PROPOSAL FOR A GROUP HOUSING PROGRAM FOR OLDER PEOPLE

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- Jean Elder
1) BACKGROUND

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has for many years provided a range of accommodation facilities for older people. These currently include a rooming house with resident supervisor, supervised self-contained flats, self-contained flats and flatlets (but no resident supervisor), cottages on the two major settlements (Lara and Carrum Downs), and several hostels.

These facilities have met the housing needs of a variety of older people, particularly those who have limited assets. However, in recent years, it has become evident that there is an increasing number of older people who have housing needs which are not met by the existing accommodation options. This group consists of low-income, older people who do not wish to live alone in a self-contained unit or in a boarding house situation, nor do they wish to become part of a large institutional setting (such as a hostel), but who would prefer to live with a few other people in a shared housing situation. In some instances, these older people have lived in a family situation but, for one reason or another, they are unable to continue this arrangement. Many would also prefer to live in the neighbourhood they know and within which their friendships and support networks are established. The Brotherhood's accommodation officer, based in Fitzroy, estimates that there are approximately five to ten enquiries a month from people whose requests could be met by an alternative housing option - small group housing.

In an evaluation of some of the Brotherhood's current accommodation facilities, one conclusion reached was:

"The experience of the Moore Street residents suggests that non-supervised communal living is a possibility, and one that may provide residents with a comfortable blend of independence and companionship. They may, however, need some professional assistance to develop communal activities."

This proposal describes a group housing program which it is hoped would test out the viability of this approach in meeting these accommodation needs.
II) SMALL GROUP HOUSING IN AUSTRALIA

Small groups of unrelated people residing together in ordinary suburban houses is not new in Australia. Many young people have chosen this life-style as their preferred housing option. It has also been adopted by those in the mental health field as a supportive housing environment for people with a variety of disabilities. Similarly, small group housing for severely physically disabled people has become more widespread throughout the country.

However, as a housing option for older people, it is a relatively new phenomenon. There are few documented examples of where this approach has been adopted. The City of Waverley, a municipality of Sydney, has operated a number of group homes for nearly four years. In their experience:

"The success of the program is evidenced by the number of aged people, both male and female, that have requested accommodation and are currently waiting for a vacancy to occur, or additional homes to be established.

Quite apart from the supportive aspects of the program - the benefits which accrue from increased social contact, personal security, more independence and a sense of belonging - the program should also be seen as an appropriate response to the problems of aged persons' accommodation in housing terms.

The program makes very efficient use of the dwelling stock, drawing together people who would otherwise occupy dwelling units individually. Moreover, a good standard of residential accommodation is provided to a low-income group, within their ability to pay.

The program also allows elderly people to be integrated with, rather than separated from, the wider community."
In Victoria, the Uniting Church of Australia, has established a group house, "Govett House" in Sandringham. Accommodation is provided for five older people in an ordinary suburban house. There is a management committee consisting of local parish people and a professional social worker. There is no resident staff person, but members of the committee assist with shopping and other chores. The main meal is delivered to the house each day, and residents prepare their own breakfast and evening meals. A paid staff member comes for two hours every Saturday to prepare and cook the midday meal and to do the general cleaning.

The recently established Abbeyfield Society in Australia (based on the British society of the same name) is another organization that endorses the concept of group living for older people. However, central to the concept of the Abbeyfield house is the live-in housekeeper. Again, residents have their own rooms and are encouraged to share in preparation of meals and in running the house. A local committee of management, including a resident representative, oversees the management of each Abbeyfield house. The Abbeyfield Society in Victoria is currently preparing a strategy plan to examine the ways Abbeyfield houses might be established in Australia.

Before outlining details about the proposed pilot project, it is important that it is placed in the overall context of current housing and living arrangements for older people in Australia, and that the policy issues underlying the project are described.

III) CURRENT HOUSING AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA

The majority of people aged sixty years or more are home owners, with some three-quarters of this age group living in their own homes. A further ten percent of older people reside in some form of institutional accommodation, including nursing homes, hostels, and other specific purpose housing. The final group of older people comprise those who are either renting, boarding (sleeping quarters and meals) or lodging (sleeping quarters only).
A national survey conducted in 1974,\(^3\) provided a wealth of data about the housing characteristics of older people. Although there have been new developments, since this time (notably with "equity", or resident funded housing schemes for the more affluent aged), the findings of this survey still reflect the overall situation. It was found that the fifteen percent of non-institutionalized aged who rent, are in far more difficult circumstances than those who own houses. They generally have fewer social resources with only one-third being married, and their average incomes are less than those of owners. Average housing costs are much higher among renters than owners. The majority of older people who rent are private tenants (in 1974, this figure was 9% of the aged), with 6% renting from government agencies, and 1% from relatives.\(^4\) Those renting privately pay much higher proportions of their income in housing, have little security of tenure and commonly live in poor housing conditions either because of a fear of moving or an inability to find a better dwelling.

The circumstances of older boarders are very different for those who depend on the private market rather than families or government. Nearly half of older boarders and lodgers pay no rent, indicative that at least an equivalent number are living with relatives. The Aged Persons' Housing Survey found that the most liked housing feature of older boarders was, "living with family". However, this living arrangement is not a viable option for many older people.

The plight of older boarders and lodgers depending on the private market is even more difficult than that of the private renter. The 1974 survey found that only 10% of this group were married, and their incomes were even lower than those of renters. Their accommodation usually consists of a very small single room occasionally shared, in large, deteriorated older houses or former hotels. The costs of room and board often take most of the single age pension resulting in this group of older people, having little income to spend on other activities, heightening the lack of choice and control over their lives. Hal Kendig writes, "The apparent satisfaction of many older boarders, despite very poor living conditions, results mainly from very low expectations and a lack of alternatives or the means to obtain them".\(^5\)
This brief description of the housing characteristics of older people highlights the vulnerable situation of older people who are living alone and privately renting, boarding in lodgings. However, it does not explore the needs of those low-income, older people who own their own homes, but who cannot continue to live alone. As outlined in Section I, this group of older people also have limited options in finding suitable alternatives.

This proposal then sets out a housing program which attempts to meet the needs of people in both these general categories.

IV) POLICY ISSUES

Section III has given a broad description of the current housing arrangements of older people in Australia. In summary, it highlighted that older people who are living alone and are privately renting, boarding or lodging are the most vulnerable group of aged people.

In Victoria, the supply of alternative accommodation for this group is provided by the Ministry of Housing's low rental, pensioner units (both "granny flats" and independent units in block developments), hostel beds provided by government and voluntary organizations, and subsidized, independent living units provided by voluntary welfare organizations. Nursing homes are seen as providing a health service and are not included as alternative accommodation.

It has been estimated\(^6\) that in 1981, specialized independent living unit capacity in Victoria was 62.0 per 1,000 of persons aged 65 or more, of which 50.7 per 1,000 elderly was provided by government or by voluntary welfare organizations other than those involved in "resident funded" schemes.

However, the spread of independent living units is most unevenly provided across the State and there is still a significant shortfall of provision for older people of limited income and limited assets. It has been estimated that the level of need for low rental pensioner units is...
about 50.0 bed/person per 1,000 elderly whereas the Ministry of Housing was anticipated as providing 24.9 per 1,000 in 1981, i.e. the estimated backlog of need for Ministry of Housing low rental, pensioner units was 6,300 in 1981.

Hostel type accommodation of all types was estimated to have achieved 42.2 beds per 1,000 aged 65 years or more, in 1981. This is considered to be close to meeting the State-wide level of need except for isolated pockets of deficiency.

In summary, current alternative supply of accommodation in Victoria is not meeting the estimated need for independent living housing for low-income, older people. Secondly, the proposed alternatives, "granny flats" and blocks of purpose-built independent units, are very costly capital investment programs. It is considered that there is a need for low capital cost alternatives which more effectively utilize existing housing stock. The proposed group housing program is one such alternative which, if successful, could help overcome the geographical mal-distribution of alternative accommodation by making use of existing housing stock throughout Victorian municipalities. A future policy issue may be to argue that subsidies paid under the Aged or Disabled Persons' Homes Act, 1954-76, be made available to municipalities to cover capital expenditure on making alterations and equipping houses for group living.

A second policy issue is concerned with what is meant by "small group living". In our society, the major focus of group living is that of living within families. Older people reflect this general pattern. In 1979, it was found that approximately one-half of those aged 65 or more lived with their spouses, about 16% lived with other family members or other persons, and about 25% lived alone (the balance of nearly 8% lived in institutions). In policy terms, the options for those older people who are unable, or unwilling, to continue living alone are seen as either being cared for by family or being institutionalized (e.g. hostels, special accommodation houses or nursing homes). In some situations, neither of these options are appropriate, or possible, for an older person. It is considered that the small group house offers an al-
ternative that is not "institutional" and yet offers similar emotional and physical supports to that offered by a family. The experience of the City of Waverley's program confirms this belief.

As small group living, outside of the family situation, has not been a common practice in our society, it is predicted that there will be difficulties with both:

a) getting the concept of group living accepted as a viable alternative to those seeking new forms of accommodation, and

b) assisting some individuals to adjust to the new life-style.

In discussions with staff associated with the Waverley group housing schemes and Govett House, these issues were raised. In both instances, it was felt the difficulties would be overcome. The City of Waverley now has quite a waiting list of people wanting to move into their group houses which is one indicator that older people have accepted this form of housing. With the question of adjusting to the new communal lifestyle, the general finding was that conflicts did emerge, but that residents could resolve them, just as family conflicts can be resolved. In their experience, there were very few individuals who could not adjust to the group living situation.

It seems a more important issue is to gain detailed information about the kind of professional assistance that is needed to give older people the opportunities to develop communal living skills. The crucial areas that need to be explored in this project concern:

a) the ways in which older people could establish a home together (including the kinds of older people who would welcome and adjust to this kind of living);

b) the forms of professional assistance needed to help older people develop communal living skills, and
c) the kinds of domiciliary services which may be appropriate, the way they should be delivered and, in particular, the relevance of domiciliary services to a co-operative situation.

V) PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE PROPOSAL

1. With both Govett House and the Abbeyfield houses, although residents participate in the decision making process final decision making and control is vested with the management committee consisting of a majority of non-resident members. This proposal aims to look at an approach which emphasizes to a much greater degree the autonomy of the residents. This means that control over day to day management of the group houses will primarily be vested in the residents.

2. Another important principle is that the house give the tenants security of tenure. Security of tenure is seen as a basic right and should exist in any house set up under the auspice of the Brotherhood.

3. The group houses must not be identified in any way as Brotherhood houses, but remain unlabelled, ordinary suburban homes.

4. It is important that, as far as practical, residents of each group house come from, or have some association with, the locality in which the house is based.

5. The total charges for the accommodation shall not exceed 25% of income.

VII) OBJECTIVES OF THE GROUP HOUSING PROGRAM

The major objectives of the program are as follows:

1. To undertake an analysis of the group living process as it is lived out in the particular houses set up by the Brotherhood.
2. To explore a variety of shared housing arrangements with regard to:
   (a) Cost
   (b) Tenure arrangements
   (c) Structure and support
   (d) Security of tenure

3. To analyze the issues and problems involved in setting up and supporting sharing housing.

4. To promote the widespread development of small group housing for certain types of older people.

The detailed objectives are:

1.1 To demonstrate, through an analysis of the group living process, that in these particular houses set up by the Brotherhood that these older people can manage and control small group housing cooperatively.

2.1 To demonstrate that small group housing can be a secure, low cost accommodation option for certain groups of older people.

2.2. To analyze what is needed in terms of structure and support in order to provide secure, low cost small group housing.

3.1 To consider issues such as:

   (a) Information regarding the kinds of older people who could best adjust to, and enjoy this style of living.

   (b) The differing kinds of external support structures that may be required (eg. in terms of professional skills and domiciliary services).

   (c) The most appropriate type of tenancy agreement.

4. To actively promote the development of cooperatively run small group houses for older people.

   (a) By developing models, that, whilst in keeping with the principles outlined earlier, are replicable by other groups within the community.
(b) By developing operating guidelines suitable for use by voluntary agencies, municipal government, and other interested organizations.

(c) Encouraging and supporting relevant groups who are interested in the concept.

(d) Working with relevant government bodies to explore future funding options which might encourage more widespread development of small group homes throughout Australia.

(VII) OUTLINE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAM

1. It is proposed that the Brotherhood obtain three houses for the object by the following means:

(a) That one house is bought by the Brotherhood (Funding is to be sought for this house).

(b) That the Brotherhood ask that the Ministry of Housing supply a house for the project.

(c) That a local council be invited to supply a house for the project.

The houses need to be sufficiently large to allow four to six residents to have their own rooms.

There should also be a large living area, separate dining room (or sufficiently large kitchen/dining area), and toilet separate from the bathroom.

Other relevant factors include proximity of the house to local shops, public transport; the need for a minimum number of steps and floor levels in the house; and the need for a house that is not built on a steep hill. The criteria for the choice of localities will include such issues as:

a) evidence of housing needs of older people in the locality;

b) degree of interest in, and support for, the project from the municipal welfare/domiciliary services;
c) range of alternative accommodation that may exist;

d) whether the municipality contains suitably located, large houses.

2. A professional staff person be appointed, half-time on a 2-year period within the Brotherhood's Services Division to assist with the development of the pilot project. This person must be experienced in working with older people and have particular skills and interest in allowing older people to control and manage their own lives.

The group homes project officer will be responsible to the Director of Community Services. Discussion of Management issues will also involve the Admissions Officer, Research Officer and other relevant personnel.
3. The Social Policy & Research Department of the Brotherhood to provide research assistance equivalent to 60 days per year in order that the pilot project is effectively evaluated. The evaluation will be particularly concerned with Objectives 2-3.

4. A project advisory committee be established under the Brotherhood's auspice to provide general support and oversight. Membership of this committee to include representatives from the Brotherhood's Services (the project manager and the project officer), the Municipal Association of Victoria, VICOTA, Abbeyfield Society of Victoria, the Extended Care Division of the Health Commission and the two municipalities where the group homes are established. Both the Brotherhood research worker and the group homes officer would attend these monthly committee meetings. The function of this committee would be to give support and advice to the project worker (particularly in the establishment phase of the program), and to assist with the ongoing work of promoting small group housing as a viable alternative form of accommodation for older people. This advisory committee would have no management responsibility for the project.

5. The initial phase of the professional worker's role will be to refine the criteria for selection of localities, assist in choosing the houses, arrange for them to be adequately furnished and renovated (if required), select the initial residents and arrange for a "phasing in" period (i.e. not all six residents move in together), work with residents in establishing co-operative management practices in running the houses, and establish good working relationships with relevant municipal welfare/domiciliary staff. Once the houses are functioning, the professional worker's role will be one of assisting residents with maintaining their chosen co-operative styles of running the house, assisting residents in making links, where appropriate, with other services or groups in the municipality and in conjunction with the Brotherhood's research worker, keeping appropriate records about the developmental process and the costs of the project.
6. An ongoing role of the worker will be to liaise with other organizations and individuals concerned with small group housing for older people, e.g. Abbeyfield Society in Victoria.

7. In the final stages of the pilot project, a research report will be prepared by the Brotherhood's research worker. The project worker (with assistance from residents and the research worker) will be responsible for developing guidelines suitable for widespread distribution to municipalities and other organizations with the potential to develop this form of housing.

8. The final phase of the two-year project period would involve the project worker, older residents if they choose to assist, and other relevant Brotherhood staff in actively promoting the small group housing content. This would involve using a variety of strategies and hence would require the skills of other Brotherhood staff, e.g. the media officer, public relations staff, as well as social policy and research expertise.