better renting

Impact report

2018-2020

Contents

From the Chair of the Board 03

From the Founder and Executive Director 04

Introducing Better Renting 05

Better Renting activities 2018-2020 08

Healthy Homes 09

- Health research 11
- Home Truths 12

Coronavirus advocacy 13

- National statement on renting and coronavirus 14
- Survey report 15
- Debt report 16

Other renter advocacy and support 17

- Blocking 'bond loans' in the ACT 18
- Facebook groups 19
- Tenant Talks 20
- Make Renting Fair ACT 21
- Re-imagine renting 22

The future of Better Renting 23

Acknowledgements 25

From the Chairperson of the Board

Better Renting is committed to transforming the lives of Australian renters. In 2020, we pivoted rapidly to throw ourselves behind people who were struggling to pay rent due to economic hardship. We worked with other tenant and housing organisations to call for a strong support package for renters and listened to renters to understand how the pandemic was affecting them. During this time, we continued to produce high-impact reports on the deteriorating and unequal conditions facing renters during an economic crisis.

Our advocacy on COVID-19 gained widespread media attention, showing how many people would be at risk of eviction if governments didn't support renters by addressing rental debt. While our movement successfully won moratoriums on evictions in every state, we still have work to do this year with those states planning on lifting their moratoriums. This is only one example of the ways in which Better Renting has contributed to a powerful renter advocacy movement.

Our work is important because we are striving to build a community of renters who can advocate for their own rights and change the narrative of renting. Renters are increasingly feeling more empowered to use their own voices to help change the national conversation.

On behalf of the Board, I want to acknowledge the contributions made by staff to Better Renting's work over the past two years since I've been Chairperson. I particularly want to thank our Executive Director, Joel Dignam, for his vision and dedication, and the resilience his team and he showed in 2020 during a year of unprecedented challenges.

No organisation can operate alone. I would like to also acknowledge the efforts of others in the sector who work collaboratively towards this mission. I look forward to working with others in our movement — especially renters themselves — to continue to build momentum in 2021. The effects of COVID-19 are ongoing, and we will stand by renters across Australia to help ensure their voices are heard.

Thank you to everyone who has supported us thus far. We would not exist without our funders, a strong movement, and all of the renters out there who believe in banding together to build a powerful and unstoppable movement.

I look forward to seeing more positive change in 2021 and beyond, with a more affordable, safe and stable rental sector.

Lani Perlesz
Chairperson

From the Founder and Executive Director

Better Renting's story begins with Craig Kelly. In 2017, he lamented rising electricity prices and the impact this was having on the cost of living. In response, I wrote a letter to the editor suggesting that Mr. Kelly might care to support minimum rental standards as a great way to reduce the cost of living for renters.

Although energy efficiency was the issue that drew me into the rental space, I soon realised that there was much more to deal with. While renters are harmed by low-quality rental properties and unaffordable power bills, it's hard for us to be concerned about this when also dealing with the ever-present threat of losing your home or having your landlord jack up your rent.

As someone with a background in campaigning and community organising, it struck me that the demographics of renting had changed, but the national conversation and the social movement ecosystem were still catching up. I saw a need for a new organisation focused on advocacy and working directly with renters. So Better Renting was born: a community of renters, working together for stable, affordable, and healthy homes.

Since Better Renting's formal beginning in April 2018, we have done a lot. We've tried many things, and learnt a lot about what does or doesn't work. We've developed a clearer sense of the role of Better Renting and the unique contribution that we can make as part of a movement of organisations and grassroots communities acting on this issue. Perhaps most importantly, we've strived to ensure that the voices and perspectives of renters are central to the work of governments in this area.

When I reflect on our humble beginnings, it's remarkable to see how far we've come. 2020 has been a particular example of this, as we stepped up to engage with the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19 and the increased relevance and urgency of issues facing people who rent their homes. Throughout, this work has been supported by volunteers, donors, and board members, without whom none of this would be possible. Most importantly, Better Renting has risen on a growing tide of support from renters, all over Australia, who share our vision for renting to be a genuine alternative to home-ownership. I am grateful to everyone who has made the last three years possible.

Joel Dignam
Founder and Executive Director

INTRODUCING BETTER RENTING

A constituency of renters

Everyone needs a decent home. Yet the commodification of housing means that this need is not being met. Governments are ignoring their duty to ensure decent housing for all citizens. This has created a situation where housing is left to the market and people are left to struggle alone.

To change this, we will build the power of a constituency of renters. Solidarity between renters will empower people who rent to improve conditions in their own lives and also to take collective action to change the laws that control our housing. We also need to raise renters' expectations so that there is impetus for reform: this requires us to change the conversation around renting and housing so that the needs and entitlements of people who rent are seen as primary. This will lead to an Australia where more people have decent homes.

Good homes, regardless of tenure

If Better Renting succeeds at our mission, then renting will be a genuine alternative to homeownership. Someone could move from ownership to renting and their day-to-day experience of having a home would be unaffected.

An independent community: A radical vision

Various organisations are playing different, complementary roles to create change in this space. Better Renting's unique contribution will be in three mutually-reinforcing areas:

- Rigorously expounding a radical reimagining of the rental sector and the rental experience.
- Building a community of renters empowered to take action in their own lives and for broader system change.
- Operating independently of government.

To some extent, our success will be seen in specific policy outcomes. However, we will not prioritise working towards specific policy shifts. Rather, our role is to change the political economy around this issue to make it easier for all supportive organisations to effect policy changes.

Rigorously expound a radical reimagining of the rental sector and the rental experience.

We will change what is seen as normal and use this to shift the centre of the policy conversation. This will also encourage a cultural change that will shift landlord behaviour.

Building a community of renters empowered to take action in their own lives and for broader system change.

For renters to create change, we need to build a political constituency that can rival powerful opponents. Better Renting will connect renters with one another and with opportunities to effect change, building the capacity of the people most affected by these issues.

Operating independently of government.

We will develop sustainable revenue streams in order to increase capacity in this space and enable us to advocate for radical change and hold governments to account.

BETTER RENTING ACTIVITIES 2018-2020

Healthy Homes

Every person needs a home that keeps them comfortable and healthy in winter and summer, with affordable energy bills. Since our inception, Better Renting has made it a priority to achieve this for people who rent their homes, through legislated minimum energy efficiency standards for rental properties.

Following the dedicated work of Better Renting and many other organisations, key successes in this area include:

- In 2019, the ACT Government committed to the implementation of minimum performance standards for rental properties as part of its climate change strategy. In 2020, the returned ACT Government included the implementation of minimum rental standards in its parliamentary agreement. The ACT Government has also introduced a program providing free home energy assessments to rental households, and proposed to expand the eligibility criteria of its Energy Efficiency Improvement Scheme so that more rental households are targeted.
- In 2019 the COAG Energy Council agreed to a plan to improve the energy efficiency of existing homes, including rental properties. The state governments of Victoria and Queensland have put forward proposals to introduce energy efficiency standards for rental properties.

To achieve change on this issue, Better Renting has produced reports, engaged with the media, engaged with politicians in a variety of jurisdictions, made submissions, and worked closely with renters across Australia to document and share their experiences.

- We have published research on the energy efficiency imbalance between properties advertised for sale or for rent. Drawing on public data in the ACT, we found that 2 in 5 rental properties had an energy efficiency rating (EER) of 0, compared with only 5% of properties for sale.
- Other research looked at the cost to renters of this imbalance. Our report, "Frozen Out", estimated that, to compensate for the energy inefficiency of their homes, renters in the ACT would have to pay an additional $39 million every year on heating.

- We have met with different ACT politicians and built effective relationships with public servants to accelerate action on minimum rental standards. In late 2020, the new ACT Government committed to the implementation of such standards.
- Informed by the policy development work of ACOSS, we advocated to independent SA Senator Tim Storer, leading to his bill to incentivise property investors to implement energy efficiency improvements. Although the bill was unfortunately unsuccessful, it served to elevate this issue in the parliament and to provide a rallying point that brought together many organisations in stronger collaboration.
- We have played an active role in the "Healthy and Affordable Housing" community coalition. Working with organisations across Australia, we've contributed to numerous open letters, policy submissions for Victoria and Queensland, and close engagement with Commonwealth policy processes happening through the COAG Energy Council.

Health research

The health dimension of inefficient rental homes has been a central concern for Better Renting. In 2019 we secured funding to produce two research projects, examining the health effects of inefficient rental properties in winter and summer.

Our winter report, Unsafe as Houses: Cold-housing deaths in the ACT, looked into the mortality impacts of cold homes, estimating that every year 40 deaths in the ACT are due to cold housing. Our summer report, Home-Baked: Housing, Heat, and Health, reviewed the health impacts of hot weather, with renters particularly exposed due to the lower-quality of their homes.

Home Truths

"Home Truths" was a 2019 project to engage more renters in understanding how they were affected by inefficient homes, and to communicate this to other renters and the broader ACT community. A goal with this was to empower renters to make changes themselves, but at the same time to highlight the positive difference that minimum rental standards would make if legislated by the territory government.

As a consequence of this project, we were able to engage with a number of renters directly to help them make improvements in their homes. We used this experience to develop an "Energy efficiency guide for people who rent" that we and many other organisations have been able to use to support broader change. At the same time, we documented the stories and experiences of renters to highlight the human face of this issue and build more public support for action.

CORONAVIRUS ADVOCACY

In 2020, we rapidly adapted our projects as COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns swept Australia. People who rent their homes experienced much worse economic impacts from these lockdowns, and many were left struggling to pay rent on reduced incomes. Our role in this environment was to keep this issue on the agenda, amplify the voices of renters, and continue to agitate for a robust policy response from governments.

National statements on renting and coronavirus

By March 2020 it was apparent that Australian renters were going to be put at great risk as the potential health and economic impacts of COVID-19 became known. Better Renting joined a group of organisations and academics that led rapid advocacy efforts raising the need for eviction moratoriums and rent relief, including a statement with 60 organisations and 27 housing and health academics. This advocacy earned national media coverage and was largely successful: National Cabinet made a commitment to state-based eviction moratoriums on 29 March, which supported ongoing state and territory based efforts.

By the end of May, all states and territories had implemented some version of eviction moratoriums and some method of reducing rent or otherwise alleviating financial pressure, though often both moratoriums and rent relief were inadequate for their purpose. After this outcome, we were concerned that governments may have moved on and that this problem was seen as solved. In contrast, we understood that the government response had been piecemeal and that many renters were still vulnerable.

Better Renting thus worked with other organisations across Australia to develop an open letter from 70+ housing and related organisations highlighting what was needed as part of a decent response to support renters. We helped to secure new organisational supporters and remobilise previous supporters, engaged the media, and supported renter case studies to share their stories. The letter served to draw attention to the ongoing challenges facing people who rent, and earned national media coverage.

Survey report

In the midst of COVID-19, we conducted a survey of almost 1,000 renters to understand their situation following the pandemic. We used the data from this survey to develop a report, Rent due: renting and stress during COVID-19, which we launched in August 2020. With this report, we were able to refocus national attention on the challenges facing renters, and give voice to the renters who were still struggling. The report earned national media attention and led to meetings with a number of federal politicians.

In compiling the report, we drew upon the words of renters themselves who had contributed through the survey. In addition, our team conducted over fifty interviews with renters to hear more about their experiences. We were able to pepper these accounts throughout the report, helping to put a human face on the issue.

Debt report

With governments set to lift eviction moratoriums in early 2021, Better Renting launched a report in November 2020 aiming to quantify the number of renters who would be at risk of eviction if governments didn't act to address rental debt. Our analysis found that between 324,000 and 973,000 people could be at risk of Covid evictions. Our report also developed a typology of debt, naming both rental debt and credit/utility debt as issues of concern for renters and governments.

The report, 'Til debt do us part: a fair solution to prevent Covid evictions, earned widespread media attention. It was covered by The Guardian, The Australian, ABC, and was syndicated by AAP. It also earned radio coverage, and was covered with a live interview on the ABC News. This was a powerful moment to make the case that this problem exists and to prompt governments to take it seriously in their planning and decision-making.

OTHER RENTER ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT

Blocking 'bond loans' in ACT

Early in the life of Better Renting, we contributed to blocking 'bond loans' in the ACT. This small victory was significant in showing the role that Better Renting could play in complementing the work of other organisations in the tenancy space.

In May 2018, new laws were to come into effect in the ACT that would allow 'commercial guarantees'. Instead of a bond, tenants could pay a fee to a commercial third party. In place of a bond, this third party would offer the lessor a surety to cover any of the costs that would otherwise have been covered by the bond.

We learnt about this issue from the Tenants' Union of the ACT (TUACT), which was worried that this would end up costing renters more and subvert the tribunal process that gives tenants a chance to argue against unfair bond claims.

In a matter of days, we were able to make this issue a political headache for the government. Better Renting reached out to local journalists to highlight the concerns about this change, penned an op-ed that ran in The Canberra Times, and connected reporters with affected renters. This complemented the advocacy of TUACT, which was engaging directly with the ACT Attorney-General to raise their concerns.

The ACT Government ended up backtracking on their own changes, just days after they came into effect. This early success showed how Better Renting's outspoken criticism of government could synergise with the advocacy and lobbying of other organisations. In late 2018, the ACT Government then extended its own no-interest bond loans program, supporting more renters to cover their bond without having to pay fees.

Facebook groups

From April 2018, Better Renting has operated Facebook groups as a way to foster online communities of renters. These groups serve to build connections between renters, to help us understand the issues facing renters in different communities, and to provide a space where renters can get support and advice with their issues. Since beginning with "Canberra Renters", we now support four Facebook groups across Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide.

A particular highlight of these groups is seeing the outpouring of support when renters post with regard to an issue they are facing. Many of those posters then feel empowered to stand up for themselves and to defend their rights as a renter, often able to post a follow-up story about their success or how they have exercised their rights. As such, we often get positive feedback from renters about the value of these Facebook groups for them.

"Better Renting has been a fantastic source, not only for providing renters with crucial information on their legal rights, but it has also offered a platform for community members to connect over shared lived-experiences. I can't emphasise enough how much comfort that brings when you're stuck in the middle of a difficult situation.

Tenants Talks

When Better Renting began in 2018, we wanted a way to begin building a community of renters, while also listening to learn more about the experiences of people who rent and identifying the issues that mattered to them. To do this, we launched Tenant Talks.

The idea of Tenant Talks was to support renters to host an event in their home where they would invite other renters to have a structured conversation about their experiences of renting. These conversations were transcribed and used to produce a report talking about what we heard. This project was inspired by similar work by the Victorian Women's Trust.

The project was a great success and delivered rich insights into what it was like to be a renter in the ACT. Participants spoke about what they liked about renting, as well as the issues with low-quality housing, competitive rental application processes, and the constant fear of an eviction notice in the mailbox. These inputs informed Better Renting's priorities; we also produced a report which we shared with the ACT's politicians.

Make Renting Fair ACT

"Make Renting Fair ACT" was a coalition of ACT community organisations to secure reforms to the ACT Residential Tenancies Act that would help to provide better homes for people who rent. Better Renting played a key role in this coalition, alongside the Tenants' Union of the ACT, Unions ACT, and Shelter ACT. The coalition pushed for and supported the passage of legislation, amongst other things, that made it easier for renters to obtain a pet and to oppose an excessive rent increase.

Better Renting:

- participated in joint lobbying of ACT MLAs;
- produced a report, House of Lords, looking at the lack of renters in the ACT Legislative Assembly;
- Organised an open letter from 12 ACT community organisations; and
- Wrote an op-ed for The Canberra Times following the passage of the legislation in May 2019.

Re-imagine Renting

Re-imagine Renting is a Better Renting project to strengthen a shared narrative about renting that we and other housing advocates can use to change the conversation around renting in Australia, creating fertile conditions for lasting reform.

Thus far, the project has focused on understanding the narrative being used to defend the status quo and to block rental reform efforts. Going forward, we will review existing narratives in use by housing justice advocates, seeking to identify and flesh out the strongest narrative that can be used to make our case for change.

This project grew out of the realisation that a fundamental barrier to reform in Australia is an out-dated and judgemental view of renting, as well as a rose-tinted view of landlords and landlordism. This dominant narrative results in low expectations: a sense that renting is inevitably inferior, that we can't ask for more, and that the only solution is more home-ownership. As a precondition to deep and lasting change, we took the view that we first needed to create cultural change: to change the stories that Australians believe about renting.

Through this project so far we've done one-on-one interviews with people from all over Australia and from a range of professional backgrounds. It's been inspiring to see their enthusiasm for the project and the shared energy to come up with a story that housing campaigners can rally around in our mission to secure better homes for more Australians.

THE FUTURE OF BETTER RENTING

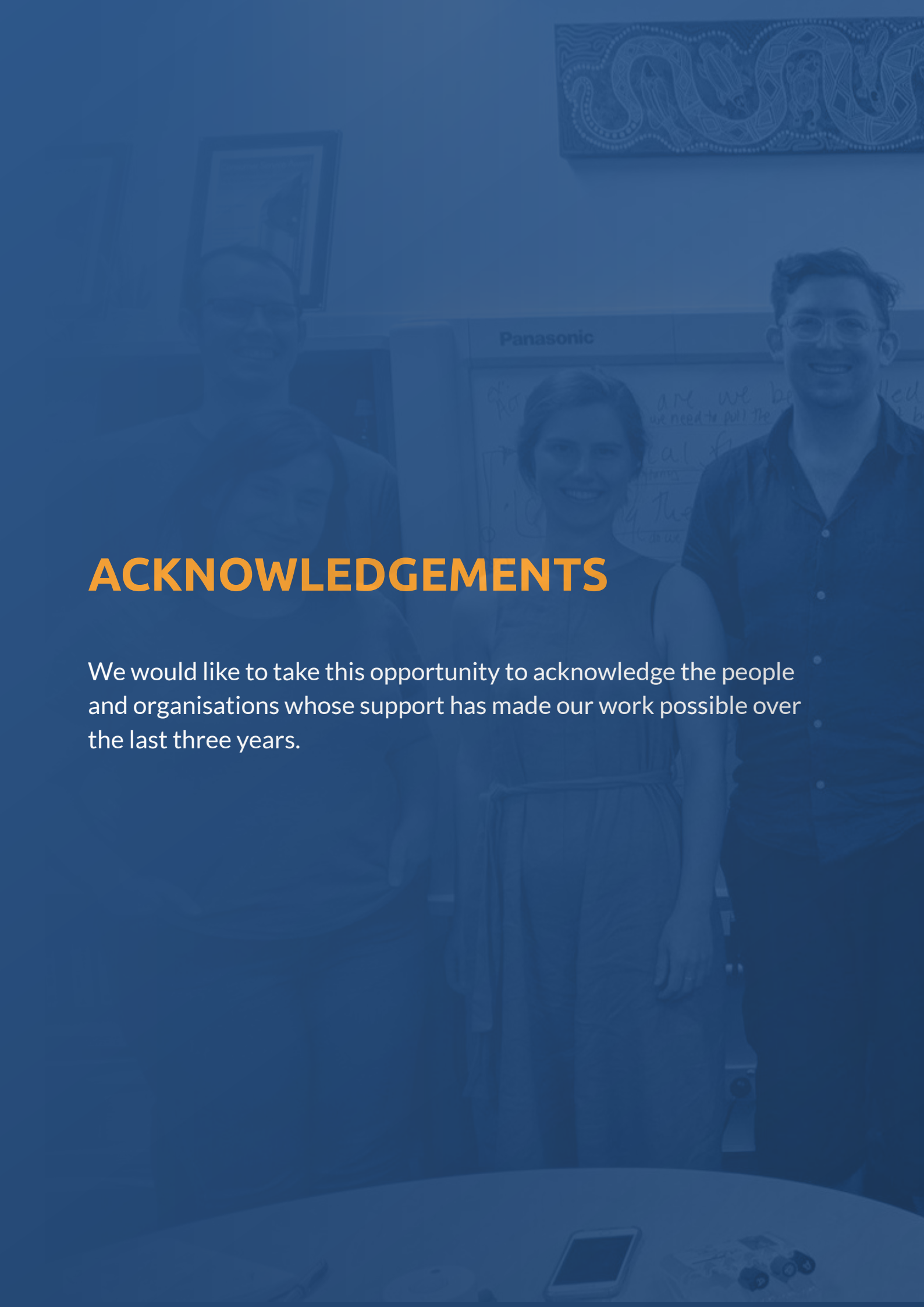
After our first three years, what does the future look like for Better Renting?

Through 2021, a priority will be our Healthy Homes work. We plan to work with more organisations to secure a commitment from every Australian government to implement minimum rental standards. Subsequently, we will continue working to make this commitment a reality. In coming years, every person who rents their home could have a guarantee of a home that meets their basic needs for health and comfort.

We will continue to build upon the work of Re-imagine Renting. This will involve strengthening a narrative for housing justice that Better Renting and like-minded organisations can use to build a groundswell of support for the housing system that we want. As well as increasing our work to influence the narrative through media engagement, we will continue to build the capacity of people who rent to act as messengers and advocates, and we will collaborate with other organisations to ensure we are telling a consistent story.

To enable this work, we will continue developing a sustainable revenue model. We anticipate this means ongoing support from philanthropic partners, major donors, and foundations. At the same time, we see great value in building a community that directly supports Better Renting through regular, small donations. In addition to the revenue, this is a way to build our grassroots power and hold ourselves accountable to our supporters. Growing this community and this revenue stream is a likely priority for coming years.

People who rent in Australia have a particular experience that is a consequence of our rental laws, institutions, and culture. All of this can change. With a different culture, different laws, different institutions, the rental sector can offer stable, affordable, and healthy homes for the growing number of Australians who are living, raising children, and growing old while renting. We can't all own a home. But we all still need one.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the people and organisations whose support has made our work possible over the last three years.

Funders

Team

Staff members

Anna Dennis
Home Truths Project Coordinator

Minna Featherstone
Coronavirus Campaigner

Isaac Daniels
Campaigner

Board members

We are grateful to Board Directors, past and present. These people have played a unique role through the early days of Better Renting as we build a strong foundation for a lasting organisation.

C Moore
Mental Health Policy Officer, Carers ACT

Varo LE
Senior Policy Officer, SA Housing Authority

Bill Browne
Researcher, The Australia Institute

Maiy Azize
Director of Communications & Advocacy, Anglicare Aus.

Lani Perlesz
Project Manager, ClimateWorks Aus.

Sophia Walter
Queensland Manager, The Pew Charitable Trusts

Michael Mazengarb
Journalist, RenewEconomy

Leo Patterson Ross
CEO, Tenants Union of NSW

Luke Gensler
CFO, Future Super

FACEBOOK.COM/**BETTERRENTINGAU**

TWITTER.COM/**BETTERRENTINGAU**

INFO@BETTERRENTING.ORG.AU

BETTERRENTING.ORG.AU