

5 April 2020

Minister Berry
Deputy Chief Minister
Minister for Housing and Suburban Development
ACT Legislative Assembly
By Email: berry@act.gov.au

CC: Gordon Ramsay MLA, Attorney-General
[By email: gordon.ramsay@parliament.act.gov.au]

CC: Shane Rattenbury MLA, Minister for Justice
[By email: shane.rattenbury@parliament.act.gov.au]

**OPEN LETTER – SEEKING MORATORIUM OF PUBLIC HOUSING AND
COMMUNITY HOUSING EVICTIONS DURING COVID-19**

Dear Minister Berry,

As Australians across the country, and in the ACT, are urged to stay at home we are extremely concerned by the ongoing risk of eviction faced by tenants in public and community housing and the threat this poses to public health as well as the individual mental and physical health of these tenants.

On 29 March 2020 Prime Minister Morrison announced National Cabinet's intention to declare a moratorium on rental evictions for six months. This is welcome news. As members of our community face unprecedented job losses and financial hardship, providing tenants with some security during this public health crisis is essential.

However, applications for evictions continue to be issued against public housing tenants by the ACT Government and by ACT Government funded organisations against community housing tenants in the ACT. These tenants are the most disadvantaged members of our community reliant on government funded housing to subsist.

Evictions force people experiencing disadvantage into extremely vulnerable situations -women and children into unsafe living situations with the perpetrators of violence, adult children with disabilities into the homes of ageing parents and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into homes of friends and relatives

Canberra Community Law acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we work in the ACT and surrounding region and pay our respect to their elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, traditions, the cultures and the hopes of Australia's First Peoples. We are grateful that we share this land and express our sorrow for the costs of this sharing to Australia's First Peoples. We will continue to acknowledge the legacy of our history and strive in our goals to empower our community through social justice. We hope that our efforts can contribute to a realisation of equity, justice and partnership with the traditional custodians of this land.

already living in severely overcrowded conditions. For example, Aboriginal clients report moving into homes where 15 people share a 4 bedroom property. These are not unusual situations, but rather the types of experiences with which our collective client base regularly seek our assistance with. The COVID 19 pandemic applies a level of urgency to these situations that can only be addressed through a moratorium on public and community housing evictions.

It is our position that **a six month moratorium on rental evictions of public and community housing tenants should be instituted** to protect the human rights and health of these tenants, and for the public health benefit of the entire community.

Public health

Chief Minister Andrew Barr confirmed national protocols that public and indoor gatherings are to be confined to no more than two people outside of the immediate household, and that all members of the public must stay at home wherever possible.

These public health measures require all Canberrans to have somewhere secure to live if they are to be effectively implemented. Evicting public or community housing tenants will result in increased homelessness. Our clients, if evicted, have no reasonable prospects of securing private rentals. Hotels and hostels are unaffordable and refuges are already at capacity. A range of homelessness services have had to reduce their services given the pandemic and limits on social interaction. It is our position that evicting a person into homelessness at this time poses not only an unacceptable health risk to them, but also to the broader community.

Financial hardship

The event of COVID-19 across Australia, and the accompanying public health restrictions, has caused an economic downturn resulting in mass job losses, shifts being cut and workers being stood down across a wide range of industries.

Tenants in public and community housing were already, definitionally, experiencing financial hardship and unable to pay private rent. This hardship is only exacerbated by the financial crisis experienced nation-wide. In this context, tenants in public and community housing are even more vulnerable to the risk of homelessness. If evicted, public and community housing tenants are precluded from the more expensive private rental market and will be forced into homelessness or secondary homelessness - couch surfing, living in overcrowded conditions with family or friends or living in substandard and unsafe conditions.

This is unacceptable. In the context of COVID-19 it poses an additional public health risk as it will be impossible for these tenants to self-isolate effectively in these conditions.

Mental health

All our services are experiencing high demand from clients who are extremely anxious about what COVID-19 means for them and their families. This is a time of high anxiety across the community more generally, but particularly for our clients with additional vulnerabilities.

Many of our clients have mental and physical disabilities, chronic health conditions, experience mental illness and have histories of trauma. Secure, stable tenancies are extraordinarily important for our clients to cope in challenging circumstances. Now faced with the additional pressure of mass job losses and financial hardship; it is more important than ever that our clients are given the security of rental eviction moratorium until the worst of this health crisis is over.

Request for a moratorium

For the reasons outlined above, the undersigned front-line service providers request an immediate moratorium on evictions for public and community housing tenants.

Signed:

**CANBERRA
COMMUNITY
LAW**

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