



Community Housing
INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

COVID-19

Our Response and Current Priorities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



What community housing organisations are doing

This statement is our initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak. It sets out what CHOs are already doing to support our tenants, communities, and staff, and describes how we want to partner with Government to continue to provide these vital services.

The COVID-19 outbreak is a health crisis where staying at home is key to reducing infection numbers. Consequently, as responsible landlords, CHIA members recognise their critical role in ensuring that tenants in over 100,000 CHO homes remain well and safely housed. This role is especially significant at this time since many of our tenants are essential “key workers” while others are particularly vulnerable under current conditions – e.g. people needing mental health or Domestic & Family Violence (DFV) support services.

We welcome the important steps already taken by Federal and state/territory governments to support individuals and businesses through (for example) increasing income support, introducing wage subsidies, and providing additional funding for homelessness, mental health and DFV services.

In the current, rapidly evolving, situation this document will be updated whenever relevant new developments occur.

CHOs are already taking action to implement our four immediate priorities:

Tenants are Safely Housed – Ensuring Our Tenants Remain Well and Safely Housed:

- Implementing procedures to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infections
- Engaging with our communities
- Increasing outreach to vulnerable residents
- For our tenants in social housing, committing to disregard the Federal governments income support measures - the time limited coronavirus supplement and the two special payments - as assessable income
- Continuing our long tradition of working with tenants suffering financial hardship – and pledging no eviction of anyone for rent arrears resulting from the current crisis.

The Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) is the federated industry peak for not for profit community housing organisations (CHOs) across Australia. This statement is supported by the following state member industry peaks:



Keeping vital services running – working with our staff, contractors, partners & governments to keeping vital services running:

- Continuing to allocate vacant properties to applicants in need
- Ensuring critical non-discretionary repairs are completed but with new procedures to protect tenants, staff and contractors from infection
- Ensuring continued provision of essential care and support by our staff and partners to protect the most vulnerable (e.g. rooming house and group home residents), thereby easing pressure on our health care system.

Maintaining CHO financial sustainability – prudently managing our finances:

- Modelling financial scenarios on how the crisis may impact our tenants and future services – and then identifying actions that could mitigate the impact on our operations – e.g. deferral of discretionary maintenance; use of capital reserves; and, negotiating lower payments to funders, government and landlords (e.g. headleased property owners)
- Closely monitoring key leading indicators such as arrears and vacancy rates for early signs of a deteriorating financial position
- Working with our partners to develop potential government responses if there are systemic challenges across the CHO sector.

Planning for recovery – considering what role CHOs can play to ensure a strong economic recovery:

- Modelling financial scenarios on how the crisis may impact our tenants and future services – and then identifying actions that could mitigate the impact on our operations – e.g. deferral of discretionary maintenance; use of capital reserves; and, negotiating lower payments to funders, government and landlords (e.g. headleased property owners)
- Closely monitoring key leading indicators such as arrears and vacancy rates for early signs of a deteriorating financial position
- Working with our partners to develop potential.

What we need from Government

Considering what role CHOs can play to ensure a strong economic recovery.

TENANTS SAFELY HOUSED

1. Extend COVID-19 income support measures to include people who have lost employment but remain excluded from the proposed Job Keeper/Seeker arrangements including temporary visa holders, migrant workers and casual workers. Additional increase in Disability Support Payments to the equivalent of Job Seeker.
2. Provide financial support to CHOs to temporarily rehouse boarding house and group home tenants needing to be socially isolated for infection control, but unable to comply in their current home due to shared facilities. Prioritise residents and staff of such establishments for medical testing.
3. Provide stability for existing tenants by extending by at least one year all housing-related grants – including National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS), head leases, and management agreements.

MAINTAINING FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

4. Strong and consistent messaging that an evictions moratorium should not be seen as a reason for not paying rent.
5. A commitment from governments and regulators to develop the processes to support CHO sector in the event there are systemic financial challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis.

PLANNING FOR A STRONG RECOVERY

6. Work with CHIA and CHOs to develop a plan for a sector role in the post-crisis economic recovery. This would build on community housing initiatives described above and should include:
 - Accelerating planned maintenance and improvements to current social housing stock as part of the first phase of economic recovery
 - Partnering with CHOs to unleash an unprecedented wave of social and affordable housing development, thereby beginning to tackle Australia's growing social and affordable housing shortfall and to eliminate the need for boarding houses to accommodate the most vulnerable.

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