

# ACT Shelter

## Housing justice advocacy in the Capital: the enduring role of ACT Shelter

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For fifty years, ACT Shelter has been the independent voice for housing justice in the nation's capital and a constant presence through decades of change, challenge, and reform.

Canberra's housing story is unlike that of any other Australian city. Where public housing elsewhere evolved as a safety net for people on low incomes, in Canberra it was integral to the city's design and growth.

For much of the twentieth century, government-built housing was not just for those in need but for all who came to work in the national capital — teachers, nurses, families, and public servants alike. By the late 1950s, 84 per cent of all houses in Canberra had been built by the government. Living in public housing was the norm rather than the exception, with the provision of decent housing firmly recognised as a government responsibility.

By the early 1970s, that vision was beginning to fray. In 1972, privately built homes outnumbered government-built dwellings for the first time, marking the start of the decline in public housing as the primary housing model.

Housing shortages, long waiting lists, and the closure of low-cost hostels left many residents struggling to find a place to live. The introduction of a means test for housing eligibility in 1973 signalled a decisive policy shift: public housing in the ACT would no longer serve the broad community, but only for those deemed most in need.

At the same time, the early 1970s was a period of social and political foment in Australia. The Whitlam Government's reform agenda, coupled with

the findings of the Henderson Poverty Inquiry, exposed the deep social inequalities that persisted even in a wealthy nation.

Canberra was not immune. The spirit of reform was alive in the ACT, where students, tenants, unions, and community groups mobilised around issues of poverty, inequality, and access to housing. It was in this climate that the Shelter movement took root.

### Founding of ACT Shelter

Following the establishment of Shelter NSW in 1974, Cathi Moore was appointed the first National Shelter coordinator and travelled the country to establish Shelter movements in other states and territories. Her visit to Canberra would help catalyse the formation of ACT Shelter.

On 16 February 1975, housing activists, tenants, students, union members, public servants, and representatives from the ACT Council of Social Service and the National Capital Development Commission gathered at University House, Australian National University (ANU), for the first meeting of the ACT branch of Shelter. In July of that year, ACT Shelter hosted its first local housing conference at the ANU, and in August, National Shelter held its inaugural national conference in Canberra. These events helped cement the foundations of the ACT's housing advocacy movement.

With the dismissal of the Whitlam Government in late 1975 and the election of the Fraser Government, the political and economic climate changed. Deep cuts to public spending in Canberra

led to economic contraction and a dramatic slowdown in housing construction.

By 1979, the building of public sector homes had virtually ceased. Unemployment, particularly among young people, rose sharply, and demand for low-cost housing outstripped supply. As inequality grew, so too did housing activism.

### Building the voice of housing justice (1980s – 1990s)

Amid these social and economic pressures, Canberra's housing challenges came sharply into focus. As affordable options dwindled and hostels closed, community groups, students, and unions began to take direct action to draw attention to the city's growing housing crisis. Squats and sit-ins took place at disused hostels and vacant government buildings and were visible symbols of a community demanding action.

One of the defining moments of this period was the 1983 protest at the former Havelock House hostel. Spearheaded by community groups, students, the Trades and Labour Council, and housing activists — including a young Michelle O'Neil, then an ACT Shelter spokesperson and now President of the ACTU — the protest saw demonstrators establish a round-the-clock picket through the Canberra winter, calling for the hostel to be reopened as community housing and for an inquiry into homelessness in the ACT.

After months of sustained pressure, the newly elected Hawke Government agreed to both demands. Havelock House was subsequently



Havelock picket, 1983.

Image courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales and Courtesy SEARCH Foundation

converted into community housing, and a formal inquiry into homelessness was established.

The subsequent 1984 *Inquiry into Homelessness and Inadequate Housing in the ACT* provided a landmark account of Canberra's housing conditions. It echoed what ACT Shelter and other housing advocates had argued: that structural factors, above all an "inadequate supply" of affordable homes and public housing, were driving housing stress and homelessness in the Territory.

Among its 112 recommendations were calls for the government to expand housing supply and establish a dedicated budgetary allocation for homelessness services, in line with arrangements already in place in the states.

Throughout this period, ACT Shelter — still volunteer-run and operating without dedicated funding — forged strong partnerships across the ACT community sector, working particularly closely with ACTCOSS. This occurred alongside the emergence of a range of grassroots housing organisations and women's refuges, the establishment of the Tenants Union ACT in the early 1980s, as well as proactive housing

activism from students, feminists, unions, and a range of other groups.

As the 1980s drew to a close, Canberra entered a new phase. The creation of self-government in 1989 transferred responsibility for housing from the Commonwealth to the newly established ACT Government, along with an ageing public housing stock and limited resources to maintain it.

For ACT Shelter, the shift was pivotal. The organisation now had a local government to engage with directly, but one grappling with competing priorities and constrained budgets. Through the 1990s, ACT Shelter worked to ensure that adequate and affordable housing remained on the policy agenda, even as economic rationalism and shrinking social expenditure reshaped government priorities. It advocated for affordability, homelessness prevention, and tenants' rights — and for maintaining the social purpose of public housing in an increasingly market-driven policy environment.

In 1996, ACT Shelter was formally incorporated and received government funding for the first time. With its first paid worker, Fiona McIlroy, ACT Shelter set up a desk within the National Shelter office and alongside Community Housing

Canberra (CHOACT), strengthening its advocacy capacity and cementing its role as the independent peak body for housing justice in the ACT.

### Evolving challenges, enduring mission (2000s – 2010s)

The new millennium saw an escalation of housing system changes already underway in the 1990s — a steady decline in public housing investment, the sell-off and redevelopment of public housing stock, and the growing financialisation of housing driven by wider policy settings. As house prices and rents surged, more Canberrans struggled to find an affordable home.

Throughout this period, ACT Shelter worked tirelessly to highlight these trends and their social consequences. Partnering with the Tenants' Union ACT (TUACT), it championed renters' rights and housing affordability. Together they launched initiatives such as the 2005 Raising Our Voice tenant participation project, which led to the creation of the Housing ACT Joint Champions Group, giving tenants a direct voice in decision-making — a mechanism that continues to this day.

ACT Shelter also joined other community peaks in campaigning for the inclusion of the right to housing in the ACT Human Rights Act.

While housing was omitted from the original legislation, the campaign laid the groundwork for renewed advocacy that culminated in amendments to the ACT's Human Rights Act in 2025 to enshrine housing as a human right into law in the ACT.

Alongside its policy work, ACT Shelter continued to support grassroots campaigns, including the successful 2008 campaign to save the Narrabundah Longstay Caravan Park, which highlighted the growing influence of private developers in the housing system and the need for stronger legal protections for residents in caravans and other marginal housing.

ACT Shelter's enduring partnership with TUACT also found expression through International Tenants' Day, which grew from small forums into

citywide celebrations of renters' voices and experiences, featuring art exhibitions, community events and public discussions that affirmed renting as a valid, dignified, and enduring form of housing tenure.

### Housing justice in a time of crisis (2020s)

In the 2020s, housing justice advocacy entered a new and urgent phase. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of the housing system and the vulnerability of renters and low-income households. At the same time, the ACT faced an unprecedented housing and rental affordability crisis, with record-low vacancy rates and persistent homelessness. The defunding of the Tenants' Union ACT in 2020 further weakened the housing justice ecosystem, leaving ACT Shelter to shoulder an even

greater burden of advocacy — despite ongoing under-resourcing threatening its own viability.

Yet ACT Shelter continues to lead. It has championed tenancy reform, contributed to public housing renewal debates, advocated for a stronger social housing sector, and worked to elevate renters' rights — including leading the development of *The National Nine: Principles for Strengthening Renters' Rights* (2023).

### Enduring relevance

As ACT Shelter marks its fiftieth anniversary, its legacy is both a cause for celebration and a reminder of unfinished work. The same structural challenges that prompted its founding — poverty, homelessness, and a lack of affordable homes — persist in new forms.

The organisation stands as one of the few remaining independent voices solely dedicated to housing justice in the Territory, yet its own future is under threat due to diminishing and insecure funding.

For much of its history, ACT Shelter has operated on minimal funding, reliant on the dedication of small teams and volunteer Committees to sustain its advocacy, research, and engagement. This chronic underfunding reflects a broader undervaluing of advocacy that often occurs within the social service system — even as governments depend on the insights, connections, and expertise that organisations like Shelter provide.

Despite limited resources, ACT Shelter has played a vital role in connecting the experiences of those most affected by housing stress with the levers of policy and power. Its advocacy has helped shape debates on public housing renewal, homelessness, tenant rights, and the right to adequate housing — always anchored in the conviction that homes are the foundation of dignity, opportunity, and social justice.

As ACT Shelter looks to the future, it does so with deep gratitude for this legacy and with renewed determination to continue the fight for a fair, inclusive, and sustainable housing system for all Canberrans.

