



better renting

Impact Report
2021-22



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From the Outgoing Chairperson of the Board

Over the last two years, renters have been hit hard by rising rents. From December 2021 to December 2022, rental prices across Australia rose 5.3%. More than ever, renters need action on rental policy to improve their lives and wellbeing. Better Renting strives for just that.

Two years since our last impact report, a **growing community of renters across Australia is becoming more aware of their rights, connecting with each other, and engaging in advocacy**. 'Renter Researchers', a central part of the 'Healthy Homes for Renters' campaign, has been critical to enabling these developments. Data provided by hundreds of renters across the country tells a concerning story of unhealthy temperatures in rental homes. Better Renting has created a space for these citizen-scientist renters to unite, share their experiences, and back each other to advocate for stronger action on rental standards.

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We are also seeing **positive changes to rental policy**. On 1 April 2023 a minimum energy efficiency standard for rental properties came into effect in the ACT, paving the way for other jurisdictions. The ACT Legislative Assembly has also passed a bill to end unfair evictions, making the ACT the first jurisdiction in Australia to remove all forms of tenancy termination without a cause. To make it easy for other jurisdictions to follow suit, Better Renting and 'Healthy Homes for Renters' supporters have developed a Community Sector Blueprint showing what's needed from governments to implement minimum energy efficiency standards for rentals.

This work is aided by **a changing narrative around renting**. We are dedicated to using our 'Reimagine Renting' report to change how we communicate in our renting advocacy.

With our media coverage over the last year having doubled, from 90 media appearances in 2021 to 181 appearances in 2022, the media has become a critical vehicle for amplifying this changing narrative — away from entrenched ideas around renting being a lifestyle choice and toward messages that convey the importance of everyone needing a home.

As a budding organisation, we have much more to give to renters, and our staff and Board are eager to build on our work to date. And with challenging economic times likely to continue, it's imperative for governments to look after those who will suffer most, including people who rent.

On behalf of the Board, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of our dedicated staff and diverse collaborators, including the 121 'Healthy Homes for Renters' supporter organisations across the country who have banded together as a political force in the pursuit of minimum energy standards for rental homes. We couldn't do this alone.

After four years as Chairperson of the Better Renting Board, it is time for new leadership to take Better Renting from its 'budding' phase to a more established and mature chapter. On parting, I would like to say a big thank you to our generous funders who believe in our mission, and to the growing community of renters who have contributed in so many ways to our work. The Better Renting team looks forward to continuing to partner with you to achieve a more just rental sector, where stable, affordable and healthy homes are the norm.



Lani Perlesz
Chairperson

From the Founder and Executive Director

This, our second impact report, covers the last two years out of the entire five years that Better Renting has existed. It's interesting to reflect on this period and see how much has changed since the first three years.

Still a young organisation, Better Renting has been growing into itself. We've built stronger relationships with other organisations, leading to richer collaboration. We've had greater strategic focus, but also greater capacity to respond to emerging opportunities across the country. While hardly a 'venerable' organisation, we've demonstrated commitment and staying power, helping to solidify our position as part of the growing tenant advocacy movement in Australia.

Our main focus for the last two years has been the 'Healthy Homes for Renters' collaboration. This collaboration has greatly increased the resources and attention going into the issue of minimum energy efficiency standards for rental homes, helping us to work with partners across Australia for distributed impact. As part of this I'm particularly proud of 'Renter Researchers'. This project has seen us partner directly with hundreds of renters across Australia, supporting them to connect with one another and draw attention to their

experiences of unhealthy temperatures. By combining quantitative data with the voices of renters themselves, we've earned vast media coverage and helped to highlight the challenges renters face and the need for governments to respond.

Another key achievement of this period has been completing 'Reimagine Renting'. Through this project, we engaged with renters and advocates to better explore and understand the communication challenges and opportunities we face. Winning action on rental policy requires changing our cultural understanding of rental issues; this project aimed to identify the messages that can help to achieve this. The work resulted in a report highlighting winning narratives for housing campaigners to employ, which has been invaluable for our own work and has also benefited the many organisations we worked with through this process.

'Reimagine Renting' and 'Healthy Homes for Renters' are large projects that we've planned in advance and then rolled out. But

some parts of our impact are less predictable. Alongside the big and more obvious work, we are busy with smaller pieces. These don't necessarily have a huge impact, but they are part of our 'sense and respond' approach, helping us to try out different methods, see what works, and learn more about the system we operate in.

We've liaised with journalists to get up small stories about the experiences of different renters or to highlight relevant research findings. We have met with various organisations across Australia to share our advice and insights on tenancy reform issues and policy objectives. We've made many submissions, met with many elected officials, and provided direct information and support to countless renters. This work is harder to enumerate and it's much harder to anticipate exactly what it will involve, but it is central to our mission and our responsibility to support people who rent.

These last two years leave me excited for the future of Better Renting, and tenant advocacy more broadly. After completing a Churchill Fellowship in late 2022 exploring this issue, I am convinced that housing justice

will be a growing concern in Australia in coming years. In this space Better Renting plays a key role in helping to centre the voices of people who rent and developing a more expansive vision for a housing system that ensures everyone can have a stable, affordable, and healthy home.

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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 being an owner-occupier. 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 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.

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.

BETTER RENTING ACTIVITIES 2021-22

Healthy Homes for Renters

‘Healthy Homes for Renters’ (HH4R) is a national collaboration pursuing minimum energy efficiency standards for rental homes in every state and territory. Better Renting has played a key role in establishing this collaboration and driving its work forward.

Everyone should have a healthy home. However, for many renters this isn’t possible: substandard rental homes are too cold in winter and too hot in summer. This puts the health of occupants at risk, increasing the risk of cardiovascular and respiratory disease. We can address this by introducing a minimum standard for rental properties that would ensure basic energy efficiency features, such as ceiling insulation and reverse-cycle air conditioning, so that renters can afford and achieve healthy temperatures in their homes.

Better Renting has been active on this issue since our founding. From 2021 to 2022, this work scaled up dramatically. This was mainly achieved through the HH4R collaboration. We launched the collaboration in early 2021, developing shared resources like a website, brand guide, and messaging guide. We also began monthly meetings of an Executive Committee of core organisations that we work with on this issue. The collaboration now has over 120 organisational members and around 3000 renter supporters, representing a diversity of organisations and areas across the entirety of Australia.

One of the most powerful achievements of this collaboration is how it allows us to engage with state governments across the country. By working with local partners, we can connect local relationships and contextual knowledge with shared resources and strategic oversight. Using this model, we’ve been able to forge relationships with state politicians in multiple parliaments, also using this system to strengthen Better Renting’s connection with HH4R supporters and to build more campaign autonomy in distributed regions. In particular, we have focused on WA, NSW, and SA, engaging with governments and oppositions and building clusters of active local organisations.

A key strength of this collaboration is the diversity of approaches it brings. This includes policy development, lobbying, research, grassroots power-building, and online advocacy. The next few sections give some examples of different projects that have been part of HH4R, helping to showcase this variety.

NSW Briefing

In October 2022 Better Renting collaborated on a briefing to the NSW Parliament. We partnered with Tenants' Union of NSW and Sweltering Cities, two supporters of Healthy Homes for Renters, and we also worked with other supporter organisations. The briefing was co-hosted by a diverse group of MPs: Minister Victor Dominello, Jihad Dib, Jenny Leong, and Alex Greenwich. It was attended by many NSW MPs as well as supporter organisations.

At the briefing, our different organisations each spoke about our own perspective on housing and health issues and the need for minimum energy efficiency rental standards. Gemma McKinnon, a renter from Sydney, also spoke about her experiences as a renter.

We also heard from our four parliamentary co-hosts. After the formal part of the event, Healthy Homes for Renters supporters were able to mingle with the MPs in attendance.

This event allowed us to communicate directly with MPs about why this issue mattered and to demonstrate the community and organisational support for change. We heard great feedback from MPs and their staff members. The event was a tribute to the work of HH4R partners in NSW and our ability to work together on projects like this, combining our diverse strengths to stage compelling events with a range of complementary perspectives.



The Healthy Homes for Renters briefing in NSW Parliament, a shared effort of Better Renting, Tenants' Union of NSW, and Sweltering Cities.



An illustration from the 'Hot Homes' report on Summer Renter Researchers 2022.

Renter Researchers

Around mid-2021, we began exploring ways to involve more grassroots renters in HH4R. We wanted to engage more with the people directly affected by substandard rental homes, and help build their capacity to engage with decision-makers. This led to the 'Renter Researchers' project.

'Renter Researchers' is a citizen-science research project exploring the experiences of renters in their homes during winter and summer. We recruit participants from across the country, and equip them with tracking devices to log temperature and humidity in their homes. To complement this quantitative data, we also survey and interview participants to get a richer picture of their experiences and concerns. We provide participants with training to support ongoing advocacy, and we cap off the whole project by launching a report through the media.

We are now running this project for the third time, having run it last winter and last summer. Each time, the results have been harrowing. We've been able to precisely document the temperature challenges that renters are facing in their homes, with extreme and unhealthy temperatures worryingly common. The qualitative data has been invaluable too, helping us to identify concerns around cost of living that, for example, prevent many people from using heating appliances, even when available. Further, we've discovered that many properties are so poor that it is barely physically possible to heat them to a healthy level, even if cost isn't a concern.

The combination of quantitative data and personal testimony from renters has also proven powerful in earning national media coverage. From our last two projects we

recorded 74 media hits; 40 of these featured renter researchers. The diverse coverage spanned the country and a range of outlets, from national news stories to local online journals. We were also able to highlight the variety of people renting across Australia through the diversity of participants in the project.

In addition to the media coverage, we've shared both reports with MPs across Australia, with many renters also sharing the report with their local representatives. Different researchers have gone further, arranging meetings with their state MPs to share their own experiences and push for more action on rental issues. Other groups that we work with through HH4R have been able to build upon this work, drawing upon it for their own advocacy and using it as a strong evidence-base showing the need for reform.

Most rewarding for our team, however, is knowing how much renters get out of being part of this project. As one participant shared with us:

"I definitely got something out of the project, but more important is what we got out of it collectively. Firstly, I think the data has helped us each to feel validated in what we already experienced (as in, I don't just feel cold in my house all winter, I now know it's GENUINELY cold - below WHO recommendations - almost 100% of the time in my house in winter!). Secondly, the Report seems to be gaining some good traction and media, and I feel hopeful that the conversation is shifting for renters. But we still have a lot of work to do, which brings me to my third point - that the RR project has helped build a community of renters who want to make change, and helped empower us to speak to media and decision-makers. This is just the beginning!"



Illness, mould, and a battle to stay warm: Australian tenants' winter struggle

Sam* is a renter who struggles to keep her property warm in winter — and she's not the only one, with a new report revealing the battle some tenants face during the colder months.



Sam* rents a property in metropolitan Sydney and has been struggling to stay warm this winter. Source: SBS News

The Canberra Times

Tips for Canberra renters to reduce energy use and save on power bills this winter, according to CSIRO scientist Michael Ambrose

By Brittany Levinson
June 17 2022 - 5:30am



Gerald-Cherry is preparing for a significant increase in her energy costs this winter. Source: The Canberra Times

Herald Sun

Victorian rental properties at temperatures beneath World Health Organisation 'safe' standard

Scott Carbines,
Property Journalist



Ben Kreunen and his two cats participated in research that showed just how cold Victorian rentals are in winter. Picture: David Crosling

Community Sector Blueprint

The second year of HH4R began with a strategy retreat in Sydney. Coming out of this workshop, the Executive Committee identified the need to have a clear shared blueprint for the detail of what we wanted governments to be doing to implement minimum energy efficiency standards for rentals.

This led to the Community Sector Blueprint, which was developed through a mammoth effort, coordinated by HH4R partner ACOSS. Over a period of months, core organisations met frequently to map key policy questions and flesh out detailed answers, drawing upon a range of expertise across tenancy, energy, governance, and engineering. This was a generative process that didn't only collate knowledge, but also helped to generate and socialise new knowledge, while also establishing a deep consensus across

community sector organisations. The process also involves various rounds of consultation with the whole community of HH4R supporters and other organisations, helping to bring in broader expertise and share the insights further.

The Community Sector Blueprint has now been endorsed by over 80 organisations. It has been an invaluable resource for Better Renting and other partner organisations. We use it to help provide background for new supporter organisations, to answer policy questions from public servants, and to demonstrate the breadth of community support to elected officials. Many HH4R partners use it in similar ways. This Blueprint, the outcome of a patient, intensive, and iterative process, shows the strength of the collaboration and the outcomes we are able to achieve together.



Recording an interview on rent bidding for *The Project*

#HowDoYouSleepAtNight?

#HowDoYouSleepAtNight? (HDYSAN) was an online engagement action to reach a broader audience of renters and discuss how winter cold affected them in their homes. While Renter Researchers engages a small group deeply, HDYSAN was designed to engage a large group less deeply. The idea was to start online conversations and solicit responses to the prompt — how do you sleep at night? — with renters sharing pictures of their substandard homes and sharing their experiences of winter.

We received over 70 submissions from renters across Australia, with many photos and striking accounts. We then used these to create social media share tiles, which we tweeted at the elected representatives of the renters who had submitted stories. Our intention was to bring this issue to the attention of more MPs and to facilitate their hearing directly from their constituents. We had some promising responses, with MPs promising to intervene on behalf of renters in their electorates.

REIMAGINE RENTING

Powerful stories to build support for rental reform

Like other organisations, when we push for policy changes we confront entrenched ideas about how the housing system should work in Australia. These ideas are often subconscious and tacit, yet they influence what solutions are seen as possible or desirable. They set the bounds on what can be achieved.

Reimagine Renting was an effort to understand and shift these culture-based assumptions, helping to create more space for significant change.

This meant a research project to identify and develop a shared narrative for Australian housing and tenancy advocacy organisations. Over two years, concluding in early 2022, we researched the existing literature on communications and framing, consulted with Australian organisational stakeholders, and analysed media coverage of renting issues. Through a series of webinars and rounds of feedback, including input from renters, we developed a report highlighting narratives to focus on as well as to avoid. This included a focus on homes, the growing number of long-term renters,

and governments' responsibility to act. We then used this report to inform our own advocacy through the media and shared it with others as a resource for them to use.

This long-term project has given Better Renting a strong foundation to strategically intervene in the media discourse around renting issues, confident each media appearance contributes to achieving a longer-term values shift along lines we've previously mapped out. We've also been able to see how this report, and the conversations between stakeholders that informed it, have filtered out in the communications of allies and like-minded organisations across Australia.

At the day-to-day level, what renters need is better rental laws that provide stable, affordable, and healthy homes. But we also hear from so many renters who are fed up with the way they are spoken about and how rental issues are treated in the media. Through Reimagine Renting, we paint a positive vision for an Australian rental sector that can ensure decent long-term homes for the growing number of life-long renters.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Through 2021 and 2022 Better Renting has excelled at working with the media to amplify our messages and grow public awareness and support on our issues. Despite our small team and meager resources we have been able to launch key reports to significant media coverage in a range of outlets spanning the entire country. Journalists regularly come to us seeking comments or wanting to interview renters about their experiences.

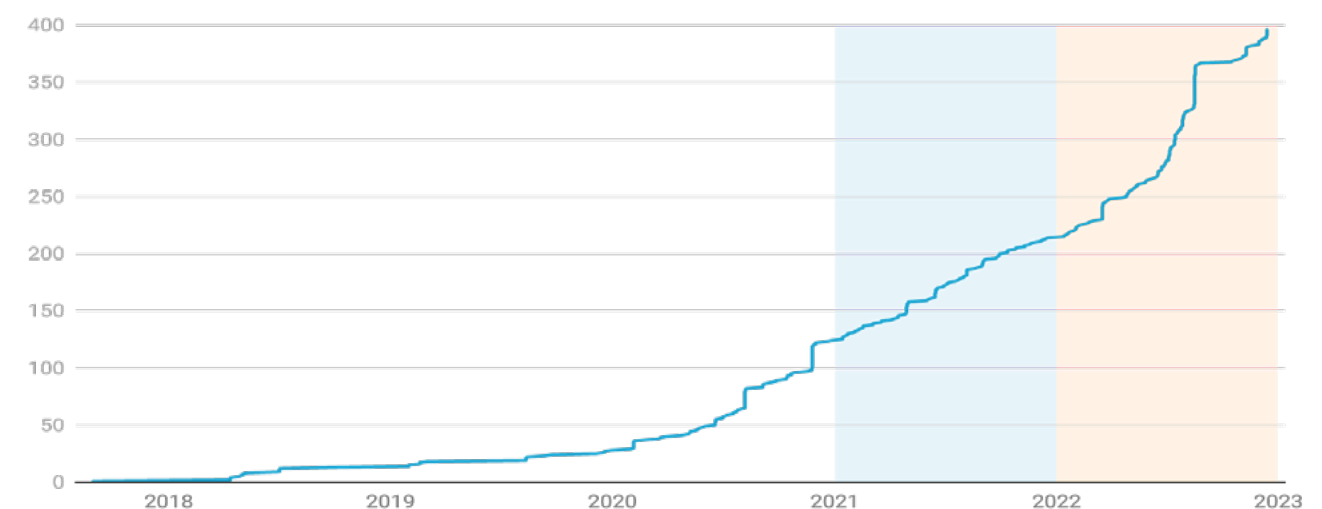
As the below figure shows, we have secured an astonishing amount of media coverage — not only that, but the rate of coverage is increasing over time, as we build stronger relationships with more journalists and news outlets. In 2021 we documented 90 media appearances — in 2022, we recorded 181 appearances, a doubling in one year. The vertical jumps you can see in the below figure are from key media moments such as

the launch of our report on Winter Renter Researchers, our single biggest media moment to date. This coverage includes:

- **418 stories with Better Renting speaking about rental issues,**
- **Engaging with over 250 different media professionals,**
- **Coverage in over 120 different media outlets, &**
- **85 stories (20%) involving renters as spokespeople or case studies.**

This sort of coverage is crucial to our work of changing the cultural narrative around renting. By sharing our messages through the media, amplifying the reach of our work, and supporting renters to make their voices heard, we can contribute to a more fertile policy environment for tenancy reform.

CUMULATIVE MEDIA OVER TIME



OTHER TENANT ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT

The Path of Lease Resistance

‘The Path of Lease Resistance’ was a research project to explore the use of non-standard terms in ACT tenancy agreements, see how it was affecting renters, and highlight options for reform.

In general, tenancy law prevents ‘contracting out’: there are minimum conditions that a landlord must comply with, regardless of what an individual agreement says. However, ACT law allows landlords to modify leases by adding non-standard terms. The Tribunal is meant to play a role in endorsing some terms but, in practice, many landlords and agents routinely add non-standard terms without endorsement. Even if these terms are not legally enforceable, tenants don’t necessarily know, so their rights are illegally circumscribed.

Our research into this issue involved interviews with real estate professionals, community sector stakeholders, as well as consultation with renters, many of whom shared examples of their lease agreements and non-standard terms. Through this process we were able to identify both the

prevalence of the problem, but also the relative lack of understanding of how the system is meant to work. We used this to develop a report, The Path of Lease Resistance, which made a number of recommendations for reform.

When we launched the report, people were rightly shocked by the invasive and controlling terms being forced upon renters. The report was covered in radio, print, and on TV, including The Canberra Times, ABC Canberra, WIN News, 2CC, Canberra Weekly, and The Riot Act. With this report we were able to deepen our institutional understanding of this issue, contribute to improved community awareness, engage and support renters to elevate their concerns, and develop a roadmap for reform for the ACT Government.

Advocacy in the ACT

Better Renting started out in the ACT. We are now a national organisation that works with governments and organisations across Australia. But we retain a connection with our home territory, particularly as the ACT no longer has a tenants union. In this capacity we have engaged with the ACT Government on rental reform and also to defend against forced evictions from public housing.

Ending unfair evictions in the ACT

A key priority for tenant organisations across Australia has been targeting unfair evictions: the use of ‘no cause’ or ‘without grounds’ tenancy terminations. These give landlords disproportionate power and make tenants afraid to advocate for their rights, for fear of a retaliatory eviction. What we want to see is a ‘just cause evictions’ framework that allows a landlord to end a tenancy only with a justified reason.

For the past years Better Renting has been active on this issue in the ACT. We have supported renters to share their stories

through the media, co-ordinated joint advocacy with other organisations, and engaged directly with elected officials to push for an end to unfair evictions. In the lead-up to the 2020 ACT election we developed a policy scorecard highlighting the different stances on this key issue, aiming to create more political accountability.

Following the 2020 ACT election, the Labor-Greens government committed to ending no cause evictions as part of their “Parliamentary and Governing Agreement”. Better Renting consulted closely with the government on this change, also supporting renters to speak out about the impact of evictions on their finances and mental health. Finally, in late 2022, the government introduced a bill to end no cause evictions. The ACT has become the first jurisdiction in Australia to fully prevent unfair evictions, including at the end of a fixed term.



Better Renting staff meeting with ACT Attorney-General Shane Rattenbury.

Public housing

In April 2022 we heard from Canberra Community Law (CCL) about concerns with the ACT’s “Growth and Renewal Program”. Although this program has the worthy goal of improving public housing in the ACT, in this process existing public housing tenants were being faced with forced eviction. Many of these tenants were clients of CCL and were very distressed by this prospect. CCL was organising a joint letter on the issue.

A key part of our approach to tenancy issues is that our laws should reflect that everyone needs a home. This is true of private renters — it’s also true of people renting in the public housing system. Our

concern was that the ACT Government was not only threatening security of tenure for these people, but also setting a concerning example for other landlords.

In addition to supporting CCL’s open letter, we collaborated with CCL on a joint opinion piece which ran in The Canberra Times. Following this piece we met with the relevant Minister to share our concerns. Housing ACT subsequently implemented an exemptions process by which tenants facing eviction could apply to remain in their homes. While this wasn’t the best possible outcome, we were glad to be able to work with ACT allies to help defend public housing and the people who make their homes there.

Churchill Fellowship

In late 2022 our Executive Director Joel Dignam completed a Churchill Fellowship, traveling to the US and the UK to connect with other tenant organisations. The purpose of this travel was to explore the challenges and opportunities that tenant organisations are reckoning with elsewhere in the world and identify the implications for Australian tenant movement organisations. The five-week trip took in San Francisco, Portland, New York City, London, and Cardiff; it included meetings with 29 people from a host of different organisations.

The study tour reinforced the importance of the narrative-focused work that Better Renting does in trying to change the cultural conversation around housing

and support renters to be messengers and spokespeople on these issues. Other takeaways were the importance of grassroots power-building, and working with other organisations in a diverse and interconnected ecosystem. Across all of this, our North Star needs to be decommodification: how can we move towards a housing system where providing homes for people is the priority, instead of creating assets and returns for speculators.

This Fellowship was a unique chance to learn about tenant organising from experienced practitioners elsewhere in the Anglosphere. The lessons we learnt have implications for Better Renting, as well as other organisations we work with, and we hope to share them widely.



Executive Director Joel Dignam meets with the Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco.

THE FUTURE OF BETTER RENTING

In 2023, Better Renting will mark five years since we came into legal existence. In this time we've grown to three staff members, built our annual revenue, navigated multiple Board transitions, earned hundreds of media hits, and supported countless renters on issues large and small. But hopefully in times to come, we will look back on this anniversary as reflecting a time when Better Renting was still growing in our power and what we were able to achieve for people who rent. Although we've grown in impact and efficacy over five years, so too has the need for an organisation like ours, dedicated to stable, affordable, and healthy homes for people who rent. We have more work to do.

In years to come we hope to expand the scope of our work to invest more resources into campaigns alongside 'Healthy Homes for Renters', particularly around dealing with excessive rent increases. This likely means securing more funding to grow the staff team to have people to take ownership of and drive this work. In addition to staff focused on specific projects, building our central capacity in areas like communications and community organising will help us to achieve our mission and work more closely with renters on the ground to build their capacity and

empower them with the tools to take action. Current projects such as 'Renter Researchers' offer a prototype for this work, but the sheer interest of renters in projects like these is testament to the level of unmet demand.

We are also preparing for a leadership transition, as our Founding Director Joel Dignam has spent over five years at the helm. This is a challenge for any young organisation, but also an opportunity. We are working to ensure that Better Renting can attract a new Executive Director and equip them to succeed, and we look forward to how a change of leadership can bring new ideas and approaches to help Better Renting to continue to grow and win better outcomes for people who rent.

Rental issues, and the housing crisis more broadly, are getting increasing attention in Australia and across the world. There is an effective consensus that something is wrong, and things need to change. Just what changes, and whose interests the changes serve, is yet to be decided. It is our mission and our responsibility to push for radical changes that can ensure that people who rent, and all other people in Australia, can have stable, affordable, and healthy homes.

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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.

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Team

Staff members



Joel Dignam



Isaac Daniels



Katelin McInerney



Bernadette Barrett



Luke Catania

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.



Maiy Azize



Lani Perlesz



Sophia Walter



Michael Mazengarb



Leo Patterson Ross



Jordan Thompson



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