



**BUILDING AN AGE-FRIENDLY QUEENSLAND**

**QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2013-14**

**COTA Queensland**

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## COTA Queensland

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## SUMMARY

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COTA Queensland encourages the Queensland Government to use age-friendly criteria in its 2013-14 Budget. The movement toward age-friendly communities is gathering momentum. Devised by the World Health Organisation, the age-friendly framework is used in over 100 cities and communities across several countries.

An age-friendly community is one that:

- recognises the diversity of older people
- promotes their inclusion and contribution in the community
- respects their decisions and lifestyle choices
- anticipates and responds to their needs and preferences.

Building age-friendly communities will benefit not only older Queenslanders, but people of all ages, particularly in the following areas:

- Outdoor spaces and buildings
- Transportation
- Housing
- Social Participation
- Respect and Social Inclusion
- Civic participation and Employment
- Communication and Information
- Community and Health Services.

Creating age-friendly communities requires strategic and long-term partnerships between State, Commonwealth and local governments. COTA Queensland looks forward to playing an active role in working with the Queensland Government towards this goal.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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COTA Queensland calls on the Queensland Government to:

1. Establish a properly funded Commissioner for Older People to assist the development of a whole of government ageing strategy.
2. Adopt the principles of the WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities Guide to enable Queensland to join the Global Age-Friendly Network, and support local governments to achieve the same goal.
3. Support Queenslanders facing increased **cost of living** pressures by:
  - a. extending state government concessions for electricity, rates, motor vehicle registration, and public transport to resident Health Care Card holders;
  - b. removing the annual cap for the state government Pensioner Rate Subsidy Scheme so that pensioners and eligible veterans receive a subsidy of 20 per cent of the gross rates and charges levied by a local council;
  - c. extending the state government Pensioner Water Subsidy Scheme beyond South East Queensland to pensioners and eligible veterans throughout the state;
  - d. increasing the state government Electricity Rebate for seniors, pensioners and veterans to 50 per cent of the household bill.
4. Support Queenslanders experiencing **housing** stress and/or housing challenges by:
  - a. developing an integrated strategic policy framework for older people's housing and homelessness, in consultation with the community sector, with a focus that includes low-income tenants, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, single people and people living in the private rental sector;
  - b. establishing an Older Person's Housing Unit in the Department of Housing;
  - c. funding a Seniors Housing Information and Referral Centre;
  - d. researching ways to assist Queenslanders experiencing mortgage stress at retirement age to remain in their own homes;
  - e. introducing Universal Housing Design Regulations, in consultation with the building industry and community sector, to cover all forms of new housing in the State;

- f. ensuring the Department of Housing collects and analyses data on all forms of older people's housing outputs and makes the data and analysis available to interested community sector organisations, in the interests of facilitating trend analysis and responding with practical solutions;
- g. introducing an accreditation system, combined with mandatory standards and best practice models, for retirement village operators, managers and owners;
- h. reversing the decline in social housing construction that has been evident since the mid 1990s by establishing realistic goals for building new social housing units;
- i. reinstating the Tenant Participation Program with public housing tenants and approving stock transfer from public housing to community housing only with public housing tenants' approval;
- j. re-funding the Tenant Advice and Advocacy Service (TAAS) program;
- k. reviewing the *Manufactured Homes (Residential Parks) Act 2003*.

5. Support Queenslanders experiencing **transport** disadvantage by:

- a. providing free weekend and off-peak travel for concession card holders on the TransLink bus, rail and ferry network, as well as on the *qconnect* bus network;
- b. providing public transport concessions for holders of a Centrelink Health Care Card;
- c. establishing a Community Transport Office within the Queensland Government to fund local government to develop and coordinate community transport options;
- d. extending the Real-Time System project on public transport to enable visual display and on-board audio announcement of stops;
- e. ensuring all new transport infrastructure complies with principles of universal design.

## **SUPPORTING EVIDENCE**

### **ELECTRICITY**

Over the past three years electricity prices around the country will have increased 40 per cent, and household bills are increasing despite reductions in electricity consumption. All electricity users are concerned about making ends meet, but for older Queenslanders, the implications are worse.

Retired older Queenslanders usually spend more time at home and rely more on their residential energy supply than younger people, who spend part of their day at work or school. Older Queenslanders are also more likely than others to make sacrifices and forgo other activities to make sure their bills are paid in full and on time, and to cut back on consumption to reduce the bill itself.

Most retirees are dependent on fixed incomes that haven't increased enough to make the rising costs affordable. While electricity bills have risen 40 per cent, the aged pension will have increased just 11 per cent for single people and 4 per cent for couples. Many older Queenslanders are also less able to afford measures to improve the energy efficiency of their home, such as replacing old fridges or electric hot water systems.

Older sole-occupant households can outlay as much as 4.1 per cent of disposable income on energy compared with a median household outlay of 3.6 per cent. This suggests 'bill shock' for older households on fixed low incomes will be greater despite their generally lower energy consumption. In addition, a higher proportion of their energy bills will be for supply charges, not actual usage. See Recommendation 3d.

### **HOUSING**

COTA Queensland believes good housing is one of the keys to successful ageing policy. There are clear links between housing and health, well-being, and social inclusion. Housing needs to be affordable, secure, appropriate and safe.

#### **Home Ownership**

There is an assumption that older Australians are well-housed and that by the time they reach retirement age most people are not only in home ownership but they own their homes outright. While this has been the case, it is becoming less so. Australian social policy has allowed the age pension to be set at relatively low levels by comparison with other countries. The assumption has been that older, low income people will have relatively low housing costs because they own their homes outright and can therefore get by on smaller pensions.

The 2011 Census shows that housing costs have outstripped economic growth and that rents have generally outstripped mortgage repayments. In Queensland, median rents increased from 2006 to 2011 at a slightly lower rate than median mortgage payments and both far exceeded economic growth.

More older people today are heading towards retirement with a home loan still to pay than was the case a decade ago. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of people in their early 60s who had paid their home loan dropped from 75% to just over 50% (Graeme Hugo, Adelaide University demographer, quoted in <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-12-28/home-ownership-rate-drops/4445792>).

The Queensland Government needs to investigate ways of facilitating older people being able to remain in the homes they are paying off. One option is to increase the value of the state government Pensioner Rate Subsidy Scheme by removing the \$200 annual cap, and enabling pensioners and eligible veterans in home ownership to claim the full 20 per cent subsidy for the gross rates and charges levied by a local council. See Recommendation 4d.

### Private Renters

Older people who do not own their own homes are particularly vulnerable in the search to locate and keep affordable, safe, secure and appropriate housing. About 82 percent of Australians aged 65 and older live in home ownership, and most of these dwellings are fully owned, however 14.5 percent of older people are renters. Of this percentage, half live in social housing (public and community housing) and half live in the private rental sector, i.e. approximately seven per cent of Australians aged 65 and older live in social housing and approximately seven per cent live in private rental (Housing for the Aged Action Group. *Home at Last: Older Persons Housing Information and Support Service*, 2011).

The 14.5% of Australians aged 65 and older who were renters in 2006 is an increase from 2001 when 12.1 percent of older people were renters. Generally speaking, Queensland has a higher proportion of private renters and a lower proportion of public housing tenants across the different age groups than other States.

As indicated, significant numbers of older people are dropping out of home ownership - and home ownership for low income earners in the 45 to 60 age group is also declining (Hulse, K. et al 2012. *The Australian private rental sector: changes and challenges*, AHURI Positioning Paper No 149). This means that in ten to twenty years time, the numbers of 65 year olds and older living in rental will have increased disproportionately. Single age pensioners are in extremely difficult economic situations and do not have the economies of scale that couples have. Older single women are particularly vulnerable because of their lower superannuation, unequal wage rates and broken paid work histories to bring up families. The difference between living in one's own home and living in rental housing is often the difference between living with a reasonable standard of living and living in poverty.

In the context of contracting investment in public housing, plus the absence of priority housing allocation for older people, more people are being forced into the private rental market as they age. The Social Housing Initiative of 2008-2012 was highly successful and exceeded its targets, but if no further additional funds are provided to continue to grow social housing the overall decline in social housing provision that has been evident since the mid 1990s will continue. Recent ABS statistics show a

continuing decline in the number of new dwellings constructed in Queensland, including a continuing decline in public housing construction. Statistics for recent quarters are particularly low. Dwelling unit commencements for public housing in the December 2011 and March 2012 quarters were the lowest for any quarter over the past 28 years.

Estimates indicate the number of people aged 65 and older living in low-income rental households will increase from 195,000 in 2001 to 419,000 in 2026 with the largest proportional increase in the numbers of people aged 85 and older (Jones, Andrew et al. 2007. *Rental housing provision for lower-income older Australians*. AHURI Final Report, No 98). The lack of appropriate housing in the private rental sector, combined with the barriers involved in adapting existing housing, means that older people in this housing sector are more likely to prematurely enter residential aged care. The subsequent loss of independence is the opposite of the objectives and outcomes the Productivity Commission recommended in its *Caring for Older Australians Inquiry Report* (28 June 2011).

Generally speaking, older people in the private rental sector live in housing crisis: their housing tenure is unaffordable, insecure, unsustainable, frequently inappropriate and sometimes unsafe. Because of their vulnerability, it is particularly important for older people in the private rental sector to have access to the advice and advocacy provided by the Tenant Advice and Advocacy Service (TAAS). Vulnerable groups have been hit particularly hard by the decision to de-fund the program. COTA Queensland believes the program needs to be re-funded.

The challenge of building age-friendly housing and neighbourhoods crosses all levels of government and provides opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. The Queensland Government State Budget should ensure that housing, whether it be privately rented, State government rented, rented through the community housing sector or occupier owned, is designed appropriately to facilitate ageing in place. This should include a commitment to universal housing design for all new buildings. See Recommendations 4a, 4b, 4d, 4e, 4h.

### Manufactured Homes Residents

Many Queenslanders, as they age, consider manufactured homes parks to be an affordable housing tenure and sell their homes to move into residential parks. COTA Queensland has previously made a submission to the Queensland Government proposing a review of the *Manufactured Homes (Residential Parks) Act 2003* to ensure the legislation is fair and unambiguous. Where procedures are unclear or unfair, disputes can escalate, causing great anxiety and hardship to older people on low, fixed incomes. See Recommendation 4k.

### Public Housing Renters

Older public housing tenants have reported a reduction in social inclusion as a result of the de-funding of the Tenant Participation program. For minimal cost, the program provided clear, tangible benefits through its opportunities to form meaningful

connections. The program needs to be reinstated. Older public housing tenants have also reported anxiety regarding possible changes to security of tenure and plans to move public housing stock to community housing management. Stock transfers should occur only in consultation with, and endorsement by, public housing tenants. See Recommendation 4i.

### Retirement Village Living

Retirement villages offer the main form of service integrated housing in Australia and the sector has developed largely in a formal policy vacuum. In September 2012 COTA provided a written submission to the Queensland Government's review of retirement villages and in October we appeared before the Transport, Housing and Local Government Committee's Public Hearing for the review. COTA has highlighted a number of issues through that process. A significant area relates to the need for an accreditation system for retirement village operators, managers and owners: this would go some way to addressing some of the issues. See Recommendation 4g.

### Housing Information and Referral Centre

Through our research for various submissions, including those on Retirement Villages and Manufactured Homes, COTA is aware of the complexity of housing decision-making faced by people as they age. Seniors facing retirement, regardless of whether they will be self-funded retirees, part-pensioners or full-pensioners, are presented with a range of housing and housing-related options. It is difficult for people to obtain accurate, clear and up to date information on which they can make the best decisions to suit their personal circumstances. Sometimes people make housing decisions they would have made differently if they had been able to access additional information. This can cause extreme mental anguish and financial distress.

COTA believes a Queensland Government-funded seniors housing information, referral and community education centre would meet this information need. Different models that respond to the need have been provided by both the Western Australian and Victorian Governments. In Western Australia the State Government has worked with COTA WA to develop a model. A different model, incorporating both the provision of advice to the growing numbers of seniors living in the private rental sector and the provision of housing crisis assistance to the frail aged, was developed in Victoria. It receives both State and Commonwealth funding. COTA Queensland would like to discuss these models with the Queensland Government. See Recommendation 4c.

## **HOMELESSNESS**

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Contrary to expectations from the sector, homelessness in Australia has recently increased. Data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in November 2012 indicate that on Census night homelessness increased by 17 per cent to 105,237 (although the numbers of rough sleepers reduced). This is of particular concern given

the increase in funding for homelessness prevention programs since 2008. Without these funding increases, homelessness would have increased even more.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience homelessness at rates much higher than the rest of the population. This community also experiences premature ageing. Older single women are also at particular risk of homelessness. It is worth noting that one of the three priorities for the Australian Social Inclusion Board for 2013 is the emerging issue of older women and homelessness.

The issue of older people at risk of homelessness has been neglected by all levels of government as an area requiring policy reform. Between 2001 and 2006, there was a 36 per cent increase in homelessness for people aged 55 to 64 years. For those aged over 65 years, the increase was 23 per cent. These are the highest increases for all age groups (Housing for the Aged Action Group. Home at Last: Older Persons Housing Information and Support Service, 2011).

At the same time, older people are less likely than other cohorts to access homelessness services. There is one small specialist older persons' homelessness program – Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA). Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA), it receives minimal funds - \$4.6 million nationally per year (<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ageing-commcare-acha-overview.htm>).

COTA Queensland commends the Queensland Government's recent announcement (Six Month Action Plan, June 2013) of its intention to develop a Homelessness Strategy. The growing risk of homelessness for ageing Queenslanders needs to be addressed through this Strategy.

As indicated above, the number of older Australians having to move into the private rental sector is also on the increase. While 7% of people aged 65 years and older live in the private rental sector, this figure will rise disproportionately over the next 10 to 20 years. On present trends, the increase in numbers of older people at risk of homelessness will also rise.

The nexus between private rental sector housing and the risk of homelessness is clear, as is the connection between support to uphold tenancy laws and averting homelessness. This was recognised by the Australian Government's 2008 report *The Road Home*. The re-funding of the Tenant Advice and Advocacy Service (TAAS) program is important to avoid likely increased homelessness, especially amongst vulnerable groups, and to assist in reducing the pressure on social housing. See Recommendations 4a, 4b, 4d, 4e, 4h, 4i, 4j.

## TRANSPORT

Transport has a significant impact on older people's quality of life and ability to remain independent. Affordable, accessible and well integrated public and community transport is essential for the participation of older people in society.

Many seniors experience physical and mental changes which may reduce their capacity to drive. Public transport does not always provide a viable alternative to driving because of the distance to services, inaccessible infrastructure, as well as routes and schedules based around work-based commuting patterns. Many outer urban areas and rural areas have limited public transport services. Older people who live in residential aged care facilities often have little or no access to transport. They often rely on family and friends as the primary source of transport support.

Community transport is vital for those older people for whom public transport is inaccessible or inefficient. While some older people are eligible for HACC-funded community transport, many others who require transport assistance are outside the eligibility criteria. Seniors in rural and regional areas often rely on community transport, as well as long-distance bus and train services, to attend medical appointments.

The Queensland Government should be encouraged to conduct a regulatory audit to ensure that the rules and contracts regarding public transport, taxis, driver and operator accreditation do not discourage innovative transport solutions.

We are also mindful of older drivers in Queensland who have to maintain medical certification from age 75. It is vital that older people have mobility options, such as access to the Taxi Subsidy Scheme, to maintain social participation once they relinquish their driver licence. See Recommendations 5a-e.

## CONCLUSION

COTA Queensland's pre-budget submission identifies a number of practical steps which the state government needs to consider to improve the health, security and participation of Queenslanders as they age.

The 2013-14 Queensland Government Budget provides a moment:

- to embrace our ageing population as an opportunity, and
- to meet the challenges with a positive approach.

We encourage the Queensland Government to work with local governments, the Commonwealth, businesses, non-government organisations and the community to build an Age-friendly Queensland where older people have access to safe and affordable transport, housing, and neighbourhoods.

## COTA QUEENSLAND – COUNCIL ON THE AGEING

COTA Queensland is committed to advancing the rights, needs and interests of people as they age in Queensland. We aim to help create a more just, equitable and caring community in which older people are actively involved and have access to appropriate support, services and care. As one of the eight State and Territory COTAs that make up COTA Australia, our work is guided by five main policy principles:

1. Maximising the social, economic and political participation of older Australians  
COTA seeks to maximise opportunities for equitable social and economic participation by senior Australians, including by promoting positive approaches to the contribution of older people and the ageing of the population.
2. Promoting positive views of ageing, rejecting ageism and challenging negative stereotypes  
COTA supports initiatives that recognise the capacities and contributions of senior Australians and actively combat ageism and age discrimination. COTA Australia believes that the impact of ageism, based on negative age stereotypes, restricts the participation and inclusion of older people in all aspects of Australian life. This has adverse effects on the community and on older people.
3. Promoting sustainable, fair and responsible policies  
COTA is committed to the development of sustainable and equitable policies for senior Australians that take account of the needs of the entire community in the short and long term. It will develop policies which are fiscally and economically responsible and which fairly balance the competing needs and interests of diverse groups amongst the older population and other sectors of the community.
4. Focusing on protecting against and redressing disadvantage  
COTA believes that all people have the right to security, dignity, respect, and safety, high standards of treatment and care and to equal participation in the community regardless of their income, status, background, location or any other social or economic factor. As a result COTA Australia will have a strong focus on senior Australians who are most vulnerable or disadvantaged in terms of these criteria.
5. Protecting and extending services and programs that are used and valued by older Australians  
COTA develops policies and provides advice on maintaining and improving services and programs that senior Australians use and value. These include health care, employment, utilities, public transport, aged support and care services, housing and education and training. It will seek to ensure that there is an adequate 'safety net' of services and income support, which all senior Australians can access according to fair and equitable criteria in order to maintain an acceptable quality of life.