

29 March 2012

Pru Goward
Minister for Family and Community Services
Minister for Women
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Subject: concerning the policy amendment re applicants' responsibility of keeping contact details up to date in order to remain on the waiting list for accommodation with Housing NSW and/or community housing

Dear Minister

The Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) is the peak body representing community managed organisations (CMOs) in NSW. Our members provide a range of clinical, psychosocial, education and information resources and services with a focus on recovery orientated practice. MHCC's membership consists of over 250 CMOs whose business or activity is wholly or in part related to the promotion and/or delivery of services for the wellbeing and recovery of people affected by mental health problems.

Working in partnership with both State and Commonwealth governments to promote recovery and social inclusion for people affected by mental illness, we participate extensively in mental health policy and sector development and facilitate linkages between government, non-government and private sectors. MHCC consult widely in order to respond to legislative reform and sit on national and state committees and boards in order to affect systemic change. MHCC also manage and conduct research projects and develop collaborative programs on behalf of the sector. We are a Registered Training Organisation delivering nationally accredited mental health training and professional development to the workforce.

MHCC, a number of community peak bodies and advocacy organisations, community managed mental health service providers and other community service sector agencies are extremely concerned about the announcement on 26 February 2012 regarding the change in policy reflected in your media release stated that "social housing applicants will now need to take responsibility for keeping their contact details up-to-date," and "the NSW Government will reward and encourage personal responsibility by putting applicants who do not respond to the back of the queue if they return to ask for social-housing."

Whilst we understand that there are five exemptions under which applicants who have not responded to a request for contact by the allotted date will retain their place in the queue, if they later indicate that they wish to apply for social housing, our concern is that this amendment to policy fails to take into account the circumstances of some of the most vulnerable people who are social housing applicants.

In the mental health and associated health and social services sectors many housing applicants experience a multitude of complex and debilitating problems including: coexisting substance abuse issues, homelessness, poverty and isolation, poor physical health, acquired brain injury and disability. They often have few formal supports, and may experience cultural barriers, live in violent and abusive environments or are itinerant. Young people are also at risk, particularly those at risk of homelessness because of family dysfunction and abuse. The 28 day period exemptions do not take such complex problems sufficiently into account.

The likely outcome of this policy change is exclusion of some of the very people social housing has been designed to assist. Many mental illnesses are closely associated with complex need which characteristically manifests as disorganisation and lack of motivation. In addition people with mental illness and co-existing substance abuse problems often experience episodic illness, may be hospitalised from time to time and may battle with the side effects of medication. The effect of mental illness and co-occurring problems can overwhelm people resources and make keeping their contact details on the Housing Registry current difficult if not impossible.

We appreciate that the Department of Family and Community Services is conducting consultations within the housing sector, however the problems are wide reaching across the human services sectors, and MHCC would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Minister to better describe some of the challenging circumstances that people with mental illness and associated health and social issues face.

MHCC and the organisations listed below urge the Minister to reconsider this policy directive.

The following organisations endorse MHCC's stated position:

ACON
Adults Surviving Child Abuse
Australian Centre for Disability Law
Homelessness NSW
Mental Health Association NSW
Network of Alcohol and Other Drug Agencies
NSW Consumer Advisory Group - Mental Health Inc.
NSW Council for Intellectual Disability
Psychiatric Rehabilitation Australia
Public Interest Advocacy Centre & Homeless Persons' Legal Service
Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely



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C.C. Jillian Skinner MP, Minister for Health, and Minister for Medical Research
Kevin Humphries MP, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Healthy Lifestyles
David McGrath, Director, Mental Health Drug & Alcohol Office