

Adequate housing a basic human right

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Chief Human Rights Commissioner David Rutherford told members of New Zealand's community boards that they were the 'grass roots of democracy' in New Zealand.

Rutherford was speaking at the organisation's biennial conference in Methven yesterday and told board members that they had the power to find solutions to community problems by co-designing those solutions with the community.

He spoke about the inequality that existed in New Zealand in housing and said this was highlighted after the Canterbury earthquakes when government agencies became involved.

"The earthquake highlighted the importance of protecting the basic human right to housing. We saw the tendency then for agencies not in the community making

decisions for people in a community without consulting them. They discovered their home was no longer their castle."

New Zealand had many thousands of inadequate homes that were owned by thousands of landlords and while poor housing affected tenant health, the costs were borne by an entire community through increased health care needs, Rutherford said.

"Housing tenure rights need to be strengthened; landlords need to understand their obligations in terms of human rights."

New Zealand had made significant progress over decades in human rights but it still lagged behind when it came to the rights of women, he said.

"We'll say Jill is a battered woman but we wouldn't say Jack beats Jill. We have to change this attitude and we can. Every time we hear a woman being objectified we have

to challenge it. Being a bystander is being complicit."

Rutherford also talked about bullying in schools, saying New Zealand's bullying record was the second worst in OECD countries.

"Every year 150,000 kids are bullied and of those 20 per cent will think about suicide. We're not doing enough to prevent this."

Poverty, education and housing were key areas where there was significant inequality, Rutherford said.

"We are sowing the seeds today of significant unrest in the future by leaving too many people behind. It's the community board's job to know their community and to advocate for the people who are being left behind in their community."

The issue of affordable housing had been bandied about by successive governments and there was no quick fix, everyone needed to focus on the problem and agree on a solution, he said.

"Renting is no longer a temporary stop along the way to owning your own home."

New Zealand's local government spotlight falls on Methven this weekend as the village plays host to the biennial New Zealand Community Boards conference. More than 200 board members heard a range of speakers and attended workshops over the two days.

