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RAHU STATEMENT ON THE NATIONAL HOUSING CONFERENCE

The Renters and Housing Union calls on government to commit to meaningful solutions in improving and expanding public housing in recognition of the urgent and unmet need.

This week the [National Housing Conference](#) is convening in Melbourne. The annual event, sponsored by a number of community housing companies, purports to exhibit “shining examples of best practice in delivering social and affordable housing options to Australians.” Tickets are \$1,500.

As part of the current housing crisis landscape, public housing has been in rapid decline, with less units today than 20 years ago. Victoria holds the lowest rate of public housing in the country, yet it remains the only form of de-commodified housing we have, with the highest levels of tenure security among renters.

The NHC is convening shortly after the state government’s shameful backflip on its [Social and Affordable Housing Contribution](#) tax policy, which property developers labelled as ‘offensive’. This proposal would have secured \$800 million per year toward the inclusion of community housing in private developments. Despite the policy’s failure to fully deliver on a sector-wide call for mandatory inclusionary zoning,¹ it was an intervention into the housing crisis that would have provided a not-insignificant developer contribution to low-income housing.

In the absence of an ongoing program that would deliver a sustained supply of low-income housing, Victoria remains an increasingly precarious place to live, with small-scale and corporate landlords controlling the supply and management of adequate housing.

The Victorian Housing Register has grown to over 110,000 people, with over 1,650 new applicants registering for social housing every three months.² As the need for housing grows, Australia’s public housing stock has declined each year since the 1990s. Research estimates that Australia will need 727,300 additional social housing dwellings in the next 20 years, equating to 100 new social housing dwellings built per day.³

1 A planning instrument to include a percentage of social housing in all medium-large private developments.

2 <https://www.housing.vic.gov.au/victorian-housing-register>

3 <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/315>





RAHU reaffirms that the demand for increased and improved public housing should not be a radical solution. It is a tried and tested example of how the government can create stable, secure and long-term housing for thousands of renters for decades to come, in order to meet people's foundational and fundamental needs.

Our demands on the federal and state governments are:

- To commit to a Big Public Housing Build, with the aim for public housing to be 15% of total housing stock by 2030
- Directly invest and build enough new public housing to eliminate the current waitlist to zero by 2024 and reduce overcrowding in existing high-rise buildings
- Maintain a rate of construction of public housing that meets existing, emerging, and forecast need to ensure an end to homelessness
- Acquire vacant investment properties for emergency public housing with rent at 25% income

The state government's policy response is totally incapable of meeting this housing need.

The Big Housing Build proposes to provide 12,000 new dwellings over the course of five years. Yet research has shown that only 8,000 new social units will result, with the balance in 'affordable' and private homes.⁴ Under the current growth rate of the Victorian Housing Register, only 15 months' worth of applications will be allocated housing, meaning that the waitlist for social housing will increase by at least 25,000 applicants (approximately 50,000 people) by the time the Big Housing Build is complete.

With public housing vacancies at a breaking point, low income renters are more likely than ever to require access to community housing after being marginalised out of private rentals. We have identified through our casework assistance that community housing providers commonly lease at higher than the prescribed rent cap of 30% of income. Further, many of these companies continued to increase rents and action evictions during the COVID-19 Moratorium.

Much like private rentals—owing to a lack of connected services, regulation, and adequate maintenance—renters in community housing also face harassment, threats of violence, and unsafe conditions that community housing agents have repeatedly neglected to handle.



“I had to move out my house of 17 years because CEHL had let the maintenance go for so long that it ended up going to cost too much, yet they’re all driving around in fancy cars that we’re paying for.”

- Lisa, RAHU Member and community housing renter

Inadequate housing—unaffordable, insecure, and inappropriate to need—has significant impacts on the health and wellbeing of renters, which displaces costs onto our healthcare system and social infrastructure. This is neither fully acknowledged by housing policy makers, nor discussed by any of the sectors that end up footing the bill of poor housing such as health and community-based services. In the UK, research has shown that the societal cost of poor housing results in \$34b p.a. in associated health and care related expenditure.⁵ In Australia, income and rental support, as well as outcomes in employment, education and training, are increasingly strained when housing precarity grows, exacerbating social inequality.⁶

Precarious housing significantly impacts on the psychological and economic wellbeing of households, and the gap between people in precarious housing and those in stable housing has widened over time.⁷ Unaffordability and subsequent forced relocation are the main drivers of this precarity, and government policies such as the Public Housing Renewal Program and the Big Housing Build are key drivers of displacement and gentrification.

There are over 1.4m households in receipt of Commonwealth Rental Assistance, equating to over \$4.7b annually.⁸ A further \$1.6b is spent annually on the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement—not to mention the billions in subsidies related to negative gearing and capital gains tax discounts. Direct Commonwealth funding for low-income and precarious households is already in excess of \$6.3b, which alone would fund over 21,000 new public housing dwellings per year if built on public land. The \$5.3b spent on the Big Housing Build in Victoria would fund nearly 18,000 homes. These costs would be substantially decreased with the preemptive measures of a National Public Housing Policy that provides stable, low-income, and regulated housing.

Current policy and funding commitments remain inadequate to fulfil the urgent need for more public housing. RAHU reaffirms the need to call on government, and all stakeholders, to commit to improving and expanding public housing.

5 https://files.bregroup.com/research/BRE_Report_the_cost_of_poor_housing_2021.pdf

6 <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/precarious-housing-and-health-inequalities>

7 <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/373>

8 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia/contents/housing-assistance>





“Low-income renters deserve better from our governments, and public housing is a far more stable and safe answer. Despite its attempts by funding community models, federal and state governments can’t shirk their responsibility to provide safe housing, connected to the existing wrap-around services to low-income renters. It will continue paying the cost of not doing so unless it can commit to a National Public Housing build.”

- **Eirene Tsolidis Noyce, RAHU Secretary**

“At a time of crisis and growing precarity what we need is more supply, and this transition to the community sector is stalling that supply. Right now we need solutions, not changing governance arrangements.”

- **Dr. David Kelly, RAHU & SPHC member**

With thanks to our contributing members: David Kelly, Luca Morgan, and the Save Public Housing Collective membership.

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The Renters and Housing Union (VIC) is a member-run union of renters and people in precarious housing, formed out of the rent strike as a response to the COVID-19 crisis. We collectively organise for the right to safe and secure housing through self-advocacy, education, and frontline eviction defence.

Find out more and join RAHU www.rahu.org.au

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