

Challenges for Victorian Housing Practice

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The title for the presentation, *Challenges for Victorian Housing Practice*, is suitably broad that I can range wide and far in what I have to say. Reduced to its bare elements, my talk overviews how housing practice has changed in Victoria, the causes of these changes, and the challenges raised for both workers and their respective agencies.

As recently as the late 1970s it was not unusual for the Housing Commission to employ ex-prison warders as housing workers. This suggests something of the perceived skills and values that were required of housing workers in that era. Times have changed greatly and, without wanting to denigrate prison warders, we would not generally accept today that supervising a correctional or remand centre makes you a good candidate for a housing worker. What has changed and what further changes can we expect as to the nature of housing practice and the role of a housing worker?

One of the major changes shaping the work environment and demanding more professional practice is the greater diversity of clients. In its first four decades, both public housing eligibility policy and the nature of the economy and household demographics meant public housing workers had to manage a largely homogenous client base, i.e. lower income working families. Hence the stock profile we largely now have and hence some of the problems of housing workers today, fitting smaller households into a form and quality of housing designed for a very different era.

Changing social and economic conditions such as deinstitutionalisation, and increased unemployment and associated poverty, mirrored by a widening of eligibility, means that public housing as well as the community sector now accommodates or attempts to accommodate households with diverse ethnic, cultural, age, disability, dependency, health and lifecycle requirements. Many require support and linkages (dictating new housing worker skills) that previous generations of tenants did not need. Many tenants still do not require support, but nevertheless the sheer diversity of clients does require some knowledge of the different context and needs which each group faces. If nothing else, this may be just one of creating a professional and caring experience at the time of eligibility and allocation, i.e. the

counter experience. But more importantly it is likely that such understanding may assist the applicant or existing tenants in obtaining an appropriate tenancy and maintaining that tenancy.

In my initial comments re ex-prison warders, I referred to the Housing Commission and made no mention of other housing providers. Another of the major changes over the last three decades has been the growth of alternative providers to the then Housing Commission and its successor, the Office of Housing. Housing workers now work for a range of community housing providers, among which the differences may be sometimes as great as those between the community providers and that of the Office of Housing. The community housing sector was in an embryonic status in Australia in the late 1970s and, although still playing a secondary role for to the public sector, it has been the growth sector for the last decade.

This growth has not been fully worked through and the next decade will no doubt see an expansion of a more diverse multi-provider system, i.e. a mix of public and community managers providing a range of not-for-profit housing types. Without going into details for the reasons for the emergence of the community sector or its likely continued growth, they boil down to offering client choice, ability to tap local networks and resources, opportunities to leverage from rent assistance, ability to facilitate tenant involvement, and ability to fit in with current orthodoxies of thought around public sector management. This is a process not unique to Victoria or even Australia – there is an international momentum towards community not-for-profit providers rather than government.

The growth of the community housing sector required a new workforce, and many community housing workers approached their work with different backgrounds, assumptions and values to public housing workers. Thus we have not only seen a diversification of housing providers but greater diversity in what a housing worker does and how they operate. The greater focus on tenant involvement among community providers and the local networking skills were two of the differences, although I think there is now a move towards greater convergence between community and public sector practice. The twist on future community provision as distinct from what we have seen so far is that there will be more large community providers with roles not necessarily characteristic of the sector in the past, for example, project development and management rather than tenancy management.

This will require a subset of housing workers to have the skills to undertake project management, and at the moment it is not clear where they may come from.

Another major change affecting the role of housing workers, and which is still being worked through, is the reshaping of the public sector over the last decade or so. This has a number of dimensions. The most obvious is what has been called the new managerialism. This is the shorthand for a whole set of management reforms which had their beginning in the 1980s but accelerated in the 1990s. The most important aspect of the new managerialism was a bringing to the public sector something of the commercial management practices of the private sector. This meant leaner and flatter management structures, decentralised cost centres (with units being responsible for their own budgets), formation of work teams, performance indicators and a focus on client service.

While many of these reforms encouraged and required a greater sense of, and practice of, professionalism, for many housing workers they were interpreted as meaning the acquisition of a new culture built around the language of cost and efficiency rather than justice, compassion or public service. It also meant working in a resource-strapped environment that often required practices of less rather than more client service, despite the rhetoric around the latter. Much of the community sector also took on these values and practices. Although the Victorian government has retreated from the harshest elements of the new managerialism, many housing workers now operate in an uncertain culture of whether to be commercial or whether to be compassionate.

Part of the rationale for the new managerialism grew out of hostility by conservatives to the role of government and the public sector generally. Increasingly the managerialist reforms were accompanied by a vilification of the public sector – employees were captured by trade unions, they were acting out of self-interest, they were empire building at taxpayers' expense. More than a decade of this vilification, together with a politicisation of the public sector by both political parties, has undermined public trust in the public sector and government generally. Combined with a reification of the private sector as exciting, vibrant and dynamic, the effect has been to make the public sector, and to some extent the community sector, a much less attractive employment choice than in the first four and half decades of the postwar years. We now are seeing the implications of this. Highly professional nurses, teachers, child care workers, social workers and – I suspect – housing

workers are, and will be, in increasingly short supply as younger people no longer see community service work and working with government and the community sector as a worthy career. Much better to do a media studies or film course and produce reality TV shows than do those dull things such as case managing, educating, counselling and otherwise supporting people to be full members of society. Cynicism aside, one of the major tasks of the Victorian government in coming years is to rebuild the notion of public service such that more and more people actually want to undertake the challenging tasks that are required of service sectors such as housing.

One of the biggest tensions that many of us face in the workforce generally, but particularly in service sectors such as social housing, is that the desire for recognition and improved wellbeing through promotion cannot be matched by the organisation's ability to promote. This tension is sharpest in a professionalised workforce. People who have been educated and trained to achieve certain professional standards and have to work in a regulatory environment constantly exhorting and requiring professionalism expect reward for achieving it. Service organisations, particularly since the managerial reforms of the 1990s, tend to have flat organisational structures with relatively few middle management and senior positions. This means that many housing workers confront the dilemma that, no matter how well they do what they are doing, it cannot be recognised by promotion. What then is the incentive to improve the level of professionalism, and to master the growing range of complex tasks that being a housing worker requires?

Some of the answer is within the individual, some is within the employer organisations. For the individual, the answer – and perhaps not a fully satisfactory one – is the challenge, the self-respect, the knowledge that you are making a real difference to people's lives and perhaps the opportunity to gain employment outside the housing sector. But for the employer organisations, it means creating other ways of rewarding staff and providing recognition, for example, secondments with a temporary higher salary to a project officer role, involving workers in committees of decision making or review, greater consultation and use of their day to day knowledge, and more professional development opportunities, not only of education and training courses but perhaps the opportunity to go to a national conference, or to take part in exchange programs with housing workers in other states or other countries and so on.

The other areas where work has to be done – and hopefully the Australasian Housing Institute has a role in this – is breaking down the silos that exist between public housing, community housing (which has its own internal silos) and Aboriginal housing. While we badge them all as social housing, they still think of each other and operate as distinctive and different sectors with little movement of staff from one to the other, and little by way of shared activities that create a sense of common identity and shared professional skills and problems.

However, we live in a highly materialist and individualistic society where success is increasingly valued by how much we are paid and what we do, and in this context any housing organisation is ultimately limited in its ability to hang on to staff. This means that the sector, no matter how professionalised, will always have a relatively high turnover of staff – indeed professionalism without promotion is part of the problem. Nursing, childcare, teaching are equivalent sectors where society demands the service but is unwilling to pay what it is worth. Thus mobility of staff becomes one of the challenges for housing workers and housing practice. The work team that you started out with at the beginning of the year may have a completely different set of persons at the end of the year, requiring skills of the continuing workers in integrating the new worker into the team, of maintaining a sense of teamship in a context of change, and of addressing the personality conflicts that are often inherent in teams that are stable, let alone in ones that have an always changing membership.

One of the biggest changes in housing practice has been the need to address issues of support and linkages, but before talking about that one, an observation on a more recent development that in a sense is a metaphor for the incessantly changing work environment of the housing practitioner. And that is the emergence of community renewal projects. Unlike estate renewal projects of the late 1980s, these do not focus just on the physical fabric but on strengthening the ties between people in these estates and improving their ability to access and use local employment, education and community health services. Over the next decade we can envisage most large public housing sites (low rise and high rise) going through a process of community renewal. For some housing workers in these areas, this means acquiring, or sliding into, another set of skills. They will become de facto community development officers as they grapple with the challenges of the renewal process.

As a result of all the changes there is now ambiguity about the boundaries of what a housing worker is. In the 1970s and early 1980s, their roles and responsibilities were

reasonably clear: one group managed tenants, which meant determining eligibility, allocating a dwelling and collecting rents, while another group managed property, which largely meant undertaking maintenance. But today housing workers may be doing some or all of these tasks plus being a social worker, a community development officer, an estate agent, a networker and a property manager. Conversely, there are those people who are predominantly social workers offering support, for example, SAAP workers, but whose roles are increasingly those of housing workers, as they appreciate that unless a person has the stability of a roof over their head, the support will not be successful.

The simultaneous widening and deepening of the role and responsibilities of the housing worker demand skills and knowledge that were not required in the past. While creating new challenges and opportunities, the process is not without its problems and tensions for workers and the social housing sector.

The community care role of housing and housing related workers best illustrates the problems the sector faces. Community care refers to those activities, notably the provision of support and linkages, that help the individual to maintain both an independent life in the community and their tenancy, whether short, medium or long. Twenty years ago there was a minimal community care role for housing workers as most of the clients who now require such care were institutionalised. Deinstitutionalisation, which was built on the assumption that people with learning difficulties or mental illness can be effectively supported within the community, has changed this situation. In both the public and community sectors, a large proportion of a housing worker's time is spent in dealing with psychiatric and mental illness. This might not mean the housing worker directly providing the support – although if alternatives fail it may mean that – but more often it involves working with and networking with SAAP, health, disability and community services agencies to provide that support. For government and community agencies, both organising and resourcing the support and linkage tasks are difficult, and inevitably there are the gaps and failures.

The organisation may be able to walk away from these problems, but the worker cannot; they are often left with a vulnerable person in front of them whom they cannot help, and they may work beyond the call of duty – and, in some cases, their skills – to find a temporary resolution. Compounding this problem is a tendency for housing workers to be left out of the strategy and administrative planning for support services

and appropriate linkages. One of the reasons for this could be their lack of professional status. They are largely unrecognised in the wider community and do not have the 'professional' stamp of workers in other areas, notably health, which is dominated by health and social workers with up to four years professional training. Thus, while governments may have the best intention of joined up support and linkage programs, they can stumble at the implementation stage through lack of dialogue and input of those who are essential to the administration of support, namely, housing workers. Establishing the legitimate boundaries between support workers and housing workers is a difficult task, and it is hard to see the problem being resolved. Much of it is a resourcing problem deriving from cutbacks to social housing funding and in the pool available for support for those needing community care. Deinstitutionalisation was premised on the ability of the community to provide and on the substantial funds to be made available from all the institutions that would be and were sold off. But ten to fifteen years on, that pool is gone, and funding now comes from recurrent sources for which there is always pressures by governments obsessed with balanced budgets and public debt to make minimise expenditures. In a context of fiscal austerity, better support and linkages will be managed by legal and organisational reforms and changes to the regulatory environment, for example, new protocols, new organisational structures, new reporting requirements. Unfortunately, without adequate budgets such reforms tend to only produce incremental effects on outcomes, but often can have as an unintended side-effect the creation of a work environment of incessant change and instability.

One of the challenges for an Australasian Housing Institute is to work out what is possible. Can we have in Australia a housing profession, as distinct from professional housing workers? I am more confident about the latter than the former. A housing profession requires a sufficient threshold number of workers to create the visibility and infrastructure associated with a profession. I am not certain we have that. It requires underpinning by a profession-specific education program. We do not have that and I cannot see it occurring. It requires a largish number of people who identify themselves as housing workers. As the role of the workers becomes more diffuse, for the reasons outlined above, many will and do see themselves as support workers, social workers, community development workers or asset managers ,and do not see that they share a common experience with other housing workers. And the mobility of workers, not helped by lack of career opportunities and a growing shortage of service industry workers, means a fluidity of workforce incompatible with a profession.

On the other hand, there is enormous need for workers who are highly professional in whatever housing roles they have. For all the reasons outlined – above client diversity, public sector reform, the development of multiple providers, more intense housing need, community renewal – future housing workers will need to have skills and knowledge at a level probably not conceived of a decade or so ago. In some respects, despite a sixty year history, the role of housing worker is just at a take-off point. The movement of workers to a level of professionalism, which the sector deserves and demands, is now upon us, and I see the formation of the Australasian Housing Institute as central to this process.