



MEDIA RELEASE

WHEN: 10.30 am - Tues 15 October 2013

WHERE: Vic Parliament gardens (near back door)

WHAT: Greens to introduce new laws for basic rental accommodation standards, launch 'Rental Health' campaign and 'Dob-in a Dive' website. The move is supported by community groups including Chase & Tyler Foundation.

WHO: Vic Greens leader Greg Barber MP; Vanessa Robinson, Founder/Director of Chase & Tyler Foundation

For Comment:

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Victorian Greens leader Greg Barber will introduce 'Rental Health' laws to Victorian parliament, in a bid to raise the standard of private rental accommodation across the state, in a move supported by community groups including The Chase & Tyler Foundation.

"Your home has a big impact on your health, which is why we call this the Rental Health campaign," said Greg Barber MP

"I want to set some basic standards that rental properties must meet, like security, insulation, heaters that are safe, cooking facilities, glass in the windows, no mould creeping up the walls. It's like a roadworthy for your rental."

"The first step is to show politicians what some renters have to put up with. So I've launched an online survey called 'Dob in a Dive'. You can dob in your own 'dive', or a friend's, and bring a camera along to open-for-inspections because you can upload photos to the website."

"Social justice and community groups have been calling for minimum standards for rental homes for years, because the accommodation crisis is pushing people to accept some pretty dodgy places, just to have a roof over their heads," said Mr Barber

The Chase and Tyler Foundation fully support and applaud the Greens on the 'Rental Health' law and campaign.

"My two children died from carbon monoxide poisoning in 2010 from faulty heater in our rental premises. The current legislation in place did not, nor currently protects our community members from these unsafe situations," said Vanessa Robinson, Director / Founder of The Chase & Tyler Foundation

"These new laws could prevent the same tragedy-like the death of my children, from happening to another family, as well as looking after the long term health of our community members. "Said Ms Robinson

Our message is simple – everyone deserves the right to a safe home environment.

Background on Rental Health laws: <http://vicmps.greens.org.au/rental-health-FAQ>

Dob in a Dive: <http://vicmps.greens.org.au/dob>

Chase & Tyler Foundation: <http://www.chaseandtyler.org.au>

How would the new law be phased in?

The new standards would be triggered by the letting or re-letting of the premises. With the average lease being 18 months in Victoria, most premises that need upgrading will be changed within a few years.

Firstly, we made sure that the onus is on landlords and Real Estate Agents to obey the law.

Compliance with the standards will be a condition of the lease agreement, which the landlord or their agent signs. A summary of the standards, and the rights and obligations under the new law will be added to the booklet of information that the landlord is already required by law to give the tenant.

The landlord may be compelled to meet the standards if they don't do so of their own volition.

The new law gives renters a range of options to notify the landlord, request an investigation and apply for a ruling if the property does not meet the standards. It empowers Consumer Affairs Victoria to do an independent report on the dwelling and gives a range of dispute resolution options, including paying rent into a special account, which will only be released to the landlord when the property complies.

Consumer Affairs Victoria may investigate of their own volition, even if a complaint has not been made. And if that isn't enough, there is one more big change:

Residential Tenancies Amendment (Housing Standards) Bill 2013

Clause 10 of the Bill introduces a new section into the Residential Tenancies Act, which guides the Minister on what those standards will include. They divide into two basic categories – health issues and energy efficiency issues.

The health standards are aimed at the lowest end of the rental market, where renters are the most vulnerable, including people who would qualify for social housing but who are in the private rental market.

The other category is energy efficiency measures. This would have a broader impact, in terms of the number of rental places that might need some work. It would reduce the cost of living for renters by reducing their energy bills. It would also have a huge beneficial impact on Victoria's energy efficiency outcomes.

Environment groups, consumer groups, social welfare and energy organisations want to help the government implement its policy.

Residents of low-cost private rentals are more likely to be at home during the day, including pensioners, people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, people caring for small children and the elderly.

They are more vulnerable to high utilities costs, so when we take action to improve the health and environmental performance of rental premises, we are taking action to improve the lives of the most vulnerable Victorians.

The increasing numbers of children growing up in rental accommodation brings with it a greater government responsibility for health and safety.

- The Residential Tenancies Act currently provides that the landlord must maintain the premises in good repair, but it doesn't specify what constitutes good repair. The Chase and Tyler Foundation wants mandatory servicing of heaters every two years.

- There is provision for the tenant to request an urgent repair of a heater that has broken down, but no standard that a house in Victoria must come with a heater, so if a tenant agitates for repair, the landlord can remove the heater before the premises is next let – no heater, no maintenance problem!

The Coroner in the Chase and Tyler Robinson case wanted the public awareness campaign to result in tenants advocating for regular servicing of heaters. But why should it be up to the tenants alone?

We wouldn't be content with a public awareness campaign if two boys had been killed by faulty brakes in a car. There are basic roadworthy standards. And that's what we need in rental accommodation – basic standards.

It is also a classic Greens initiative, in that action taken on the environment has collateral health and financial benefits, especially for the most vulnerable Victorians.

FOUNDATION BACKGROUND FACTS

The Accident

- The Foundation is named in honour of Robinson's two sons, aged eight and six, who died in May 2010 after being poisoned by a faulty gas wall heater in their rented Shepparton home.

- After the boys were found, inspectors visited our home and found the carbon monoxide reading inside the house was a staggering 500 times higher than the safe level. They confirmed that the cause was our faulty gas wall heater.

The aims of the Chase and Tyler Foundation

- The Chase and Tyler Foundation has three aims:
- To raise awareness of the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning
- To tell people how to reduce their risk
- To lobby the government to help improve gas appliance safety
- The Foundation's website, www.chaseandtyler.org.au, has information about choosing the right gasfitter to service appliances. Specialist equipment and training is required to check for carbon monoxide leakage.
- The Foundation will also lobby for change to reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by faulty or un-serviced gas heaters and fuel burning appliances, particularly for those living in rented accommodation.

Carbon monoxide poisoning

- Carbon monoxide exposure can lead to illness and in some cases, death
- Over the past decade Victoria has averaged one death per year from carbon monoxide poisoning and countless more cases of illness
- Carbon monoxide is a silent killer - it's an invisible gas you can't smell, see or taste
- Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are similar to those of the flu – often it can be misdiagnosed or untreated
- CO Poisoning is the leading cause of death by poisoning in developed countries caused by malfunctioning or improperly used fuel-burning appliances and may be responsible for more than half of all fatal poisonings worldwide.

Appliances and carbon monoxide

- Gas fuel burning appliances can spill carbon monoxide if they are faulty or have not been adequately maintained
- There is often no way of knowing that an appliance is spilling carbon monoxide
- Chase and Tyler died as a result of a faulty gas heater leaking carbon monoxide
- It's not just gas wall heaters that pose a risk – gas central heating units can also spill carbon monoxide
- CO is produced whenever any fuel such as gas, oil, kerosene, wood, or charcoal is burned.

Reducing the risk

- Despite the wide use of gas heaters many people are unaware of the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning
- The best way to reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning is to have gas heaters and fuel burning appliances serviced regularly

- Appliances should be serviced a minimum of every two years by a licensed gasfitter

Choosing a gasfitter

- Check the local paper or phone book for licensed gasfitters
- Before booking a service, ask the gasfitter if they are licensed
- Ask the gasfitter if they are qualified to check for carbon monoxide leakage
- Ask the gasfitter if they have a **carbon monoxide analyser**
- If the gasfitter doesn't have the right qualifications and equipment look for another tradesperson

Other lines of defence

- Regular servicing of gas fuel burning appliances and heaters is the best way to reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning
- Audible carbon monoxide alarms are available in Australia. They should meet EN50291 (European standard) or UL2034 (US standard).
- Experts recommend servicing appliances at least every two years as the best way to reduce risk

Chase and Tyler's deaths

- An inquest into Chase and Tyler's deaths was held in March
- The Coroner will hand down her findings in the next few months but it is known that a faulty gas wall heater caused Chase and Tyler's deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning
- In forming the Foundation, Vanessa wants to ensure Chase and Tyler's deaths have not been in vain by ensuring other families don't suffer a similar tragedy

Working with the government

- One of the Foundation's goals is to work with the government to help improve gas appliance safety
- The Foundation is working closely with Energy Safe Victoria, which is responsible for gas and electricity safety in that state
- The Foundation will continue to look at ways to work with government and policymakers to put better systems in place, particularly to help protect those who rent their homes