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Houses of shame

Street youth crisis

By PHIL HICKEY

ILLEGAL boarding houses crammed with street youths as young as 15 are operating across Perth because of a lack of crisis and emergency care.

Homeless support network Shelter WA is investigating a flood of reports of unregulated boarding houses that have sprung up around the city.

The charity said it was investigating one case of up to 16 people living in a single-bathroom house where living rooms were partitioned and rented separately.

Drug-taking and alcohol abuse in such rental houses was rife, authorities said.

Shelter WA chief executive Bronwyn Kitching said the illegal boarding houses were used by the desperate homeless, while an "underground system" of unregulated international student accommodation was also an issue.

"There is little legislative protection for boarders and lodgers. Tenants have no rights to privacy, security of tenure, exclusive occupation, guaranteed rent levels and are vulnerable to theft, eviction and financial exploitation," Ms Kitching said. "We believe there are some operators out there offering rooms without complying with any local government laws."

Uniting Care West executive man-

ager Lesley Wilkinson said unregulated boarding houses were a problem, particularly in winter.

"Sadly the people who run these unregulated homes are not the most straight up and down citizens," she said. "I can't help but think the people who choose to stay are being ripped off."

Salvation Army spokesman Warren Palmer said he was aware of a number of unregulated boarding houses that had lured many renters.

He said people, in their desperation to find a safe bed, would resort to living conditions that were not healthy or acceptable.

"Unregulated boarding houses leave vulnerable people open to abuse, often sharing cramped and squalid conditions," Mr Palmer said.

"These boarding houses provide little privacy or dignity and we as a community must see this as counterproductive and an unacceptable form of accommodation."

The City of Perth said it was not aware of a rise in illegal boarding houses, though a spokesman said one landlord on Beaufort St was advised of the council's concerns about the building being used for emergency accommodation.

City officers have visited the premises regularly and police are kept informed of who is staying there, City of Perth chief executive Frank Edwards said.