



homeless persons'
legal clinic



MEDIA RELEASE

24 January 2013

CHANGE IS NEEDED TO PROTECT VULNERABLE TENANTS AND RESIDENTS

The Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic (HPLC) and Tenants' Union of Victoria (TUV) have described the deaths of three Indian students who died on 3 January 2008 in a house fire in Footscray as "a tragedy" and called on the Coroner to make recommendations that could prevent similar tragedies taking place in future.

The deaths are currently being investigated by Coroner White, who made far-reaching recommendations in an earlier inquest relating to the deaths of Leigh Sinclair and Christopher Giorgi in a rooming house fire in 2006.

In a joint submission to the Coroner, the HPLC and TUV have asked the Coroner to recommend necessary changes to improve the safety of housing for vulnerable tenants and rooming house residents.

The investigation revealed that up to five international students were living in a single bedroom. The Melbourne Fire Brigade reported that the power boards in the room were overloaded, there was inadequate electrical circuitry in the house and there may not have been any safety switches or working smoke alarms. The real estate agent had also failed to undertake any inspections of the property for over two years.

Chris Povey, Manager and Principal Lawyer of the HPLC explained that "The reality is that these students had nowhere else to go, they had no options other than to accept dangerous and overcrowded housing. By any definition, these students were homeless."

"This is just another tragic example of the fallout from the chronic lack of affordable, adequate and safe housing," said Mr Povey. "There are people living in housing like this all over the state – it's a ticking time bomb. In addition to a range of safety measures, it is important that the Coroner acknowledge and take into account these broader social and policy issues when making his findings and recommendations."

HPLC and TUV also called on the Coroner to recommend legislative changes.

Mike Williams, Policy and Liaison Worker at the TUV said that, "the Residential Tenancy Act is currently silent on key safety issues. The legislation should be amended so that landlords and rooming house owners are responsible for ensuring that premises are safe and that they check that smoke alarms have been correctly installed and maintained".

Mr Williams said that education is also crucial. "We request the Coroner make recommendations that Consumer Affairs Victoria and other agencies conduct an education campaign to better inform landlords, rooming house operators, real estate agents, tenants and rooming house residents (particularly international students) of their rights and obligations and about basic fire safety".

"We urge the government, the real estate and rooming house industry to accept the recommendations so that people do not continue to die because of unsafe rooming houses and rental properties," said Mr Williams.

A copy of the submission is available here: <http://www.pilch.org.au/hplc/lawreform/coroner/>

Contacts

Chris Povey

Manager/Principal Lawyer
PILCH Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic
(03) 8636 4412 / 0432 603 100
Chris.povey@pilch.org.au
www.pilch.org.au/hplc/

Mike Williams

Policy and Liaison Worker
Tenants Union of Victoria
(03) 9411 1413 / 0448 042 275
mwilliams@tuv.org.au
www.tuv.org.au