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Submission- Review of the Residential Tenancies Act

The St Vincent de Paul Society (SA) Inc (The Society) is committed to improving the lives of the marginalised and disadvantaged in our community. Experienced staff and volunteers work to provide people in need with a hand up out of their current situation.

The first topic of concern for The Society's recent SA Election Statement was:

Housing Insecurity.

Provide better access to affordable housing options for people on low incomes and those experiencing homelessness.

The current low-cost housing crisis in South Australia is forcing people to wait years for secure accommodation. Significant government investment is needed in social housing, coupled with better programs to support vulnerable people navigate their way to better housing outcomes.

We welcome the Government's Review of the Residential Tenancies Act.

The Society's submission is referring to the considered reforms in the Act in the following areas:

- Section 1: Longer tenancies.
- Section 4: Rooming houses and shared accommodation.
- Section 5: Renting with pets

Section 1 Longer tenancies

We would like to begin with supporting the suggestion of introducing the prescribed reasons for termination and non-renewal of leases in SA in a similar way to the legislation changes that were successfully introduced in NSW and Victoria. Beyond increasing tenants housing security, this will allow tenants to ensure their rights are being maintained and will positively impact their ability to make long term plans in life areas such as schooling and employment. Suggested reasons for termination would be a breach of tenancy agreement or a change in the usage of property (sale, used for landlord tenancy etc.). While it is a landlords right to change the usage of tenancy, if a tenancy is terminated for this reason the notice should be longer than the one required currently by law (28 days).

We suggest setting a 60-90 days' notice requirement for termination by this reason. This change to legislation will allow families reasonable time to source a different property and make any schooling and work adjustments if required. Moreover, it will reduce any breaks in families' routines, disruption to children's schooling or absences from work that could also impact incomes. These impacts on families not only have financial implications but they are also found to have a significant impact on mental health, spousal issues and children's ongoing access to education and community support.

From our service delivery experience through the Vinnies Open-Door Program, the impact of housing instability on families with children is even greater which is validated by the AHURI 2022 report, *“Precarious housing and wellbeing: a multi-dimensional investigation”*. Housing stress affects the parenting capacity of parents as well as their ability to participate in employment, education and training and community life. The lack of housing affordability, insecurity and unsuitability impacted, singly and in combination, on the health and wellbeing of children living in households experiencing housing stress. The investigation found that rental stress is at its lowest in couples with no children, and highest among couples with two or more children. In addition to the impact of housing stress, frequent moves have been found to negatively affect the health, social and emotional wellbeing of children.

Therefore, we strongly support any steps and changes to legislation that will increase rental stability for families as well as individuals.

Section 4 Rooming houses and shared accommodation

Rooming houses are a significant concern in the homelessness sector. Many of our companions in our specialist homelessness services resort to medium to longer term tenancies in rooming houses due to the unaffordability or lack of availability of other options in the rental market.

The main issues identified by our services:

- Houses in an unlivable shape are being rented.
- Houses are too small or do not have enough facilities for reasonable use by the number of people residing in the property.
- Tenants are known to be vulnerable and being taken advantage of by unfair tenancy contracts or at times, no contracts at all.
- Additional payments are required at times, that were not agreed on lease agreements.
- Tenants are being frequently intimidated by eviction if they raise concerns or are not willing to comply with proprietor’s requests.
- There are concerns of drug related or other illegal activity taking place within the houses.
- There is often no ability to have a child/children staying with their parent.

These issues require the establishment of a registration scheme that will outline a clear criterion for shared houses with standardised contracts and requirements alongside a clear pathway for tenants to raise any grievances.

The registration scheme should include a “fit and proper” person checks for proprietors, but not be limited to that. There should be a schedule of inspections and periodical reporting from the proprietors to ensure tenants are being treated fairly and the property is maintained as needed.

Section 5 Renting with pets

Many studies have shown the health and psychosocial impacts that raising pets have on people. These impacts are magnified when we are talking about people experiencing disadvantage, as they are at an increased risk of being affected by these conditions.

Petting animals such as dogs and cats has also been shown to reduce blood pressure and stress. It’s said that petting a dog for just 15 minutes can lower blood pressure by 10%. The stress hormone, cortisol, also reduces when you spend time with pets, while feel-good hormones serotonin and oxytocin increase. Scientists believe that human beings have an innate need for touch and affection. Another person can fulfil this need but stroking or hugging an animal can have the same effect.

People who own pets also tend to have higher self-esteem, especially children and teenagers. Self-esteem has a significant link with mental health and low self-esteem is linked with poor relationships, addiction, depression and anxiety. Having a pet is also more likely to mean that you adopt healthy lifestyle habits such as taking regular exercise. A study carried out by the University of Western Australia found that dog owners were more than three times likely to walk regularly in their local neighborhood.

SA is a State of pet owners, with two out of three households having an animal as a companion. For most people pets are considered a part of the family and are considered a great benefit to their sense of wellbeing. It is also known that the inability to take the pet to another residence is a major barrier to leaving unsafe households due to domestic violence or other forms of abuse.

Therefore, we would like to suggest that the revised Act would include the requirement of landlords to allow pets and to specify the conditions where pets cannot be accommodated. Also, it is important that tenants can dispute the landlord decision if it seems unreasonable. In other states, there has been a process of pet bonds introduced to protect landlords from any pet related damage or losses and to encourage them to allow pets in rental properties. A similar process can be initiated here in SA to ensure both sides are protected from losses.

If you would like to further discuss this submission or points raised, please contact Evelyn O'Loughlin, Chief Executive Officer on 81128700 or email Eoloughlin@svdpsa.org.au.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Evelyn O'Loughlin', written in a cursive style.

Evelyn O'Loughlin
Chief Executive Officer