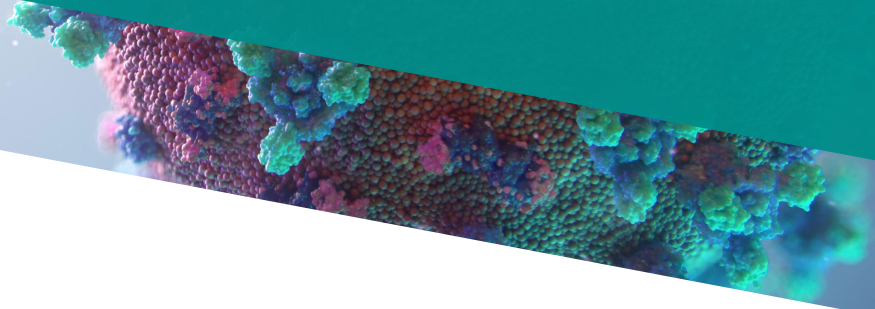




Community Housing
INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

COVID-19 Our Response and Current Priorities



What community housing organisations are doing

This statement is our initial response to the coronavirus outbreak. It sets out what CHOs are already doing to support our staff, tenants and communities, and specifies how governments can enable us to continue to provide these vital services. In what is a rapidly evolving situation we will update this document as pandemic impacts become clearer.

We agree with UN Special Rapporteur, Leilani Farha, when she says ‘Housing has become the front line defence against the coronavirus’ and share her concern for the homeless and people at risk of homelessness due to financial hardship resulting in rent or mortgage arrears.

Undoubtedly the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak is causing significant community concern, with many people losing jobs or finding their incomes suddenly much-reduced. As responsible housing providers, CHOs recognise the important role we can play in mitigating the impacts on our tenants and other service users.

We are also concerned for people residing in high density housing situations including residential care, group homes and boarding houses. We are particularly mindful of very vulnerable groups including Indigenous Australians and those with compromised immune systems.

This pandemic will impact individuals across the housing continuum including social and affordable housing tenants.

We welcome the important steps that the Federal and state/territory governments have already taken to support individuals and businesses through (for example) increased income support, wage subsidies, and extra funding for homelessness, mental health and DFV services.

Community Housing Organisations

CHOs are a vital part of Australia’s housing system. They provide one in five of Australia’s social housing properties, complementing public housing.

They manage more than 100,000 rental properties, which are home to people who are on very low to moderate incomes and who find it hard to access affordable or appropriate housing in the private market.

Our 170 plus CHO members include the largest to those with less than 100 homes. They provide a diverse range of housing for vulnerable people, Indigenous Australians, people living with disability and the formerly homeless.

CHOs reinvest their surplus funds to improve services and increase the amount of housing they offer.

CHOs play an important role in co-ordinating support services for our most vulnerable tenants.

CHOs have a long record of supporting tenants through difficult times. We will redouble our efforts in this 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:



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

1. Ensuring our tenants remain well and safely housed by maintaining critical services such as emergency repairs.
2. Protecting tenants' income and cushioning financial stress. This means (for example) we will halt evictions for anyone in rent arrears caused by the crisis and will respond quickly to instances of domestic and family violence.
3. Keeping vital services running, including care and support schemes to protect the most vulnerable and ease pressure on our health care system.
4. Working together with our communities, partners and government both to address the crisis and also plan for a strong recovery.

We welcome the vital steps the Federal Government has already taken to support individuals and businesses and to increase funding for critically important DFV and mental health services. We also commend state/territory governments for their actions to support communities and strengthen their response to homelessness.

In the short term our sector also needs governments to:

- Work in partnership with the sector to implement responses to the housing needs of those most inappropriately positioned to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Recognise certain key CHO roles as performed by 'essential workers' including keeping homes safe, providing care to elderly and people living with a disability, running frontline support services for homeless people, and for those with complex needs or experiencing domestic and family violence.
- Ensure access to personal protective equipment to maintain vital care, support and other services.
- Ensure that wage subsidy and income support measures are quickly and efficiently implemented so that everyone affected by the crisis is able to carry on paying their rent.

In this rapidly evolving situation, the community housing industry is ready to work with all governments to assist in their response. We also welcome their commitment to our sector and openness to assessing health crisis impacts on our businesses which provide critical services to many vulnerable Australians.



Our Priorities

This statement provides further details on our four priorities, as introduced above, outlining what CHOs are doing, and what we need from governments to support this action.

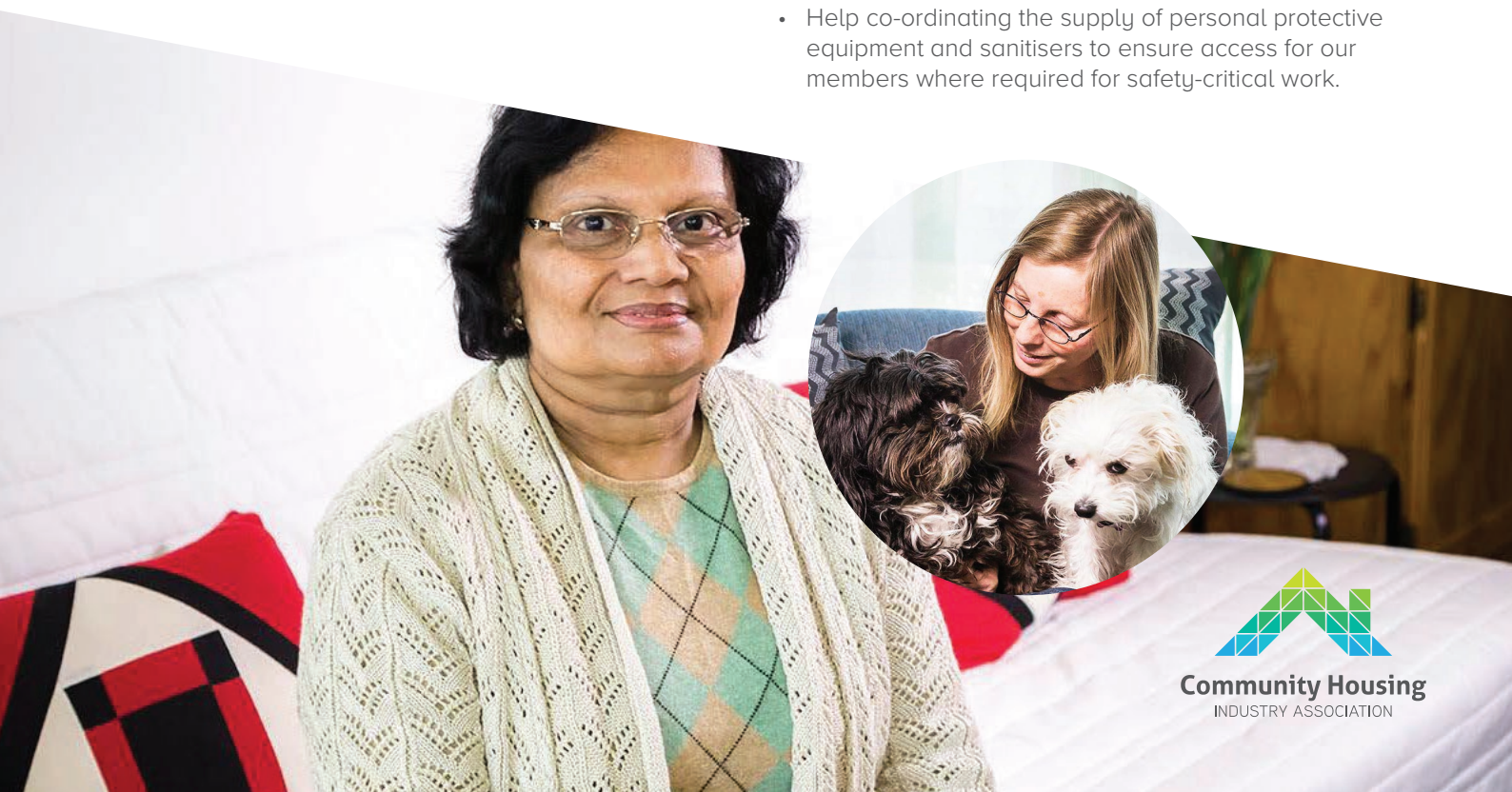
1. Ensuring our tenants remain well and safely housed

What community housing providers are doing

- Remodelling their business operating models to ensure that critical housing functions can continue to operate.
- Putting in place extensive business continuity planning to ensure critical repairs and support functions can continue – for example, vital remediation works, emergency repairs and well-being checks for our most vulnerable tenants.
- Forecasting and modelling their cash flows to ensure they can continue to monitor financial sustainability.
- Ensuring compliance with infection control protocols that allow critical functions to be fulfilled without exposing CHO tenants or staff to the risk of contracting coronavirus – for example, calling ahead to every resident, sourcing and distributing protective equipment, and rescheduling appointments.
- Taking extra steps to protect tenants who are self-isolating if appointments have to be delayed.
- Supporting contractors and suppliers to understand the currently novel working environment, infection control protocols and, where possible, to continue critical functions, including quicker payment to small suppliers where necessary to protect supply chains.

What we need from government

- Confirmation that these services are considered essential and that relevant staff are both excluded from any current or future movement restrictions and prioritised for testing.
- Resourcing pre-planning work to prepare alternative accommodation options for people most vulnerable to cross-infection with other vulnerable individuals residing in very close proximity.
- Work with CHOs to resource housing options to clear hospital beds and maximise hospital capacity by avoiding future bed blockage due to lack of housing options on exit.
- Providing resources to enable the national and state peak organisations to co-ordinate continuity of delivery should services be severely impacted by illness or isolation. Specifically, to explore:
 - The concept of local service hubs whereby individual CHOs could pool resources across operational teams
 - Training individuals for deployment in areas with staff shortages.
- Producing informed guidance on how to protect both residents and staff when planning statutory safety checks or emergency repairs when a resident is self-isolating.
- Help co-ordinating the supply of personal protective equipment and sanitisers to ensure access for our members where required for safety-critical work.



2. Protecting tenants' incomes and reducing financial and social stress

What community housing providers are doing

- For our tenants in social housing, where rent is assessed according to income, we will not include Coronavirus Supplements, Special Payments or the Government Stimulus Payment as assessable income.
- Most are also committed to suspending rent reviews during the crisis period.
- Adjusting affordable rents in cases of hardship arising from COVID-19 impacts.
- Committing not to evict anyone for rent arrears resulting from the coronavirus outbreak.
- Treating people with compassion and understanding and putting in place extensive support to help tenants manage reduced income.
- Using our arrangements with existing partners and other organisations to support tenants via hardship and charitable funds.
- Providing support for older people, Indigenous Australians, and vulnerable tenants – for example, by phoning every tenant to assess need in the event of self-isolation, and using staff and volunteers to help by funding or linking with other local charities and coordinating volunteers in circumstances where people are having difficulty accessing essential food or medication.

What we need from government

We welcome the measures that the Federal Government has already put in place to support people's incomes and to temporarily relax benefit claimants' mutual obligation requirements. This should greatly assist individuals to maintain their rental payments and thus sustain their tenancy. Governments could go further by:

- Putting in place additional rental assistance measures to support tenants whose reduced income makes it impossible to meet rental payments
- Strong and consistent messaging that an evictions moratorium should not be seen as a reason for not paying rent
- Provide stability for existing tenants by extending all housing-related grants including payments relating to:
 - National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) properties where incentives are due to expire in 19/20 and 20/21
 - Head lease and other management agreements.





3. Keeping vital services running

Community housing organisations support older people, Indigenous Australians, disabled and vulnerable tenants through supported housing schemes and services, through short term and transitional and crisis accommodation, and through outreach programmes. These services will be more vital than ever to help people through the public health crisis and ease the burden on aged care and health services, but they are extremely challenging to deliver when many are staff unavailable for work.

We also manage accommodation where unrelated individuals share kitchen and bathroom facilities. This includes boarding houses and group homes. These pose particular risks for both tenants and staff.

CHOs finance their tenancy, property management and support services largely through rental income. This will be challenging where overall revenue is reduced.

There are also opportunities for the sector to build on existing schemes to assist in providing accommodation and services to (for example) rough sleepers and those at risk of homelessness.

What community housing providers are doing

- Planning carefully for how to keep these vital support and accommodation services running safely – including shared accommodation, domestic violence refuges, and specialist housing for older and people living with disability.
- Through our national and state peak organisations, sharing resources to support providers through the crisis.
- Working closely with the Federal and state/territory governments to safely manage existing shared accommodation and reduce associated health risks.
- Putting forward proposals to assist in meeting the housing needs of rough sleepers and others in financial stress.
- Wherever we can, facilitating timely hospital discharge to reduce pressure on health services
- Closely monitoring the impact of the crisis on our financial position and taking steps to minimise any risk of disruption.

What we need from government

- Confirm that essential frontline staff providing these vital services are designated as essential workers.
- A commitment to helping bridge funding gaps or meet additional costs resulting directly result from the crisis, to assist CHOs as they strive to keep services running and meet additional demand.
- Grant funding to enable CHOs to acquire additional accommodation and/or expand services for homeless people and others in housing stress.

4. Working with our communities and partners to address the crisis and ensure a strong recovery

Community housing organisations play an important role in the locations where they operate, supporting community groups, small businesses, contractors and supply chains. They have also played an increasingly important role in constructing new affordable homes. From this strong base they have the potential to make a major contribution in aiding the post-crisis recovery. In the short term our role will be to support local partners and communities wherever possible. But in the longer term we can work with governments to help communities and the economy recover.

Most critically we want the Federal and State/territory governments to work with us 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. As a stimulus measure, such an approach has been highly effective in the past. This will get people back to work and speed the post-crisis recovery.

And finally, 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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