

TENANT NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE TENANTS' UNION OF NSW

112 MARCH 2016



**"Be brave
and strong."**

- Hana

WOMEN FINDING HOME

Rekha Sanghi – Settlement Services International

Women from a refugee background face a multitude of challenges and barriers when trying to find a place to call home in Australia.

Like many Australians faced with a sudden change in living circumstances, they don't have a rental history, referees or money for a bond or advance rent.

Further compounding the difficulties of finding a safe and secure home is the fact that these women have escaped violence, war and other traumatic circumstances in their home countries. They now have to adjust to a new culture, environment and language, with many

being the sole carer for their children.

Some have lost their partners to war, while others have fled domestic and gender-based violence, leaving them with long-lasting mental and physical scars.

Adjusting to life in Australia is particularly difficult for these women, but the pressure is eased somewhat when they arrive at Sydney airport and are met by Settlement Services International (SSI) who helps start their settlement journey.

SSI is a community-based not-for-profit organisation providing a range of services in the

areas of humanitarian settlement, asylum seeker assistance, multicultural foster care, disability support and employment services in NSW.

Providing housing options is also one of SSI's key service areas. Last financial year SSI supported more than 1,200 people in vulnerable situations to find accommodation, including refugees and people seeking asylum.

Hana* arrived in Australia in June 2014 with her two sons. She fled Iraq almost six years ago, but spent four years in Syria waiting for her application to seek refuge in Australia to be approved. Sadly,

Continued on page 2

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY EDITION

WOMEN FINDING HOME 1

MORE THAN BRICKS AND MORTAR 3

THE RELIEF OF NEVER HAVING TO GO HOME 6

WOMEN WORKING FOR CHANGE 8

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS 12

UPDATE: MORE BANG FOR YOUR BOND 13

TRANSGENDER WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS 14

RUTH SIMON: A CHAMPION FOR HOUSING RIGHTS 16

AT LEAST I HAVE A ROOM 18

TU TURNS 40! 19

WHEN HOME ISN'T SAFE 21

SEEKING SECURITY 23

IS MY RESIDENCE MY HOME? 24

TENANCY Q&A: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE 26

Continued from page 1

while in Syria, her husband was killed. Speaking through an interpreter, Hana said her flat didn't feel like 'home' yet, but she had no other options at the moment.

"The location is good but my flat is very small and my sons are 18 and 21 years old and still have to share a room," Hana said.

"I can't work because of rheumatism and a slipped disc so I don't know how I will ever afford to find something bigger."

When asked what advice she would give to other women in her situation she said the most important thing was to help yourself. "You should be brave and strong and not expect anyone to do anything for you," she said.

Zara* has three small children and has been in Australia six months. Also from Iraq, she spent three years in Malaysia waiting for her visa application to be approved. Zara was granted a 'Woman at Risk' visa, which is given to women who do not have the protection of a male relative and are in danger of victimisation, harassment of serious abuse because of their gender. Zara has had three different rental properties in the short time she has lived in Australia, but she is happy to stay in her current house for now and make it her home.

"There is no internet connection at the moment so I feel very cut off from the world, but it is a quiet place, close to some shops, and good for my small children," Zara said.

Being a woman, and of refugee background, can be a double disadvantage, but the resilience and strength of these women shines through no matter what their situation. 🏠

*names have been changed



Some of the Tenants' Union women who produced this edition of *Tenant News*: Julie Lee, Margaret Di Nicola, Glyn Mather, Anne Coates, Julie Foreman and Cass Wong.

EDITORIAL

Julie Foreman – Executive Officer, Tenants' Union of NSW

The women of the Tenants' Union have enthusiastically produced this edition of *Tenant News* to celebrate International Woman's Day (IWD) on 8th March. The IWD theme this year is #Pledge for Parity – telling the stories of women who rent is our small action or pledge to include and advance women.

Like the history of the women's movement this edition includes stories of struggle, hope and celebration. Inside you will find women writing about the legal insecurity and cultural beliefs that impact on their ability to make a home when renting. You will read how LGBTIQ, refugee and older women face hardship and discrimination in the rental market. We explore public housing redevelopment and relocation policies and their effect on women and their children. We also have an inspiring story of residential park activists making a difference and celebrate an Aboriginal champion for housing.

The common thread in all these stories is the search for stability, liveability and affordability when

making a home. Renting laws can be changed to facilitate these basic needs. With the review of the Residential Tenancies Act under way, now is the time to act. We ask Minister Dominello to do this by including changes to the law on evictions, rent increases and repairs. You can read our full recommendations for change at tenantsunion.org.au.

We invite you to join us in the movement for stability, liveability and affordability for tenants by becoming a member of the Tenants' Union and/or subscribing to our e-bulletin at eepurl.com/JBMVb. Alternatively, see the back page for details.

Happy International Women's Day!

Do you need some tenancy advice or assistance? See the back cover for the phone number of your local service.

MORE THAN BRICKS AND MORTAR

Julie Foreman – Executive Officer, Tenants' Union of NSW

Robyn Stafford lives in Minto, a suburb in south western Sydney. She has experience as a tenant who has been through a redevelopment process in public housing. She has been active in working alongside other community members to improve tenant outcomes from the redevelopment process.

Redevelopment of public housing is a topical issue with the announcement of the social housing strategy by Minister Brad Hazzard in late January. This strategy will see the redevelopment of over 20,000 social housing units. So our Executive Officer, Julie Foreman, interviewed Robyn and asked her to share her experience and learning.

Tell me about Minto?

I love the Minto Community. The public housing community of Minto has gone, as most of the original tenants have moved on; some of the families went before the redevelopment and have bought their own places. I worked at the Post Office in Minto Mall until I retired 11 years ago so I am lucky that I knew, and still do,

“You can’t just throw people together – especially when some have complex needs – and expect a community to form.” – Robyn

people from every area. Minto is a very diverse community; we have the rich, the poor, the in-betweens (young families trying to make a living and buying their own homes). It is also very multicultural with people from many nations living in our midst.

As part of the renewal I was moved over to Campbelltown for six years. I was lucky enough to be successful in the housing ballot and came back to a brand-new two bedroom home in 2011. To be honest I am not that fussed about living where I do – once I put my car in the garage nobody would even know you’re here. I say hello to neighbours but don’t really know them. The fences are so high you can’t even be

sociable over the back fence. This is different to when I lived in Minto before the redevelopment.

How did you find out about the redevelopment of Minto? How long was it expected to take?

I actually found out about the redevelopment on the 6pm news on TV on 29 May 2002 – the date is etched in my memory. I saw Dr Andrew Refshauge, then Minister for Housing, standing up on the hill addressing the media about demolishing all of the townhouses in Minto and that it was a ghetto – I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! Yes, parts of Minto did need attention but it was not a ghetto. I had recently had my townhouse

Continued overleaf...



Robyn Stafford and Kathy Calvert at the launch of Remembering Minto

MORE THAN BRICKS AND MORTAR

Continued from page 3

inspected and I was to have some work done and an upgrade of my kitchen so for that, I was excited. Officially I received my notification from Housing NSW the following day via a letterbox drop.

The redevelopment was expected to take about 10 years initially but there were four Housing Ministers before the masterplan was even signed. Some of the residents in the first precinct "Valley Vista" were moved out within the first two months. When it came to the second precinct, my precinct "Sarah", we were able to advocate for it to be put on hold for 12 months. After the masterplan was approved the completion time was put back until 2015 and now that has been extended until the end of this year (2016).

The plans have continued to change. At first we were informed that there would be no three bedroom homes built and instead we were to get 104 two bedroom homes and 120 senior / over 55s units. That changed too – the two bedroom stand-alone houses were not viable so now three bedroom cottages are being built on the remaining lots. The small units have generated issues, which are caused by living so closely together without the necessary government or community supports. You can't just throw people together – especially when some have complex needs – and expect a community to form.

What was the impact of the redevelopment on the community and on you?

We were devastated and watched in awe at the speed that the first lot of residents were moved out. People were wandering around bewildered. The lack of information and understanding led to fear and stress and if I am honest led me to take early retirement. Some people took the opportunity to move to coastal areas and we were all told we could come back. Those who wished could

put their names on a return to Minto list.

Apart from our own individual stories there was the bigger picture. Due to dislocation and the population dropping, the schools in our area lost services – they have picked up again now – and our shopping mall went downhill badly. At times it was like living on a building site. And many friends moved away. It was hard to believe that 800 people were going to be dislocated and no social impact study was going to be undertaken.

Gradually things have improved again, the mall has had a facelift and been renamed as Minto Marketplace. Life in Minto is good. The carparks are full, the community is vibrant and everybody is smiling.

During the difficult times community members met together, and did their best to keep each other informed and supported. Not long after the announcement the Minto Residents Action Group (RAG) formed. We worked alongside non-government organisations like St. Vincent de Paul Animation Project, South Western Regional Tenants Association, Shelter NSW and too many more to name individually. Along with these NGOs, residents and the wonderful Franciscan Friars who lived within our community, the Macarthur Housing Coalition was formed and we were successful in lobbying Housing NSW for an independent Tenant Advocate. Together these groups and Housing NSW came up with guidelines that have been used in a lot of the estates that are undergoing renewal.

What does living in public housing mean to you? What difference has it made in your life?

I have lived in public housing for 48 years. My husband, myself and our three children moved into a brand-

new house in Ashcroft – back then the Housing Commission and Rural Bank had this agreement that you could purchase your home for \$150 deposit and pay it off over 30 years. Unfortunately we did not have the deposit as wages were not that good back then. My husband passed away leaving me with four children so I regret that my chance to purchase my own home had gone. Later I moved to Minto and had my fifth child. I think living in social housing is secure – you do not have to worry whether the owner wants to sell!! (Ha! well at least public housing did set us up in other accommodation).

What projects or organisations are you involved in?

Since retiring back in November 2004 I spent a couple of months at home, just attending Minto RAG. Then one day Kevin Goode (a Franciscan Friar) came to my door and asked me if I would go with a few people to meet with then Housing Minister Joe Tripodi. I went to that meeting, and that same afternoon I attended the Community Reference Group meeting and became a regular member. I was a member of "Remembering Minto Committee", Macarthur Housing Coalition and South Western Regional Tenants Association (SWRTA). I still volunteer at SWRTA two days a week. I have been the Secretary of Minto RAG since 2009.

I was also part of the Kids Community Park Committee. After finding out that our original park was deleted from the plans we were successful in having another park renamed Kids Community Park and a small plaque was erected commemorating the mural which was painted by the children. There is also a plaque commemorating the contribution of the Franciscan Friars and Sisters Kerry and Patricia who lived in the community. For 10 years I also volunteered (one day a week) for Myrtle Cottage, Ingleburn – a daily respite centre. 🏠

ROBYN'S TIPS

FOR PUBLIC HOUSING REDEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

In this article, Robyn Stafford provides some advice for decision makers and tenants who are embarking on new redevelopment projects in public housing.

DECISION MAKERS

COMMUNICATION – talk to the people it mostly impacts on. Don't be afraid of them or their ideas and concerns.

SHOW COMPASSION – how would you feel if you were uprooted from your home with no real control over the time to move and where to move to?

Some practical things to think about:

- Have alternative accommodation ready for the elderly so people do not have to move twice.
- Ask who wants to move and start with them first.
- Keep residents informed and updated on plans.
- Come up with a different solution for single unit complexes. Without the right supports young people with mental health issues and the elderly do not mix.
- Make sure there are community facilities such as parks, community centres and meeting rooms available in unit complexes.
- Try not to move the elderly as most have lived in their places for years and raised families there, so it is the family home. When implementing a redevelopment project try to understand that when older, long-term tenants were originally allocated their house they were told it was for life and to "treat it like your own". They put in their own floor coverings, blinds, fans and air conditioners. Some even put up fences and sowed the seed for their lawns. Their heart

and soul has gone into their family home.

TENANTS

- Do not talk to relocation officers on your own.
- Look around you – what do you have that you would like in your new place? Things like screen doors and window security locks are not always guaranteed.
- Make a list – **negotiate**.
- Have you purchased your own ceiling fans or air conditioner – did you have permission to install them? Even if you haven't – do you have receipts from an authorised installer? These can be relocated with you or you may get new ones.
- These days Housing tries to match your needs to a house so make sure they know your needs – doctors, hospital, public transport, shopping and family.
- Get medical certificates from your doctors to confirm your needs.
- When you go to look at new places, take someone with you –

check each room for adequate power points – **negotiate**.

- Write a list of everyone who needs to be updated with your new address (this can be a big job).
- Remember you are not alone; seek support from organisations and your community. Ask questions and **negotiate**.
- Be warned a lot of people get letters of termination and rental arrears when they are relocated. These need to be dealt with straight away and most are human error – like a relocation officer not pressing a button to finish off your account at the address you moved out of.
- Remember you are entitled to two weeks rent credited to your new account while you are moving. 🏠

If you have questions about a public housing redevelopment project, call your local Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service – see back page for contact details.

Robyn Stafford, Lesley Browne and Uncle Ivan Wellington



THE RELIEF OF NEVER HAVING TO GO HOME

I want to share my story in the hope it helps others but it is still very current and I am still having to hide (I wish there was a better word but that is what it is).

Fleeing an abusive relationship was the most frightening experience of my life. By the time we fled, it was already a game of life or death. Leaving often angers the abuser even more and my case was no exception. My husband needed absolute control and by the time we fled he was watching everything I did, every item I purchased, every train I took and every toll I drove through. He logged my phone location, read my emails, messages and files, and monitored my social media. How can you flee when the “modern day aids” of our digital lives are key weapons for control?

There was no preparation time. On my way from work to collecting the kids from school I considered if it was safe enough for the children and me to return home. It wasn't.

I had no chance to pack or withdraw money. I could not use my cards. Even my phone and car put us at grave risk of being located. I could not contact mutual friends and feared involving others as he would spin stories and seek vengeance on anyone who would not listen. In his eyes anyone helping us was against him and should be punished.

The first night we stayed in a hotel out of the kindness of family. The following day I was advised it was not safe to take the kids to school or conduct my usual activities. We went to the psychological service

at my work. In a time when crisis accommodation is very hard to come by, particularly with children in tow, I was extremely fortunate they connected us with refuge accommodation for a few weeks.

With no safe access to my cards, accounts, normal communication methods or friendship groups I felt stuck. It was a relief to have a safe space but there was no food, no bedding, and definitely no comfort. That same night a volunteer community group, Helping Hands, organised and delivered food, bedding, clothes, toys for the kids, and vouchers to help keep us going. They have been truly incredible.

This help, plus a very understanding workplace gave us two important things: a safe space and time to plan. The next weeks were spent running between Centrelink, Housing NSW, legal appointments, psychologist appointments, property inspections, schools and banks to name a few. Fortunately, the Department of Housing referred me to Moving On Moving Out (MOMO) who support women and their children leaving domestic violence and help them re-establish and find accommodation. They link women up with services and funding, and offer regular contact and guidance via a case manager. I would have been lost without mine. She was there every step and could predict my own husband's behaviours better than me. She also came to court and supported me through the AVO process.

Finances were complicated. I earned too little to function alone but too much to qualify for most assistance. As my husband and I owned assets, I was ineligible for financial support even though

“I am very grateful for the services I received, but a lot needs to change to help women like myself get out and stay out of abusive relationships. Finding suitable housing is the foundation of this.”

he refused to free them up and had taken our savings. A fantastic program called Start Safely subsidises rent for people in my situation, but due to my need to live near work while caring for the children, the ratio of rent to salary again made me ineligible. My case manager suggested a shelter but it was important to me that I gave my children a home and stability they had been lacking due to the abuse. I borrowed money for a rental deposit and continue to borrow to cover daily expenses. I know many others without access to such loans and that certainly upsets me.

The thing that upsets me most about it is that changing my work was the first independent step I made. Given my husband's need for control, this decision infuriated him and he did everything he could to block and sabotage it. The system made it near impossible to keep my job, find and establish a new home and fight the ongoing abuse through the legal system, child support and other sources.

I feel very fortunate to be out. My future and that of my children will be much brighter. I am very grateful for the services I received, but a lot needs to change to help women like myself get out and stay out of abusive relationships. Finding suitable housing is the foundation of this. There were many times when I felt I had to give in to my husband's financial power, control and ongoing abuse. Being locked out of services due to assets and income he held and I may never see, contributed to these feelings.

Like many women I have since met, if it wasn't for Helping Hands and guidance from my case manager at MOMO, I would have been forced to leave my work - the one key piece of independence I claimed in

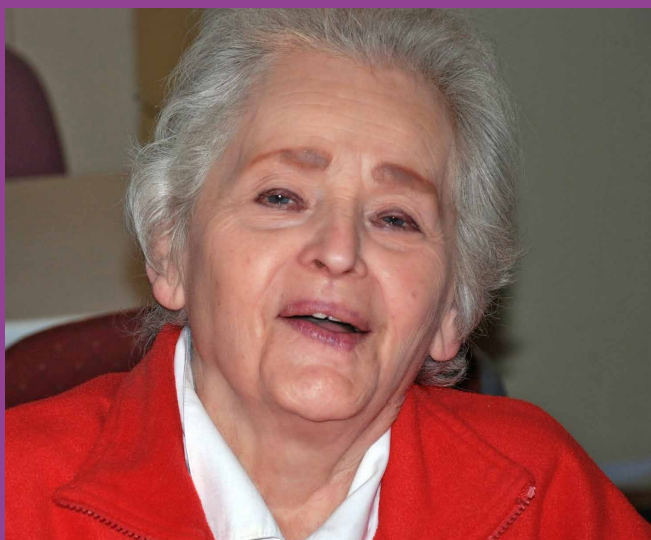
a relationship where my husband tried to take everything. That independence gave me strength to keep defending the rights of my children and myself, rights my husband told us we did not have.

If I was to change one thing about the services offered, it would be to ensure that it is not necessary to sacrifice independence to receive help. For me, this independence was work. For others it could be their family home, even their children's schools. Many have fled relationships where giving up such independence to keep the peace and minimise abuse is all they can do. These pieces of independence should be encouraged and nurtured as they are key to women like myself finding themselves again and being

able to give back to an area in dire need of support. Choosing to leave was one thing, but without it being sustainable it meant nothing. Being able to hold on to my small piece of independence not only made my choice sustainable, it made me stronger. 🏠

Check out our factsheet on tenancy issues for renters in NSW who want to leave a domestic violence situation at tenants.org.au or contact the *Domestic Violence Legal Advice Line* on 8745 6999 or 1800 810 784.

CESARINA'S STORY



Cesarina arrived in Sydney from northern Italy in her mid 20s and quite a few of her brothers and sisters came too. Now in her 80s, she has spent most of her time here in rental accommodation, first in boarding houses and then in houses she and her husband rented.

They lived in many Sydney suburbs and now Cesarina lives in Sydney's inner west. They had two children in this time followed by four grandchildren.

She has lived for around 20 years in a Housing NSW flat. The building has eight flats altogether and most of the tenants have been there a long time. Like Cesarina, they are nearly all elderly widows now. This provides Cesarina with some social life which is important because she is having trouble moving around. One of the problems with the building though is that it was not designed for people with health problems and she is finding it difficult using the stairs (no lift!). The tenants have had disagreements over the years but these days they get on together pretty well.

For Cesarina, this flat is her home and she is adamant that she wants to live there "until I die". She has always decorated the places where she has lived with ornaments and pictures because she wants to "make it look nice". She has always tried to keep her place spotless and her husband always used to fix things if they broke. In her words, "I good tenant".

Cesarina's husband died last year. As he was head tenant, Cesarina had to apply to Housing NSW for the flat in her own right. This made her very upset because she was scared they would take it away from her. Fortunately she has been given a temporary lease and told that she will be eligible for longer term housing, so she feels safe again in her home. 🏠

WOMEN WORKING FOR CHANGE

Jemima Mowbray & Julie Lee – Residential Parks Officers, Tenants' Union of NSW



Jemima and Julie

This year's theme for International Women's Day is 'pledge for parity'; a theme with a focus on 'accelerating gender parity' to ensure everyone – women and men – have the chance to participate in creating meaningful change within their own communities.

For this article, we talked to six women who live in residential parks who are all creating meaningful change within their communities. They are involved with their communities in a range of ways including: participating on their park residents committee; representing their fellow residents in negotiations with park operators or in disputes at the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal (the Tribunal); lobbying for affordable housing; and general advocacy around improving the rights of park residents.

These women are also members of the Residential Parks Forum. The Forum is convened by the parks team at the Tenants' Union and brings together lawyers, tenant advocates and resident representatives to discuss matters relating to residential parks and work towards improving the lives and rights of park residents.

We asked the women about their experiences as residents and as female community activists in residential parks. This is what they had to say...

PARK LIVING

All the women we spoke with cited affordability as a key reason for moving into a residential park. Park living has traditionally been an affordable housing option, with the cost to purchase a home lower than the general community.

Christina Steel, who has lived in her park for over 14 years, explained: "I chose a park because it allowed me to have the home I couldn't afford elsewhere." With many caravan parks situated along the

coast or waterfront, choosing to live in a residential park meant being able to afford a home in a location that was otherwise out of reach. When Faye Wilson moved into a park with her husband over 25 years ago they did so because it meant waterfront views, with the added bonus that "we didn't have to worry about mowing lawns!"

Many of the women, however, recognise that homes in residential parks are becoming less affordable. Janice Edstein, who recently moved out of her park in Anna Bay after 22 years of park living, witnessed a clear process of gentrification in parks over this period with operators increasingly marketing park living as 'resort style living'. She worries this will put park living out of reach for

WHAT'S A RESIDENTIAL PARK?

Residential parks are caravan parks and manufactured home estates that provide long-term accommodation. Most residents own their own homes (around 87%) and lease the site from the park operator. Other residents rent both their home and the site.

In Australia caravan parks originally provided holiday accommodation only, but in 1986 legislation was passed to legalise the long-term rental of residential sites. Further legislation was passed in the early 1990s to provide consumer protections for long-term residents. In the early days homes were caravans with annexes, but the

manufactured home industry has greatly improved the product and these days manufactured homes are modern and almost indistinguishable from homes on an average suburban street.

WOMEN IN PARKS

In New South Wales residential parks provide long-term accommodation to around 34,000 people (NSW Fair Trading 2012). According to the 2011 Census just under half (46.5%) of these are women. Long-term residents of parks are generally older, and around 80% of women who live in parks are aged over 50. Over a third of women in parks live alone (36%), and 42% live with their partners.

Janice Edstein and Christina Steel



"I find my advocacy work keeps me very busy!" – Christina

most pensioners. Jill Edmonds, a strong advocate for the cooperative ownership of residential parks as a way to create and retain affordable or low-cost housing, is similarly concerned: "The corporatisation of parks in Australia is moving the industry away from facilitating affordable housing."

Alongside affordability many of the women also talked about parks providing safe and secure communities, "because there is always someone who will help if you need it". When Pam Meathringham and her husband moved in to their park, they did so partly because her husband, who had recently had a stroke, could get out and about in the community in complete safety. While they moved in because of affordability, they stayed because of community. Neighbours help each other out, and "are incredibly generous with their time". There are lots of organised social functions and other opportunities to catch up with neighbours. As Marie, a long term resident of her park, explains: "Even if I won Lotto I would not consider moving, as I believe it is a community within a community".

BEING A COMMUNITY ACTIVIST

These women did not move into parks with the intention of becoming activists but an event or situation triggered something in each of them that led to them becoming leaders in their communities.

- Christina helped out a friend, and has never looked back. She is now a regular at the Tribunal and is not unfamiliar with the inside of Parliament House!
- Faye could see that there was a need in her park for someone to stand up and represent the needs of the residents.
- An excessive site-fee increase issue was the reason Janice became active.
- Pam met with a resident advocate who inspired her to get more involved.

Once they got involved, most of the women found that they were not only participating as members of a residents committee, or working on individual issues that came up

in their communities; they also got involved in broader campaigns and advocacy around residential parks. It doesn't leave time for much else, as Christina explains: "I find my advocacy work keeps me very busy!"

We asked the women whether they believe they are treated differently to their male counterparts. The women overwhelmingly agreed they are.

Christina believes women are often perceived as inferior to men. She has found some operators and male Tribunal Members to be patronising towards female

Continued overleaf...



Pam Meathringham

WOMEN WORKING FOR CHANGE

Continued from page 9

“The corporatisation of parks in Australia is moving the industry away from facilitating affordable housing.”

advocates. She has witnessed operators adopt the same attitude towards female Tribunal Members!

Faye also has found that the attitude among many residents in parks is “the men will look after us”. She thinks more women should get involved because they are just as capable and often flourish when they become active. Faye believes that “men also need to realise that women are just as smart as men and cope with life just as they do... we certainly have the brains”.

“Women should get involved because they are just as capable and often flourish when they become active.”

An all too familiar observation from Marie is that men act as though they



are “members of a ‘boys club’”. She believes that women have to take it on and make a stand.

Like others, Janice has experienced the patronising attitude of many operators towards female advocates. Some act like the women don’t know what they are talking about; with one operator asking her: “what would you know about the CPI (consumer price index)?”, implying this was beyond the scope of what a woman would know.

Pam has also been treated differently as a woman advocate. She is often not taken seriously and has experienced abuse that she believes a man would not have faced in her place.

ACHIEVEMENTS

When asked about their achievements these women were typically modest, responding that they were just pleased to have been able to help people. Further prodding, however, unearthed some of the fantastic results they have achieved despite the challenges they face.

Janice was involved in getting funding for, and delivering, community education across the state to fellow residents as a member of resident organisation APRA (Affiliated Park Residents’ Association).

Christina has successfully prevented a number of tenancies being terminated. She also took a very complex appeal from the Tribunal to the Appeal Panel and successfully argued that the Tribunal made the

Park residents...
get news and legal information at
thenoticeboard.org.au

TENANTS' UNION
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

wrong decision. The result was a fantastic outcome for the 80 plus residents she was representing. As Janice, who works with Christina on parks issues, said "It took 12 months but it was a very sweet victory indeed."

Jill secured funding from the Department of Fair Trading and Gosford City Council and undertook a feasibility study on establishing a cooperative model of resident-funded, resident-owned residential parks as a way to provide affordable housing and security of tenure for people on low incomes.

Marie has had many successes negotiating with operators to reach a resolution everyone is happy with, avoiding the need to go to the Tribunal.

Pam, like many of the women advocates interviewed, has successfully challenged excessive site-fee increases on behalf of fellow residents too many times to mention.

WHAT KEEPS THEM GOING?

All of the women we spoke to are now retired, but their involvement and advocacy around residential parks issues keeps them busy and that's the way they like it. Marie told us: "I did come to the coast to retire but I am enjoying being able to use my knowledge to help people".

It is hard work, but the thanks they receive from residents for their help keeps them going. As Christina explains, "I don't think anyone does the advocacy for rewards, but you just keep getting rewarded when someone says 'thank you' or you see the relieved look on someone's face when you tell them they don't have to face the problem alone." 🏠

Our thanks and acknowledgment to Jill Edmonds, Janice Edstein, Marie, Pam Meathringham, Christina Steel and Faye Wilson for sharing their stories for this article.

LOUISE'S STORY



Louise and Alexei

Home will always be where my kids and I live. For me the mess and the love make the space homely. That said the spaces we live in can be destructive to having a cohesive home life.

In the house where I'm living now we have had a kitchen cabinet door sitting off its hinges for about 9 of the last 12 months. We told the real estate agent several times before they sent someone. It stayed on for about 2 glorious weeks. Then another few months of reminders and it was eventually fixed. This particular cupboard is kept locked as it houses all the cleaning products. We had nowhere else to keep them while it was broken so we had to keep the kids out of the kitchen, which is about as easy as keeping seagulls away from leftover chips 24 hours a day. Now that it's fixed I open and close that door as carefully as if I'm breaking into my own collection of household poisons.

We also have a leaky roof that has soaked our bed through multiple times. It is not a homely feel to come home from work, soaked from the rain outside to find a sodden bed. Drifting off to sleep thinking 'How dangerous can mould in a mattress really be?' The landlord has been advised of the problem on numerous occasions. After ages the landlord came and tried to do it himself. Not surprisingly it didn't work. Two weeks ago they sent a professional to have a look who told us that there is about a week before part of the ceiling collapses. On the downside it still hasn't been fixed; on the upside my ceiling hasn't fallen in yet.

So these things are frustrating but the biggest problem is being afraid of using your space for fear the home reno job by the landlord will break in all its crappy glory and we will be left with the bill and/or a 6 month wait for action. Feels just like home, if you rent in NSW. 🏠

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

Alison Jolly – Boarding House Resident

In March of 2015 I was living in a residential Melbourne hotel which was forced to shut down at a month's notice, so I decided to make a sea change to Sydney.

My son had just moved to Sydney after 12 years overseas during which time I had barely seen him. He had invited me up prior to this, for a short holiday and to convince me to make the move. And so I did. I moved into their apartment but tensions began to arise between his wife and myself and so I moved quickly from there to a boarding house in Surry Hills.

I had some funds and was optimistic of starting a new and better life

in Sydney until the situation in the boarding house became untenable due to my house-mates' mental illness. One woman had schizophrenia and screamed at me whenever I approached the communal kitchen and would systematically throw my things out on the street!

But it was my closest (next door) neighbour who caused the most problems. After one particular bad night where he paced up and down our tiny stairway and onto the street screaming I had to call the police.

He knew it was me and from then on spoke in a threatening manner towards me... My mental health

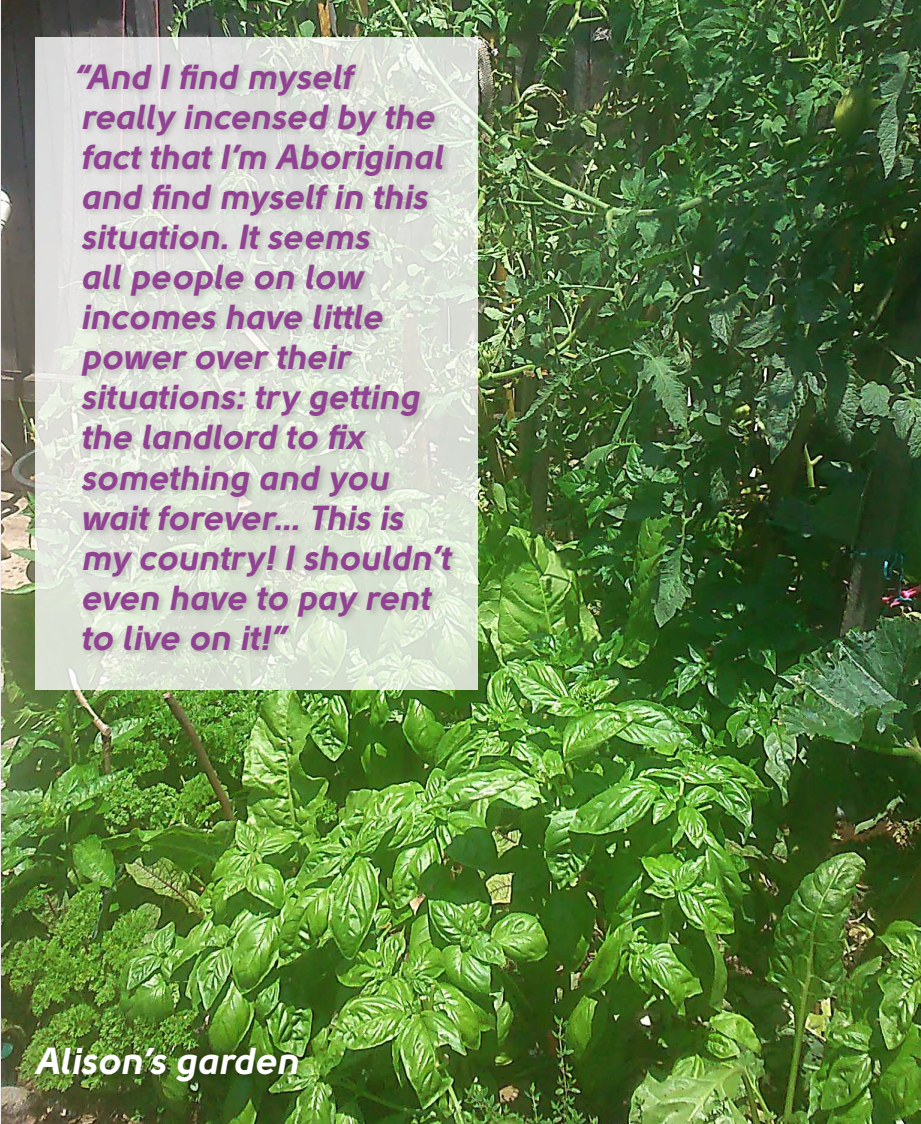
went downhill, partly also due to the fact my room was infested with bed bugs, and so I went to the Surry Hills neighbourhood house to seek some help for him. Instead I found help for myself, as they connected me to Moving Out Moving On (MOMO). Tracie was very understanding and gave me a list of boarding houses to consider. I felt these were my only option, because shared housing seemed prohibitive and I wasn't up for house interviews and didn't have the necessary income to pay shared bills on top of rent!

While this new place is not perfect, the manager is very understanding and helpful and most of the residents are fairly well socialised, it is a far better place than the former one. Tracie also organised a new fridge for me and paid my moving costs.

The housing situation for older single women like me (I'm 61) can be difficult unless they own their own home. Many of us divorced our husbands after years of domesticity which had left us unskilled for the work force, without superannuation, and often with an extreme lack of confidence. I think women also like to potter and enjoy homey things like baking etc. so housing is important to them. We also miss out (as do grandfathers) on having our grandchildren visit if our housing is dangerous and unclean.

I'm not sure how you fix this situation unless the wider issues of housing investment are addressed: the stigma around homelessness, the lack of government action to ameliorate the situation and ongoing gentrification of our cities.

From what I have observed in my years of homelessness, most people who end up in this situation have faced some trauma in their lives: early death of a parent, abandonment, traumatic break-up or accident. So it can happen



"And I find myself really incensed by the fact that I'm Aboriginal and find myself in this situation. It seems all people on low incomes have little power over their situations: try getting the landlord to fix something and you wait forever... This is my country! I shouldn't even have to pay rent to live on it!"

Alison's garden

to anyone! Mental illness often follows, going hand in hand with homelessness.

I lived with ex-cons, extortionists, prostitutes, drug users and dealers during my time in a Melbourne boarding house. I didn't have a mental illness at all beforehand, but soon developed anxiety and depression after two people had attacked me and my friend hung himself outside my room! He was Aboriginal like me. I ended up living in his room, along with his ghost, but the housing people would not allow a smoking ceremony to move him on! Indeed more problematic, of all the above mentioned, the managers and staff who ran this institution patronised me and could not recognise my only deficiency was lack of housing. I feel particularly frustrated because I was a promising film writer before my housing situation let me down. I had to quit my film school course part way through because of the situation there.

Since I left my husband 20 years ago I have maintained a positive, healthy lifestyle, volunteered in social organisations and been a strong advocate for human rights and the environment.

And I find myself really incensed by the fact that I'm Aboriginal and find myself in this situation. It seems all people on low incomes have little power over their situations: try getting the landlord to fix something and you wait forever. But if your rent is a few days late?! Watch Out!

Of the future: I can retire in 3½ years and have considered buying an old van and touring around rather than put up with untenable housing. I work hard to keep my health as this would be important should I take this route.

I trust the universe to look after me, have developed a small art business and just hope these two things will see me through. I know the spirits will guide me. This is my country! I shouldn't even have to pay rent to live on it! 🏠



CAMPAIGN UPDATE



"TAAS gave me all the tools I needed to get my bond back"
– Milly

In November 2015 with the backing of over 1,500 supporters, we took our *More Bang for Your Bond* campaign to NSW Parliament – formally presenting a petition to bring funding up to speed with the needs of the rental market in 2015.

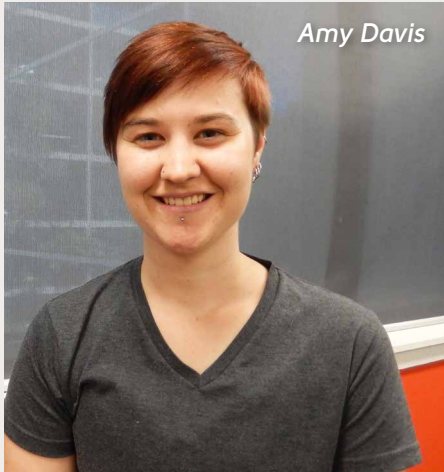
You may recall issue #109 of *Tenant News* focused on this campaign. Milly, who appeared on the cover, unquestionably stole the show on the day. She spoke about her experiences as a tenant and the importance of her local Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service. Her speech hit home perfectly on the struggles of so many tenants and highlighted important areas for law reform. You can read Milly's speech on our blog *The Brown Couch*: tunswblog.blogspot.com.au

Tenants, advocates, Members of Parliament, and many representatives from legal, community and housing peak organisations came to voice their support. Speeches of support were given by Dr Geoff Lee MP (Member for Parramatta, Liberal Party of Australia), David Mehan MP (Member for The Entrance, Australian Labor Party), and Jenny Leong MP (Member for Newtown, Australian Greens). Dr Lee agreed to raise the issue with Victor Dominello, Minister for Innovation and Better Regulation.

Thank you for being part of the campaign so far. **It's not over yet!** We await a response from the NSW Government to our petition, and we'll keep you informed of developments. 🏠

TRANSGENDER WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS

Amy Davis – Administration Assistant, Tenants' Union of NSW



Transgender and trans are umbrella terms applied to people whose sense of themselves as gendered people (*gender identity*) is in some way incongruent with the gender assigned to them at birth, where assigned gender is typically based on the medical perception of external genitalia.

Some (but not all) trans people choose to socially and/or medically transition by changing their name to one that is more appropriate to their affirmed gender, wearing gender-affirming clothing, accessing hormone therapy or undergoing surgical reassignment procedures, among other things. This article specifically addresses the experiences of trans women, being people who were assigned male at birth and who identify as female.

It is difficult to estimate the rate of homelessness among young transgender people since homelessness statistics are not collected in relation to trans status. However, taking same-sex attracted youth and/or transgender youth together, in NSW it has been estimated that although only 7-11% of the population are same-sex

attracted and/or transgender they constitute roughly 25% of the young people who are homeless.

Parental rejection and family violence based on gender identity have been cited as causes of homelessness for young trans people in Australia. Homeless can mean sleeping rough on the streets but it can also mean staying in supported accommodation, 'couch surfing', or living in accommodation that falls below minimum community standards such as boarding houses.

Fundamentally, homelessness is about insecurity which can in turn have devastating effects on a person's mental and physical health. Given that trans people are already four times more likely to have been diagnosed with depression than the general population, the compounding effects of homelessness on trans people can be dire.

Alyssa, 23, who identifies as a bisexual trans woman, has been no stranger to insecure housing and accommodation stress. Her family lived in multiple houses across Australia when she was young and never stayed in one house for more than a year.

However, as she began to medically and socially transition in her early twenties it put more pressure on her relationships with her family members and in turn her housing situation.

"My parents were also not great people to grow up under," Alyssa says. "In my early twenties I was also briefly homeless and couch surfed for a while until I found my feet living independently." As Alyssa's relationship with her father broke down it became necessary

for her to leave home. "I was homeless briefly due to moving out of my Dad's house into my grandfather's house but he passed away shortly after I moved, so I couch surfed after that point, rather than go back to living with my Dad."

Alyssa now lives in share housing after spending a year living in transitional, supported accommodation provided by Twenty10, a non-profit organisation which works with young people of diverse genders, sexes and sexualities. She is now partway through a computer science degree at the University of New South Wales and works full time at a software company. While Alyssa's accommodation situation has improved since leaving home she says that being homeless puts a lot of pressure on the mental health of young trans people.

While Alyssa reached out to support services it took her a long time to find stable accommodation. Research has consistently found trans youth regularly experience harassment, violence and transphobic abuse when accessing accommodation services, both on the part of the workers and other service users. On top of that, staff and residents at some women's services reject trans women or refuse to acknowledge their affirmed gender. For many trans people this not only means that they do not feel comfortable disclosing their gender identity when accessing services, but that some prefer to sleep rough rather than access accommodation services.

Alyssa says, "I branched out to a number of different places, most of them had negative results (being at capacity already, or not being very willing to help me as I'm a big



Alyssa Besseling

“I think that at the moment there is a big deficit of safe housing in general for queer women, particularly for women without a steady income or on a Centrelink allowance. Having more houses that can house at-risk people can only be a good thing in my mind.”

queer). I found temporary year-long housing with Twenty10 which helped me a ton.”

Alyssa expressed concern around the lack of accommodation services for trans women and other LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer) people.

“When I was homeless in my twenties I had a few queer youth help groups to reach out to, particularly The Gender Centre and Twenty10, but nothing else aside from that,” Alyssa says. “I think that at the moment there is a big

deficit of safe housing in general for queer women, particularly for women without a steady income or on a Centrelink allowance. Having more houses that can house at-risk people can only be a good thing in my mind.”

Research suggests that between an estimated 5,000 and 6,250 LGBTIQ youth are homeless in Australia on any given night, a significant proportion of which would be in NSW. The LGBTIQ youth service package as part of the Going Home Staying Home reforms is funded to accommodate only

140 young people, meaning that LGBTIQ youth homelessness is significantly underfunded in NSW. Alyssa would love to see a place that provides a safe and supportive environment for people like her who have experienced transphobia. In the meantime, however, young trans women like Alyssa are struggling with limited support. 🏠

For more info and resources, check out twenty10.org.au and gendercentre.org.au

RUTH SIMON

A CHAMPION FOR HOUSING RIGHTS

Julie Foreman – Executive Officer, Tenants' Union of NSW

While there is still much to be done to improve housing rights for renters and in particular Aboriginal renters, it is important to recognise those who have worked hard to make a difference. Ruth Simon is one of these people and her story is of a true champion for housing justice.

Ruth is the Coordinator of Dtarawarra – the Aboriginal Resource Unit for the network of Tenant Advice and Advocacy Services (TAAS). In 2014 she received a Lifetime Achievement Award for her contribution to the TAAS network.

For well over a quarter of a century Ruth has dedicated herself to ensuring justice for Aboriginal people through her work, both paid and unpaid. She has initiated or managed a range of initiatives promoting access to education, secure housing, health and employment. Always, Ruth has understood how these issues interrelate and how they all must be addressed to create positive outcomes for Aboriginal people.

For well over a quarter of a century Ruth has dedicated herself to ensuring justice for Aboriginal people through her work, both paid and unpaid.

Her current work with the TAAS network began in 2000. This involves:

- providing management support & advice to all the Aboriginal TAASs



“Without proper shelter you can’t go to the next level.”

- representing their concerns to government and other decision makers
- coordinating an annual Aboriginal TAAS conference
- providing cultural awareness training to the network.

She is also involved in directly supporting Aboriginal tenants to maintain their tenancies. Ruth says “without proper shelter you can’t go to the next level.”

Ruth is an inspirational adult educator and has worked on materials for training in community services advocacy, to ensure it is culturally appropriate for Aboriginal tenancy staff. Ruth’s commitment to presenting cultural awareness training has meant that for many years, several times a year, she has presented such training for tenant advocates generally.

As part of her role in the network, Ruth advocates for Aboriginal tenants who, in most cases, are at risk of being evicted from their homes. She has had a high rate of success and without her advocacy and negotiation skills many of these already disadvantaged people would now be homeless.

She is able to paint a picture of how the tenants’ life situations got them to the position they are in and to negotiate for manageable repayment of any rental arrears.

Ruth is passionate about Aboriginal control of Aboriginal services

Ruth extends her concept of care to providing tenants with contacts and advice about services which could assist in other areas of the tenants’ lives. She still receives calls and invitations from community

members whose lives were turned around by her advice & support when they were at their most vulnerable.

Ruth is passionate about Aboriginal control of Aboriginal Services and has taken on, often at personal cost, mentoring TAAS staff and auspicing Aboriginal TAASs to ensure they remain in Aboriginal management, staffed by Aboriginal workers.

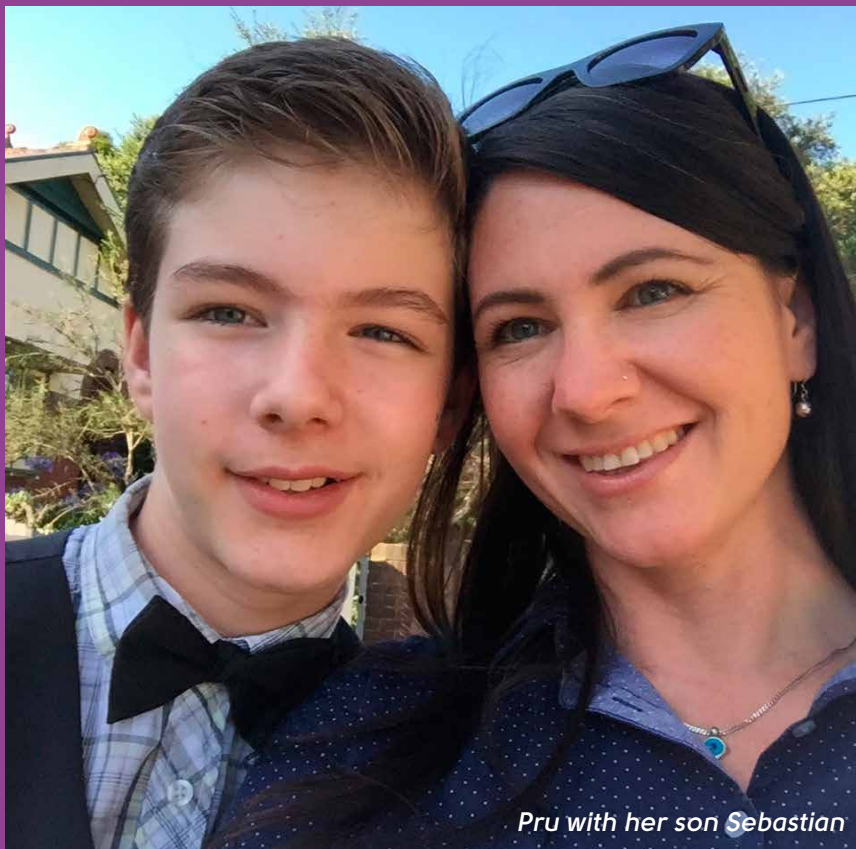
Before Ruth's involvement with the TAAS, she was facilitating access to justice, education and employment for Aboriginal people in NSW. A sample of her achievements in this regard include:

- Co-ordinating and facilitating Death in Custody Workshops involving a number of regional panels of experts from various service areas such as police, education, housing etc. to receive local feedback from Aboriginal community members. Following these workshops a number of the funded programs and projects made available after the Royal Commission were modified to more appropriately target the communities they were meant to be supporting;
- Undertaking crime prevention research targeting young Aboriginal people. This led to a pilot program demonstrating best practice for police and the court system in their contact with young Aboriginal people.

Ruth's commitment to ensuring access to just outcomes for Aboriginal people means that she always goes the extra mile. With many of the projects she has been involved with, she has made herself available 24/7. She does not distinguish between her time and the community's time – as far as she is concerned, her time is their time. To every project Ruth brings her professionalism, her humanity and humour.

I have personally learnt much from Ruth about advocacy, communication, education and the issues facing Aboriginal people. 🏠

PRU'S STORY



Pru with her son Sebastian

As a tenant, is where you live your home?

Most definitely! We love our home, we chose it for its charm, comfort, relatively cheap rent and convenience! It is on the same street as our children's school, and close to transport for us to get to work. We were so happy when we found out our rental application was successful.

This house holds a lot of memories for us. The fact we don't own it doesn't change that. It is where we are raising our kids, where we lost our dear old dog and brought a new puppy home to, where we have gatherings of family and friends, where we've held many special occasions – most recently my Mum's 70th birthday.

We are lucky because our landlord is great. We only deal with the agent, but the landlord is prompt to carry out repairs, and does not invade our privacy! They also entertain suggestions we have for

improvements. This all helps us feel at home.

We are quite house proud, and spend a lot of time at home. We enjoy feathering our nest and caring for the garden. If we didn't have to ask every time we want to make minor modifications – like installing blinds, hanging pictures and so forth, it would make it feel even more like a home.

We'd like to stay as long as possible, at least until both our children finish primary school. We have been told this house is a long-term investment property for the owners, and that we have some medium term security. But we just don't know if the owner's circumstances will change and we will have to move from a house we all consider our home. The main thing that diminishes the sense of being at home is that lurking insecurity! 🏠

AT LEAST I HAVE A ROOM

Margaret Di Nicola – Boarding Houses Education Officer, Tenants' Union of NSW

You may remember Gretta from issue 107 of *Tenant News*. Here, Gretta continues her story in conversation with Margaret Di Nicola.

Leaving behind family, Gretta moved from the Central Coast to Sydney about five years ago. Initially living in public housing, which did not work out.

Gretta has lived in two boarding houses. The first she liked very much as it included a communal living area as well as shared facilities. About two years ago the building was sold and she had to move out. With the help of staff at Newtown Neighbourhood Centre, Gretta was able to find cheaper accommodation but the current boarding house doesn't have any living room space or anywhere outdoors to go. Gretta described getting 'cabin fever' as the \$200pw she now pays provides only a room, with shared kitchen and bathroom.

What Gretta does like about her boarding house is that it is handy to public transport, shops, doctors and support groups, all of which Gretta depends on to maintain a well-balanced life.

It is hard living in a boarding house; Gretta described it as 'awful'. Gretta sees herself as a reasonable person living amongst other unreasonable people. She doesn't like the drunken violence that often happens; the thoughtless behaviour that leads to a lot of noise from other residents' rooms at any time of the day or night, or the dirty bathrooms, which she needs to clean each time she showers as the owner only organises weekly cleaning.

She would like to see the development of women's only boarding houses, which she believes would reduce a lot of violence that women are subject to and would be particularly ideal for women leaving domestic violence.

Public transport is an important part of Gretta's entertainment. She rides buses and trains for something to do; something that takes her out of her room and keeps her in contact with other people, however vicarious that may be. Shopping malls are used on hot days to stay cool.

The Boarding Houses Act, 2012 has not made any significant difference to Gretta's life. Although residents know they have rights, they don't ask questions or make demands because they don't want to lose

their room. Gretta has unfortunately noticed that there appears to be a growing number of women and children who are homeless and are sleeping rough.

The biggest event that has happened to Gretta in the last year is reconnection to her family. That won't make her go back to the Central Coast as Sydney is home, but she has photos of her growing extended family, which gives her great joy. That, along with returning to study next year, means that Gretta has new energy; she is looking forward to the future – one that will include her ideal – a place of her own where her friends can visit and where she doesn't have to clean the bathroom every time she wants to use it!

Gretta's message to others in her position is to keep going. Accept help whenever it is offered, attend community meetings where support is given, act before bad things happen, like being threatened with eviction. Most importantly, don't give up.

Gretta hopes the future will be brighter – a full time job after the completion of a diploma, most importantly leading to a place of her own. 🏠

Gretta would like to see the development of women's only boarding houses, which she believes would reduce a lot of violence that women are subject to and would be particularly ideal for women leaving domestic violence.



Gretta

40th ANNIVERSARY OF THE TENANTS' UNION OF NSW

2016 marks the 40th year of the Tenants' Union!

On Thursday 11 February we launched our 40th Anniversary celebrations with a BBQ at Northcott Community Centre. Almost 100 tenants, tenant advocates, community supporters and dignitaries attended.

The Hon. Shayne Mallard MLC launched the celebration. Our new website thenoticeboard.org.au for people living in residential parks was also unveiled. A teaser for our *My House, My Home* video was shown – we look forward to sharing the final cut in August.

The 40th celebration will culminate with a forum and party on Monday 15 August, save the date! If you would like to come along please email contact@tenantsunion.org.au

Our thanks to the many tenants who attended, and the tenant representatives from Sutherland, Campbelltown, Maroubra, Riverwood and Surry Hills. Thanks also to MPs Tania Mihailuk, Jenny Leong, and Alex Greenwich, and to Commissioner for Fair Trading Rod Stowe. 🏠



Eastern suburbs tenants with Julie Foreman



The Hon. Shayne Mallard MLC launching the celebration



MPs cutting the cake



Charmaine, Patrycja, Jemima, Anne and Julie from the TU

PATRYCJA'S STORY

We've been renting flats and houses in Sydney as a family for 12 years, until last year when we purchased our own house. Within this period, we have moved four times. For me, the rented houses never really felt like home. I was always conscious that I was temporarily living in someone else's property and therefore very restricted with what I could do to make it feel like home.

One of the biggest issues for me was the lack of security of tenure. Any time I received a letter from the real estate agency looking after our landlord (it didn't take me long to figure out that they were not there for us), my heart would start racing and I would get anxious. It was never good news. It could be either a rent increase, dreaded notice of inspection, termination notice or a threat of termination notice – like one time when the real estate changed their bank account. They sent a letter informing us that we were in rent arrears and had to rectify the breach as soon as possible or

we would be evicted. Even though it turned out it was an error within their system, which didn't record our last rent payment so we were not in breach at all, the stress and anxiety this letter caused did linger.

Going on extended holidays to visit my family on the other side of the world would also be spoiled with the anxiety about what would await us in the mail on our return. The most scary thought was that a notice of termination would be waiting for us, possibly giving us just days to find a new place and move out.

Nevertheless, all these rented places were my temporary homes. Even when they were on display for various unfriendly real estate agents checking the level of cleanliness and looking through our cupboards, I was trying to make the best of it. Since I could only hang the pictures where the hooks were already installed, it would take me just a few days to put all my pictures in their new

places, as opposed to the year it took me to figure out where I ought to drill the holes in my new home. There was a sense of urgency with setting rental homes up, knowing that we could be booted out any time. I am now taking my time to make my new home warm and pretty. I think I'm slowly getting there. We were lucky to be able to purchase our home. If not for very unforeseen circumstances, we would still be renting.

I really wish real estate agents, landlords and the government would recognise the value of good tenants and make the experience of renting more human. At the end of the day, the right to safe and secure housing is a basic human right. There should be more support for people who are renting. Renters should not feel like second class citizens: they should be able to feel safe and secure, and kids need to grow up in a place which feels like home. 🏠



"Safe and secure housing is a basic human right."

Patrycja with Roland and Atreiiu



WHEN HOME ISN'T SAFE: QUEER WOMEN AND SHARE HOUSING

Amy Davis – Administration Assistant, Tenants' Union of NSW

Indigo Dunphy is a 20 year old queer person who, at the time of interviewing, was living in a share house with another queer woman and two straight men. She has a girlfriend, Lisa*, who stayed over regularly.

Have you ever found yourself in difficult living situations or accommodation stress?

Yeah I would say so. In both share houses I lived in I had to move out due to feeling uncomfortable. In the first house it was emotional but in the second house I felt physically unsafe. One of my housemates Andrew* was always a little bit iffy, making weird comments about women and sexualising me or my other housemate Melanie*. I put it down to just house banter but I felt a little uncomfortable. He was always very nice to my girlfriend, Lisa, but I got the feeling he didn't really see us as a couple.

He also had no respect for my privacy or alone time. He was always knocking on the door. I had been

warned that he could get aggressive when I first moved in, and I was told there was a lock on my door. But I kinda just shrugged it off. Anyway the straw that broke the camel's back was when he punched someone in our home.

What were your options when that happened?

My options when that happened were to find another house or move home. I chose to go home because it was cheaper and more comfortable. Also because I felt let down by people and the ability to find good housemates, where my queerness and body wasn't sexualised or I wasn't made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe in my own house.

What does the future look like for you?

My personal future looks like me staying at my parents' house until I can afford to find a decent house that hopefully has less creepy people living in it. Basically the more

money I have the more choices I can make of who I want to live with.

Anything else you would like to say about women and housing?

Well, I just watched a documentary on domestic violence and it was super messed up. I haven't experienced that but the potential threat I felt in my previous house was enough for me to run away and hide. If women are being sexualised by their housemates, feel like if they don't lock their doors something bad might happen, or feel physically threatened by the actions of their housemates, even if it's not directed at them, then that's a problem.

And queer women always have the threat of "correcting" sexual violence or just homophobia. Which makes living situations super hard because if you can't be yourself in your own home than where can you? 🏠

*names have been changed

VANESSA'S STORY



In putting this piece together, I realised that I don't have any photos of where I live, except photos taken to show the real estate agent, either as part of the property condition report, or to inform them about some change. Even though I've lived in this place since late October 2015, and in Sydney since late August of the same year! This fact is so sad! I'm a little embarrassed.

But I guess I've always defined home not by the physical space of where I reside, but by who else is living there. Where I live now is home, but specifically because my partner lives with me. We spent much of 2015 apart, which was tough. Even though I was still living in our house interstate (we "own a mortgage", I like to say), it didn't feel like home because my partner was on the other side of the country. So home for me isn't necessarily defined by whether I need to ask someone for permission to hang something up on the wall, but by the strength of the connections I have with the people who live with me.

Check back with me next year – I might have more interesting photos of my home then!
Happy IWD!!! 🏠

OLDER WOMEN'S HOUSING CRISIS

Deborah Georgiou – Chief Executive Officer, Women's Housing Company

Older women's homelessness continues to grow as a result of Sydney's housing affordability crisis and the fact that older women have more limited assets and superannuation available to them than their male counterparts.

The Sydney Women's Homelessness Alliance (SWHA) Boarding House Working Group has representatives from Newtown Neighbourhood Centre's Boarding House Outreach Service, the Women's Housing Company, Homelessness NSW and the Haymarket Foundation. The working group was set up in 2014 to respond to some of the issues facing homeless older women, and it is focusing at this stage on older women able to live independently in smaller, studio like accommodation, including the new generation boarding house model allowed under the Affordable Housing State Environmental Planning Policy.

There is limited understanding of what women think about smaller accommodation and how it could work for them, and there has been little work done to understand the cost implications of providing this form of housing in Sydney. In October 2015, the Boarding House

Working Group submitted an EOI to the Mercy Foundation Grants to End Homelessness requesting funds for a research project that would:

- Identify older women's current understanding of the new generation boarding house model and their concerns and issues with studio accommodation,
- Review current models of studio or boarding house accommodation that have worked well for older women, their key design and management features, and
- Carry out an analysis of the cost of delivering a new studio or new generation boarding house development for older women in the inner and middle ring of Sydney.

The EOI was successful and in January the Group will submit a full application for funding. If you are interested in the work of the Group or want to get involved please contact Sue McGilvray at Homelessness NSW – swha@homelessnessnsw.org.au 🏠

The Sydney Women's Homeless Alliance was established to assist cross agency sector collaboration and improve a woman's journey through a complex system. The alliance responds to emerging service gaps and politically advocates for systematic change for at risk and homeless women.



Deborah Georgiou

SEEKING SECURITY

Barbara Malcolm – Older Women's Network

Monica* is having difficulties trying to find permanent accommodation. I have collected her words. Words I hear every time I ask if she has found anywhere to live yet. She comes to our centre every week to take part in exercise programs and is determined to live as independently as she can.

I can hear the anxiety in her voice as she speaks. Monica is an extremely shy person, and is her mother's carer though they do not live together. Monica sees her mother every day, takes her out, helps in her garden and does her shopping. For this reason she would like to live as closely as possible to her mother but has been unable to find affordable housing, even in this socially disadvantaged area.

Monica lives modestly so I'm guessing she is very typical of an older woman who has never owned her own home and now her working life is behind her and she finds she is being priced out of the rental market. While Monica has been happy to talk to me and volunteers about the difficulties she is having trying to find permanent accommodation she is reluctant to speak about it to anyone else. However she has given permission for me to pass on her words to you.

"It's so hard to find rental accommodation that is in any way decent. I watch the papers all the time and have my name with lots of agents, but they don't care.

You should see some of the places I am offered, they are disgusting. Some of them should be condemned – they are hovels.

The unit I live in is in a very old block and the owner put it on the market about two years ago but no one will buy it. If it is sold it will probably be knocked down and



"I would like to feel secure and know that as long as I pay my rent regularly and look after the place, ... I can live there and not have to move because the place may be sold or the owner will put the rent up."

new units built. I have no written lease and may have to leave at any time. I worry all the time that I will have to leave and will have nowhere to go. It's an awful worry and every day I am anxious and thinking about not finding a clean safe place to live.

I've been shown places that you would not put your dog in, old filthy places, decrepit, smelly, they are uninhabitable yet they ask people to pay to live there. It's disgusting. Rust riddled baths and you should see the kitchens. Everywhere you look. Broken things. It's depressing, thinking about what is happening.

I have my name down for public housing, but because I have a place to live I have to wait until somewhere is available. I know there are many people who are worse off than me, but that doesn't

make me feel any better. I worry all the time and think I'll never find a home where I will be safe. I live in a nightmare.

What am I looking for? My dream? A place that I will be able to keep clean, it can be small, I'll always live alone. Neighbours who will be decent people and will allow me privacy and respect me as a person. There are lots of good people around; I would like to live with good people around me. I would like to feel secure and know that as long as I pay my rent regularly and look after the place, you know, not breaking things or doing things that annoy other tenants, I can live there and not have to move because the place may be sold or the owner will put the rent up." 🏠

*name has been changed

IS MY RESIDENCE MY HOME?

Glyn Mather – Project Officer, Tenants' Union of NSW

One of the themes for this year of the Tenants' Union's 40th birthday is *My house, my home*. But is that true if I am renting it? The definition of a home that fits this discussion best is probably: "the place in which one's domestic affections are centred".

A stereotypical view of a tenant is someone who is renting temporarily and will move on eventually to buy a proper home. I always regarded the places I rented as my home, except maybe that appallingly damp flat with the slugs in the carpet. I had assumed (foolishly) that was generally true, but the women I have been speaking to, and those who are featured in this issue of *Tenant News*, vary of course.

One of the key issues for those who do not view their rented place as home seems to be security, with the potential for being forced to leave affecting their concept of house or home. However, for many women their rented place is a deeply personalised space that they are attached to and have arranged and maintained to their own standards. They may not conceive of it as "home" but they have tried to make it feel like a home.

In our discussions at the Tenants' Union about this edition a related question raised was – who is the homemaker? You could view this as the stay-at-home person raising children but I think it is more about standard setting and control in the broad sense of "running a household". The intuitive answer is women, but is that true and has it changed at all? There's not really any data on the homemaker concept although there are plenty of images. Pictured is a sample from the 1950s of a home in Wagga. This may be your dream pantry but I find it slightly scary!

During the 1950s and 60s there was a spate of images of women



Source: State Library of NSW

with their new, shiny electrical appliances, which from the 1970s expanded to include the concept of the "home beautiful". A more recent feature is personal benefit – calculate how many calories you can burn off with these household tasks! My favourite quote is "dusting, mopping and sweeping helps keep your arms in good shape."

However, there have been many surveys in the last 20 years on how much housework men and women do. This seems like a good indicator of who is the driving force. Every

survey I've come across shows that in every age group women spend considerably more hours a week than men do on housework. The graph opposite sums up things very neatly.

The trends for the various life stages are clear here. The data I found most intriguing was for the women over 65 who seem to do almost as much housework as those with children under 5; and these men, strangely, do more than any other age group (PhD, anyone?). There could be a number of reasons

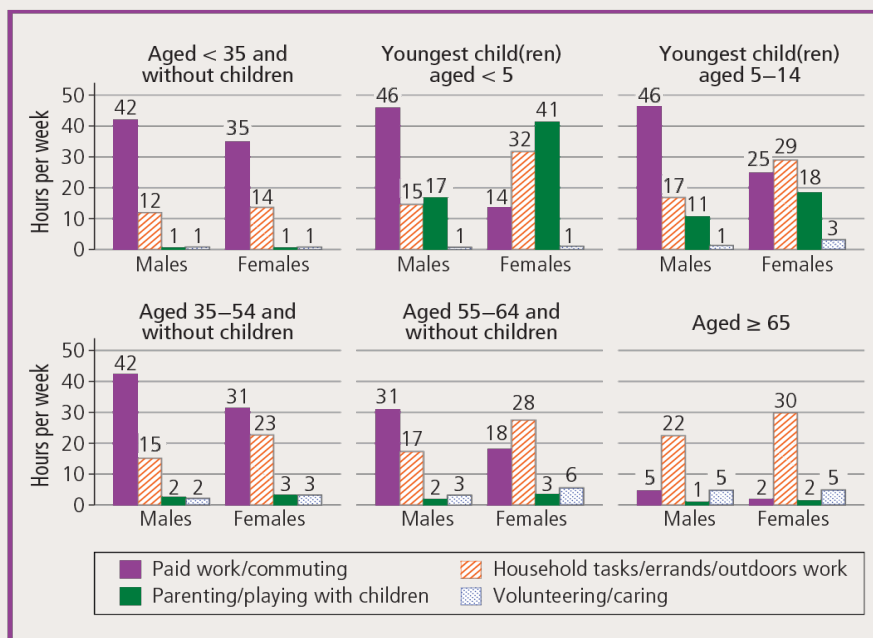
for this, such as changing standards of housekeeping, but it is a little odd all the same. It's worth noting that in this, as with other surveys, the combined hours of paid and unpaid labour is roughly the same for men and women.

One trend emerging is that the hours spent by women is decreasing while that by men is correspondingly increasing. Apart from an attitudinal shift, this has probably been affected by changes in employment patterns for women. For instance, according to the Australian Institute of Family Studies, in the early 1980s about 40 per cent of mothers were employed, compared to more than 60 percent in 2011.

How does this relate to renting? There was only one series of survey reports I came across, from the HILDA Wave surveys, that linked the two at all. They did find a correlation between home

ownership and number of hours spent on household work but it was very slight. Which brings me to my conclusion – considering the amount of time all women spend on taking care of the household, those who rent either see the place

as their home or, where they don't, they are more than likely to take care of it as if it were their home. It is a shame that Residential Tenancies Law doesn't recognise this and give tenants the security a home deserves. 🏠



Note: Excludes men and women aged less than 35 years who are living at home with parents

Source: HILDA Wave 11 (2011)

CLARE'S STORY



My home is a place where I have all I need, where I can be surrounded by my favourite things and feel comfortable and relaxed. Home to me is a place that is furnished with more than just my furniture but also memories, friends, a garden I lovingly tend to and a random cat that likes to think it lives here too. And it would be right. It clearly feels comfortable and seeks refuge here, so it's of course the cat's home too.

The definition of a home is "the place where one lives permanently especially as a member of a family or household". Even with that very beige definition I still qualify as living in a *home*. I have a household, I *am* a household. I run the kitchen, I clean the floors, I create life within these walls. When I travel, I return to my home, to here, to this space that nurtures me, that holds

me and my life within it. Having moved within the last 12 months I can fervently declare that where I live is indeed my home and that living exactly here is no act of seeking four random walls. When I was seeking a new rental, I had many stipulations about where I could set up my home, much as someone would if they were buying a property.

Space, proximity to shops, a park & transport aside, the real deciding point ended up an intangible thing: *could I feel comfortable and safe here?* So why is that important? Because quite simply, where I live is not just an interim resting place but a place that affects my whole life, that contains and supports my routines and lifestyle. What kind of place can do that? Only a *home* can do that. 🏠

TENANCY Q&A: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Cass Wong – Litigation Solicitor, Tenants' Union of NSW

Q "I am a survivor of domestic violence and am going through the courts to have a final Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) taken out against my ex-partner. We are renting the same place as co-tenants but my ex has moved out. I want to leave. What can I do? I am still in the fixed term of the lease and have some weeks to go."

A There are a number of options for you to consider and the law can be a bit tricky because it does not currently provide well for such situations. Talk to your local Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service (TAAS) for specific advice on your circumstances.

Where you and your ex-partner are co-tenants on the lease, it is important that you end the tenancy properly. The reason for this is because as **co-tenants**, you are jointly and separately liable for any breaches of the tenancy agreement, including that of breaking a lease. This means your landlord could still come after you for compensation even if you have not done anything wrong.

1. Try negotiating with your landlord

Where your ex-partner has left and **agrees** to the termination of the tenancy, then you may consider negotiating with your landlord (or the real estate agent acting on their behalf) to get a **written agreement** to terminate the lease. It is important that your landlord accepts your request, not merely saying that they would consider it

or give you no response at all. Any agreement should be detailed, in writing, and should include things such as:

- the date you will leave
- arrange for a final inspection (and keep any evidence about the condition of the property when you leave)
- a statement that all your liability with respect to the tenancy ceases on that date
- be signed by both you and the other co-tenant.

2. Applying to the Tribunal for termination of the tenancy

If speaking with your landlord or your ex is not going to work, then you may have to apply to the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal (the Tribunal) to make sure your liability ends at a certain point and does not continue after you have left.

If you *don't* have a final AVO with an exclusion order

You could apply under **section 102** of the *Residential Tenancies Act 2010* ("the Act") for an order to terminate your contractual obligations under the co-tenancy. The Tribunal will consider *if it is appropriate to do so in the special circumstances of the case*. Typically, escaping a DV situation is a special circumstance in itself. As your ex has left and you do not wish to stay, you could apply for the entire tenancy to end. Alternately, if you wish to stay, you could apply under the same provision for your ex's share of

the tenancy to be terminated. The Tribunal may order compensation against the co-tenant whose tenancy has ended prematurely. If you are the one seeking to leave, you may negotiate with the landlord or landlord's agent about the amount of compensation payable up to the applicable 'break fee' (see **s102(4)** of the Act).

There is one reported s102 case in the Tribunal, see: *Harvey v Ribbon [2013] NSWCTT 369*.

If you *have* a final AVO with an exclusion order

If you have obtained a final AVO with an exclusion order that prohibits access to the residential premises, then the tenancy of the named person (i.e. your ex) terminates by operation of the Act. This is provided in **section 79** of the Act. This termination does **not** however affect the tenancy of any co-tenant not subject to the final AVO (i.e. yourself).

3. Giving notice and leaving (without going to the Tribunal)

Within fixed term of the lease

If you are still in a fixed term, provided that you have obtained a **final AVO** that specifies that the other co-tenant is prohibited from having access to the rental premises, you could give 14 days notice to your landlord and leave. This can occur without you being liable to pay a 'break fee' to your landlord for ending the lease early (**s100(1)(d)** of the Act). There is a sample letter on tenants.org.au for this situation.

“If speaking to your landlord is not going to work, then you may have to apply to the Tribunal... If the perpetrator has left and you do not wish to stay, you could apply for the entire tenancy to end. Alternately, if you wish to stay, you could apply under the same provision for the perpetrator’s share of the tenancy to be terminated.”

Cass Wong, TU Litigation Solicitor



It is a good idea to attach a copy of the AVO to your notice and request a response from your landlord (as indication that they have received it).

If you have not yet obtained a final AVO with an exclusion order, then it is essential that you apply to the Tribunal to properly end the tenancy if you want to leave. The application is under **section 102** of the Act for a co-tenancy situation, or **section 104** otherwise.

On periodic term of the lease

If you are still there when the fixed term ends, and are now in a periodic lease (week to week), then at any stage you could give 21 days notice and give possession

to your landlord in accordance to that notice.

In conclusion...

Ending a tenancy early is a complicated and costly exercise. This can become even more difficult if you are also dealing with a DV situation. Here are some key points to remember:

1. **Seek help** – see below.
2. **End your tenancy properly** – in order to avoid any further liability as a result of the tenancy. It is not sufficient to just pack up and leave. The Tribunal in a reported case
3. Where possible, **arrange for a final inspection** – so that you can arrange to get your bond back quickly.
4. **Get advice to sort out the bond** – Contact your local TAAS. 🏠

of *Henry v Houston [2015] NSWCATAP 158* observed that just because a person has obtained an AVO did not mean that the person’s name should be removed from the lease. You have to do it properly, either by giving notice (sample letters are available on **tenants.org.au**), applying to the Tribunal or negotiating with your landlord.

Help is out there. For further information and assistance:

- Visit **tenants.org.au** for our Domestic Violence Factsheet (Factsheet 12) & sample letters.
- Contact your local Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service with any further questions. For contact details see the back page.
- Call the Domestic Violence Line on 1800 656 463, or Community Legal Centres on 9212 7333 or the Domestic Violence Legal Service (for Women) on 1800 810 784.
- Check out the Womens Legal Service website: **wlsnsw.org.au**.

STAY IN TOUCH

The Tenants' Union of NSW is a membership-based co-operative and a community legal centre specialising in NSW residential tenancies law. We're also the resourcing body for Tenants Advice & Advocacy Services.

The Tenants' Union has represented the interests of all tenants in NSW since 1976. We have a proven track record of improving tenancy laws and providing legal assistance and training.

We encourage you to support us in our work for safe, secure and affordable housing. Together we can achieve more. Please fill in this form, tick the appropriate boxes and return to the address below.

Name:

Organisation:
(if applicable)

Address:

Email:

Phone:

SUBSCRIBE (It's free!)

- Send me *Tenant News*.
- Send me the Tenants' Union email bulletins.
- Send me additional copies of *Tenant News* to give to others.

VOLUNTEER

- I would like to participate in the TU's volunteer program.

JOIN (You don't need to join to get advice or subscribe.)

I apply for membership of the Tenants' Union of NSW Cooperative Ltd as an:

individual tenant individual (non-tenant)
 tenant organisation organisation (non-tenant)

Membership fees (GST included):	1 year	5 years
Low wage / pension / benefit	\$8.00 <input type="checkbox"/>	\$35.00 <input type="checkbox"/>
Waged worker	\$16.00 <input type="checkbox"/>	\$70.00 <input type="checkbox"/>
Organisation	\$32.00 <input type="checkbox"/>	\$150.00 <input type="checkbox"/>

Donation: \$ Total: \$

Signed: Dated:

Name (please print):

Payment method

- Enclosed cheque or money order payable to Tenants' Union of NSW
- Deposit into our bank account below
(for online deposits, please give reference: "MEM" plus your surname)

Account name: Tenants' Union of NSW

BSB: 062-004

Account number: 00802624

Address: Suite 201, 55 Holt St,
Surry Hills NSW 2010

Phone: 02 8117 3700

Fax: 02 8117 3777

Web: tenantsunion.org.au



TENANTS' UNION
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Get free tenancy advice



Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services

Eastern Sydney	9386 9147
Inner Sydney	9698 5975
Inner West Sydney	9559 2899
Northern Sydney	8198 8650
Southern Sydney	9787 4679
South Western Sydney	4628 1678
Western Sydney	8833 0933
Blue Mountains	4782 4155
Central Coast	4353 5515
Hunter	4969 7666
Illawarra South Coast	4274 3475
Mid Coast	6583 9866
Northern Rivers	6621 1022
North Western NSW	1800 836 268
South Western NSW	1300 483 786



Aboriginal Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services

Greater Sydney	9698 0873
Western NSW	6884 0969
Southern NSW	1800 672 185
Northern NSW	1800 248 913

Free Tenants Rights Factsheets are available on the Tenants NSW website

www.tenants.org.au

Tenant News

ISSN-1030-1054

Views expressed by contributors are not necessarily held by the Tenants' Union.

Copyright of *Tenant News* remains with the Tenants' Union of NSW & individual contributors.

Printed on recycled paper.

Editor: Julie Foreman

Disclaimer: Legal information in this newsletter is intended as guide to the law and should not be used as a substitute for legal advice. It applies to people who live in, or are affected by, the law as it applies in New South Wales, Australia.