

The World Today with Eleanor Hall

An hour of current affairs background and debate from Australia and the world every Monday to Friday, 12:10 pm, ABC [Local Radio](#) and [Radio National](#).

Public advocate raises pensioners' plight

Rachael Brown reported this story on [Thursday, September 24, 2009 12:26:00](#)

ASHLEY HALL: Just a week after Victoria's Community Services Minister was criticised for not doing enough to protect vulnerable children, she is again under siege.

This time it's about women in care homes. The State's public advocate says some women in supported accommodation are being raped while others are trading sexual favours for basic necessities.

The State Opposition has repeated its call for the Community Services Minister Lisa Neville to resign.

Rachael Brown reports.

RACHAEL BROWN: The majority of Victorians living in state-monitored care homes are men and the private businesses charge residents up to 75 per cent of their pension for rent and food.

Victoria's public advocate Colleen Pearce says both these factors are leaving women vulnerable. Ms Pearce says she's hearing alarming stories, the worst of them, rape.

COLLEEN PEARCE: We know of one case where actually a conviction was secured. That's the rarity.

RACHAEL BROWN: Did that woman have a disability?

COLLEEN PEARCE: My understanding is that she had an intellectual disability.

RACHAEL BROWN: Ms Pearce is accusing the Department of Human Services of failing to sufficiently monitor residents, many of whom she says have been forced to trade sexual favours for items like cigarettes.

COLLEEN PEARCE: If you're spending 75 per cent or more of your disposable income on accommodation, it doesn't leave very much money. It doesn't leave money to enjoy many of the things that you and I would take for granted - a meal, a hobby, the cost of public transport. And if you smoke or even if you drink, there is very little money left.

So that's when people become increasingly vulnerable and it is not uncommon for us to hear stories about women trading cigarettes for sexual favours.

Where we can we report it to the police but it's very difficult to get reliable evidence to secure convictions.

RACHAEL BROWN: Why is that?

COLLEEN PEARCE: There was a study of reported rapes in Victoria for the year I think 2003. They looked at all reported rapes. Twenty-six per cent of rapes in that period were women who had a psychiatric disability and they were amongst the group that was hardest to get reliable evidence,

hardest to get someone to believe them and harder to get a conviction, if indeed it ever went to court.

RACHAEL BROWN: Ms Pearce says there needs to be better coordination between disability and mental health services.

COLLEEN PEARCE: Particularly say when you've got somebody who has been released from a mental health service, often they have nowhere to go so they end up in a supported residential services in a very vulnerable state.

RACHAEL BROWN: The Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu:

TED BAILLIEU: The thought that elderly women are offering sex for favours and indeed being raped simply underscores the problem in this sector.

RACHAEL BROWN: After last week's damning Ombudsman's report into the State's child protection services the Community Services Minister Lisa Neville has been arguably under siege over the reported failures.

TED BAILLIEU: She has and deservedly so because she has let down vulnerable children and this report today from the public advocate, the Government's own watchdog simply reinforces that she has let down vulnerable Victorians across the board.

RACHAEL BROWN: Lisa Neville did not respond to The World Today's requests for an interview.

A spokeswoman has released a statement saying the rape case was the result of an intruder breaking into a residence in 2006.

It says the Government is currently reviewing the Health Services Act and changes will be introduced into Parliament next year.

The acting Premier Rob Hulls was left to speak on her behalf on local radio this morning.

ROB HULLS: There will always be cases, and I think as the Premier said the State can never guarantee absolutely that no person is going to be dealt with inappropriately wherever they live. But we can put in place structures as best we can to ensure that such harm doesn't occur.

RACHAEL BROWN: Mr Hulls says the supported accommodation sector has had a recent revamp.

ROB HULLS: We've been rolling out a \$40.4 million package over five years to improve the quality of life in residential service areas.

RACHAEL BROWN: But Colleen Pearce says while the infrastructure has improved, services haven't.

COLLEEN PEARCE: We've seen significant improvements in the actual quality of the buildings but that money hasn't gone into the delivery of services and that's where we're saying the gap is.

ASHLEY HALL: Victoria's public advocate Colleen Pearce ending Rachael Brown's report.

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