



Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
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Submission into the worsening rental crisis in Australia

Dear Committee Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission into Australia's worsening rental crisis. WIRE (originally known as Women's Information and Referral Exchange Inc) is a leading service delivery organisation with 40 years of experience supporting women, non binary and gender diverse people across Victoria.

At WIRE we work with women, non-binary and gender diverse people to address the issues they identify, assist them to make informed choices in their lives and advocate for structural change to bring about gender equity and social justice.

We are the only Victorian state-wide free service that provides information, support and referrals to any Victorian women and gender-diverse person on any issue, and as a result we see where the cracks are in the system.

The top four issues people seek assistance from WIRE about are family violence, legal issues, separation/divorce and housing.

Our submission will specifically address the following Terms of Reference:

- a. the experience of renters and people seeking rental housing,**
- b. rising rents and rental affordability;
- c. actions that can be taken by governments to reduce rents or limit rent rises;**
- d. improvements to renters' rights, including rent stabilisation, length of leases and no grounds evictions;**
- e. factors impacting supply and demand of affordable rentals;**
- f. international experience of policies that effectively support renters;
- g. the impact of government programs on the rental sector; and
- h. any other related matters.

Recommendations:

1. Tackle the social housing shortfall

We need to urgently build at least 25,000 social homes each year for 20 years to tackle the social housing shortfall.

2. A fairer tax system for housing

Phase out negative gearing and capital gains tax exemptions, and use the funds to create more social and affordable housing.

3. Nationally consistent protection for renters, including:

- a. An end to no cause evictions, including at the end of a fixed term, as recently implemented in the ACT;
- b. Ending unfair rent increases by setting clear limits for rent prices and increases;
- c. Minimum standards to make rental homes liveable; and
- d. Real, independent enforcement of laws that protect renters, including around privacy. It should not be up to renters to enforce the rules by taking action against their landlord.

We believe in women's and gender diverse people's resilience and strength, and their ability to identify housing options that will work best for them, based on what's available. However, Government can and must do much to make these options that enable people's financial and personal wellbeing, rather than undermining and threatening it.

The rental crisis comes after decades of failed housing policy, including a shortfall of 640,000 social and affordable homes¹ not just in the capital city, but across regional Victoria.

The lack of social housing means there is nowhere to go for people who have been forced out of the private rental market. It also means that people in the most severe rental stress are competing for the cheapest rentals.

The temporary policy of the Victorian government during COVID lockdowns to house every person and provide mental health and wellbeing programs shows that a solution is possible. However, once that state of emergency ended, people were in the same predicament as before and public housing waits continue to be impossibly long. This was especially hard on women and gender diverse people who are forced to live in their cars, stay on friends' couches, or on the streets again.

We have had a strikingly noticeable change over the last three months where we have heard more cases of women living in their cars with their children.

¹ Quantifying Australia's unmet housing need: a national snapshot (2022) *Community Housing Industry Association*
<https://apo.org.au/node/320820>

Policy choices made by successive governments have led to skyrocketing prices and pushed more people into precarious and insecure living arrangements.²

The current climate of COVID-era exceptions ending, in combination with rising interest rates, has created increasing pressure on people leaving homes where there is family violence.

We often hear from people who are considering leaving abusive relationships, and the rental crisis is at the front of their mind.

Women who have been in caregiving roles are unlikely to get a rental in this market because they don't meet the criteria of real estate agents, not having a confirmed rental history, work history or credit score. This is very common in an older cohort.

Knowing that the rental market is highly competitive to the point of being inaccessible often plays on the mind of people we support, and limits their options for creating safety and stability where there is family violence. Victim-survivors who might otherwise end relationships where there is family violence, feel forced to stay because the rental market presents an insurmountable barrier to long term independence.

Many people we speak to would rather be on the streets than be in boarding houses because the perceived safety issues they present create an unbearable toll on their mental health.

Separated couples are continuing to live under one roof creating increasing strain and risk of escalation.

Additional barriers are experienced by people navigating visa issues, disability, racism, and/or anti-trans bias.

We recently worked with an emergency housing provider who had only been able to find accommodation in another state for a woman leaving a home where there was family violence, and then had to navigate the additional costs of relocating.

Better regulation would allow more people to live in a quality rented home that they can afford. Minimum standards need to address mould and cooling as well as heating. Quality of life for many people living in private rentals during winter is low due to cold and mould. We receive at least five calls about mould in rental houses a week. This has untold costs for their current and future physical health, presenting additional barriers to financial wellbeing and independence.

We frequently hear from people who have been given a notice of eviction on the grounds of renovation, because the landlord wants to renovate to sell due to interest rates having gone up.

² The market has failed to give Australians affordable housing, so don't expect it to solve the crisis (2022) *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/the-market-has-failed-to-give-australians-affordable-housing-so-dont-expect-it-to-solve-the-crisis-192177>

We also hear from single parents for whom rent and utilities costs leave no money for food, relying on handouts from friends and charity to feed themselves and their children.

Governments need to ensure renters have access to safe, affordable and decent homes. Better regulation would allow more people to live in a quality rented home that they can afford. We need to protect people from unfair rent increases and make sure their homes are decent and liveable by legislating national standards.

A fairer system would give renters genuine choice and security. Governments can make that happen by building social and affordable housing, instead of spending billions on tax breaks for investors.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and we look forward to the Committee's findings.

Yours sincerely,

Jade Blakkarly
She/her
CEO
