

**Submission to Department of Housing's
Tenant Support Program Discussion
Paper 2011**



wacoss

Western Australian
Council of Social Service Inc

*Ways to make
a difference*

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Introduction

The Western Australian Council of Social Service (the Council) is the leading peak organisation for the community sector, and represents around 300 member organisations and individuals, and over 800 organisations involved in the provision of services to individuals, families and children in the community. The Council has strong relationships with the community services sector and represents the interests of the sector and the communities they serve. The Council therefore is in a unique position to comment on critical social issues that affect members of the WA community.

The comments articulated in this submission have been made in response to the Department of Housing's Tenancy Support Program Discussion Paper 2011.

Client Eligibility

One of the main areas of focus within the framework of the Tenant Support Program is early intervention. The Council supports early identification of a tenant's eligibility for the Tenant Support Program as a critical measure of ensuring that tenancy support is effective. It is therefore crucial that program includes early intervention as a core objective.

The key message from research carried out by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI)¹ shows that consistent and individualised case support of tenants who exhibit 'difficult to manage' behaviours that may result in their eviction can be highly effective in maintaining tenancy and reducing the costs to housing agencies as well as the trauma associated with eviction.

In order for effective intervention to occur, there needs to be a systemic understanding of the factors that make tenancies vulnerable to failure and a more systematic and reliable process for early identification of vulnerable tenancies.

Research outlined by AHURI suggests that there are numerous factors associated with the lack of sustainability in tenancies: poverty, prior household debt, mental illness/addiction, ill health/disability, lack of social supports and limited life skills, household/family instability, cultural factors, and prior housing instability. Moreover, precipitating life events (such as unemployment, illness, unanticipated expenditure, income loss, financial difficulty, relationship breakdown, domestic violence, family conflict/crisis) and the 'pile-up' of stressful life events are also associated with a perennial cycle of evictions.

Another factor noted by the AHURI is that there is often no requirement for service providers to seek out vulnerable people who do not actively request assistance. As such, people with learning or physical disabilities and mental health issues who are not actively engaged with any mental health, drug and alcohol, or homelessness services may go unnoticed within the public housing system. Many of these individuals also fall through the cracks of the varying eligibility criteria of services and the bureaucracy of formal providers, making access to services challenging for many people who find themselves in these unfortunate situations.

Early detection of risk factors

Baker (2005, as cited by AHURI, 2007)) proposes a 'tenancy health check' that can be developed for use by housing providers, which would include a list of critical factors that make a person or family more vulnerable to housing instability. Identifying these issues early on allows for the use of better preventive measures. Crane and Warnes (2000, as cited by AHURI, 2007) found that many evictions could have been prevented if appropriate referrals and procedures had been made as their difficulties mounted. They identify six 'risk factors' that may lead to a high likelihood of eviction:

1. A change from a regular to a poor payment record
2. The inheritance of a tenancy or mortgage in middle or old age
3. Neighbours' reports of disturbed behaviour
4. Defective housing benefit or other social security applications

¹ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (2007). Sustaining tenants with demanding behaviour: a review of the research evidence

5. Living alone and the absence of a confidant or carer, especially when compounded by the recent loss of a co-resident supporter
6. A previous episode of homelessness

A process of intensive assessment at the onset of the client's engagement and tenancy application with the "tenancy" service could facilitate the opportunity to gain information in relation to all of the above, and determine the level and type of support the client might need and appropriate referral pathways.

Support Programs

The types of services required in meeting current and future needs of clients are all entirely dependent on the client's individualised context and social needs. They will also be intrinsically linked with the initial assessment which was carried out to establish the client's eligibility for the program. Moreover, special consideration should be given to the client's cultural and language background and the impact that this may have on their capacity to engage with certain service providers and their life skills.

It is also important to recognise that many of the clients will already be engaged with a number of different agencies, including DCP, Corrective Services, and mental health services, amongst others. Ensuring that ongoing and collaborative work with existing agencies continues is fundamental in ensuring the best possible outcome for the client and that services are not duplicated and resources are used effectively. Existing services will also be better able to identify areas of additional work that may be required for the client to increase their likelihood of maintaining tenancy and can provide additional support to Tenancy Support Workers.

According to research carried out by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), successful strategies for support do not necessarily need to be highly sophisticated. Reviews regularly identify the benefits of practical assistance such as establishing Centrepay arrangements for the automatic payment of rent and utilities, assisting with the purchase of whitegoods and other furnishings to establish a home, and assisting the client in liaising with utilities to negotiate debt.

While details vary from program to program, a review of the international and local programs, as outlined in a report by the AHURI, titled "Sustaining Indigenous Tenancies", suggests the following fundamental factors lie behind successful tenant support interventions:

- Providing flexible responses (tailored solutions, flexible duration, flexibility of resources);
- Engaging with clients and building relationships of trust;
- Making early and appropriate referrals and implementing early intervention strategies working jointly with other agencies where appropriate and planning and coordinating service delivery;
- Targeting those assessed as at-risk;
- Ensuring that at-risk tenants have access to existing formal and informal support networks
- Addressing both housing need and other underlying issues that might impact negatively on housing outcomes.

The Council believes that it is not essential for a funded Tenancy Support Program to provide all services to a client and that the client should be referred to other service

providers for more specialised support. For example, Settlement Grants Programs may be able to provide clients from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds with support better suited to their specific circumstances.

Strong linkage with outside agencies is a key element that ensures the success of tenant support programs. These programs should not only address the immediate tenancy-related issues that leads to referral to the program, but also other co-morbid or underlying issues that could be present, such as mental health concerns, substance misuse, or family breakdown.

The Council would also like to stress the importance of an effective exit strategy. That is, ensuring that clients who have been assessed as being prepared to exit the program are made aware of agencies which they can make self-referrals to following exit from the program. Ensuring that tenants have access to essential supports and the facility to seek assistance when they need it are critical factors in preventing repeat tenancy termination/evictions.

Community Education

The Council supports the integration of a community education program into the Tenancy Support Program to increase public knowledge of the difficulties that some tenants experience.

When tenants feel that they are a welcomed and accountable member of their local community, their tenancy will be a much more pleasant experience for them and for the rest of the community. Unfortunately there is much stigma attached with public housing tenants and many individuals have rejected the idea of having public housing facilities and services located in their communities. Working at ameliorating negative perceptions about public housing tenants would be an important step toward ensuring prolonged and maintained tenancies, where clients feel supported and welcomed by their community. Community education could be implemented through localised strategies in residential areas, schools or community newspapers that break down stereotypes around public housing.

Measurement Framework

The Council believes that all reporting requirements should be sensitive to the fact that providing support to the client is the primary function of the Tenancy Support Program and as such reporting should not hinder this process in any way.

The Council believes that measuring the effectiveness of the Tenancy Support Program should be a collaborative process that involves the client at all levels of decision making, including determining how effective they believe the program to be and if they are meeting their target goals and outcomes. Moreover, establishing quarterly inter-agency meetings and ongoing communication between service providers where the client's progress and setbacks can be discussed and brought to the attention of the client, providing further opportunity for growth. It is imperative that the client's right to confidentiality is respected and as such the Council believes that a release of information consent form should be attained from the client prior to any sharing of information between services, relating to the client.

The Council believes that gathering quantitative and qualitative data and reporting against certain outcomes could be useful in assessing the effectiveness of the Tenancy Support Program and shed light on areas that require improvement and reform. Initiating

the use of exit interviews could also be constructive in determining how tenants feel about the program and outline suggestions for improvements.

Conclusion

The Council thanks the Department of Housing for the opportunity to comment on its Tenant Support Program Discussion Paper and, in conclusion, submits the following recommendations:

1. The Council supports the introduction of a Tenancy Support Program which includes an early intervention service tailored towards each individual's circumstances.
2. The Council advocates that "at risk" tenants are referred to an early intervention program once assessment is complete and the tenant is eligible and willing to participate in the program. Moreover, the Council does not support mandatory participation in the program as a compulsory approach would disempower tenants, breach their basic rights, and undermine the efficacy of the program.
3. The Council supports a Tenants Support Program that engages with a range of specialised support services that are responsive to tenants' multiple and complex needs and can provide ongoing support.
4. The Council supports the integration of a community education program that will increase community awareness of the Tenancy Support Program and help ameliorate negative perceptions often associated with public housing clients.

The Council believes that determining the efficacy of the Tenancy Support Program should be a collaborative process, with the client at the very centre of this process. The client's anonymity and right to privacy must be maintained at all times and a release of information must be obtained from the client prior to any sharing of information between service providers.