

Illawarra public housing tenants hurting over tax

By EMMA SPILLETT Oct. 30, 2014, 9 p.m.



Warren Wheeler of the Illawarra South Coast Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service. Picture: SYLVIA LIBER

Illawarra public housing tenants have been forced to delay seeing a doctor or buying medication in order to afford the state government's controversial "bedroom tax," the region's tenancy advocacy service says.

The vacant bedroom charge, which came into effect last month, has added financial pressure to many Illawarra households already struggling to make ends meet.

Under the new rules, tenants who choose to stay in a house with vacant bedrooms must pay for the extra space.

Singles are charged an extra \$20 rent per week while couples are expected to pay \$30 more.

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The Illawarra and South Coast Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service's Warren Wheeler said most local tenants had opted to pay the extra money.

"A house is more than just a house, it's a home," he explained.

"People are prepared to pay a little bit extra because they feel part of their community - they get along with their neighbours, they've raised a family in their home, they feel safe; they don't want to start afresh somewhere else."

Since the charge's introduction, the Department of Family and Community Services has already spoken to more than 2000 households statewide.

Of these, 921 had agreed to move to a smaller house while 1251 said they would prefer to pay the extra rent, a department spokesman said.

Figures showing the Illawarra's response to the charge were not available.

But Mr Wheeler said the preference for paying the extra fee had put pressure on people already stretched financially.

"They might delay that trip to the doctors or buying medication, they've had to make sacrifices," he said.

"We haven't had any people fall behind with their rent yet but we're concerned."

The department spokesman said the policy aimed to ensure the size of properties were appropriate for the number of people in the household.

But Mr Wheeler believes the charge won't solve the real problem - a lack of housing stock.

"Public housing was originally built for families but the demographic has changed," he said.

"There's a lot of single parent families or older people who want to move to a smaller property.

"We've had a lot of people tell us they've asked to move to a smaller premises but have been declined or told there's lengthy delays.

"The problem is the stock of smaller houses just isn't there - the government is putting pressure on people to move but they don't have anywhere to move them to."

The demand for social housing in the Illawarra is high with residents across the region expected to wait at least five years for a house.

Public housing tenants in Kiama and Shellharbour are generally facing wait times of more than a decade while Wollongong residents are likely to wait between five and 10 years.

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