

COVID-19 and housing providers

With the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak causing significant community concern and many people losing their jobs or finding their incomes much reduced, community housing organisations (CHOs) as responsible landlords recognise we have an important role in mitigating the impact on our tenants and other service users.

We agree with the UN Special Rapporteur, Leilani Farha, when she says '[Housing has become the front line defence against the coronavirus](#)' and we share her concern for the homeless and those at risk of homelessness due to financial hardship resulting in rent or mortgage arrears .

CHIA member CHOs are already taking steps to respond to the coronavirus. They are committed to maintaining tenancy services, safeguarding residents and staff, and minimising the risk of exposure. Most have already written to or met with tenants to provide advice and are working with others to ensure that the particularly vulnerable get the help they need.

By taking the action outlined in its second stimulus package to support the incomes of people who are made jobless, the government will not only help prevent evictions but also reduce the accumulation of rent arrears and thus enable a more rapid recovery from the health crisis.

We are also calling on our tenants to prioritise rent payments. Our members rely on rental income to pay for the services we offer. By continuing to pay their rent, tenants can also help us to offer assistance to those in significant financial hardship as a result of this public health emergency.

We are also acutely aware of the risk that eviction poses to any tenant, particularly at this time, and fully understand the calls to halt all such actions. During this crisis, possession action should be progressed only as a last resort in extraordinary circumstances – for example, where tenant misconduct is placing other residents (or staff) at serious risk in terms of health or safety. In any such extraordinary cases we will work with other agencies to minimise the harm to the individual.

Our members will, of course, work closely with relevant government agencies in responding appropriately to any serious problems at the individual case level. But our sector will also need government commitment in ensuring that once the pandemic has receded, we are strongly placed to continue providing vital tenancy services, and helping to redress Australia's [growing social and affordable housing shortfall](#).

We expect that, as the impact of the Coronavirus becomes clearer, so will our specific requests for government support. Already we are clear that governments - at both Federal and state/territory levels - can assist through:

- Pledging to extend measures that support the incomes of people made jobless should this prove necessary. We need to prevent the accumulation of rent arrears and other debts
- Strong leadership and co-ordinated management to enable health, aged and social services and housing providers work together to minimise the impacts on tenants and staff
- Increased funding for services assisting people in financial hardship - particularly financial counselling and debt advice
- Increased funding for mental health services to support our work with the most vulnerable
- Support to enable expanded crisis accommodation (and associated services) so that those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness do not need to be on the street

- Regular dialogue so that we can together assess the impact on CHOs' services and our members' businesses and, the necessity of additional support being provided to the sector. Such a forum also provides an opportunity to jointly consider initiatives that will mitigate adverse impacts on our communities
- Working with the sector to develop and implement an economic stimulus package for the construction of new social and affordable housing to meet the already large and growing shortfall. Such an approach has been successful in the past. This will get people working and speed up the recovery from this crisis.

We are committed to ensuring that our tenants continue to receive high quality services throughout this period. With our partners in the not-for-profit, private and government sectors we can do this.

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Chief Executive

Community Housing Industry Association