

22 August 2016

To the Housing Spokespeople
of the Labour, Green and Maori Parties

**Submission from Sisters of Mercy Wiri
to the Cross-Party Labour, Green and Maori Parliamentary Parties Inquiry
into Homelessness**

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.

We are a community based, social service agency and have over 30 years' experience of service provision, including housing and tenancy concerns. We are a member of ADCOSS, and as such fully endorse the ADCOSS submission to this committee.

We acknowledge that our written submission was very brief – it was written under pressure. Therefore we are grateful for the opportunity to speak to the committee.

It is the right of all New Zealanders to be adequately housed, and while we all have a part to play in making sure that this happens, the ultimate responsibility lies squarely with the Government. We take this opportunity to applaud the actions of all the non-Government agencies and people, especially the management of Te Paea marae and latterly Manurewa marae, who value the common good and step in where Government has failed.

We are dismayed at the abject failure of current housing policy as evidenced by the increasing numbers of homeless families that are having difficulty finding and maintaining good, adequate and affordable housing. We might spare a moment to reflect on all the pain and hardship that these families are enduring. These are families and people living on the streets, in cars, garages and other structures not built as housing, families overcrowding with other families, families paying well over 50% of their incomes in rent, getting into debt and unable to afford basic necessities...Life is very grim for many of our mothers, fathers and children. In the present climate, what hope do they have that anything will change in the future, so that they and their children will have a future.

On the other hand we have institutions and people becoming wealthy through 'housing' – banks, corporations involved with building houses and selling house building materials, land bankers, people buying houses to make money... Housing has become a commodity, something to trade with primarily to make money. Even in Wiri, a mainly state housing area, private rental houses are being sold and resold with sickening regularity.

We see neoliberal ideology as the basic problem. It is the main cause of the growth of inequality in our society. Inequality in housing is the ugliest symptom of this. The market is not going to provide housing for the poor. It hasn't throughout history, and it is very clear that it is not going to do so now.

It is obscene that a person can buy several houses in a prime location, and knock them down in order to build one house, valued at well over \$30 million. The fact that legislation makes it legal does not make it right. It is not right. It is wrong. All those resources should not be used for one consumer, especially when so many families have nothing.

When a Government and a country have only one goal, and that is to grow the economy, the people at the bottom suffer. For a properly governed country the good of society, and all within it, must have at least equal priority with the economy.

The right to healthy housing

New Zealand is a signatory to a number of UN conventions, one of which is the right to housing. We also have a tradition of responding to housing need through State initiatives. Government needs to accept its responsibility to provide housing for those who need it and to develop a housing strategy encapsulating these rights and our history, and act on this.

From our perspective, this means that there must be a strong public housing sector. The public asset that is our housing stock must not be sold. It must be strengthened and maintained. Third sector housing has also to develop, but not at the expense of state housing.

More houses are needed

The proposed changes to State housing, does not actually create more physical houses. More houses, particularly in areas most affected by the current housing crisis, are needed.

Capital funding makes the biggest difference

While increasing the eligibility for IRRS makes a difference for some, more houses are built and families assisted when there is government capital funding available. Successful community and NGO provided social housing in other countries has been as a result of sustained capital investment by government.

Any transfer of State Houses to other entities should be to public ownership only

Finally, any transfer of state housing should be to other public structures. State houses should remain in public ownership. The UK Housing Associations provide a model worth considering. Community owned, not NGO-owned or Church-owned, but publically owned through the community.

Thank you again for this opportunity.

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