

THE



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Care home residents 'raped'

Watchdog slams years of 'Government neglect'

EXCLUSIVE

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AGE INVESTIGATIVE UNIT

VULNERABLE women in state-monitored care homes are reportedly being raped and are trading sex for cigarettes and money, highlighting years of neglect and inaction by the State Government, according to its own watchdog.

The Public Advocate, Colleen

Pearce, says Victorians would feel "ashamed" if they visited some Government-monitored private nursing homes.

"We have left vulnerable Victorians without support. It is a shameful situation," said Ms Pearce, who was appointed in 2007 to protect the rights of the disabled and vulnerable.

Ms Pearce said she had decided to speak out to highlight years of Government inaction over reports from Office of

the Public Advocate monitors about conditions facing mentally ill, disabled and elderly residents of state-supported accommodation.

She said there was particular concern about women in so-called supported residential services. "When you have got women who need to get basic necessities, they will often provide sexual favours to get them and then feel really abused by that. It is not uncommon for us to hear about women either trading cigarettes for sex or else being raped."

Ms Pearce accused the Department of Human Services of failing to adequately monitor the treatment of supported

accommodation residents, and of failing to prosecute facility owners who abused or neglected them.

She also said the Government's reforms of the care-home sector, which include new regulations and a \$40.4 million five-year plan announced in 2006, were "piecemeal" and a "Band-Aid solution".

"It is not addressing the fundamental issue and that is that vulnerable people are in accommodation that often involves two people sharing a room, a lack of privacy and few or no activities for them" which led residents to turn to drinking and smoking.

"Many residents require

physiotherapy, disability services, mental health intervention and speech therapy but there is no co-ordination with the majority of these services. So you have got a group of people unable to access the services they need," Ms Pearce said.

Community Services Minister Lisa Neville — who is under pressure over recent reports detailing failings in the Department of Human Services — said the Government had begun improving the care-home sector, which consists of 181 privately owned, low-care nursing homes. The most problematic are pension-level homes, where residents often give 75 to 100 per cent of their income to

the owners. "There are some facilities that operate very well but there are some that are below standard and [the Government initiatives will] address some of those issues," she said.

Ms Neville, who has visited several such homes but none while Community Services Minister, said she knew of two Office of the Public Advocate reports — both sent to the department months ago — that catalogue systemic failures in the supported accommodation sector.

She said it would be unacceptable if women were exchanging sexual favours for necessities and said she had asked for more details. But Ms Pearce told *The Age* it was diffi-

cult to collect hard evidence about such activity.

A second Office of the Public Advocate report states that supported-accommodation monitors found "that the physical environments of the visited facilities are substandard".

Ms Pearce told *The Age*: "We are seeing a deterioration in the well-being of many of the residents over a period of time. They are people we may have visited as community visitors or we may have under guardianship.

"It is the deterioration of the physical and mental welfare of these human beings that drives us to knock at the Government door and to try and get the system reviewed."