

Government must act on Coroner's damning rooming house recommendations

MEDIA RELEASE

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The PILCH Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic (**HPLC**) has welcomed the findings of Coroner Peter White into the 2006 deaths of Leigh Sinclair and Christopher Giorgi, and demanded that the Government act to implement these changes and save lives.

On 1 October 2006, Leigh and Christopher died in a rooming house fire at 211A Sydney Rd, Brunswick. Five other residents, including a seven year old child, were lucky to escape alive. Today, the Coroner found that, "These two young lives were lost against a backdrop, which included a failure in the administration of applicable building code fire safety, planning and rooming house regulations". The Coroner's findings are **attached**.

"The Coroner has adopted seven out of eight recommendations put forward by the HPLC, Tenant's Union of Victoria and Council to Homeless Persons during the inquest aimed at improving public health and safety in rooming houses," said James Farrell, Manager/Principal Lawyer of the HPLC.

Key recommendations included:

- that rooming house operators must be licenced and, as a condition of these licences, they must meet a "fit and proper person" test;
- that rooming houses be registered (and meet appropriate standards) if more than one room within a residential premises is offered for rent;
- that Government agencies be given powers of search and entry to ensure that rooming houses comply with appropriate standards; and
- that penalties be increased for rogue operators within the sector, who are putting residents' security and safety at risk.

"The Coroner has made strong recommendations aimed at protecting the vulnerable residents of sub-standard rooming houses," said Mr Farrell.

"Government must implement these recommendations fully and without reservation, to ensure that no more senseless and tragic deaths occur in unsafe rooming houses."

The Coroner's findings come just two months after the Premier John Brumby announced a rooming house task force to report to the government on new standards and enforcement processes for rooming houses. The findings of the report have not yet been made public.

Ends.

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Key Facts about rooming house conditions

In a recent Homeground survey of 228 individuals living in rooming houses around Melbourne, results indicated that 74% of the residents were male and 26% were female. As a minority in rooming houses, women can often feel vulnerable. There are also an increasing number of families in boarding houses with parents and children living in a single room.

The respondents to the same Homeground study indicated that they were living in unbearable conditions:

- 78% said that they were sharing a bathroom with at least 5 other people, whilst half of all respondents were sharing with 10 or more people;
- one third said there were no locks on their bathroom doors;
- some stated that they did not have lighting or access to power points, and 8% didn't even have windows;
- 14% said their rooms did not have locks on their doors and 29% indicated that there no locks on external doors; and
- not surprisingly, 57% of the respondents did not feel safe.

Of the 110 rooming houses inspected by the Tenants Union in the past year, 90% were unregistered and many were overcrowded and in appalling conditions.