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Committee Secretariat  
Social Services Select Committee  
NZ House of Representatives  
Parliament Buildings  
**WELLINGTON**  
Email: [select.committees@parliament.govt.nz](mailto:select.committees@parliament.govt.nz)

## **Submission on the Residential Tenancies 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.

The contact details for this submission are:

Sister Anne Hurley  
Community Social Worker  
P. O. Box 98923  
Manukau, Auckland 2241

Phone: 09 263 6464  
Email [anne@sistersofmercywiri.org.nz](mailto:anne@sistersofmercywiri.org.nz)

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

### **Introduction**

The New Zealand Government is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 25 of this Declaration states that all people have the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being – including housing.

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 change in social policy and consequently in the provision of housing for the poor. The overall outcome of this has tended to favour those who have more than enough to the detriment of those who have comparatively little. From our experience it has become increasingly difficult for the poor to find affordable and adequate housing. Even state housing is hugely difficult to obtain.

The Residential Tenancies Act 1986 did provide some legal protection for the poor and low income families accessing rental accommodation but again experience has shown us that the poor, in particular, are very reluctant to take action against landlords for many reasons, including lack of education, unawareness and fear of repercussions in an unequal relationship.

**Consequently, Sisters of Mercy Wiri strongly supports the objectives of this Bill. We affirm the aspiration to achieve “warmer, drier and easier to heat” tenancies and also to “strengthen enforcement powers to officials administering the Residential Tenancies Act 1986**

### **Legislated Minimum Standards and Smoke Alarms**

Sisters of Mercy Wiri welcomes the introduction of legislated minimum standards for insulation and smoke alarms in private rental housing. This is an essential step in ensuring that all rental accommodation in Aotearoa New Zealand is safe and adequate. However, the Bill in its present form needs to be stronger to ensure the stated objectives are achieved.

There is no excuse for not ensuring unequivocally the minimum standards and smoke alarms exist in all tenancies. Poor housing is responsible for illnesses and even death among our most vulnerable children. Conditions in even some of our state houses have been attributed to contributing to the ill health and even death of some of the tenants.

### **Warrant of Fitness**

The Bill provides the opportunity for Parliament to ensure that the quality of rental accommodation is what could be classed as ‘adequate’. Currently it is children and the elderly especially who suffer from respiratory conditions resulting in hospital admission, absences from school and unnecessary suffering. Third world conditions exist in many of the tenancies that families are forced to take. We have a vehicle warrant of fitness to maintain high standard of safety in our motor vehicles, we have restaurants, cafes and food outlets inspected and assessed for health and safety and given a rating. Why is it not possible to have a Warrant of Fitness that sets a sufficiently high standard for rental accommodation?

### **Resourcing**

The Government is responsible for the well-being of all its citizens, especially those in needy circumstances and therefore open to exploitation by unscrupulous landlords. Adequate monitoring of a Warrant of Fitness for all rental accommodation requires

sufficient resourcing for it to be effective. The health and wellbeing of our children and our most vulnerable citizens depends on it.

**Sisters of Mercy Wiri recommends that:**

- 1. The Bill sets standards high enough to ensure that the health and wellbeing of all those residing in all rental accommodation is not compromised**
- 2. The benchmark be comparable to that of the current standard building code**
- 3. A Warrant of Fitness equivalent to a vehicle warrant of fitness in stature and obligation be introduced**
- 4. Sufficient resourcing be set aside to ensure that a Warrant of Fitness for rental accommodation will be able to be effective in ensuring adequate rental accommodation is available for all New Zealanders.**