



COTA Over 50s Ltd.
PO Box 3508
MANUKA ACT 2603
Phone: 02 6295 1844
Fax: 02 6295 1807
Email: info@cotaover50s.org.au

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LOOMING HOUSING CRUNCH FOR OLDER AUSTRALIANS

On current trends, within 20 years there will be more than 400,000 older Australians looking for rental accommodation. Even if rental properties could be offered at 20% below market rates, most of these renters will still not be able to afford them. As well, more and more Australians are entering retirement with substantial mortgages hanging around their necks. Many will want to downsize, and there will be nowhere for them to go.

These and other concerns have prompted the peak seniors organisation, COTA Over 50s, to conduct a major forum on housing issues for older Australians as part of a national gathering of all the state and territory Councils on the Ageing in Canberra at the end of May.

"The absolutely fundamental requirement for people to age well is to have secure accommodation," said COTA Over 50s Executive Director, Dr Geoffrey Bird. "Every health initiative, every effort at social inclusion, every family that wants to support their elders, must work from the basic premise that people have suitable housing.

"We are delighted that the Rudd government has taken housing seriously, and has appointed Tanya Plibersek to lead the charge. We are concerned, however, that older Australians might be overlooked in the focus on delivering affordable housing to working families and to first home owners. Older Australians are becoming a larger section of the population. They are a self-reliant bunch who have a lot to offer, not only to their own families, but to the community as a whole. It's vital that they can stay living in their own communities, in housing that is accessible, and from which they can continue to participate as active, effective citizens.

"Older Australians in rental accommodation are particularly vulnerable. If you're on a pension and the rent goes up even a few dollars, it can mean ending up on the streets. If that happens, it's a downward spiral for the person, and an expensive strain on the services that have to step in and help. It makes sound economic sense to enable people to retain their accommodation and be better able to look after themselves."

The COTA Over 50s Affordable Housing Forum will be opened by the Minister for Ageing, Justine Elliot, and feature her colleague, Housing Minister Tanya Plibersek, as well as top housing academic Professor Hal Kendig and leading interstate figures who are bringing innovative ideas to bear on affordable and accessible housing. Newly appointed Ambassador for Ageing, Noeline Brown, is giving the luncheon address, along with Indigenous Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma. Limited places at the Forum will be available to interested members of the public. It will be held at the National Press Club on Thursday 29 May from 9am -2:30pm. Inquiries to Dr Geoff Bird on 6295 1844 or email gbird@cotaover50s.org.au.

CONTACT:

Dr Geoffrey Bird Mobile : 0409 705 951
Executive Director
COTA Over 50s Ltd