



# Care Leavers Australia Network

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## SUBMISSION

Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN) welcomes this opportunity to provide input into this review of the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria. Public housing is critical to the wellbeing of a large proportion of our members and older Care Leavers in general.

A CLAN survey showed that public housing has played and continues to play an important role in the lives of Care Leavers who constitute a significant user group in the public housing sector. Nearly 40 per cent of survey respondents have lived in public housing at some time in their life (CLAN 2008: 10). The evidence suggests that public housing is the only form of accommodation many Care Leavers can afford.<sup>1</sup>

Further information about this submission may be obtained from CLAN President, Leonie Sheedy, at the above address or from Frank Golding, Vice-President, by e-mail at [fgolding@bigpond.net.au](mailto:fgolding@bigpond.net.au).

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee (2004), p. 347.

## About CLAN

Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN) is a national support and advocacy group for people brought up in 'care' in children's Homes, orphanages or other institutions, or in foster care away from their own family. CLAN is the only single purpose national organisation dedicated exclusively to support services for former Care Leavers.

In recent years, following the Senate Report, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* (2004), the term 'Forgotten Australians' has been applied to cover this large group estimated to number over 500,000 in Australia and well over 100,000 in Victoria in the period between 1920 and 1980. The term 'Forgotten Australians' is not one that sits comfortably with many to whom it has been applied. They prefer 'Care Leaver' or Homie or direct descriptors such as former Wards of the State; but 'Forgotten Australians' is used for convenience at times in this submission.

CLAN offers support to any person who has been a State Ward, Home child or foster child in Australia, or who grew up in 'care' elsewhere but is now living in Australia (as well as people who grew up in 'care' in Australia but who now live overseas). CLAN also supports individuals whose parents, partner or other family members have had this experience because it continues to impact on their lives. Services offered include telephone and email support, assistance with locating records of time in care, bi-monthly newsletter, website, and national and state advocacy on Care Leaver issues. In many instances, CLAN refers members to other relevant services be they be provided by government or non-government agencies.

As well as monitoring research related to the needs and interests of its members, CLAN has published its own major survey of care leavers' experiences (*A Terrible Way to Grow Up*, 2008).<sup>2</sup> It also encourages members to write about their childhood experiences and how these experiences continue to affect their adult lives.

## Care Leavers (Forgotten Australians) as a Special-Needs Group

CLAN does not have the resources to collate authoritative data and make a submission on all of the terms of reference of this inquiry. However, there is an overwhelming amount of readily available evidence to argue a convincing case that Care Leavers should be treated as a special-needs group in respect of public housing along with, but in addition to, the often overlapping groups specified in term of reference (e) namely: women, seniors, the homeless, indigenous Victorians, refugees, and people with a mental illness, substance abuse and/or disability. Indeed, Care Leavers constitute a significant subset of all but one of these groups; but their needs are unique in many ways.

Evidence about these unique and complex needs has been available to housing authorities for many years. For example, the Burdekin report into homelessness found that 50 per

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<sup>2</sup> Available for download at: [http://www.clan.org.au/images/CLAN\\_Survey\\_Results.pdf](http://www.clan.org.au/images/CLAN_Survey_Results.pdf)

cent of homeless children had been in the care of the state, but the Senate's Forgotten Australians Inquiry heard that homelessness and SAAP services continue to ignore that feature of the Burdekin Report. There is virtually no reference to Care Leavers in the literature generated by service providers.<sup>3</sup>

Care Leavers make up a high proportion of the users of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services (jointly funded by the Commonwealth and the States to provide transitional supported accommodation and other services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness) but 'there has never been an admission that care leavers make up a distinct group within those services requiring special forms of redress'.<sup>4</sup> The Review of progress on the Forgotten Australians Report recommendations made the comment:

*Victoria did not provide a submission to the inquiry [the only State to decline the invitation]. However, it appears that its SAAP program does not appear to contain any reference to specific needs of care leavers.*<sup>5</sup>

Information about SAAP and other related programs are rarely made available to care leaver support groups such as CLAN.

Five years ago, the Senate's Forgotten Australians Report recommended:

*That the Commonwealth and States commit, through the Council of Australian Governments, to implementing a whole of government approach to the provision of programs and services for care leavers across policy areas such as health, housing, welfare and community services and other relevant policy areas.*<sup>6</sup>

The Senate Committee considered that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) was the best forum for advancing this approach. However, five years on, the Committee reported such disappointing progress that it was necessary to reiterate and strengthen the previous recommendation. In 2009 it recommended:

*...that the Commonwealth and State governments reconsider the previous responses to recommendations...of the Forgotten Australians report with a view to explicitly recognising and meeting the needs of older care leavers in the funding and development of health, housing, aged care and education programs; and ensuring that appropriate services are provided.*<sup>7</sup>

As has been noted, the Senate Committee remarked that Victoria was the only State **not** to have made a submission to its review of progress.<sup>8</sup> This was widely interpreted as signifying that the Victorian Government was not prepared to have its lack of progress on

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee (2009), p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee (2004), Recommendation 33.

<sup>7</sup> Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee (2009), Recommendation 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

this and related recommendations brought under public scrutiny.

However, in recognition of the complex needs of Care Leavers, the Prime Minister, in the context of making a national apology to the Forgotten Australians in November 2009, announced that:

*The Government will identify care leavers as a special-needs group for aged-care purposes, to ensure that providers are assisted to provide care that is appropriate and responsive, and provide a range of further counselling and support services.<sup>9</sup>*

In a joint media release on 26 November 2009, the Commonwealth Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Commonwealth Minister for Ageing announced that, as a matter of priority, the Government would amend the Aged Care Principles 1997. The media release explained that:

*This will ensure the needs of care leavers are considered in the planning and allocation of aged care places. The Government will also support the development and distribution of information so providers and carers in the aged care sector recognise the special needs of care leavers and provide appropriate and responsive care, including access to counselling and support services.<sup>10</sup>*

The underlying reasons justifying that decision in the aged-care area apply equally to public housing. The case is made explicit in what follows.

### **How the Childhood Experiences of Care Leavers or Forgotten Australians Impact on their Current Day Housing Needs**

The Senate Report *Forgotten Australians* (2004) concluded that the hundreds of stories they heard from Care Leavers throughout the inquiry constituted

*...a litany of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and often criminal physical and sexual assault. Their stories also told of neglect, humiliation and deprivation of food, education and healthcare. Such abuse and assault was widespread across institutions, across States and across the government, religious and other care providers.<sup>11</sup>*

The CLAN Survey documents the depth of feelings of abandonment and rejection (over 60 per cent of children were separated from their siblings in the 1960s). These feelings were intensified and exacerbated by the widespread nature of maltreatment, abuse and

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<sup>9</sup> Transcript of Prime Minister's Address at the Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants, Parliament House, Canberra, 16 November 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Joint Media Release with the Minister for Ageing, 'Response to the Senate inquiry report *Forgotten Australians and Lost Innocents Revisited*', 26/11/2009.

<sup>11</sup> Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee (2004), p. xv.

neglect when in 'care'.

- 45 per cent said they had been sexually molested;
- 82 per cent reported being hit, whacked or smacked;
- 47 per cent had been put in solitary confinement;
- 45 per cent has worked between 3 and 5 hours a day, unpaid
- 56 per cent said they had been deprived of food as a punishment and many complained of being hungry most of the time;
- 54 per cent left care without having achieved the first certificate level of education;
- 5 per cent left 'care' with no schooling at all; and
- large numbers mentioned having little or no medical or dental treatment throughout their childhood.

A profile of older Care Leavers can be readily drawn from the above findings and from other experiences reported in the CLAN Survey.

Given the high incidence of sexual abuse by trusted adults, it is not surprising that many Care Leavers have lost faith in authority in general. This lack of faith is compounded by strong memories of police involvement in their incarceration as children. Some 30 per cent of survey respondents were removed from their families by the police. Furthermore, some 34 per cent had been 'in trouble with the law' in their adult life. Many will not use government agencies - even when they have an entitlement to do so - because they continue to feel that the government and other people in bureaucracies are not to be trusted.

Brought up without parents and rarely seeing 'normal' adults in a parenting role, many CLAN members report themselves having difficulties in parenting. Some 56 per cent felt inadequate as parents; 49 per cent were unable to trust their children with other adults; 14 per cent had children in 'care' or had adopted out a child; and 9 per cent had children in gaol. These feelings impact on CLAN members' abilities to maintain close family ties and domestic stability.

Many CLAN members also report mental health and personal issues in maintaining intimate relationships. Some 67 per cent said they suffer from depression; 45 per cent have nightmares about their 'care' experiences; 35 per cent said they suffer post-traumatic stress disorder; 64 per cent said they had had suicidal thoughts; and 37 per cent said they had tried to suicide.

Given all the above, and with only 4 per cent finishing secondary schooling, many Care Leavers have low level skills especially in reading and writing; most have worked in unskilled occupations; and many are over-represented among the long-term unemployed - and all that follows from chronic unemployment, including difficulties with maintaining rent payments and meeting other household expenses.

Given the cluster of damaging childhood and adult life experiences, it is not surprising to learn that 53 per cent of CLAN respondents are income support recipients. Of these, 25

per cent are on a disability pension.

In their review of the relevant literature, Mendes and Johnson (2008) conclude that

*Numerous studies in Australian, New Zealand, the USA, United Kingdom, Ireland and Canada have found a high correlation between state care and later housing instability, transience and homelessness.*<sup>12</sup>

Mendes and Johnson (2008) show that recent reports, government and non-government alike, confirm ‘beyond any doubt the direct link between state care experiences and poor housing outcomes’. They cite four contemporary reports that are particularly relevant:

- the National Youth Commission report (2008) which drew on a number of recent studies that documented the over-representation of care leavers in the homeless population;
- the Create Foundation (2008) which urged that priority be given to assisting the many care leavers at risk of transience and homelessness;
- the National Child Protection report (FaHCSIA 2008) which urged greater individual support for care leavers to prevent homelessness including an enhancement of the existing Transition to Independent Living Allowance scheme; and
- the Green Paper on Homelessness (2008) which acknowledged that care leavers were a particularly vulnerable group due to the lack of support provided during their transition from care to independent living.

Despite the clear evidence of causal links between homelessness and growing up in ‘care’ – even within the Green Paper itself - when it turned its attention to common factors that increase the risk of homelessness, the Green Paper fails to include people who have been in state care and protection. Furthermore, the well-documented impacts of state care systems are invisible in the list of potential goals and targets set out in the Green Paper.<sup>13</sup> This oversight defies understanding when the evidence is so clear.

The negative impact of growing up without families is felt first in the years after leaving ‘care’ when Care Leavers are routinely left to fend for themselves without support from either family - with whom they have lost contact - or from welfare agencies who feel no obligation to assist the transition from ‘care’ to adulthood. Many Care Leavers remain unable to return to the family home during periods of transition or life crisis for the very reasons which led to child protection intervention in the first place.

One of the largest and most telling of the research studies (Johnson and Chamberlain, 2008) found that, of 4291 homeless people in inner city Melbourne, 1689 people (39 per cent of the sample) had experienced homelessness before the age of 18. Of this group 42 per cent had previously been in the state care and protection system.<sup>14</sup> This is a telling

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<sup>12</sup> Mendes, Philip and Johnson, Guy (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Jamieson, Karoline (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Chamberlain, C., Johnson, G. & Theobald, J. (2007).

statistic: it illustrates that young people leaving 'care' are much more vulnerable than the age cohort as a whole and are at high risk of falling into the homelessness trap - and thence being vulnerable to other risks and other forms of social disadvantage. Their ability to access stable housing, particularly in the private rental and home ownership markets, is reduced further by alcohol and substance abuse, offender status, mental illness, educational deficits, and the combined impact which these issues have upon the capacity to access and maintain meaningful employment. Consequently, homelessness amongst care leavers tends to be recurring and more entrenched than that which affects other sectors of the population.

Older Care Leavers are in many respects even worse off than those who are leaving care these days where there is at least some modicum of support for some. In the period before the 1980s, young people leaving 'care' were in most cases simply shown the door of the institution with a minimum of thought for how they would integrate into the community. Many older Care Leavers speak of the little cardboard suitcase or the brown paper bag in which they carried all their worldly possessions. They had no social networks except other Care Leavers.

**The CLAN survey (2008: 10) illustrates the plight of these young people as they left 'care' years ago. Of the 297 respondents who at the time were aged 13 or older, 116 people (39 per cent) spent their first night out of 'care' alone or with strangers; 23 spent the first night on the streets or in a park, and 3 were 'on a train alone'. The rest were boarding in the house of strangers (temporary accommodation found for them by the Home), or in a room in a boarding house, or in a hostel; or with an employer, in a placement straight from the Home. Many of those who exited out-of-home 'care' decades ago continue to experience the full gamut of homelessness. Some 88 people (that is 23 per cent: 52 men and 36 women) out of the total of 382 have lived on the streets at some time in their life (CLAN 2008: 11). That means that over 30 per cent of all the men in the sample have been homeless at some time in their life, while the figure for women is 17 per cent.**

The complex interaction of social problems for Care Leavers is made more evident when it is appreciated that a secure and safe dwelling provides more than just shelter; it is also essential for a person's good health, education, employment and their ability to participate actively in their communities (Australian Government 2008). Lack of access to housing can create a number of negative consequences, not just homelessness, but also low levels of living standards, poor health, family dislocation and lower rates of employment and participation in education. In summary, the lack of secure and stable accommodation can lead to protracted social exclusion (AIHW 2008a).

### **Fear of the Future**

John X wrote to CLAN after the Prime Minister's apology to the Forgotten Australians. He referred to his experience in a children's Home:

*That which you can only know after prolonged hours, days, weeks, months & years of*

*constant sick cruelty, loneliness, hunger and cold in that dark hollow place where love knows no one. I do not consider myself a religious man, but I will pray and hope to die in my sleep long before anyone places me in another institution.*

As survivors of trauma among Care Leavers and Forgotten Australians grow older, many recall the traumatic experiences of their childhood in institutions. Many are now becoming frail and less able to look after themselves in the manner they have become accustomed to as adults. They begin to think about how they will manage in their retirement years and this gives rise to distressing thoughts about what the future holds for them. Stories of neglect, exploitation, sexual abuse and other forms of violence towards vulnerable people in retirement homes trigger life-long, deep-seated feelings that accompanied their childhood.

In addition to those fears, there is also for many a return to their earliest sense of abandonment. As already indicated, many Care Leavers have no family networks and some have no friendship or community ties. They dread the future because they see themselves returning to a state of ultra-dependence akin to their unhappy childhood years. While we have no firm statistics, we have anecdotal evidence of an unusually high incidence of suicide among Care leavers.<sup>15</sup>

Some years ago, Anna Howe pointed to “the great divide between the circumstances of older owners and private renters in our society”. Howe also showed that the proportion of people over 65 years of age in private rental compared to public housing has increased through the 1990’s. This is largely due, she argued, to funding for public housing being in decline for the past two decades. It is essential that this trend be turned around. Given that CLAN’s membership is predominantly an ageing group with many Care Leavers now in or reaching retirement, Howe’s main message to government that “the highest priority should be given to obtaining housing for those who don’t have secure tenure when they reach retirement age” is increasingly apposite - and is strongly endorsed by CLAN.

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<sup>15</sup> See CLAN/AFA joint submission to the Senate Community Affairs Committee Inquiry on Suicide, November 2009.

## Recommendations

In discussing the Green paper on homelessness, Karyn Walsh, Coordinator, Micah Projects in Queensland says we urgently need:

*...to find a way to end homelessness for those individuals cycling between emergency services for years, and for families experiencing intergenerational homelessness and involvement with the child protection and correctional systems. These people require a long-term response that provides subsidised housing and support services to end their homelessness. What is needed is social housing and it can work with the right mix of appropriate design, safety measures, social, health and employment services and most importantly, integration within cities and local communities.<sup>16</sup>*

The following actions are strongly recommended:

1. Inclusion of Care Leavers as a special-needs group requiring a targeted approach in all public housing plans and programs of the Victorian Government and those plans and programs developed in association with the Australian Government.
2. Identification of ‘Forgotten Australians’ as a group with complex needs requiring access to support which may involve a number of coordinated services to break the cycle of homelessness.
3. Examination and implementation of strategies to enable access to a range of low cost social and public housing options, and initiatives to increase home ownership amongst Care Leavers.
4. Establishment of effective ongoing liaison between Care Leaver support services in Victoria (including CLAN) and housing service providers to facilitate access to a range of specialist supported accommodation, low cost social housing, and public housing for Care Leavers at all stages of the life span in accordance with a ‘no wrong door’ approach to people seeking assistance.
5. Delivery of professional development training in respect of Care Leavers to staff in mainstream services (e.g. Supported Accommodation Assistance Program) such that the impact of historical institutional abuse and neglect is recognised, acknowledged and responded to appropriately.

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<sup>16</sup> Walsh, Karyn (2009).

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