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Committee Secretariat
Social Services Select Committee
NZ House of Representatives
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Submission on the Social Housing Reform (Housing Restructuring and Tenancy Matters) Amendment Bill

Sisters of Mercy Wiri are part of Nga Whaea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand, a Catholic religious congregation of women. We live and work in Wiri, a small largely state housing area immediately south of the Manukau City Centre. The Gospels, Catholic social teaching and the charism of the Sisters of Mercy inform our mission.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri are a community based agency involved in raising awareness of local issues and concerns, encouraging neighbourhood and community participation and supporting local initiatives. We work from a social justice and community development focus. Services include advocacy, housing and tenancy concerns, responding to immediate need, supporting family/whanau and children, home visits and visiting those in prison, information and referral.

The mission of Sisters of Mercy Wiri is to work with the poor, especially women and children, to build positive relationships that strengthen families and communities and to work with others for a just and compassionate society.

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We request an opportunity to appear before the Select Committee if the Committee is meeting in Auckland.

Introduction

Sisters of Mercy Wiri has been actively involved in social housing issues in Aotearoa/New Zealand for over 25 years. Over this time there has been significant

ideological transformation which favours those who have more than enough to the detriment of those who have little. Policies incorporated in these changes contain some shreds of truth, but for the most part are not well researched, and often depend on misleading statements. From the experience of the Sisters of Mercy Wiri, the result has been the increasing inequality currently affecting so many of the people we work with. Sisters of Mercy Wiri sees the 'reforms' contained in this proposed legislation in that light. It appears to be ideologically driven. Empirical data about outcomes is lacking, and, in our opinion it will not benefit those in our society who most need the assistance.

Reviewable Tenancies

As a community based agency Sisters of Mercy Wiri can foresee social upheaval in many of our communities, brought about by the provisions of this Bill, if it becomes law. It is proposing that within a 3 year time frame 3000 state house tenants will have their tenancies terminated. We strongly question this aspect of the Bill. Over the past year, we have conducted a monthly survey of empty state houses within our area. Already in our community of Wiri, in which there are approximately 520 state houses, there has been a big increase in the turnover of state tenancies. On 21 May 2012, when we began the survey, there were 13 empty houses in the area. On 21 May 2013 the number of empty houses was 33. In the month of April there were 41. The average time that houses remain empty is 85 days. Our records also show that in the last year 93 families have moved out of the local community. In one street alone during this period 17 houses have been vacated.

This is a time when there is a severe housing crisis Auckland. For the most part people are not leaving their state houses because their situation has improved, and they are moving on to better housing and a bright future. Some have moved to Australia in the hope of finding employment and better opportunity for their families. Others have so much debt that they can do nothing else other than run away. They are moving in with relatives for somewhere to stay and in the hope that the two or more families will be able to assist each other. Moving on in low decile communities is usually not a lifestyle choice for a family, but a survival strategy.

The effects on the children's health, education and social relationships cannot be underestimated. The community links and support networks that families have built up have been broken, diminishing their lives and the cohesion of the neighbourhood. Participating in the life of the community becomes very difficult for a family who moves frequently.

The social dislocation and isolation caused in our communities by this sort of movement should not be disregarded. Rather than providing positive solutions and strengthening an already beleaguered section of our society, this Bill looks to moving 3000 more state tenants in the next three years. Many of these families are the families who bring stability and identity to a community.

Most families would move on from their state house tenancies when their situation improved if there was planning and a programme built into the tenancy from the start. Families could then be assisted into the next step of housing in an appropriate way. But

there is no programme, and there is no next step. The provision for reviewable tenancies in this Bill provides only backward steps. There needs to be security of tenure for state house tenants in order to provide a reasonable degree of stability for individuals, families and communities.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri submits that the section on Reviewable Tenancies be deleted from this Bill and that the needs of children and their families be the prime consideration in the development of the Social Housing Reform Bill.

Social Housing Providers

In the view of Sisters of Mercy Wiri the state has the primary responsibility to ensure that everyone one in Aotearoa/New Zealand is adequately housed. The third sector, while it has a real and valuable role in providing for the poor, cannot be developed by the reduction of the state housing stock. Any assistance in the establishment of social housing providers must be in addition to the provision of state housing. Again, assisting social housing providers by subsidising Income Related Rents is desirable only if resources are not diverted from state houses, and state house tenants.

If the state and the third sector do work together to provide social housing then this should be a partnership. The picture portrayed by the Bill has the potential to undermine the independence of the third sector in giving the Government the right to determine what will be done and what will not be done. The tenants housed by the third sector must be able to be selected freely by the representatives of that sector, within certain categories maybe.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri submit that in order to increase the ability of the third sector to provide alternative housing for the poor, adequate planning and sufficient resources are given to the sector to ensure that good housing and viable alternatives can be provided by them.

Ministry of Social Development

Over time the Housing New Zealand Corporation and its forebears have given good service to thousands of New Zealand families. That is not to say that the situation has been perfect. It has not. This is especially true at times when the Corporation has not been adequately resourced and has been allowed to run down. From our observations, such a situation currently exists. The solution is to fix the problem by providing adequate resources rather than by dismantling part of the Corporation.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri suggests that there is a problem with the present allocation system used by Housing New Zealand. While we agree that those who most need the houses should be housed, the present allocation criteria are too demanding and unrealistic. Low paid working families need to be able to be housed in state houses. At the present time this is practically impossible.

There is no justification in passing over the allocation of state houses to the Ministry of Social Development. Even though, in our view, the criteria are wrong, Housing New

Zealand has historical knowledge and expertise in this regard. This dismantling of Housing New Zealand is of grave concern. Our experience of the Ministry of Social Development does not inspire us to believe that they will be able to improve the situation.

Earlier in the life of the current Government the role of tenancy managers was changed. Many of their roles were replaced by a call centre. This was going to solve so much. Again, lack of planning, relying on rhetoric and ideology, and introducing policies to save money, while pretending that they were to improve the situation, make an unwelcome impact on the lives of those who can least afford it. The moving of the assessment of need and eligibility to the Ministry of Social Development has the potential of increasing the vulnerability of the most needy rather than improving their situation. From our perspective, there will be a huge upheaval with little good effect.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri submits that if there needs to be an independent assessing agency then an independent housing agency be established.

Warrant of Fitness

Sisters of Mercy Wiri strongly supports the need for a Warrant of Fitness on all rental dwellings, not only state house tenancies. While there is room for improvement in the management and maintenance of the public asset we know as Housing New Zealand there is a section of private sector rentals that is in much greater need of scrutiny. It has always seemed wrong that, through the Accommodation Supplement, taxpayer money is paid to landlords for properties that are substandard and inadequate. It is only fitting that a property must pass the Warrant of Fitness test before the Accommodation Supplement is paid on it.

Sisters of Mercy Wiri submits that the Warrant of Fitness criteria be extended to all rental properties covered by the Residential Tenancies Act.