

## **VPTA Policy Position Statement – Working with Dept. Human Services**

### **Topic: Improved Working Arrangements.**

#### **Executive Summary**

A significant part of the VPTA Strategic Plan is to strengthen our alliances vis:-

*“We will form strong alliances with relevant Government Departments, Community and special interest groups to improve the living conditions, affordability and security of tenure for people living in public housing.....”*

The VPTA strives to continuously improve its effectiveness in representing and serving the best interests of its members and public housing tenants more generally. Having a strong, positive working relationship with the Department of Human Services is paramount when raising issues on behalf of public housing tenants and being able to influence and improve Departmental policy and procedures in relation to public housing.

For the VPTA to remain a strong, credible voice for public housing tenants across Victoria it must engage constructively as a major stakeholder at meetings with the Department and other relevant DHS forums.

The VPTA provides clarity on the discussion the Department needs to have with tenants.

#### **The benefits of a stronger relationship and improved working arrangements**

The VPTA believe that there are many benefits to be derived from a closer working relationship not the least being genuine resource savings to the Department. It is our view that there is scope for improvement across the board but particularly in the following areas:-

- Improved Communication protocols
- Better more timely response mechanisms
- More Productive Meetings
- Streamlined more efficient processes
- Better information exchange
- Ideas incubator
- New policy exploration and development
- Process mapping/improvement
- Genuine Consultative processes
- Increased mutual respect and co-operation
- Proactive approach to problem solving and conflict resolution
- Better informed tenants resulting in fewer complaints and appeals against Departmental decisions

We welcome the opportunity to have this conversation with key Departmental staff in order to develop a better service agreement and more meaningful performance criteria for the VPTA to be measured against, that reflects the real work and services provided.

#### **Maintaining VPTA Independence is vital for all parties**

The independence of the VPTA is an important consideration in how tenants relate to us. At times they will raise matters with us or seek advice from us particularly when they are unsure of how to approach the Department. Trust is an issue for tenants. We have an active role in explaining departmental policy and guidelines so that tenants are more comfortable, better equipped and more

confident in dealing with the Departmental staff. We also help reduce the number of complaints generated by running information forums and providing timely advice to tenants in newsletters and on our website particularly on tenancy management matters. There are a number of examples of this including the recent statewide property audit where in conjunction with advice from key departmental staff we helped explain the purpose of the audit, tenants' rights and obligations under the Residential Tenancies Act and Consumer Affairs – which significantly reduced the number of enquiries and complaints referred to the Department.

There will be times where the VPTA policy direction may differ to that of the Department or the Government of the day. Where differences occur the VPTA will endeavour to provide viable alternative policy solutions and will continue to negotiate for the best possible outcomes for public housing tenants. We must increase our reach and profile in the Community and strengthen our links with Government whilst at the same time maintain our independence from Government.

There is synergy between the Department and the VPTA - both seek to provide the best possible services to public housing tenants and improve the public housing system. This relationship could be reinforced particularly if the role of the VPTA was enshrined in legislation and the VPTA more clearly defined and funded accordingly.

The VPTA is aware of its responsibility to accurately convey information about Departmental programs and services as well as new directions and initiatives. We will provide information to our members' that is timely, factual and avoids speculation about what may or may not be occurring in the sector. It is important that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our society are kept properly informed on matters that affect them without undermining their sense of well-being and security. We will continue to seek out relevant policy and decision makers for resolution on any matters affecting public housing tenants and make a positive contribution on the public housing agenda.

The VPTA believes it could be more effective and provide better services to its members, to public housing tenants and the Department if it was better resourced. Additionally, if the VPTA was appropriately funded for the services it provides or would be able to provide, it would be a more cost effective option for the Department to improve its Tenant Participation program, by making it more meaningful and relevant Statewide, across each of its four divisions. Improved Tenant Participation via the VPTA network is imperative to the success of Departmental Program delivery and policy development.

### **Focus on Improvement**

To deliver real improvement to the system the VPTA is offering to participate in new policy and procedural development, to help improve existing processes and services based on tenant feedback and to help evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery. We believe we could play an important part in the Department's continuous improvement program and change management initiatives given our strong relationship with its customers.

We aim to develop more effective communication channels and response mechanisms particularly in regard to having more productive meetings that are well conducted, with appropriate and timelier response mechanisms. Deriving maximum value from communications is imperative and should be the aim for all concerned. To achieve this, we must foster a climate of open and honest dialogue with mutual respect.

The VPTA can play a role in helping provide induction training for new DHS staff. We could assist by providing them with a first-hand understanding of tenant issues and their experiences in dealing with the Department and how to engage sensitively and respectfully with tenants to achieve the best possible outcomes for all concerned.

### **Transition from Public Housing**

We recognise that people's circumstance and aspirations change. There will be those wanting to move out of public housing but do not quite have the skills or wherewithal to make the change without support. The VPTA could have a significant role in assisting people to transition from public housing by

promoting programs and services designed to help provide skills and better equip people to help achieve this. We could assist in identifying the needs of tenants and provide this information to the Department so that appropriate programs can be developed as a part of its case management program.

Additionally we could assist in the development of requisite policies and incentives to encourage people to progress from public housing to more suitable housing options as their circumstances warrant it and their future aspirations change.

Lowering the demand for public housing is particularly important if public housing is to be viable and available for those who need it and have little realistic alternatives in the circumstances. By facilitating moves and aiding mobility of public housing tenants to the private sector the VPTA helps ensure the availability of public housing for those with no other options.