

Looming crisis for older single women renters



Wendy Walters with granddaughter Lucinda, 14 months, has little left to spend after paying her rent. Picture: Paul Beutel

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Wendy Walters is one of a hidden but rapidly growing cohort of Australians being hit hard by the housing affordability crisis: older single women.

Despite having worked all her life, volunteered for several community organisations, raised three children, including a foster son, and put herself through university as a mature-age single mother, Ms Walters is unemployed at 63 and struggling to afford rent. The plight of older Australians like Ms Walters will be on the agenda at the National Press Club today.

Experts and advocacy groups will come together for a Council on the Ageing policy forum, warning of a looming crisis as older Australians face mounting

pressure from the rising cost of private rent, an increasing shortage of social housing, and carrying mortgages into retirement.

After a long career in the community services sector managing large teams of workers and volunteers at organisations including the Red Cross, Cancer Council and UnitingCare, Ms Walters moved from Perth to the Queensland town of Bundaberg three years ago to be close to her daughter's growing family.

Although she's had several jobs since moving to the unemployment capital of Australia, Ms Walters has been hindered in her ability to find full-time employment by health problems, having recently been diagnosed with glaucoma. She says she has also encountered prejudice about her age from potential employers.

Aside from a limited amount of superannuation, she is dependent on the \$360 a week she gets in Newstart payments, with little left over after she pays \$275 in rent.

The house she and her former husband owned was sold when they divorced when their children were young. "You walk out with the kids and that's it. I think I got about \$5000 when we sold the house," she said.

Grattan Institute chief executive John Daley, who will address the conference, said declining rates of home ownership meant the number of older Australians struggling to find affordable housing would increase exponentially.

"At the moment, most 65-year-olds own their own home, but if you look at 45-year-olds, a substantial proportion don't and probably never will," Professor Daley said.

"In 15 to 20 years' time we're going to be facing a real crisis."

Rising rental prices and a hostile private rental property market, scarcity in social and community housing, increasing numbers of older Australians retiring with a mortgage and an inadequate supply of suitable housing for older people would only compound the problem.