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No justification for paternalistic police presence on public housing estates

Statement by IMCL CEO, Damian Stock:

The continued police presence at the public housing tower block at 33 Alfred Street, North Melbourne, and the assembly of a wire fence 'exercise yard' (now removed), are disproportionate, paternalistic and enforcement-first responses to a health issue which take away the residents' dignity and agency. There is no justification for last night's events or the continued police presence.

Quarantine does not mean detention. The detention directions were lifted three days ago and residents at 33 Alfred Street have been denied fresh air and exercise for a full eight days. They should now be allowed to exercise these rights like every other Victorian, and trusted to do so safely. It should not have taken assertive demands from the community and the intervention of community lawyers for this to be allowed.

There should be one set of rules for everyone. That public housing residents are being treated differently speaks volumes about the Victorian Government's view of the people living in these buildings.

The government should have confidence in the resilience, capability and civic responsibility of the communities they are working with and stop the overbearing enforcement approach. All efforts should be placed on health and welfare, led by the community, with residents trusted to be responsible for their safety and wellbeing as are all other Victorians.

For months the residents have called for protective measures to be put in place, such as sufficient hand sanitiser and cleaning, but were ignored. When the inevitable occurred, residents and their community organisations continued to successfully manage the crisis response by coordinating medical care and food efforts and quickly translating health and legal information.

The Victorian Government has consistently failed to recognise this.

Had they, they would have first consulted with the residents and organisations they work with before making an unnecessary and heavy-handed unilateral decision destined from the start to cause legitimate outrage.

The government needs to urgently adopt a new approach. It must allow residents and community groups to work with the authorities. Only through understanding and working with the community can the government truly ensure that its actions are proportionate to the public health crisis we all face.

For further comment contact

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