

## **DISABILITY ACCESS TO HOUSING FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH ALLERGY AND CHEMICAL SENSITIVITY**

In Australia the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) has acknowledged that MCS is a disability covered by the Disability Discrimination Act. A [Letter](#) sent to the ASEHA President in May 2004 from the Disability Discrimination Commissioner substantiates this. Complaints of disability discrimination can be made to HREOC website [www.humanrights.gov.au/disability\\_rights](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights)

In the US there are calls to to reduce pesticides in public housing. [Click here for more information on the call in US to reduce pesticides in public housing.](#)

## **TARGET GROUP FOR DISABILITY HOUSING**

People on low incomes with:

Asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, other respiratory diseases

Allergy

Chemical injury/chemical sensitivity

Occupational poisonings to specific products e.g. formaldehyde

Reactive arthritis

### **Disability access to public housing**

Public housing authorities are required to house people with a disability and have a responsibility to provide housing that does not make people ill. For people with chemical sensitivities, that means meeting their need for housing free of chemicals and other substances that make them ill, or may increase their sensitivity levels to chemicals in the future. As allergy can be a predisposing factor for both, asthma and chemical sensitivities, individuals who suffer from these problems can also have specific needs in housing that require similar considerations.

Location and choice of materials can create poor indoor air as the quality of indoor air starts with the quality of the outdoor environment. The same air pollutants in outdoor air are also found indoors, with indoor air further polluted by substances brought into the dwelling. These include building materials, paint, adhesives, consumer products such as cleaning chemicals, fragranced toiletries, recently dry cleaned clothes, synthetic materials in furnishings and floor coverings, chemicals used for pest control, books and newspapers etc. ( [www.epa.gov/air](http://www.epa.gov/air) ). People with allergy and chemical sensitivities vary in their degree of sensitivity to different chemicals and products, they generally need to avoid such products in order to prevent immediate symptoms and further deterioration in their health.

The following are some basic suggestions to assist with housing for disability arising from allergy, respiratory disease or chemical sensitivity: More information on these suggestions use the following link - [Location, Housing Material and Design Guidelines](#)

### **LOCATION -**

Preferably in clean air but this is difficult with current pollution levels.

Housing should be available in a suitable location.

### **BUILDING MATERIALS**

Ensure that any materials capable of contaminating indoor air and affect health are not used in the dwelling. Building products and paints that are low in Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) are essential to reduce contaminant levels inside the dwelling. Discussions with public housing authorities are essential at this point as each individual will have different sensitivities or sensitivity levels and may need to define which materials need to be avoided. It is essential to ask the person with a disability what they know about materials they tolerate and don't tolerate. In these discussions, it is important that the client is heeded as poor choice of materials can severely exacerbate existing health problems and inflict high medical costs on an individual who is poorly resourced to deal with any increased costs.

If there is any question about the suitability of materials, getting a material safety data sheet from the manufacturer should be the first basic step. This will give further information about a product and assist to assess product suitability ( <http://siri.org/msds/mf/cards/> or [www.cdc.gov/niosh/](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/) ). Assistance from the treating doctor may also be required. Further information about building materials and products is available on the Internet from a variety of sources such as [www.epa.gov/air](http://www.epa.gov/air) and those listed at the above link to guidelines. Building materials should be low maintenance materials as much as possible because products used for repairs or painting are likely to cause ill health.

## HOUSE DESIGN

*Note: Chemically sensitive individuals should not be accommodated in units or townhouses as their health will be compromised by close proximity to individuals who may smoke, use pesticides, fragranced products, burn scented candles or incense. Some substances such as pesticides and fragranced products may cause life-threatening allergic reactions.*

## THINGS YOU NEED TO DO WHEN APPLYING FOR LOW ALLERGY HOUSING.

When you apply for public housing you need to:

1. Provide the Department of Housing with your regular documentation e.g. letter from landlord, Social Security number, amount of welfare benefit paid
2. You should then ask for Disability Housing and

3. Ensure your medical certificates are specific about your illness and your special housing needs

### **Medical certificates**

A letter from a Specialist is best if possible e.g. allergist, immunologist, neurologist or occupational physician. However, for individuals with chemical sensitivities, providing documentation from medical sources may be difficult, as most doctors do not diagnose chemical related illnesses. While a letter from a specialist is required, the Department of Housing will accept certificates from medical doctors with supporting letters from natural therapists or social workers. ASEHA has also provided letters in support of its members seeking low allergy disability housing. Once a caseworker is assigned, they can often notice deterioration in health following chemical exposures.

Your medical certificates must accurately define your illness and your special needs. They should include:

1. What is wrong with you
2. What things affect you
3. How these affect you
4. Type of accommodation necessary.

A sample letter is as follows:

### **Letter for Doctors and other support people to assist people into the right kind of housing**

This should read:

**1. What is wrong**

Mr/Ms.....*suffers with* allergy and/or Multiple Chemical Sensitivity.

**2. What things affect them**

He/she *is sensitive to* ..... (e.g. carpets formaldehyde, plasticisers, pesticides and other volatile organic compounds VOCs) and reacts adversely to these in his/her environment.

**3. How these affect them**

*These substances cause* Mr/Ms..... (e.g. severe respiratory problems such as asthma, allergy problems such as anaphylaxis on exposure to fragrances and neurological problems such as (eg migraine).....

**4. Type of accommodation necessary**

As the only known treatment for this problem is avoidance of exposure to substances that provoke reactions, Mr/Ms ..... needs to be housed in a detached, 2 bedroom dwelling with no (e.g. formaldehyde, plastics, pesticides, VOCs)..... This is essential as exposure to synthetic chemicals in the bedroom will cause.....

Mr/Ms ..... should not be housed in a unit or town house as cleaning compounds, pesticides, synthetic chemicals and highly perfumed products routinely used by neighbours in his/her immediate vicinity will exacerbate his/her ..... (eg migraines, asthma, provoke life threatening allergic reactions, respiratory, neurological problems) and unnecessarily compromise his/her life/health.

**Sample letter:**

Mrs Parker-Brown suffers with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS). She is sensitive to formaldehyde, xylene, toluene, terpenes and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs), motor exhausts, fragrances, cigarette smoke, pesticides and herbicides. She is also likely to react to most synthetic chemicals in her environment. These substances cause Mrs Parker-Brown

intractable migraines, severe muscle spasms, throat swellings and stomach cramps.

As the only known treatment for MCS is avoidance, Mrs Parker-Brown's accommodation needs are a detached, 2 bedroom dwelling with no levels of formaldehyde, VOCs, pesticides and synthetic chemicals. A second room is essential as exposure to synthetic chemicals in clothing and personal effects in her bedroom will provoke the above symptoms. She needs a room clear of anything that causes ill health to ensure proper rest and a place to recover from chemical exposures.

Mrs Parker-Brown should not be housed in a unit or town house as cleaning compounds, pesticides, herbicides, synthetic chemicals and highly perfumed products routinely used by most people in her immediate vicinity will cause severe symptoms which can damage her health and may threaten her life. It is also possible that ongoing exposure to cleaning compounds, cigarette smoke, pesticides and other chemicals used by neighbours may result in a reaction that will threaten her life or require emergency hospital care, a worsening of her chemical sensitivities and an overall deterioration in her general health

Yours sincerely

Dr Croak (pardon the pun)

*If you are unsuccessful in achieving the required level of disability accommodation for your special needs, you have the right of appeal to the Queensland Department of Housing. If you are still unsuccessful following an appeal to the Queensland Department of Housing, you can lodge a complaint on the grounds of disability discrimination to the Queensland Anti Discrimination Commission, or the use the processes of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Discrimination Act.*

**Contacts:**

Queensland Anti Discrimination Commission free call 1300 130 670

## Information on Applying For Low Allergy Housing

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Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission. Complaints infoline 1300 656 419 or website: [www.humanrights.gov.au](http://www.humanrights.gov.au)

Dorothy M. Bowes September, 2004