

Better rent protections welcome

The Tenants' Union ACT (TUACTION) and the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) today welcomed improved protections for renters in the ACT being introduced into the Assembly by ACT Attorney General Gordon Ramsay MLA.

Key changes will increase the notice period from 4 weeks to 8 weeks required for landlords to terminate a periodic lease where the landlord or family member wishes to move into the premises; reduce the maximum rent payable in advance to two weeks; provide a right for a tenant to terminate their agreement if they are accepted for a social housing dwelling or a residential aged care facility; and create a head of power for the introduction of minimum standards for rental properties.

According to Deb Phippen, Executive Officer of TUACTION, "Advocates for renters have been saying for some time that the ACT needs to improve its protections to tenants under the Residential Tenancies ACT as well as at an operational level with Housing ACT and related programs.

"We have specifically called for reforms to ensure that all rental housing is stable, accessible, appropriate, safe and liveable including: protection for vulnerable renters not classified as tenants; reform of termination by landlords – just cause terminations only and longer notice periods for non-breach termination; minimum standards for properties; subsidies for insulation, energy efficient heating, hot water and other appliances; penalties for breaches by landlords; and measures to prevent unlawful discrimination.

"These reforms are welcome and will provide improved fairness and confidence for renters as well as rights protections to prevent people sliding into homelessness. The Productivity Commission's report, *Vulnerable Private Renters*, released earlier this week found that, nationally, 39% of individuals who sought help from specialist homelessness services cited an eviction as a reason for doing so. In the ACT, this figure was 45% and was the most common reason why people sought assistance.

"Measures to reduce advance rent requirements and include cooling in the list of urgent repairs will support low-income renters and some of those feeling the effects of Canberra's climate extremes, including older people, people with chronic health conditions and people with disabilities. Introducing the mechanism to make a start on standards for rental properties is also welcome as are changed lease provisions which will make it smoother for tenants initiating a move into social housing or aged care," Ms Phippen said.

According to ACTCOSS CEO Susan Helyar, it is "good to see government act on some outstanding recommendations of the Review of the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 as well as progress an important element of last year's ACT Housing Strategy. While we had called for a longer period of 3 months to allow people to find alternative accommodation in Canberra's tight rental market, the doubling of the notice period in periodic leases is a good start.

"We also note indications the government is responding to the circumstances of residents of caravan parks and manufactured home parks who own their dwellings yet rent their site, including by explicitly

providing that site-only agreements will be protected by the occupancy law. The detail of this will be important. We welcome a much-needed focus on tenancy law reform to provide a fairer deal for tenants,” Ms Helyar said.

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