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Bridge Steps Up to Help Our Queensland Neighbours

"This summer was one of devastation for Queensland with thousands of people displaced, over 36000 properties damaged and the states infrastructure in desperate need of repair due to multiple natural disasters.

The people of Queensland were, and still are, in need of desperate help but the human spirit shone through in the face of this adversity with over 62000 Australians registering with Volunteer Queensland to offer assistance and help.

Vital supplies were needed in areas that had been cut off by flood waters, including everyday items that we take for granted which were not available throughout the South East Queensland area.

After watching constant footage on tv of the horrendous events further North, I decided that we needed to take action. Together with a friend, I launched a facebook page urging all of our contacts to donate, so that



Special Report:
written by
Bridge Project Officer,
Emmanuel Smith-Aspros

we could organise a trip to deliver essential items to Queensland. I also asked my colleagues at Bridge if they would like to contribute to the cause. Anything from cash to school items for kids, from sunscreen to insect repellent. The response was great. People came back with a whole range of essential items for our trip but they also dug deep. \$375 was raised by staff and Bridge Housing Limited contributed an extra \$200 to the overall total

of \$1,200 that we raised from family and friends.

A van was hired and packed with goods that were purchased in Sydney. The thirteen hour car ride up to Brisbane left little to be desired, but the beautiful Australian landscape kept us from developing car fever.

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Important News About March 2011 Rent Review

Every 6 months Bridge Housing is required to carry out a rent review for all our tenants who are eligible for a rebated rent. This is in line with the Community Housing Rent Policy and is based around the time of year when the Consumer Price Index, (CPI) is announced. The CPI is a measurement of prices for a range of consumer products

and is widely used to price the cost of living. This in turn leads to a change of benefit levels, which in turn leads to a change in incomes, which is why we have to review the rents at this time.

We wrote to all tenants on March 21 who are required to take part in the March 2011 review.

If you received a letter from our rent review team, you should have replied to us by Friday 8 April. If you haven't done so yet, please ensure you get your information to us as soon as possible so that we can recalculate your rebate. If you do not

supply us with the correct information in time, you may have your rebate cancelled, and be charged the full market rent for your property.

As your rent is based on your household's income, it may go up or down. If your rent goes down, this will take effect on or after Friday 15 April. If your rent goes up, this will take effect on Tuesday 24 May.

If you have any queries on the Rent Review and how it affects you, please contact the Rent Review Team or your Housing Manager on 9699 6055.
www.housing.nsw.gov.au/rent policy

New Tenancy Laws Launched in NSW

State housing law has changed following the introduction of the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 on 31 January 2011. This means the law has changed for tenants of Bridge Housing as well!

NSW tenancy laws have remained largely unchanged since they were first introduced more than 20 years ago. In 2005, the Government began a comprehensive review of the existing tenancy laws and during three rounds of public consultation, more than 2000 submissions were received from tenants, landlords, agents and key interest groups. As a result, the new act has introduced more than 100 reforms.

The new Act aims to:

- Balance the rights and obligations of landlords,
- Modernise and update in line with current practices and,
- Reduce the level of disputes by providing greater clarity in the legislation.

At Bridge, this has meant we have had to change some of our processes. For example, we have had to review the way that we sign up new tenancies as now there is a new tenancy agreement and property condition report that must be used.

But there are also some key changes which affect existing tenants:

Tenants Get More Time To Move Out



If you are in one of the leasehold homes that we let, you may receive a "no grounds notice" if the fixed term period expires and the owner asks Bridge to return the property. However, under the new Act the notice period you are entitled to has increased from 60 to 90 days.

Alterations



Owners of our leasehold homes must now give reasonable consideration to a tenants request to make alterations to their home. A tenant will still need Bridge's written approval and landlords can still say no if a tenant wants to paint the premises or make structural changes, however, for minor changes, they will be expected to give their consent.

Domestic Violence



Victims of domestic violence living in a Bridge property will have the right to change the locks and to ask the CTTT for consent to take over the tenancy even if their name is not already on the lease.

Faster rent arrears process at the CTTT



Bridge will no longer have to wait 14 days to apply to the CTTT when it has served a notice for rent arrears. The new Act means that Bridge can apply to the CTTT for an order at the same time as giving a termination notice to the tenant.

Serving notices by hand



Bridge will now be allowed to serve a legal notice by delivering it by hand to a person's letterbox.

Additional grounds for eviction



Bridge will be able to apply to the Tribunal to end a tenancy if the tenant uses the premises for an illegal purpose or if they threaten, abuse, intimidate or harass a member of staff.

For more information on the Act visit the NSW Fairtrading website at www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au or call 13 32 20

CEO Update



"Life at Bridge Housing has certainly been busy since December, as we lay the foundation for its future growth. After an extensive recruitment process, the successful candidates for the three general manager positions were appointed. Hayley Austin for Housing & Community, Andrew Riolo for Finance & Corporate Services, and Hugh Phemister for Assets. They all bring extensive experience and form the executive team which will grow Bridge Housing over the next five years.

The Bridge Housing portfolio continues to increase with our successful tender for the redevelopment of the Glebe public housing estate Cowper Street in partnership with Housing NSW and City West Housing. We will be responsible for developing 153 seniors units within a mix of social, affordable and private housing on the site. This is an exciting project as it will be the first time that Bridge Housing will undertake a substantial development and we expect the properties to be ready for occupancy by late 2013.

On another historic note, the NSW state government on 11 March 2011 announced the vesting of title to Bridge Housing and a small number of Class 1 community housing providers. This means that Bridge Housing will now be able to borrow funds to develop more affordable housing and begin to control its own destiny. Vesting will occur in phases with the first stage being 163 properties secured through the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Package (NBESP).

The transfer of NBESP properties in Parramatta is also proceeding well and we expect that the transfer of 193 properties to be completed by the end of April 2011. The team has done a great job in ensuring that they were tenanted in record time, meeting our commitment to target homeless people and working well with our support partners.

Our improvements in service delivery continue with the transfer of responsive maintenance to our assets team. This will result in a more focused maintenance service to tenants, improved management of contractors and responsive maintenance. We look forward to your feedback.

John Nicolades

Chief Executive Officer

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We visited two of the seven community recovery centres that were dotted around the most affected areas in Brisbane. The first stop was the Yeronga recovery centre located near one of the worst hit areas of the city. Between 600 and 1000 people a day accessed this recovery centre to register for services

such as Centrelink, internet banking, counselling services, mobile phone charging and vaccinations.

These centres were also used as information points on legal advice, insurance, removal of debris and rebuilding homes. Our second stop was Indooroopilly, another community recovery centre that had been

set up in the local church. We met people who had lost everything, but were at the community recovery centre purely to help others in their time of despair; it was truly a heartening scene to see a disaster bring out the absolute best in human nature.

It was a truly humbling experience but we were pleased

that we were able to organise something like this, no matter how small it seemed when faced with so large a loss."

Bridge Housing has since donated a further \$200 to the Premiere's disaster fund on behalf of our tenants. The Premiere's disaster fund has now been extended to include victims of Cyclone Yasi.

To donate or to find out more please go to www.qld.gov.au/floods/donate or phone 1800 219 028

Bondi Junction Outreach Office – New Opening Hours

Bridge Housing has run an outreach office at the Mill Hill Centre in Bondi Junction since 2009, following the merger of the Eastern Suburbs Rental Housing Association with Bridge Housing Limited.

It has always been important for Bridge to maintain its presence in the Eastern Suburbs. Tenants can telephone or call into our

Redfern office to see their Housing Manager, and we are happy to conduct home visits, but we have also worked hard to ensure that we provide an office presence with our Outreach Office at Bondi Junction.

However, because there are other ways of keeping in touch visits to our Bondi office have fallen. We decided to investigate this so in the recent Tenant Survey we asked whether tenants knew about the office and, if they had visited, what they had used the office for. We have also looked at who has visited the office over the last 3 months to gauge if the current operating times of the outreach office are working.

The Survey results indicated that just 35% of tenants living in the Eastern Suburbs were aware of the outreach office. Of those who had called, 40% were visiting for tenancy matters, but 32% were actually coming to see us just to drop off paperwork.



As a result Bridge Housing has decided to reduce the hours of the outreach office to one afternoon a week, but has extended the opening hours for this one day. The Outreach will now run every Monday afternoon from 1pm to 4.30pm.

We plan to review these changes in June and would welcome your feedback. Please contact: Sarah Barclay on 02 9699 6055 ext 217 or email s.barclay@bridgehousing.org.au

A New and Improved Way to Report a Repair

Bridge Housing now has a dedicated contact point to take all of your repairs enquiries.

Our aim is to centralise the repairs service and provide a higher level of customer care to tenants by having one point of contact that specialises in, and is solely responsible for, your repairs requests.



To report a repair:

Simply call Bridge Housing on 9699 6055 and select option 1

Option 1 will direct you through to our dedicated repairs and maintenance team.



We are also developing a link on our website so that tenants can report a repair via www.bridgehousing.org.au. We anticipate this system to go live by the end of April 2011.

Please note that if you are in a capital property and have an urgent repair that needs attention out of office hours please call 9699 6055 and follow the prompts. For tenants in leasehold properties please refer to the contact details shown on your lease.

If you have any questions please contact Lucy Bouza on 02 9699 6055 or email repairs@bridgehousing.org.au

Easter Opening Hours

The Bridge Housing office will be closed for the Easter and ANZAC day public holidays. This means that the office will be closed on Friday 22 April 2011 and will reopen on Wednesday 27 April 2011.

During the holiday period if you have an urgent repair and live in capital property please call Bridge Housing on 9699 6055 and follow the directions to our call centre. For leasehold tenants, please refer the bottom of your lease for emergency contact details.

Thank you for your feedback

A big thank you to all the tenants who returned a 2010 Bridge Housing Tenant Survey. Bridge Housing is committed to continually improving the services it provides to tenants and would like to shape some of these services by using the feedback that you have given.

Results of the survey are currently being collated and will be presented to our Board and will also be used as part of the material for the NSW Community Housing Registrar. The results will also be published in the June edition of this newsletter.

Congratulations to the three lucky tenants who won the \$100 gift vouchers for completing and returning their tenant survey.



Pay your rent and win!

Your chance to win \$150

Bridge Housing has a rent incentive scheme for tenants who keep their rent two weeks in advance and have no other debts. Tenants are automatically entered into a draw for their chance to win \$150.

Congratulations to our December winner – Marjorie from South Coogee.

Our next draw will be held on 15 May 2011.

The lucky tenant will be contacted by Bridge Housing then sent a cheque within two weeks of the draw – it's that simple!

If you are having difficulty with keeping your rent two weeks in advance and would like to speak to someone about a payment plan, please contact your Housing Manager.

Your chance to own a computer package for only \$50!

Bridge Housing are still offering the opportunity to own a computer package for only \$50 to "Bridge the Digital Divide" for families and households on a low to moderate income.

Package Includes:

- A fully refurbished PC (inclusive of software)
- Introduction to computer training
- Up to \$90 worth of internet download
- Delivery of Computer Package
- 12 month warranty
- Free telephone support (for a limited time)

Please call Emmanuel for more information or to apply on 9699 6055 ext 227 or email e.smith-aspros@bridgehousing.org.au.



Update from Pam Pryor Chairperson of the TAG and the Tenant Network Representative

Our first Tenant Advisory Group (TAG) meeting for 2011 was held on 11 February. We were pleased to invite Hayley Austin along, the new General Manager for Housing & Community, to talk to us about her experience in Community Housing and to explain how Bridge was going to develop its services over the coming year. It was a great opportunity for tenants to talk to a member of the senior management team especially as she stayed around after the meeting to talk with everyone there. This is an opportunity we're also making available at our next meeting when the new General Manager for Assets, Hugh Plemister, comes along.

The main purpose of the meeting was to plan future events for the year. There was active discussion about the themes for future meetings and then we had a light lunch and a chance to socialise. I hope to see you at one of the upcoming events. We hope that you will find these meetings interesting and the information you get helpful. Thank you to everyone who attended, we hope to see you all and some new faces at our next meeting in April.

In early February the NSW Tenant Network held a workshop for its members about the Tenancy Law Reforms. Grant Arbuthnot, the principal solicitor for the Tenants Union, was the guest speaker. It was one of the most successful workshops we have held, with

almost everyone taking part in an exercise regarding the payment of water usage.

Around the middle of last year the Tenant Network also began reviewing "The Rules" – our name for the groups terms of reference. We are getting close to a "final draft" which will go onto the Federation website for any of our members who are interested to look at and make any comments on. If you are a member of the Network but do not have the internet, contact Bridge Housing and ask them to provide you with copy. We also discussed with a Federation Representative the concerns that tenants have about the way they are able to make complaints to their housing provider.

Finally, in February Susan Lucock, the Chairperson of the Network, and I were asked to join the Registrar's Advisory Forum, as a tenant representatives. I am proud to say that I was accepted onto the panel and attended my first meeting in February where the Registration of smaller, Class 4 community housing providers was discussed.

Pamela Pryor
Chairperson

Future Events:

Redfern Town Hall
73 Pitt Street
Redfern NSW 2016

15 April – Repairs & Maintenance
10.00 – 12.30

(your chance to meet the new General Manager for Assets, Hugh Plemister, and to hear how the service will develop over the coming year).

3 June – Antisocial Behaviour
A Guide To Your Rights
Responsibilities

10.00 – 12.30
(Find out what Bridge is able to do as a landlord and what other organisations can do to help).



The February NSW Tenants Network meeting