would deliver 30,000 additional social housing units and create up to 18,000 full-time equivalent jobs each year. The report also called for a renovation budget of an additional \$500 million to 'improve the quality of life for tens of thousands of existing social renters, as well as bring back into use many homes out of service awaiting works'.

Large-scale investment in social housing isn't new.

The Commonwealth and State Governments directly contributed 24 per cent of the total increase in in Australia's housing stock between 1947 and 1961. This investment was integral to building capacity in Australia's burgeoning construction industry at the time. After the Global Financial Crisis, a decade ago, the \$5.6 billion Social Housing Initiative - part of the Nation Building Stimulus - saw the construction of 19,700 new homes and the creation of 14,000 Full Time Equivalent jobs.

Backing the need and appropriateness of SHARP, the Australia Institute public policy think tank has highlighted key criteria for choosing appropriate fiscal policies in a pandemic. It recommended targeting populations with a high propensity to consume, activities that create high employment and projects with obvious co-benefits, like improved health outcomes and reduced homelessness. More social housing anyone?

Sue Masters, Haven; Home, Safe



Susie takes a call from her 'virtual volunteer'.

Happy HousingFirst resident with her delivery.

MEMBERS PIVOT DURING CRISIS TO KEEP TENANTS SAFE AND CONNECTED

Desperate times call for smart measures and our member organisations stepped up to the challenge with a range of initiatives to keep tenants safe and connected, and look after staff, including these examples from Wintringham, Women's Property Initiatives and HousingFirst.

VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERS KEEP RESIDENTS CONNECTED

'How do we keep our residents and volunteers connected at a time where on both sides, they'll be feeling varying levels of grief and isolation?' That's what Wintringham Volunteer Coordinator Laureen Smith asked herself when this pandemic became a reality back in March. 'We already have many dedicated volunteers that visit our residents in housing, so we wanted to find a way to keep them in touch throughout this pandemic,' Laureen says.

Enter the Virtual Volunteering program that keeps volunteers and their resident buddy connected via regular catch ups through online Zoom or phone calls.

CEO/Founder Bryan Lipmann AM, his wife Dot Lipmann AM and their dog Jac also got involved in the program. Dot is a weekly volunteer at McLean Lodge, so they thought they'd also dial in and put some smiles on residents' faces as they converse over video chat.

For those who are more inclined to write or draw pictures, the PenPal Club was also created for any new volunteers who would like to share a little about themselves. Wintringham Recreation Coordinators match letters with a client that they think has similar hobbies or that they think may be interested in writing back. The Coordinator works with the client to correspond, and letters or even drawings are sent by email.

'This was just another way to engage residents that don't already have a regular volunteer visiting them, but perhaps feel like they need a different kind of human connection, or maybe just something else to do, to break up their day,' Laureen says.

If you, or someone you know, has some spare time up their sleeve and may be interested in volunteering, you can register your interest by emailing: volunteer@wintringham.org.au
Christina Bucci, Wintringham

SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN TO 'HOME SCHOOL'

The economic impact of COVID-19 has been keenly felt by many community housing tenants, with those in low paid employment, single parents, casual employees and those in industries where job losses have been extensive, being some of the hardest hit.

When families are experiencing financial disadvantage, children can fall behind with their learning, leaving them more vulnerable to experiencing hardship themselves later in life. Research shows that completing Year 12 (or equivalent) increases a young person's likelihood of continuing with further study, as well as entering the workforce.

However, many tenants have school-aged children who are expected to be

learning remotely but do not have adequate resources to do so.

In response to tenants expressing a need for their children to have access to additional resources to keep them in school and complete Year 12, Women's Property Initiatives (WPI) has introduced the Brighter Future Small Grants Program.

WPI tenants can apply for small grants through the program to help pay for electronic devices and home Wi-Fi to support remote learning during COVID-19 restrictions and school closures and remote tutoring services. When the COVID-19 restrictions are eased and children return to school, the grants can also be used for school uniforms and shoes, textbooks, backpacks, extra curricula activities, school excursions and camps.

Program beneficiaries include WPI tenants Maria and her son Josh. Maria and Josh escaped horrific family violence and, after several years, have managed to find some calm and balance in their lives with a stable home. Josh has autism and compromised immunity, so he wasn't able to go back to school when everyone else did. Maria is his carer and, until recently, worked as a teacher's assistant at his school. Like other parents, Maria had been home schooling Josh with an old and poorly-functioning computer. With help from some very generous supporters WPI was able to fund a new computer with a touch screen, which really helps Josh. His teachers have been super impressed with his work and he is staying connected to classmates. Well done Josh!

Colette McInerney, WPI

FRESH FRUIT AND VEG DELIVERED TO THE DOOR

One the most popular programs facilitated at HousingFirst for our tenants is Pocket Market - a fortnightly fresh fruit and vegetable market, that connects tenants with each other while giving them the opportunity to conveniently purchase top-quality below-cost fresh fruit and vegetables. The market is a great initiative staffed by tenant volunteers and made possible by our partnership with Berengarra School (youth pathways training



programs) that run an enterprise Café Ed onsite at our Ashwood property.

Pocket Park started as a single fortnightly market at our Ashwood property and then grew.



With the advent of the pandemic, panic buying, persistently rising costs of food and the lock-down limitations, our Community Development Team identified the need to pivot the program. Pocket Market was reinvented into a contactless home-delivery service, ensuring tenants were kept supplied with fresh produce as well as pantry staples at this challenging time. For a flat \$5 fee, our tenants could order a fresh fruit and veggie box which contained a range of seasonal fruit and vegetables, including potatoes, onions, carrots, sweet potatoes, bananas, apples, mandarins, cucumbers, spinach, bok choy, eggplant and corn.

With our partners at Foodbank Victoria, we also provided tenants the opportunity to access a grocery box, which contained a range of staple grocery items including

pasta, milk, tea, coffee, cereal, tinned goods, personal hygiene items and sweet treats.

The response from our community was exceptional: from March to June 2020, we delivered over 1,000 boxes of fruit and vegetables and groceries to tenants in need. This equates to more than 15 tonnes of food, and more than 1,000 people who have consistently benefited from our initiative during this time.

Pivoting a physical fresh produce market at a couple of eastern suburban locations into a weekly to-your-door delivery service to seven municipalities during a pandemic took a huge amount of work. Our passionate and determined Community Development team championed the reinvention of the program and set about putting systems in place to make this happen - from a dedicated phone and email ordering system, text messaging services to keep tenants in the loop, payment systems including online, the use of a refrigerated truck for deliveries and accessing various partners to ensure supply of fresh produce and staples - and, of course, a lot of PPE equipment to keep our team and tenants safe.

Long days saw incredibly grateful tenants at times brought to tears by the hard work of our team.

Our Pocket Market program survey, anecdotal feedback, and data on tenant purchasing habits, show us that a produce box can change a life.

In our end of June, 2020 survey:

- 86% of tenants told us that the program was very good or excellent value for money
- 94% told us that they would like the program to continue beyond June 2020
- We learned bananas and mushrooms were our tenants' favourite fruit and veg.

Natascha Balducelli, HousingFirst



Typical 1950s, post war home.

Gimme Shelter

COVID-19 AND THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL HOUSING

COVID-19 has created misery for millions and had major impacts on key industry sectors including housing, with fears of major falls in dwelling prices, rental income and new construction, but this crisis also presents an opportunity for growth, as Swinburne Adjunct Professor Terry Burke explains.

To date, most tenants have been protected somewhat from the risk of a COVID-19 inspired affordability crisis by falls in rent and a flurry of emergency housing assistance measures, including the Victorian Government's rent relief grant (largely for non-Commonwealth Rent Assistance recipients), the Australian Government's rent assistance program (mainly for income support recipients), plus various processes to assist tenants to negotiate temporary rent reductions or deferrals.

The JobKeeper and JobSeeker income supports, although not designed as housing measures, are also likely to have helped hundreds of thousands avoid housing hardship.

However, like World War II and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, this pandemic provides an opportunity to utilise social housing as both a mechanism for economic stimulus and a vital provider of affordable housing in times of crisis.

Unfortunately, despite lobbying by CHIA Vic and others, the idea of increasing social housing, whether public or community, has failed to gain traction. In fact, the Commonwealth Government has explicitly rejected the idea.

In most developed countries, social housing makes up 15 to 20 per cent of all dwellings. In Australia it is only around 4 per cent and, in Victoria, it is a paltry 3 per cent. So, why has the idea of increasing social housing failed to gain support, particularly during a crisis?

There are a number of intersecting factors; probably the most significant in the Australian context is an unreasonable faith that the private market will solve society's problems. This appears to hold even in the face of demonstrable evidence of the market's failure to create an adequate supply of affordable housing, provide security of tenure, or build environmentally-sustainable housing.

Part of this faith is simply ideological. Like beliefs about religion, argument and logic do not sway long-held perceptions. As a result, what you get in crisis is a scheme like the HomeBuilder grant, which has been designed to give middle-income households \$25,000 to renovate their dwelling, with the idea being this will stimulate construction. Like many hastily put together programs, HomeBuilder has been poorly designed and targeted and will have little take up. If the equivalent funding had been directed to social

housing upgrades, it would have produced clear outcomes.

A related point is that, politically speaking, poor people do not count! Two thirds of the electorate in Australia are home owners, and pandering to the majority rather than a minority is what wins elections. By contrast when a country has, for example, 20 per cent of its population living in community housing, many of whom would be articulate middle class rather than poor, the political power embodied in such housing is much greater. Also, part of the political process is lobbying and the social housing sector is seriously outgunned by private sector developers and housing companies that have hugely more powerful and influential lobbying arms and use them not to push social housing, but their private interests. Strangely, they appear largely oblivious to the fact that social housing is actually constructed by the private sector.

But that's not all. Treasury and Finance departments now have much greater sway in government investment decisions. We have all heard of the cliché 'Knowing the cost of everything and the value of nothing'. For many of us, this summarises the economist's perception of social housing. In Treasury, social housing has always been viewed as an unreasonable cost to the public purse, ignoring the value it provides in the form of reduced homelessness and financial stress, which provides savings to the justice system,

IN MOST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, SOCIAL HOUSING MAKES UP 15 TO 20 PER CENT OF ALL DWELLINGS. IN AUSTRALIA IT IS ONLY AROUND 4 PER CENT AND, IN VICTORIA, IT IS A PALTRY 3 PER CENT.

reduces family violence and mental illness and increases the wellbeing and quality of life for residents by virtue of providing them with a secure and affordable home.

The labelling of welfare recipients as drains on the public purse who are predisposed to doing very little to improve their situation is another factor behind the government's reluctance to fund social housing. In most cases this is a myth but, unfortunately, it has powerful resonance in Australia.

Then there are more prosaic explanations. Australia's political system is a recipe for policy inertia with neither federal nor state governments taking responsibility for providing social housing, although the Victorian Government has shown some initiative in recent years.

Finally, there is a problem of social housing responsibility being buried by most states and territories in a Human or Community Service Department where its visibility is lost and Ministers have to weigh up the competing needs of other departments. When these areas include health or child protection, social housing, gets short shrift.

Having said that, Victoria's COVID-19 initiative to provide \$500 million to build and upgrade community and public housing provides some hope for improvement. But, social housing's real opportunity for growth is likely to come from the longer-term outcomes of the virus. When JobKeeper and JobSeeker have gone, the rental relief programs have wound up, and there is some semblance of normality, that is when the need for more social housing, including community housing, will likely become manifest.

Without these schemes propping up the private market generally, and private rental specifically, market failure and the need for a counter cyclical role by social housing will become clear. With 7 to 8 per cent unemployment likely to be the new normal, existing income support unable to support even reduced rent, less investment in private rental, more rental evictions, and with the private sector unable to produce enough housing, hopefully long-held institutional barriers to more social housing will break down and larger scale supply initiatives will emerge.

It would be sad if it took widespread hardship to be the catalyst for more social housing, but that has often been the history of the sector both here and internationally

Adj Prof Terry Burke

SOCIAL DISTANCE CREATES NEW SPACE FOR ART

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has caused unforeseen global upheaval, it has also been a catalyst for innovation. With social distancing restrictions in place, the organisers of Wintringham's annual art show were forced to consider new ways to ensure the show could go on, creating its first ever online exhibition, *Art Space 2020*.

Wintringham's art show has been a feature of Homelessness Week since 2014, and has become a much anticipated highlight of the calendar year for many of the housing association's budding artists.

The exhibition is a creative outlet that enables Wintringham's housing, residential aged care and home care clients to learn



Winning entry above: *My Little Pumpkin* by Catriona and (right), runner up: *The Village* by Ted.



new skills, keep busy, or find creative ways to share their stories and experiences through various art forms, with more than 80 artworks on show.

Many of the artists are supported by Recreation Workers, like Bella.

'I loved hearing about the process of the artworks, about what clients were thinking

and how they were feeling while creating them,' Bella says.

Congratulations to Catriona for her winning piece, *My Little Pumpkin*, and to Ted, who came second with *The Village*.

Art Space 2020 will remain online for your viewing pleasure at art.wintringham.org.au
Donna Huang, Wintringham

HOW TENANTS ARE COPING WITH TOUGH TIMES

Despite the lockdowns and fear of falling ill, many community housing tenants are determined to play their part in helping the broader community in the fight against the virus, as Annie and Dawn demonstrate.

Dawn sewing and baking to 'give back'

Lockdown has been hard for Dawn as she cannot see people or attend community groups that she is usually involved in.

However, Dawn has been using her skills and keeping busy sewing facemasks for the Multicultural Community Association as well as for her community at Wintringham Delahey, where there are 124 residents.

Dawn also distributes food from the Multicultural Community Association to her neighbours each week. Before the harsher Stage 4 restrictions began, Dawn would bake biscuits for the Advantage Medical Centre, which assists her to manage her pain.

'It makes me feel better to do things for people. It is very difficult to be isolated by yourself, so it is good to give something back,' Dawn says.



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PROUDLY SUPPORTING



Annie is on the frontline

Community housing tenant and critical care nurse Annie is one of the courageous workers on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis.

Annie is a single mum to three-year-old Maddie and was offered a home by Women's Property Initiative after she was unable to find liveable and affordable accommodation after splitting with her partner, despite being employed as an essential worker.

Before moving into her WPI home, Annie didn't know how she could provide a stable and positive environment for Maddie, whilst working in the health sector and furthering her studies in critical care when she couldn't afford a safe home. The harsh reality is that even our most essential workers do not earn enough to afford housing in the private market.

Annie has experienced first-hand the COVID-19 crisis unfold with cases rising in the intensive care unit of the hospital in inner Melbourne where she works. Annie's job is very demanding, often heart-breaking and, during the crisis, she worries about the risks it poses to herself and her daughter. However, with staffing shortages now becoming an issue, Annie is determined to keep providing care to her seriously ill patients and to continue to acquire new knowledge and training in critical care.

The bank that supports community housing is the bank Australia needs.

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