

Policy name	Absence from Dwelling
Policy date	August 2020
Authorisation	General Manager, Operations
Policy owner	National Manager, Housing Services
Policy type	Mission Australia Housing Operational Policy
Policy setting	

1 Purpose

1.1 Overview

- 1.1.1 This policy outlines the approach to be adopted where Mission Australia Housing (MAH) tenants take planned or unplanned absences from their property.

1.2 Coverage

- 1.2.1 This document is a National policy and covers both Mission Australia Housing (MAH) and Mission Australia Housing Victoria (MAHV). All references to Mission Australia Housing, MAH and Housing include both MAH and MAHV unless specifically stated otherwise. Where state based variations exist in policies and procedures, these will be identified in the document.
- 1.2.2 This policy applies to tenants in all forms of housing provided by MAH including social, affordable and transitional housing.

1.3 Information on procedures and other related policies

- 1.3.1 This policy focuses on why certain things need to be done. It is supported by procedures that provide more detail on the what to do.
- 1.3.2 Other MAH policies also need to be considered in managing tenant absences. To assist you, these are identified where relevant in this policy and supporting procedures.

2 Scope

2.1 Parts of Mission Australia that this policy covers

- 2.1.1 This policy applies to MAH staff responsible for working with MAH clients, tenants and properties.

2.2 Definitions

2.2.1 Key terms used in this policy are defined in the following table.

Term	Definition
Absence from dwelling	A period of time in which a property is not used as a full-time dwelling by the tenant or tenants listed on an agreement for housing.
Reduced rent	MAH charges a reduced rent in special circumstances, down to a minimum of \$5 a week for a limited period, to reduce hardship on tenants and household members. This is available on a one-off basis.
Rental rebate	A subsidy made available specifically to eligible tenants housed under social housing and supported tenancy programs. Tenants in receipt of a rental rebate will pay a percentage of their income as rent, up to the market rent.

3 Policy

3.1 Guiding principles

3.1.1 MAH is focused on the needs of tenants and their families:

- MAH supports tenants to balance their tenancy with other life responsibilities and goals.
- Tenants are given approval to take an absence from their property where necessary and appropriate.

3.1.2 MAH protects the value of assets under its management:

- Recognising that social and affordable housing is a scarce resource, MAH ensures that properties are not vacant for extended periods of time.
- MAH acts to minimise damage that can occur where tenants are absent from properties.

3.1.3 The MAH process for managing tenant absences is fair and transparent:

- The basis for decisions is explained to tenants.
- Tenants are given the opportunity to appeal organisational decisions in order to ensure fair and transparent outcomes.

3.1.4 The MAH process complies with relevant laws and procedures:

- Properties are managed in accordance with the requirements of residential tenancy and rooming accommodation legislation, taking property owner requirements into account.

3.2 General approach

- 3.2.1 Tenants are not required to seek approval for absences from MAH where the absence:
- Is four weeks or less in transitional housing and rooming accommodation; or
 - Is six weeks or less in general or affordable housing.
- 3.2.2 While tenants are not required to seek approval for shorter-term absences, tenants should be encouraged to notify MAH as this aids the management and protection of the property. Tenants in transitional housing with support agreements in place should also notify their support provider.
- 3.2.3 Where tenants will be absent for periods in excess of those set out in **3.2.1**, they must seek approval for their absence from MAH.

3.3 Approval of tenant requests

- 3.3.1 Where tenants seek approval for a longer absence, staff:
- Will assess tenant requests on a case-by-case basis, considering the purpose and/or necessity of the absence;
 - Will ask the tenant to confirm details of the arrangements set out in section **3.4** below; and
 - May ask the tenant to provide evidence to support the absence.
- 3.3.2 Requests for absences of between three and six months may only be approved in very exceptional circumstances, not including the incarceration of a tenant. See the supporting procedures for further details.

3.4 Tenant responsibilities

- 3.4.1 Tenants are responsible for their property during an absence, including for the actions and/or inactions of occupants residing in their property. Tenants must:
- Continue paying normal rent and utility costs during their absence, unless covered by the reduced rent provisions discussed below;
 - Provide their contact details and those of their nominated agent to staff whenever they take an approved absence, to facilitate communication as required; and
 - Ensure that arrangements have been made for any pet or companion animal to be looked after.

3.5 Reduced rent

- 3.5.1 Tenants may be eligible to pay a reduced rent where:

- They are absent from their property in order to access centre-based health, social or residential care requiring an accommodation fee; or
- They are in custody, rehabilitation, a refuge, or other safe accommodation for a period of up to three months, on a one-off basis.

3.5.2 Tenants will not be eligible for a reduced rent where they are incarcerated for a serious breach of tenancy. See the associated procedures and the **Rents, Bonds and Other Charges Policy** for further details.

3.6 Failure to seek approval

3.6.1 Where a tenant fails to seek approval from MAH for an absence, staff may:

- Seek to remove the rental rebate given to the tenant as per the **Rents, Bonds and Other Charges Policy**; or
- Seek to terminate the tenancy as per the **Ending Tenancies Policy**.

3.7 Absences longer than the approved timeframe

3.7.1 Where staff members obtain evidence that tenants either will not or may not return to their property by the approved return date, they will wherever possible liaise with them to discuss their tenure and identify their continued need for housing. Further action may then be taken as required.

3.8 Succession of tenancy

3.8.1 Where a tenancy is terminated or the tenant gives up their tenancy, staff may need to consider whether succession of tenancy is an option.

3.8.2 Staff will, where applicable, identify whether transferring an existing occupant into an agreement for housing is appropriate, following the processes set out in the **Making Changes to Your Tenancy Policy**.

3.9 Abandoned property

3.9.1 Where a tenant has been identified as having abandoned their property, staff will manage the abandoned property and goods as per the **Abandoned Properties and Goods Policy**.

3.10 Appeals

3.10.1 Staff will inform tenants of their right to appeal organisational decisions and to complain about the services of MAH as per the **Appeals and Complaints Policy**.

4 Responsibilities

4.1 Housing staff including Housing Officers and Client Service Officers are responsible for:

- Informing tenants of their rights and responsibilities in accordance with this policy.

- Approving absences of up to three months.
- Verifying standards of appropriate property care.
- Liaising with nominated agents where required.
- Coordinating the succession of tenancy process.
- Keeping records of the process in the relevant systems.
- Recommending improvements to this policy and associated procedures.

4.2 Team Leaders/Regional Managers are responsible for:

- Assisting housing staff to implement this policy.
- Assessing applications for reduced rent.
- Ensuring good management of evidence in the tenancy management system.
- Incorporating this policy and associated procedures into staff induction and training.
- Ensuring staff are aware of and have access to this policy and associated procedures.
- Escalating feedback about this policy to the policy owner and/or policy writer.

4.3 The National Housing Services Manager is responsible for:

- Ensuring that MAH complies with this policy and associated procedures.
- Recommending any changes to this policy and associated procedures.