



## Position Statement

### Pension-level Supported Residential Services – Sept 2009

Supported Residential Services (SRSs) provide accommodation and support with activities of daily living. They are private sector services regulated by the state government.

The Office of the Public Advocate (OPA) has a number of concerns about this ‘for-profit’ sector as a whole, but has particular concerns about the wellbeing and living standards of people in the lower-fee facilities offered for up to the cost of a pension and known as pension-level facilities.

Residents of pension-level facilities are a strikingly different group to ‘above-pension’ residents. While residents of above-pension facilities are most commonly frail aged people, dementia sufferers, or older people without a disability, almost three in four pension-level residents have either a mental illness, an intellectual disability or an acquired brain injury, and most are younger than 70 years old. Hence, pension-level facilities house people who are more likely to be marginalised and poor, as a result of longer experiences of disability, and who present more complex needs. OPA’s experiences show that these facilities frequently struggle to meet the needs of this vulnerable group, due to poorly trained staff and insufficient operating budgets.

The Victorian Government’s current strategy is to ‘slow the decline’ of pension-level SRSs, by using SAVVI to provide funds to enhance financial viability and to improve standards of care for residents. This is aimed to prevent the collapse of this sector as a significant provider of low-cost accommodation to around 2,000 vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians, many who have nowhere else to go. This approach is pragmatic: while the government does not hold the SRS model of care as ideal for the majority of current residents, it does not want to see them sleeping on the street. In the longer-term, the state government is not seeking to protect or grow the sector, choosing instead to focus on developing alternative models of housing provision for people with complex care needs.

*Recommendation 1: That the Victorian Government adopt a strategy to reduce its dependence on pension-level SRSs as a supported accommodation option of last resort for vulnerable Victorians. The strategy must include proactive initiatives to improve the life chances and accommodation choices of current (as well as potential) residents.*

Current government efforts to improve housing options will be strengthened by the implementation of National Partnership Agreements on Homelessness and Social Housing. Unfortunately, while the agreements categorise boarding house residents as experiencing tertiary homelessness, they do not recognise SRS residents as such, despite the fact that both groups frequently use shared bathroom and kitchen facilities and, in practice, often experience insecurity about their continued tenure. Excluding SRS residents from this definition is likely to result in reducing SRS residents’ eligibility for improved housing and support options.

However, because of their circumstances, there are pension-level SRS residents who are at high risk of homelessness.

*Recommendation 2: That state government include current SRS residents at risk of homelessness as a priority target group for programs implemented to support at risk tenancies.*

While OPA supports all efforts to increase the range and availability of housing and support options for low-income Victorians, experience strongly suggests that these efforts are inadequate: many residents remain trapped in SRSs by a lack of suitable alternatives or support to pursue other accommodation.

For more than 20 years, OPA and the Community Visitor Program have highlighted the difficulties pension-level SRSs have had in meeting their minimum regulatory requirements or providing a standard of living that meets community expectations.

*Recommendation 3: That the Victorian Government works with hospitals, mental health facilities and other social services to reduce the current level of inappropriate referrals to pension-level SRSs.*

The model of care evident in most SRSs is one of ‘maintenance’ as opposed to skill-development or goal-oriented rehabilitation. This can cause resident disengagement and negative outcomes previously linked to institutionalisation: including pacing, boredom and wasted lives. OPA believes that employing this model in the care of vulnerable people is unacceptable.

*Recommendation 4: That government offers ongoing, flexible case management services to all pension-level residents who do not have them, to prevent and address resident disengagement.*

For further information on SRSs, see our *Status Report on Supported Residential Services*, which is available to download from our website: [www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au](http://www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au).