

Part 2

Australia's Housing Crisis — Experiences from Older People Who Have Lived It

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As Australia's housing crisis has worsened, a diverse group of older people from across the nation has come together with a common goal. By speaking about their own experiences of this crisis they hope to build awareness of how it impacts people as they grow older, and to add their voices to those calling for a fairer housing system, one which ensures everyone living in Australia has access to a safe, stable, accessible and affordable home.

We are three of those women and these are our stories.

Why Investing in Public Housing is So Important

Marie comes from a generation of women who were stay-at-home mums. Around 20 years ago, following a marriage breakdown, Marie had to attempt to re-enter the workforce and find an affordable private rental.

'I found myself out in the big wide world trying to start again,' she says.

'It was a very tough time as most weeks I couldn't afford medications or healthy food. So, my mental and physical health deteriorated very quickly.'

Today high rents and low vacancy rates are forcing older people on low incomes to move out of communities they've lived in for much of their lives and far from the friends, family and services they rely on. Marie knows all too well how difficult that can be. Her own search for an affordable property took her to the Central Coast of New South Wales, hours away from her family and grandchildren.

'It was a serious balance that became harder as time went along. After a few years my mental health deteriorated and I had a breakdown', she says.

After a suicide attempt, Marie was supported to find an apartment in public housing closer to family.

'Admitting that I just could not cope anymore was the hardest thing I have ever had to do,' Marie says.

'I was given a one-bedroom apartment in Macquarie Park on the Ivanhoe Estate and it was an amazing community. I got involved very quickly and set up a Community Centre. It saved me and made life worth going on, helping others and setting up activities for people to enjoy.'

'I felt at last I had found my forever home.'

Unfortunately, in 2012, plans were unveiled that would see the NSW government sell the Ivanhoe public estate at Macquarie Park and relocated many public housing tenants. Marie was involved in a fierce campaign to save the estate. After four years of campaigning, Marie moved out of the estate and into community housing.

In 2018, redevelopment of the estate began, and it was replaced with a mix of social, affordable and private housing.

Marie is still living in safe, stable community housing and remains a staunch advocate for older people who are experiencing homelessness or housing crisis.

'I cannot stop until changes are made, and seniors are safe,' she says.

What It Means to Have a Stable Home

Fourteen years ago Susan's life turned around when, after months in temporary accommodation, she moved into

stable accommodation with a community housing provider.

It had been a turbulent period. Moving from lodge, to apartment, then back to a lodge with a bag of clothes and nothing more.

The insecurity had taken its toll.

'I was emaciated and having panic attacks,' Susan says.

'I had no certainty about my future and had to take life one day at a time.'

It was exhausting getting used to new locations, learning public transport routes and being disconnected from friends and family.

'Moving from temporary accommodation into stable accommodation turned my life around,' she says.

Susan is still living in the same home in Sydney's inner west today. Community housing provided her the stability and support she needed to recover from that turbulent period of her life.

'My housing worker asked me to call her every morning so she could check I was ok,' Susan explains.

'She provided support and counselling that helped me cope with my new circumstances.'

Soon she would be enrolled in TAFE and over the next four years achieved a Certificate III, IV and Diploma of Community Services. After nine years of unemployment Susan returned to work, finding a job at the community centre where she had completed her diploma placement.

'I gradually gained weight and my panic attacks abated,' Susan says.

'In 14 years, I have gone from poverty to savings in the bank. I have gone from fearfulness to confidence. I have experienced the difference that support makes.'

'Community housing has provided me with a firm foundation to build on. Key to this foundation is subsidised rent to help tenants

climb out of poverty. But community housing, and other forms of social housing, offers so much more than just affordable accommodation.'

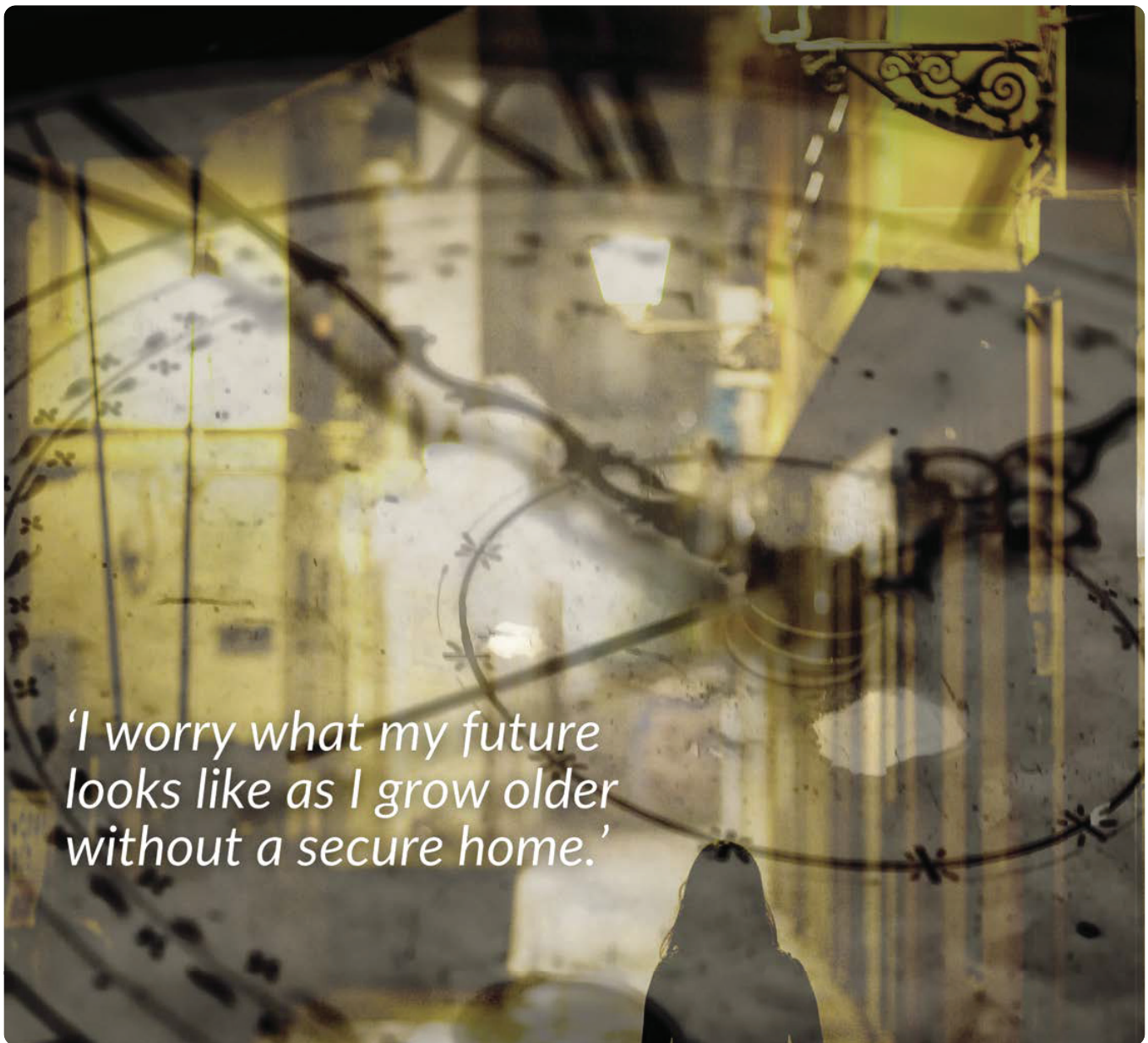
'Emotional support and encouragement to achieve provided by community housing workers are just as central to my story as subsidised rent. And so too is the stability that long-term housing provides — I have a home.'

How An Unfair Tax System Makes It Difficult to Bounce Back from Crisis

At 23 Wendy was married, had four children, and owned a suburban house in Perth. A qualified drafts person she worked for mining companies, and later, while raising her children, as an English tutor and newspaper proof-reader.

When her marriage broke down, she was 48. Her share of the family home, which sold for \$38,000, was not enough to buy another dwelling as a single mother without a full-time job. What followed was a period of





'I worry what my future looks like as I grow older without a secure home.'

Image courtesy of Older Women's Network NSW

prolonged insecurity. Nine months in a granny flat before the landlord needed it for a family member. Another nine months of homelessness, house sitting for a friend.

'On unemployment benefits, affordable private rental was impossible to find,' she says.

Through a Catholic Church community Wendy found seven years of stable accommodation in a not-for-profit housing cooperative. Rent was 25 per cent of your income and it this stability that helped her find full-time work.

When the co-operative dissolved, Wendy left and retrained as a librarian which proved to be a very successful late career and provided

her with many fulfilling roles until retirement. However much of the work she was able to pick up early in this career were short term contracts. She was ineligible for Newstart between contracts, and this took a toll on her savings.

Wendy moved in with her daughter and house-sat when she could. One day, after a house-sit, her daughter asked her not to return. At the time she was 65, working part-time and planning to retire.

Unable to afford a private rental and in a panic, she made what she calls a disastrous decision. Drawing on almost all of her superannuation, she purchased a portable home in a residential caravan park close to where she worked. She bought the dwelling

outright but had to rent the land it was sitting on from the park.

Four years later, when the park was sold, the residents who had no legal protections to rely on, lost their homes with no compensation. The cost to relocate these 'portable' homes was prohibitive to nearly all the residents, even if they could find somewhere to relocate them.

Wendy currently lives in a tiny home she rents from a young couple at the back of a bush block in the Perth Hills.

'I worry what my future looks like as I grow older without a secure home,' she says.

If you're interested in joining this movement, visit the National Alliance for Seniors Housing Facebook group.