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'New generation housing' can open doors for the marginalised

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A KEY element in any strategy to alleviate homelessness must be an increase in the supply of safe and affordable housing. While federal and state governments are working to improve life for the marginalised — a federal white paper is due in October and a national affordable housing agreement is expected later in the year — there must be wider acknowledgement that it has become almost impossible for people who are homeless to find safe and affordable accommodation.

Agencies whose mission is to help the poor often have no alternative but to place people in private rooming houses where a couple must pay up to \$370 a week for a room no bigger than a standard lounge room — with no toilet, no kitchen and no money left at the end of the fortnight to even start to get your life back together.

This means people remain homeless for longer, and the longer you are homeless, the harder it is to get back on your feet.

It should not be this hard. The solution lies in public and community housing, which provides people with security of tenure and is not run for profit, allowing rent to be set at a level where people can begin to rebuild their lives and reconnect with the wider community.

The Australian Government's Institute of Health and Welfare has identified the many benefits of public housing: not only do its tenants feel more settled and better able to cope with life, it also leads to better education and employment outcomes. What a shame then, that "public housing" has become a dirty word.

The first obstacle to overcome is that of image. When we hear "public housing", many of us immediately think of high-rise flats and crowded estates, places widely regarded as creating ghettos of disadvantage. It does not have to be like this. Public housing should be dispersed throughout the community in ordinary streets and suburbs; this avoids the stigma such housing now has.

The second obstacle is the name itself. If public housing were given a more constructive label, we could discard the negative connotations and focus on the innovation and social responsibility this kind of housing can offer the community. A title such as "new generation housing" might allow us to focus on future solutions, not past mistakes.

The third obstacle is that public housing is not seen in the same light as public schools or Medicare. While these services are regarded as essential to our nation's wellbeing — we would not allow people to go without appropriate health care or education — housing is not. There are people in our community who cannot afford to be subjected to the ebbs and flows of the private housing market. New generation housing would ensure a safety net for those who are vulnerable, and so offer them dignity and the freedom to participate in their community.

It also makes economic sense. The Howard government reduced its spending on public and community housing by 31% over its time in office, while increasing the amount of rent assistance it provided. In its last year, it was spending \$2 billion on subsidising people's private rent.

This is an expensive, inefficient and ineffective program and needs urgent reform. Further, it is not targeted to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged and is not set at a level that alleviates people's housing stress.

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In turn, this has led to states and territories reducing their investment in public housing and selling off stock to pay for the maintenance of remaining properties. The only government bold enough to buck the trend is the Victorian Government, which announced an increase of \$500 million in its 2006-07 budget.

As a result, the level of public and community housing has remained at about 400,000 units for the past 10 years while the population has grown by more than 2 million. This imbalance will continue to have negative consequences.

The United States experience offers a useful insight. The Reagan administration substantially reduced the level of investment in public housing, and this was a major factor in creating a homeless epidemic that started in the 1980s and is still growing.

American policymakers now argue that it makes economic sense to work towards preventing homelessness because the cost burden of managing the social problem is prohibitive. There are now more than 400 plans to end homelessness and, yes, public housing is a key part of these plans. We have the opportunity to learn from America's mistake.

New generation housing, on its own, will not solve homelessness or the housing crisis, but it must be a key component of any effective strategy. Properly developed, it will build greater community wellbeing by offering secure housing for people who are struggling.

Given the seriousness of the housing crisis and homelessness in Australia right now, it could just be one of the courageous ideas the Government is looking for.

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This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/new-generation-housing-can-open-doors-for-the-marginalised-20080928-4pnn.html>