

2 June, 2008

Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth

Dear Secretary

I wish to make a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth's Inquiry into Better Support for Carers. I have been a Carer for twenty two years and I could suggest many ways on how Carers could be supported however at this time I am overwhelmed with a housing issue. In this submission I will explain some for my background, my housing issue, what it is like to be a Carer for two people and how the lack of support for life necessitates has resulted in my own mental health issues.

Call me , I have been a Carer for twenty two years for my sister, Angela who has an acquired brain injury from a car accident. My sister became an alcoholic for some time after her accident. To save her life I brought her in to my home with my son who was 18 months old at the time and my husband. It was suppose to be a temporary solution however after realising the extent of her injuries we decided that I would become her fulltime time Carer. I also thought that people are more important than money. Shortly afterwards she became a sober alcoholic. I raised my family, two sons, cared for my sister and was married for twenty six years. We always rented large houses so that the children and the family had space from my sister who repeats herself from sunup to sundown. We felt it was important so we could coexist with one another. Approximately four years ago my youngest son experienced severe mental health issues. I became a Carer for two people and I felt totally exhausted but had to keep up the support in a bid to save my son's life. My son is now making a slow recovery and still needs my support. Sixteen months ago my twenty six year marriage failed due to these stresses and my lack of availability to my husband.

Last September 2007 I applied for public housing. Although they said they would give me an additional family room the wait was going to be seven years. I appealed and was placed on the High Needs list. Although I have had the support from Michelle from Community Options through this process it has been daunting and exhausting. I appealed, (begged) them for housing so that I could keep my family together and continue my caring roles. I provided them with letters from the Carers Association, my son's doctor, my doctor, Community options and my counselor. I have had Richard (Member for Molonglo) office take this issue up for me with housing to no avail. I was given notice to vacate my present premises by the 6 June 2008. At present my vacate date has been extended to 6 July 2008. Housing will not place me on there priority list and expect me to find alternative accommodation for my family. At present they apparently are sending me another appeal form and are considering my latest letter from my counselor. This process will take another two to three weeks. I am overwhelmed by the lack of support, lack understanding for the people I care for, lack of acknowledgement as a Carer and lack of acknowledgement of my own mental health issue due to this additional issue for housing. I find it difficult to fathom the Public Housing system and it has left me feeling degraded and not valued as a Carer. I have told housing that I do not have the capacity to find alternative accommodation to no avail. I cannot deal with the consequences that this action will have. I have told Housing that I feel overwhelmed and suicidal to no avail.

Since my first son was 18 months old I have been a Carer for my sister who has an acquired brain injury (for 22 years) and a wife, (for 26 years). When she came to my home she was an alcoholic now she is sober. I use to get help from my extended family but when I asked for more help they stopped altogether. In 1989 my second son was born and I was busy caring for my family. As I said before we rented large houses so we could coexist with one another (that is not feasible any more). My children and family missed out on a lot because of my caring role. No holidays, limited recreational pursuits and a lack of a lot of other things. We survived on the bare basics because I believed that she was more important than money. For me educational and work opportunities were too difficult to contemplate due to the high needs of my family. I had a break a long time ago at Women's Refuge. I cannot explain how stressful it is with my sister's repetition when I am feeling highly stressed but somehow I was able to care for two people for the last four years. My son now is slowly recovering from his mental health issues and I was able to save his life. I feel exhausted and try to put my energies into looking after my family and deal with the housing issue and rest. Not to mention I am also dealing with the grief of a failed marriage after 26 years. My sister does not do anything right which is part of the parcel of her injury but because I am stressed out to maximum I do find it difficult to handle. I am finding it difficult to keep up both my caring roles but keep on pushing myself. I do not know how long I can keep this up without support particularly housing. People who understand what caring is like admire me but this is obviously not reflected in our society. My son and sister are both involved in activities but ironically I am not, due to the lack of time or money.

I hope this letter is helpful for your committee. I realise some Carers do not care for as long as I have let alone while raising a family or do not have an issue with housing. However I feel the other issues I described are common for most Carers such as stress from the demands of caring every day coupled with day to day issues of existence, financial constraint from being a Carer, loneliness, lack of opportunities such as education, work, recreation and devalued by society. I have been left wondering who really can help Carers when things are really tough and they are struggling for survival. At present I cannot suggest specific solutions to support Carers as I am personally in an overwhelmed state.