

Tenants may sue over living expenses

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Canberra tenants struggling to cope with living costs may take their fight to the courts, the ACT Human Rights Commissioner says. Dr Helen Watchirs launched a report yesterday on low-income households' living costs, saying she "wouldn't be surprised" if evicted tenants aired their grievances in court should public agencies make it hard for them to meet the costs of living. Dr Watchirs said a legal challenge could be possible under an amendment to the Human Rights Act, which came into effect January 1. Under the Act, individuals can sue ACT Government agencies, or private companies providing public services, for infringements of their human rights. The report from the ACT Council of Social Service yesterday showed low-income households spent more than two-thirds of their money on essentials. Basic needs accounted for 69 per cent of the low-income household budget, and 65 per cent of the average Canberra household's budget, according to the report.

The figures came from the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics Household Expenditure Survey, from 2003-04. Council director Roslyn Dundas said Tuesday's federal stimulus package, which promised cash handouts to Australians with low incomes, was a "stop-gap" measure. "The economic stimulus package is welcome, but it will only help in the short term," Ms Dundas said. "\$950 is a drop in the ocean for families who are spending over 20 per cent of their household budget on food." Low-income households made up 13 per cent of Canberra's population, Ms Dundas said. Dr Watchirs said Canberra's poorer families went largely unrecognised given the city's reputation for affluence. Ms Dundas called for a long-term strategy to meet the needs of households, including increasing the unemployment benefit.