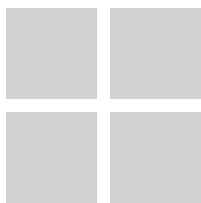


VICTORIAN PUBLIC
TENANTS ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021



ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

The VPTA acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Victoria and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and Elders of past, present and future generations.

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VISION, VALUES & PURPOSE

VISION

Safe, secure and accessible public housing for every Victorian that needs it.

VALUES

Integrity: treating all tenants with dignity and respect.

Quality: striving to do our best and improve the way we do things.

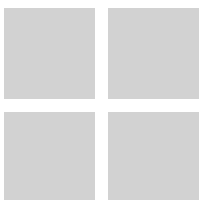
Collaboration: working together to achieve results.

Responsibility: committing to achieve the best possible outcomes for tenants.

Client focus: working towards improving the living environment for tenants.

PURPOSE

To provide benevolent relief and social welfare support, including counselling, advice, referral and advocacy for public housing tenants and those on the waiting list.



2020-21: YEAR IN REVIEW

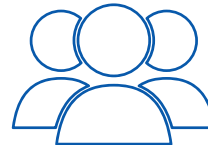


AROUND 8,000

The number of calls staff received from, and made to (or on behalf of) people who live in public housing.

512

The number of cases VPTA staff managed for people who live in public housing.



MAINTENANCE IS STILL AN ISSUE

Maintenance is still the most commonly raised problem, accounting for 37% of cases. However, waitlist issues are becoming increasingly more common, and are now raised almost as frequently as maintenance concerns.

THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH HOMES

More than one third of the cases Tenant Advocates worked on were related to the waitlist - either the length of time people are waiting to access public housing, or the length of time people are waiting to transfer.



NEIGHBOURHOOD DISPUTES ARE INCREASING

We continue to hear more and more from renters who are having difficulty with their neighbors. Last financial year, neighborhood disputes accounted for 9% of cases, this financial year it accounted for 11%. This does not take into consideration the number of transfer cases that are also related to an ongoing problem with neighbors.

3 FULL TIME, 4 PART TIME STAFF

We are still a very small team. This year we said goodbye to one full time staff member, and welcomed two part time staff members to the team.



CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

The VPTA has worked hard over the last year, as readers of our Annual Report will see and indeed, over many years. But there's always more to be done, particularly when it comes to the provision of housing for those in need.

The announcement of the Victorian Government's "Big Housing Build" with its commitment to developing a 10-year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing heralds more work ahead for the VPTA.

The VPTA, while continuing to advocate for more Public Housing and improvements to service delivery, is facing substantial growth in the Community Housing sector, as new properties will be managed by Community Housing providers under the Government's "Big Housing Build."

It is worth looking back (this being the end of my journey with the VPTA) at the growth of our organisation in order to have a vision for the future.

- We began as an umbrella organisation representing only those involved in local Tenant Groups – now we advocate for all Public Housing Tenants across Victoria.
- From being funded to employ one full-time worker, we have negotiated further service agreements enabling us to expand our staffing to a current total of seven full-time and part-time employees.
- Originally working out of a shared space and then a community facility on a public housing estate, we now have our own fit-for-purpose office with up-to-date technology and equipment.
- Our status has moved from being a newly Incorporated Association only, to a Registered Charity, bringing additional benefits to the operation of our organisation.
- The challenges in our early years of providing regular and responsive communications to tenants, whether it be via telephone contact or written information have been overcome with dedicated Tenant Advocate workers operating our phones, regular email Subscribers' Bulletins, website content and social media platforms.
- Over a twenty-year period, the VPTA has evolved into a stable, credible and respected organisation, frequently consulted by Government Departments, politicians, other sector agencies, the media and many in the fields of research in, and advocacy for, Social Housing.

If the VPTA is to continue to grow and further advocate for improvements in the delivery and supply of Social Housing for those in need – and the ever-ballooning numbers on the Housing Wait List are clear evidence of this need – then we must expand our remit.

Like it or not, Government is clearly intending to grow Community Housing. The VPTA will continue our on-going advocacy for growth in publicly owned and managed housing but we need to recognise that numbers of Community Housing Tenants will continue to increase over the coming years.

The challenge ahead for the VPTA is to obtain the resources to represent all Social Housing Tenants, particularly those being impacted by the current Government focus on expanding Community Housing via management transfers and through new builds.

Greater resources will allow the VPTA to develop a stronger role advocating for, and supporting, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tenants, diverse ethnic communities and tenants transitioning to and from Public and Community Housing. Having safe, secure and affordable housing has never been more important, given the on-going impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The VPTA is uniquely, and best, situated to be the voice of all Social Housing Tenants who will always need an independent advocate to turn to for assistance; an organisation committed to improving service delivery and increasing supply.

MARGARET GUTHRIE
CHAIRPERSON (RETIRED)

OFFICE REPORT

A year of dramatic change

There is little that can be said about 2020 that is not overly simple, or that has not already been said. The team at the VPTA got used to new ways of working remotely. We didn't miss a single day of working for public housing renters as a result of the pandemic – for that, we are grateful.

The 2020-21 financial year began with the controversial hard lockdown of nine public housing apartment buildings in Flemington and North Melbourne. Although this was successful in preventing a broad scale outbreak of Covid-19 in these towers, the manner that the lockdown was implemented and controlled caused significant distress for many of the impacted residents.

The Government's actions drew the attention of the Victorian Ombudsman, who undertook an investigation into the lockdown and subsequently made a number of recommendations. Notably, the Ombudsman recommended that the Victorian Government apologise to the impacted residents. This has not occurred. We understand that a number of other recommendations have been accepted.

In November, the Government announced the Big Housing Build, a \$5.3 billion dollar investment to grow social housing in Victoria, with more than 9,000 new properties to be built. While new social housing is always good news, we were alarmed that – counter to our ongoing and clear advocacy about the importance of growth in public housing – all the new properties will be managed by the community housing industry.

In better news, the Big Housing Build announcement also included a commitment to enter into a 10 Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing, and an independent Social Housing Regulation Review, both of which are much needed.

The VPTA has been a key contributor to both processes, advocating for the protection and growth of publicly-owned and managed properties and the protection and extension of rights for people who live in public housing.

We welcomed Lisa Murr to the team as a part-time Tenant Advocate in July 2020. Lisa works Mondays to Thursdays and brings many years of experience as a social worker and former employee of Tenants Queensland to the team.

The year ended on a bittersweet note – with the retirement of Mark Feenane. Mark served as the Executive Officer of the VPTA for nine years. He left behind him a much larger, more effective and more sustainable organisation than what he found almost a decade ago.

We thank Mark for his service to public housing in Victoria and wish him health and happiness in the years to come.



CASE STUDIES

NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

CASE STUDY 1: 'SARAH'

Sarah contacted the VPTA after the lift next to their home had been broken and making loud noises throughout the night for some time, disrupting Sarah's sleep and creating a health concern. Although residents in her building had contacted Housing, and contractors had attended, the lift had not been adequately fixed. Once the VPTA raised the issue with the local housing office, the lift was quickly fixed.

CASE STUDY 2: 'ALEX'

Alex received a notice from housing, charging them for the cost of a broken window. Alex told us that the window was broken by a rock, which was flicked up by a lawn mower, and that they were not responsible for the broken window. The VPTA Tenant Advocate was able to explain this issue to Housing, and the charge was waived.

CASE STUDY 3: 'YAGO'

Yago and their children had been on the waiting list for housing for 16 years. When Yago contacted the VPTA, their family was living with a friend in their public housing property. Yago's friend wanted to leave the property, but was worried about what would happen to Yago and the children if the tenancy was relinquished. The VPTA was able to assist the household to transfer the tenancy to Yago, so that Yago's friend could move away, and after 16 years on the waiting list, Yago and the children finally have a permanent home which they love.

CASE STUDY 4: 'PETER'

Peter was evicted from their public housing property due to rent arrears. Housing were willing to allow Peter to move back into the home, but only if Peter paid a large amount of the rent debt first. It was much more than what Peter could afford to pay. The VPTA Tenant Advocate worked to coordinate grants from other community agencies, so that Peter could pay the rent debt and return to their home.

POLICY & COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

As expected, the 2020-21 financial year held many challenges for Victorians, as working remotely became the norm for most workers, including the team at the VPTA.

The year began with the hard lockdown of nine public housing apartment buildings in North Melbourne and Flemington. Residents of these buildings experienced a significant shock, which for many was very traumatizing. In the early days of the lockdown, food and material aid deliveries were difficult to come by, and local community groups stepped up to ensure residents needs were met.

It was incredibly disappointing to see Victoria Police in place to enforce what were health measures, particularly where there was no indication that any residents were seeking to breach the health directions.

What the world learnt from this experience was that people who live in public housing generally, and in those buildings specifically, form strong and resilient communities that help one another whenever there is a need, and that the negative stigma associated with people who live in public housing is misplaced.

Another significant development of the year was the Government's announcement of the 'Big Housing Build'.

Whilst we welcome new social housing stock, it has been disappointing to see that the new properties will be entirely managed by community housing providers when it is public housing which is best placed to address serious social issues like increasing levels of homelessness.

Early in 2021 the final reforms implemented by the Residential Tenancies Amendment Act 2018 came into effect, including the introduction of minimum standards and gas and electricity safety checks. Unfortunately the transitional provisions within the legislation mean that many of these reforms apply only to leases which began after 29 March 2021, and so most current public housing renters will not benefit unless they move. This is something we continue to advocate to be resolved.

Despite this setback and only working from the office for 17 weeks of the year, the VPTA staff have nonetheless been busy advocating for people who live in public housing and those on the waitlist.

We estimate our team of Tenant Advocates processed almost 8,000 phone calls, as they assisted more than 500 individuals to resolve issues with the Department.

The VPTA also continued to actively advise the Department on policy development, including through the Covid-19 Housing Stakeholder Group, the Public Housing User Advisory Group, the Victorian Housing Register Senior Leadership Group, and the Public Housing Fire Safety and Arson Committee. We also continue to be an active member of the Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance, convened by the Victorian Council of Social Services, as well as forging new relationships in the community sector.

We look forward to further consultation on and release of two key Government documents in the coming months – the 10 Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy and the final report from the independent Social Housing Regulation Review panel.

Social media plays an important role in the VPTA's communication and engagement strategy, both with public housing tenants, and with fellow community/social justice organisations, journalists, academics, politicians and lobbyists. The VPTA currently operates three social media platforms - Facebook, Instagram and Twitter - and we update them consistently with relevant and informative content.

Facebook and Twitter are our primary platforms, due to the former's popularity, and because Twitter is a favourite with journalists, academics and politicians. Thus, our Facebook (and Instagram) content is targeted at public housing tenants and supporters, and we post information that is relevant to them, such as support services, updates about events, maintenance, etc. On Twitter, we post content targeted to the audience of journalists, academics and politicians and thus those posts are more about news items, policy and lobbying efforts.

Social media plays an important role in the VPTA's communication and engagement strategy, both with public housing tenants, and with fellow community/social justice organisations, journalists, academics, politicians and lobbyists.

POLICY & COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Social Media progress:

Over the past 12 months, the VPTA's social media platforms have grown at a healthy pace, which means we have been able to reach, and inform, more people about the VPTA and public housing issues.

Facebook: PublicTenants

- Followers: 1,447 - a gain of 291

Instagram: @publictenants

- Followers: 245 (Note, this account was only opened in 2020)

Twitter: @publictenants

- Followers: 1,463 - a gain of 183

Over the past 12 months, our most popular post reached 583 engagements. Another four posts reached more than 500 engagements, which is extremely promising.

In the next 12 months, VPTA will aim to increase its numbers of followers and engagement across all three platforms. Being a reliable, trustful and consistent source of information is an important role that the VPTA is proud to fulfill.

KATELYN BUTTERSS
CEO

ALANA SCHETZER
COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT

Community Engagement looked a little different over the past 12 months. There have been some challenges adapting to working from home during lockdowns, and new opportunities to better connect with residents, housing staff and services from across Victoria particularly on digital platforms.

During the year we took part in the Yarra Covid-19 Network, which involved services sharing resources and information relating to Covid-19 and troubleshooting ways to better support community during lockdown and beyond. We also participated in networks dedicated to supporting residents affected by the Covid-19 hard lockdowns, particularly those in high rise settings including Yarra, Flemington, and North Melbourne.

Sadly, it is important to note that residents did not feel supported by government departments during these lockdowns. It was the community who stepped up to ensure residents had access to culturally appropriate food, information in language, and support during the first weeks of lockdown. The handling of these lockdowns resulted in an investigation by the Victorian Ombudsman into the events that took place at 33 Alfred Street, North Melbourne. This has been a huge learning curve for all involved and will shape the way we do community engagement in the future.

A definite highlight of the year was starting our Tenant Reference Group (TRG). It's a group of people who are currently living in public housing across Victoria, who meet with Victorian Public Tenants Association staff, via Zoom to discuss issues linked to public housing.

The group is wide ranging, made up of renters who live in high-rise apartments in Metro Melbourne, medium and low-density properties in the outer suburbs, and detached dwellings in regional Victoria. Group members provide their opinion on important topics to strengthen the VPTA's advocacy on behalf of all people who live in public housing, with the overall aim of protecting, improving and growing public housing in Victoria.

Throughout the year VPTA staff engaged with local housing offices via face-to-face meetings and on Zoom. We continue to build rapport with housing staff as this is key to the success of the VPTA's advocacy and achieving good outcomes for our renters.

We facilitated safety meetings with residents, Homes Victoria and Victoria Police that resulted in residents feeling supported and their experiences validated. We also continued to assist Homes Victoria with Community Capacity Building Initiatives and facilitated outreach at various housing estates.

A year on from the start of the pandemic, and we are still learning to live with lockdowns and Covid-19. This year has been, yet another example of how resilient public housing communities really are. It has been a pleasure to work with residents on a range of activities and we look forward to the year ahead.

MATILDA HOOPER,
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OFFICER



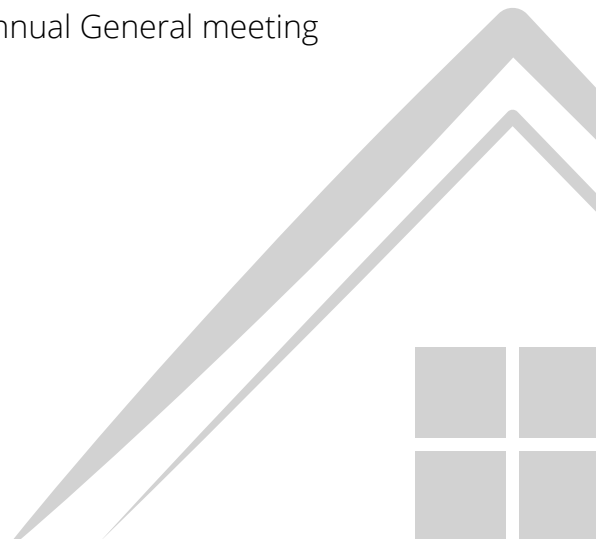
TREASURER'S REPORT

Treasurer's Report for the Financial Period 1st July 2020 to 30th June 2021

I, Dragan Todorovic, hereby table the Special Purpose Financial Report of the Victorian Public Tenants Association for the period 1st July 2020 to 30th June 2021, which has been completed by our external auditor, Ryk Esteen of Collins and Co. I believe that the Profit and Loss Balance Sheet Reports, as prepared by Nina Xinnou (Administration and Finance Officer) and shown here at the 2021 Annual General meeting online via Zoom, are true and correct.



**DRAGAN TODOROVIC,
TREASURER**



BOARD & STAFF UPDATE

BOARD MEMBERS

Margaret Guthrie - Chairperson
Dragan Todorovic - Treasurer
Victor De Beer - Secretary
Natalie Rabey - Board Member
Anne Donegan - Board Member
Jessica Mekhael - Board Member

STAFF MEMBERS

Katelyn Butterss - CEO
Matilda Hooper - Community Engagement Officer
Michael Aboujundi - Senior Tenant Advocate
Lisa Murr - Tenant Advocate
Katie Watkins - Research Officer
Alana Schetzer - Communications Officer
Nina Xie - Finance and Administrative Officer