

Two more elderly men die alone in Sydney

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Two more lonely deaths in Sydney have shed further light on a disturbing social trend. Frail and aged, living alone, suffering from ill health and with few personal resources, increasing numbers of elderly working class people are being left to fend for themselves with little or no support, following years of government cuts to social welfare programs.

Residents of a public housing estate at Yagoona, in Sydney's western suburbs, expressed outrage at the discovery of the badly decomposed body of their neighbour, Jorge Chambe-Coloma, a 64-year-old retired factory worker, on January 8. Chambe-Coloma, originally from Ecuador, had no family in Australia. He had worked as a process worker at the B&D Roller Door factory in nearby Revesby, until his retirement some years ago.

It is believed Chambe-Coloma died more than 12 months earlier. Even though his electricity had been cut off for at least six months, the New South Wales Department of Housing took no action because his rent had continued to be paid by direct debit from his bank account.

When neighbours noticed his mailbox was overflowing, they alerted police, who made the grisly discovery.

The media reported that distraught neighbours lashed out at authorities for not checking on the man earlier. "You shudder to think how long he would have been there if some kind people hadn't raised the alarm," one resident observed, referring to her neighbours, Shirley Kemble and Tom Feeney, who contacted police on January 7.

Feeney first approached the housing department, but was told there could be no check as there were no spare keys to Chambe-Coloma's flat. Instead, an official from the department came and put a note on the door. Feeney then called police, who broke into the flat.

Another resident, Mary Rayner said the department notified residents of visits twice a year, so officials should have noticed that Chambe-Coloma failed to respond. "I can't understand how a man that's been near 12 months dead in bed [was not found]," she said. "Where have they been?" she asked. "They haven't been anywhere near here."

Despite authorities being informed more than a year ago that his meals were not being collected, no action was taken, except to cancel his meals-on-wheels service with the local council. Police actually visited the apartment block and talked to neighbours on January 25, 2007 but decided he had locked up and gone away.

Other authorities also did nothing. Centrelink, the federal government's welfare payments agency, knew Chambe-Coloma had not been in contact with them for 12 months, and his bank knew his account had not been touched. Electricity authorities cut

off his service without checking on his welfare.

The state Labor government's response to the discovery of Chambe-Coloma's body was to declare that the "community"—neighbours, family and friends—was responsible. Director General of Housing Mike Allen told the media: "Neighbours and friends are better placed to check up on tenants." Allen insisted that his department was simply a landlord. "No landlord can take the place of family and friends."

Housing Minister Matt Brown was just as unapologetic, saying there were 50,000 public housing tenants over the age of 60. "The government can only do so much... I do not have dedicated staff nor will I direct there to be dedicated staff to go and tap on people's doors. No landlord does that."

Within days, a further death was reported. Kevin Jones, 73, was found dead in his Department of Housing one-room bedsitter at Artarmon, in Sydney's north. Neighbours said they believed Jones lay dead on the bathroom floor for up to two weeks before police found his decomposing body.

Once again, it was left to residents, many elderly or infirm themselves, to raise the alarm.

The tenant representative at Jones's housing complex, 76-year-old William Atkinson, condemned the department. "Public housing is in a shambles. We have no one in authority here. I always say: there is no one to watch over me. There has got to be an investigation because the government is not worried about this; the bedsitter is a terrible thing to do to old people. Tomorrow, if I was given half a chance, I'd get out of here."

It has been reported that Jones, a retired long-time council worker, did not have any children. His wife passed away before he moved into the unit about 11 years ago. He was diagnosed with lung cancer about seven years ago and was reliant on an oxygen mask.

Between mid-February and early March 2006, seven elderly public housing tenants were found dead in their homes in Sydney (see: "Elderly people die alone and unnoticed in Australia"). Public outrage forced the former housing minister, Cherie Burton, to announce in parliament the establishment of a system whereby elderly tenants living alone would be visited by housing officers every six months.

It has now emerged that department policy simply requires two contacts—which need not be visits—with those who are over 60 every year. Officers approach tenants by phone, then letter, then a visit. This system obviously failed Chambe-Coloma and Jones. A departmental spokesman declined to say what attempts had been made to contact Chambe-Coloma.

The Department of Housing previously announced the

establishment of a “Care Call” service, which would telephone people living alone and inform family or welfare agencies to follow up if they could not be reached. However, this service was put out to tender and is not yet in operation.

Elderly people can easily fall at home, become ill or immobilised and be unable to call for help. If they live alone, and have no immediate family or close friends, their plight can go unnoticed, unless there is a properly organised, adequately-funded, social and medical support system.

Lonely deaths are by no means confined to public housing estates. Coroners’ statistics show that 582 people died alone in New South Wales, Australia’s most populous state, during 2006 and 2007. Each had been dead for at least seven days before their death was reported. Just 22 of these had died in Housing Department dwellings.

A Red Cross program, Telecross, exists in some Australian states, but it relies on volunteers to phone elderly or incapacitated people who live alone. In 2006-07, more than 5,000 Telecross volunteers nationally made more than a million calls (one each per day) to about the same number of elderly people. If two calls go unanswered, the volunteer phones a nominated family member or friend.

This reliance on volunteers, who cannot possibly provide anything approaching a universal service, is part of a wider pattern. In its report, *Australia’s Welfare 2007*, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) estimates that the \$28.8 billion spent by governments, non-government organisations and individual clients on welfare services in 2005-06 was dwarfed by the imputed value of informal unpaid care, which totalled \$43.7 billion. The unpaid amount included the services provided by people receiving carers’ benefits, for which the federal government paid \$2.5 billion.

Far from the “community” being to blame for a lack of care, millions of people are being compelled, by the lack of government services, to look after their relatives and friends, either unpaid or as volunteers. While 481,000 people were employed to provide and support welfare services, unpaid carers provided services equivalent to 1,039,000 full-time employees.

Efforts to establish “individual responsibility” as a social norm in the delivery of essential services are well advanced. At the same time, measures are underway that will only serve to increase the levels of hardship on the frail aged and their loved ones.

There are an estimated 2.7 million Australian residents aged 65 years or over, and the 85 years and over population is projected to more than quadruple to 1.6 million over the next 40 years. Three major government responses have been outlined in the *National Strategy for an Ageing Australia*—extending the retirement age, cutting the proportion of retired workers receiving full pensions and harnessing increasing numbers of people into the provision of voluntary services.

Currently, some two million people receive the aged pension, with 62 percent being paid the full rate, which is about \$250 a week, itself below the poverty line. But compulsory superannuation programs and higher pension age requirements, combined with incentives to keep older people working, are expected to fundamentally alter this situation over the next four

decades.

The AIHW report states: “It has been estimated that by 2050, two-thirds of pensioners will receive a reduced government pension, compared with about one-third today, owing to rising superannuation coverage and, potentially, future higher workforce participation rates in older age groups.”

A systematic effort is also underway to keep elderly people out of residential care. Over half a million people received government-funded Home and Community Care Services in 2004-05. These services are overwhelmingly provided by non-government, not-for-profit organisations, many of which rely on volunteers. Moreover, the service system is complex and fractured, with thousands of organisations involved. Consumers of these services often complain that the system appears bewildering and hard to access.

For those elderly people who can afford to pay for private at-home care, a burgeoning market has arisen. For example, in 2006 Home Instead, a US aged-care franchise, announced plans to establish 60 to 70 offices in Australia during the next 10 years. Existing residential aged care is expensive and the system also favours the rich—a maximum basic daily fee is set at 85 percent of the basic aged pension, with wealthier residents entitled to a subsidy to pay higher fees for premium care.

Underpinning this transformation is a combination of the free-market system of “user pays”, the slashing of social spending to reduce corporate taxation and official indifference toward elderly workers, once their ability to work can no longer be exploited for profit. The terrible lonely deaths and other tragic consequences can be prevented only through the complete transformation of society on the basis of human need, not private profit and the allocation of billions of dollars to high-quality social facilities and services, allowing all senior citizens to live in comfort, dignity and security.



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