



 [Print this article](#) |  [Close this window](#)

State's excuses on care homes are wearing thin

September 25, 2009 - 12:45AM

UNTIL very recently most Victorians would probably have struggled to name Lisa Neville as the state's Community Services Minister. But Ms Neville has rapidly moved from being one of the lowest-profile members of the Brumby Government to one who is in the news almost daily, and it is not the sort of exposure she might have wished for. The Public Advocate, Colleen Pearce, and Ombudsman George Brouwer have each drawn attention to abuses, errors and neglect by the Department of Human Services or by institutions overseen by the minister, and Ms Neville's responses have not been reassuring.

Yesterday *The Age* reported comments by Ms Pearce about conditions in some state-monitored care homes, which she described as shameful. Ms Pearce, who has a statutory obligation to ensure that the rights of the disabled and other people with special needs are upheld, said that for years the Government had ignored reports by the Office of the Public Advocate about the plight, in particular, of women in supported residential services.

The content of those reports, as described by Ms Pearce, is shocking. She spoke of women who in order to get basic necessities would "often provide sexual favours to get them and then feel really abused by that. It is not uncommon for us to hear about women either trading cigarettes for sex or else being raped."

The minister's response, reasonably, was to ask for details of such allegations, which at the very least concern the personal dignity of those in care and the obligation of those who care for them to ensure that it is respected. If the allegation is of rape, it should be referred to the police, and a police investigation of a complaint of rape in one home is under way. Ms Pearce concedes that it is difficult to collect hard evidence of such allegations, but that admission hardly lets the minister off the hook.

Two years ago *The Age* reported allegations of abuse in the state's care homes, including inadequate feeding and hygiene standards, improper reporting of deaths and mentally ill patients performing sexual favours to obtain drugs and alcohol. At the time, the Office of the Public Advocate told *Age* reporters that it had notified health authorities of almost 900 allegations of abuse and neglect in residential services. Then, as now, the allegations most often concerned pension-level homes, in which residents give most or all of their pensions to the owners.

The question is why so little appears to have changed. Given the mental and physical frailty of many of the individuals concerned, both Ms Pearce and Ms Neville make obviously valid points: hard evidence is not easily collected, and the relevant facts in each case need to be known before action can be taken. The difficulty in discovering the facts, however, is hardly an excuse for doing nothing, and Ms Neville should explain why the Public Advocate's investigators apparently feel they have been talking to a brick wall. Surely she and the Department of Human Services do not think the investigators have been making it all up?

Beyond the allegations of specific abuses, Ms Pearce and Ms Neville also disagree on the Government's response to general conditions prevailing in supported residential services. In 2006 the Government announced a \$40.4 million plan to reform the sector, and in September 2007 Ms Neville announced a review of supported residential services. The Government, she said, had an "unprecedented commitment" to protecting the welfare of supported residential services residents by identifying gaps in the system. Ms Pearce, however, argues that the Government's reforms do not address fundamental problems that may exacerbate abuse in care homes, such as the lack of privacy in shared rooms.

Nor is the Public Advocate the only senior public official to report longstanding failure on the part of the Department of Human Services in oversight of supported residential services. As *The Age* reported earlier this week, Victoria's Ombudsman, George Brouwer, found that the department had repeatedly failed to respond to serious complaints about Moara Shira Lodge in Cobram, and asked Ms Neville to consider revoking the home's licence. It would be easier to accept the minister's assurances of the Government's resolve to tackle abuses if the sorts of complaints referred to by the Ombudsman and the Public Advocate were diminishing over time. That, however, is not the case.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/editorial/states-excuses-on-care-homes-are-wearing-thin-20090924-g4o1.html>