



Office of the Auditor General Western Australia

SUMMARY OF THE PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Fitting and Maintaining Safety Devices in Public Housing

Report 7 – August 2010

Background

The Housing Authority (Housing) is the largest rental property manager in Western Australia, owning more than 35 800 properties across the state.

Residual current devices (RCDs) and smoke alarms are designed to reduce the chance of death or injury by electrocution or from fire.

Housing has had a number of programs to fit and maintain RCDs and smoke alarms. In 1997 it started a five year program to retrofit smoke alarms to all existing properties. Housing started retrofitting RCDs to all its properties in 2005 after it received funding of \$7.6 million for the program. In 2007 and 2008 Housing started three programs to upgrade smoke alarms.

Housing has a policy of inspecting its public rental properties at least annually, and carries out maintenance in response to needs identified by these and other periodic inspections, or if a problem is brought to their attention, for instance, by tenants.

We examined Housing's programs to install and retrofit safety devices in its public rental properties, and their ongoing management and maintenance of the devices.

Audit Conclusion

Housing's safety device programs have not been managed effectively to minimise the risks to its tenants and properties.

Unreliable property information, inadequate monitoring and oversight of retrofit programs, and weaknesses in property inspections and maintenance, mean Housing is unable to provide assurance that all its properties have the number of RCDs required to meet legislation and its own policies. These weaknesses are also evident in recent smoke alarm programs.

What the audit found...

- Housing was amongst the first Australian state housing authorities in moving to fit RCDs and hard-wired smoke alarms to all its rental properties and its deadline for installing these devices was years ahead of when legislative requirements came into force.

- A lack of planning, coordination and oversight meant that Housing did not manage its safety device programs efficiently or effectively.
- Housing was slow to identify that the RCD retrofit program had not achieved its objectives and did not take systematic action to identify properties without the required number of RCDs.
- Most properties are inspected each year but because the inspections are not consistently conducted or recorded Housing can not be sure that missing and broken devices are always identified and fixed.
- The safety device information in Housing's property information system 'Caretaker' is unreliable because Housing staff do not regularly update it after inspections or maintenance.
- Housing's practices for timely repair or replacement of faulty safety devices is inadequate and fails to minimise risks to tenants or properties.
- Housing is undertaking organisation-wide change management and transformation which amongst other things is intended to improve its maintenance operations.

What the audit recommended...

The Housing Authority should:

- Formally assess the risks associated with maintaining its rental properties in a safe condition and use this information to manage its properties and set priorities.
- Ensure that all its properties have the required number of RCDs and smoke alarms and that safety device information is accurately recorded.
- Review, improve and monitor inspection and testing regimes for safety devices, including setting appropriate timeframes for maintenance of safety devices.
- Ensure all maintenance and property services staff receive training so they understand the importance of Housing's procedures to manage safety devices and record property information accurately.
- Review its other safety maintenance policies, programs and procedures to ensure they are implemented, managed and monitored according to the level of risk.
- Incorporate lessons learned from its RCD programs into future safety-related programs, and introduce a structured project management and reporting framework for each safety device program.
- Fast-track proposed enhancements to Caretaker and other property information systems so that these systems contain the information Housing needs to manage its safety devices.