

Senate Community Affairs Committee
Inquiry into Appropriation (Nation Building and Jobs) Bill (No.2)
2008-2009
Provisions Relating to the Social Housing Program

Public Hearing

Canberra
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OPENING STATEMENT

Frank Quinlan
Executive Director, Catholic Social Services Australia
Susan Helyer
Director Services Development, UnitingCare Australia
On behalf of the Major Church Providers of Social Services in Australia

My name is Frank Quinlan. I am Executive Director of Catholic Social Services Australia. David Eldridge from The Salvation Army travelled to Canberra yesterday to participate in the hearing, but has had to return to Victoria where The Salvation Army is central to the relief work in communities affected by the bushfires. Susan Helyer, Director Services Development, UnitingCare Australia joins me to provide evidence to you today.

We are appearing on behalf of the major church providers of social services in Australia – Anglicare Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia, The Salvation Army and UnitingCare Australia – who represent the overwhelming majority of social service provision across the country.

We would like to extend our thanks for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today.

The major church providers are gravely concerned that the deepening effect of the global financial crisis will impact most harshly on those Australians who are the least able to weather the changing economic times on their own. Many Australians who did not enjoy the prosperity of the recent boom, will bear the greatest impact of the bust.

Further, as organisations assisting some of Australia's most disadvantaged individuals, families and communities, our capacity to assist is also affected by factors beyond our control. Inefficient government funding processes, a downturn in investment returns or donations, and rising demand for services already operating beyond their capacity all conspire to deprive some people and communities from receiving the assistance that they deserve.

In November 2008, in response to the global financial crisis, we gathered some of our major social service providers at Parliament House in Canberra to participate in a Summit where we released a report by Access Economics on the Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Social Services. Arising from that Summit, and from the deliberations that have followed, we prepared a report for the Deputy Prime Minister, which was distributed to all Federal parliamentarians last week.

Both these documents form the basis of our submission today.

It is our hope that through swift and cooperative action, many Australians will be spared some of the effects of the global financial crisis.

We welcome the Government's second stimulus package, *Nation Building and Jobs Plan*, which promises an unprecedented investment in social housing through the establishment of 20,000 new dwellings to bolster Australia's social housing stock.

This initiative includes half of the stock recommended in the Government's White Paper on Housing.

This initiative must be targeted to high-needs areas in the community, especially to people leaving institutional care such as prison, mental health facilities, and young people leaving out-of-home-care.

It must also fill gaps in specialised infrastructure for veterans, older people, people experiencing domestic violence and people with mental health problems.

We must see a focus on housing affordability, especially for people exposed to the private rental market and older people who can't afford to maintain their own homes.

And we must see appropriate tax treatment for non government partners in non government housing maintained by the charitable sector.

Our experience both in public housing and in other social housing developments suggests that:

- wherever possible, the social mix has to be a primary concern. Provision of targeted numbers of high needs and affordable housing in private estate development is required. However, this must not be private developments which have poor infrastructure and are located on the edges of urban sprawl, isolated from jobs and services.
- not-for-profit providers have the potential to provide small scale, dispersed developments, using church land,
- transport corridor developments need to get high priority consideration because they provide access to central CBD's, large community infrastructure and jobs,
- design has to be along universal design principles to maximise flexibility of use for the future,
- dwellings need to be a mix of types, not all three bedroom developments,
- medium density has to be a strong consideration, which increases the need to consider social mix,
- any designs must consider water, thermal properties, and power supply issues, and ensure that the Government's environmental objectives are met along with housing objectives.

One of our key concern is the link with improved infrastructure to meet the needs of our ageing population, so in addition to the information above, government should look at social housing being prioritised for older people experiencing extreme housing stress and unable to take up public housing offers because of stock being unsuitable and poorly located in terms of access to services and amenities.

The provision of secure, adaptable, affordable rental housing options for older people who do not own their own home will enable our organisations to provide assistance and care into the home and delay or prevent the move to a residential aged care facility.

This strategic approach in turn will save federal funds in reduced use of residential aged care.

Universal design standards must be used and houses must be located close to public transport, shopping and medical facilities.

We are heartened by the urgency that the Government is bringing to bear on this matter and are confident that this housing initiative can work.

We are encouraged by the Government's commitment to bypassing bureaucracy and cutting red tape to get homes on the ground where they are needed.

Following the release of the Government's homelessness white paper just before Christmas, church groups and community agencies across the country are ready to act now.

The Government's housing initiative meets the twin imperatives of providing long overdue social housing dwellings and creating urgently needed jobs in the face of the downturn.

We believe there is capacity for the direction of the overall stimulus package to focus on programs that use investment in housing and infrastructure to underpin local employment opportunities for disadvantaged communities, and that spending should be skewed toward low income earners.

The stimulus package can be leveraged to ensure physical infrastructure investments contribute to building social infrastructure including job readiness and opportunities for people who have been long term unemployed. Investment needs to be targeted to disadvantaged communities as well as disadvantaged individuals and families.

The recommendations in our submission provide a framework for improved partnerships between the government and social services. We think that any initiatives that form part of the final package should be implemented in a manner that demonstrates streamlined processes and stops the diversion of funds from service delivery into unnecessary administrative compliance.

The major church providers of social services endorse the housing measures announced last week and we stand ready to assist the Coordinator General of the stimulus package, Michael Mrdack and the Government in the days and weeks ahead.