

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Melbourne — 22 April 2013

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Witnesses

Ms N. Bassat AM, president, and

Mr D. Marlow, executive director, Jewish Community Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. On behalf of the committee I welcome from the Jewish Community Council of Victoria, Ms Nina Bassat, president; and Mr David Marlow, executive director. Thank you both for your time this afternoon and being before the committee. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. Witnesses may be asked to return at a later date to give further evidence if required. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript. Please note that these proceedings are not being broadcast.

The committee, as you are well aware, is very interested in speaking to organisations that have responsibility for caring for children or organisations under their umbrella groups. We are particularly interested in looking at aspects of where policies and procedures can be improved amongst organisations, particularly leadership issues for peak bodies like yours. At the conclusion of the committee members asking questions of you, you might like to make a statement — we would certainly be happy to provide that opportunity for in — in relation to this inquiry.

What I would like to go to first is to ask a little bit about your organisation and ask if you could provide the committee with an overview of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria and the responsibilities it has.

Ms BASSAT — You use the term ‘umbrella’ organisation; we tend to use the term ‘roof’ body. Let me start: when I say we are a roof body, we have approximately 60 or just over 60 organisations which are affiliated to us. These organisations cover the entire spectrum of Jewish life in Victoria, ranging from synagogues, schools, libraries and museums to sporting organisations and cultural organisations. It does cover the whole mosaic of Jewish life. Having said that, that may still be only half the organisations which are in Victoria. These organisations are affiliated with us and we represent them to government and in the NGO arena, so we are an external voice to the community and hopefully also a guiding force within the community.

The CHAIR — Thank you. In your submission you state:

Child abuse has only recently emerged as endemic and there are many who do not understand the extent of the problem or are too ashamed to discuss the issue, let alone know whom to approach for help.

I am wondering, in view of the organisations that you represent as the overarching body, is that within the Jewish community that you are particularly speaking about, or are you talking in general terms?

Ms BASSAT — I thought we were talking generally, but the Jewish community is in fact a microcosm of the wider community. There are of course ethnic, religious and cultural differences, but on the whole what happens in our community, whether it is in relation to drugs and alcohol, whether it is in relation to divorce rates or whether it is in relation to child abuse, is reflective of the wider community. The figures will not necessarily be reflective but the facts will be.

The CHAIR — Can you comment on the reporting of child abuse within various organisations that you are responsible for or have affiliations with?

Ms BASSAT — In relation to organisations which are affiliated to us, I am not actually aware of any incidence of child abuse. Is that a fair comment?

Mr MARLOW — Yes, that is a fair comment.

Ms BASSAT — In terms of our affiliated organisations, I am not aware of any such cases. There may well be. We are speaking organisationally, I am assuming; we are not speaking about individual cases. Am I correct in that?

The CHAIR — Yes. Obviously there have been some individual cases that have been highlighted in the media in recent times, but I am asking generally whether amongst your community you are aware of reported cases or, in the event that you are not, whether you are not familiar with any.

Ms BASSAT — I am aware of reported cases; going back to your question, which refers to our affiliated organisations, I am not aware of reported cases within organisations which come within our ambit, but certainly I am aware of a large number of cases outside that ambit but within our community.

The CHAIR — In your submission you state that in 2005 you conducted a public forum on child sexual abuse to raise awareness. Can you comment on the effectiveness of that forum at that time? I am sure other committee members will have questions relating to future awareness and what you have put in place, but I am particularly just interested in what happened in 2005 for you to conduct that forum.

Ms BASSAT — I can only speak from hearsay because neither Mr Marlow nor I were in the positions we are currently in in 2005, but obviously I have made inquiries and I understand it was very much a wider community issue and on the basis that we are aware that what happens in the wider community also happens in ours, there was a great deal of anxiety — should we also be taking note of this issue? That was the forerunner of the planning for the forum. That is my understanding.

The CHAIR — Mr Marlow, have you got any comments?

Mr MARLOW — I have not heard anything. I have been in the role for three months. I think I probably was aware of the forum at the time but just as a member of the community, but there were no dramatic outcomes at the time that I am aware of.

The CHAIR — Was there any follow-up from that forum? I know that you have done very subtle things but has there been any follow-up from that particular forum?

Ms BASSAT — No, there was no follow-up from that particular forum per se, but there have been follow-ups since July 2011 when we have become much more aware and active in the area and we have brought in some of the people who participated in the forum because they also have things to add. In fact we had a session with some of them this morning, coincidentally.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. I might hand over to other committee members to explore this a bit further.

Mr McGUIRE — Just recently you have held another forum of presidents of the 60 affiliate organisations. Can you explain what were the results of that? For example, how many of those organisations actually have child protection policies and procedures in place?

Ms BASSAT — I would just like to correct something. That was not a forum. We have what we call a council of presidents, which are the presidents of the various affiliated organisations, and we meet about three or four times a year. They, together with our executive, form an advisory board and on the basis of what we discuss there we take things to the plenum, which is the wider group of delegates.

First of all, to answer that, it was extremely interesting because we provided them with a briefing paper some two weeks prior or 10 days — —

Mr MARLOW — About two weeks beforehand.

Ms BASSAT — So that they would not come to discuss serious matters like this without a briefing and without being able to speak to their organisations. We provided them with a briefing paper which included a risk assessment checklist, and we have brought a copy to leave with you in case you are interested in what the briefing paper was. First of all the briefing paper stated what our policy is, what we are doing, what we are hoping to achieve and how we hope to engage the entire community in what we are doing, not necessarily just our affiliates. That was the purpose of the briefing paper.

The purpose of the checklist was to do with if you are dealing with children — and only a small percentage of our organisations are. The museums do not because where children are involved they always come under the care of someone else. Our libraries do not. Certainly there is a multiplicity of organisations which have no engagement with children whatsoever. But those that do we said, 'Ultimately the responsibility of what happens is with you. It is not the school principal or the schoolteachers — they have their responsibilities which are statutory and prescribed — but ultimately you are the ones who are responsible for whatever happens and how you handle it and how you respond'. We have provided them with the checklist and said, 'Go away, think about it and tell us, first of all, whether your policies and procedures fit what is required; secondly, if they don't, what do you propose to do about it; and, thirdly, how often do you have them audited? How often do you check that these policies and procedures are still appropriate?'

This briefing paper was provided to the presidents who attended that council of presidents meeting. We then sent it out to our wider community, including to organisations which are not affiliated with us. So we have circulated it through the community, and it is also going to go on our website and into our e-bulletins, so that the community is aware of the risks and the measures that as a community they should be putting in place.

Mr McGUIRE — If I can get just a little bit more information on that, I know that is action you have now taken, but I am trying to establish what was in place before that. What we have been able to find out from other organisations is that quite often there is a gap between what is the theory and what is actually happening within the group. We are just trying to establish what is the state of play.

Ms BASSAT — We have been advised by the schools that they all have policies in place, that they have procedures in place and that in fact the schools that we have actually managed to speak to one on one do audit them. That is as far as the schools go. We have very little information that has been given to us by the synagogues, so I cannot answer that question. Sporting clubs: there is only the one large sporting club, which has sub-branches. They have policies and procedures in place which they tell us they also audit.

Mr MARLOW — There is a number of youth groups. For obvious reasons, they are making this a priority. They have been implementing processes and procedures and training leaders. The Zionist youth council and Chabad Youth, which is not an affiliate, are moving with this as well — and a couple of others that I cannot think of off the top of my head.

Ms BASSAT — They have in fact gone beyond just training and putting in policies and procedures. The Zionist youth groups, which cover a wide number of youth groups which run camps, holiday programs and weekly sessions, have been accredited by the Safeguarding Children program. So they have done, I think, a three-year program, and they have fully achieved accreditation, and the other groups are in the process of doing that.

Mr McGUIRE — Just so that we have an idea of the time line here, is this just in the recent past, because this has now become such a big issue within the public domain? Did it previously remain more of a hidden issue?

Ms BASSAT — Yes and no. Some of the activities, such as the accreditation, have been taking place over the past two or three years. Some unfortunately not well enough known initiatives have been in place since 2002. Those of you on this particular inquiry would know about ACCYO. ACCYO was founded in 2002, basically through the initiative of Andrew Blode, whom some of you would have met, because he has been incredibly active in the area of child protection. This group is the group that developed the Safeguarding Children program. This group was funded predominantly by the Jewish community through many of its philanthropists, but it did go out into the wider community. It developed programs which are being run throughout.

I think it was in 2010 that ACCYO felt that they had achieved all they could in terms of policies, procedures, auditing and creating the Safeguarding Children program, and that was then handed over to the Australian Childhood Foundation. That has been an amazing initiative that has been going from 2002 until now, as far as some people in it are concerned. The sad thing is that they were a voice in the wilderness. They begged for assistance from government, they tried to really involve communities and they were not being listened to.

Mr McGUIRE — Thank you for that. I am well aware of the groundbreaking and hard work from the early days by ACCYO, so thank you for putting that on the record.

Ms BASSAT — If I may just add, we have taken three people from ACCYO and invited them to be in our reference group, because it seemed like such a shame to waste all that experience. So Andrew Blode is heading up a Jewish Community Council of Victoria reference group and we have Katherine Levi and Anton Hermann, who were in that group and who have huge experience in child protection, because we really needed guidance in that. It was not something that we were going to go into blindly and just start doing things. We needed as much guidance as we could get. We also try to talk to groups such as Tzedek, which is the victim representational group. Where we can get advice, we are trying to obtain it.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you, Mr Marlow and Ms Bassat, for being here today. I know that you, certainly, were at the launch of the Rabbinical council and the Jewish Taskforce Against Family Violence and Sexual

Assault document, *Will My Rabbi Believe Me?*, which was launched by Chief Commissioner Lay as his very first task on appointment. That was launched — I was there as well — with a lot of promise, and a lot of heart-wrenching acknowledgement that family violence did exist within the Jewish community, that something was to be done about, that this was a very big step and that it was going to be used as a basis for ongoing programs and work. Has anything been monitored on family abuse, with an emphasis on child abuse, as a result of that particular document and that particular program, that you are aware of?

Mr MARLOW — The task force has continued to be very active. They have been working with schools as well as off their own bat dealing directly with the community. In fact they have a forum on tonight. Some of these forums are aimed at particular age groups, or parents of particular age groups. I know they have done work with a number of the schools and various parent groups to try to educate parents and bring the community along to a greater understanding.

Ms BASSAT — If I can add to that, I understand that, as Mr Marlow has said, there is a group for primary school parents today, an education awareness campaign, and next week one for secondary or slightly older primary and lower secondary school parents. To my knowledge, they have also had educational programs for over 40 rabbis in the community, actual training programs, where they have spoken to the rabbis and said, ‘You need to listen, you need to hear and you need to respond appropriately’. They have been full-on educational programs. But we really must be careful not to conflate what is happening in the family violence area and what is happening in the child sexual abuse area, because the task force was originally created to deal with family violence, and that has been their focus for very, very many years. But over the last six or eight years, I think, they have become much more aware of how much focus they have to put on child abuse generally — and I am not just speaking about child sexual abuse, because we all know that psychological and physical abuse is just as much part of the problem.

Mrs COOTE — I am aware of that emphasis that they are taking, and that was my reason for the question about the monitoring — to see whether in fact things are coming out and whether the organisations that you deal with have been working closely along those guidelines and with that program in mind.

Ms BASSAT — Well, we have invited the task force to be part of our reference group as well, because again that is a group of people who have expertise. In fact, they attended this morning’s briefing as well, and one of the things that was questioned was: ‘We need to have actual data. We need to have information. Anecdotal information is all very good, but we need to have something a lot more substantial to work from’.

Mrs COOTE — Are the organisations that are affiliated with you generally welcoming of that type of approach and raising these issues? They are sensitive issues to raise, but are they generally encompassing of these issues?

Mr MARLOW — Well, from my three months experience I think we are at a stage now where people coming on board are much more supportive of anything that works towards protecting the kids. Not that they were against things before, but they might have been more defensive or had a bit of ‘not invented here’ syndrome in some cases. But I think all the organisations I have dealt with have been open to discussion, to asking, ‘How can we do things better?’ and to working together. We have planned to have forums with organisations or affiliates and non-affiliates; everyone is happy to be involved and put their hand up, and everyone wants to talk. The schools are certainly happy to talk. We have got a meeting planned — I think it is tomorrow — with the principals.

Ms BASSAT — Yes.

Mr MARLOW — There are a number of steps to get through, in terms of communication, getting everybody on board and changing the culture and getting people to understand that this is something they can be open about and talk about. It is a matter of talking with the families. We were talking today, again, about family forums and how we communicate more directly with families. Certainly constituent organisations, particularly the schools, have run educational sessions — sometimes using the task force, something with SECASA, sometimes with the police and sometimes with lawyers — to educate the families and their own staff of what to look out for and how to protect the kids as well as having policies in place. I think there is a big education process where people have to learn what to look out for, how to protect the kids and make it open. It is a bit like — we have had a few social issues in the past where it was taboo initially to talk about it, whether it be

things like depression or other areas of social issues. Once you open the doors people can talk, people feel comfortable opening up and the families are comfortable and talk. Then they can educate the kids, then they can be open in coming forward and not worried about what people will think. So I think it is important to have the families and the community on board across the board.

Mrs COOTE — Do you see that it is your role to in fact monitor the ongoing reactions of these education-type programs and these awareness-type forums that you are holding? Is monitoring something that you see as your responsibility?

Ms BASSAT — We see our primary role as putting a culture in place, where the community understands that these are issues, A, that have to be addressed and, B, that they have to be educated on and responded to, and then surely down the track we will have to monitor it, because if you do not monitor your outcomes and if you do not keep some sort of statistics on what you are doing, it all becomes a little bit nebulous. So that will have to become part of it. But I think we are at a stage where we are much more focused on getting things up and running. Before we start doing the monitoring we need to have something concrete to monitor, but certainly the monitoring function has to be a part of it — for no reason other than credibility. If you cannot give facts and figures on what it is you are producing, it is hard to maintain credibility.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you both very much indeed.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Ms HALFPENNY — I was just going to ask: I know we heard earlier in the hearings that there was an advocacy group for people who had been abused as children, and there were the allegations in the paper. Do you work with them as well, just in terms of that — —

Ms BASSAT — I did mention that in my initial presentation, that Tzedek is one of the groups. In fact, Mr Marlow has met with Mr Waks, who is one of the representatives of that group.

Ms HALFPENNY — Sorry. I have got a cold; maybe I was — —

Ms BASSAT — Yes, sorry. I speak very quickly. I am sorry. Indeed we do, because these are the people we are most concerned with, and these are the people who need to have their voice heard. I feel that we are at such an early stage. We have made contact and we have spoken, but I think we are yet to come to a point where their input is going to be important, because we are still doing the mechanics of it, and the mechanics unfortunately takes a while to put in place. Mr Waks will probably tell me differently and tell me that we should be engaged in a different direction, but that is something we will talk through.

Ms HALFPENNY — In terms of looking at what governments can do, policies or whatever, have you got any sort of ideas? One of the things I think people have spoken about is in terms of educators. You have said the community, because often people are shocked and they do not believe it. Then there are people who are not inclined to speak up, maybe they are not thinking about it. Do you think there are certain things in particular that governments could do to try to support groups such as yourself to ensure that there is the education, not just for the individuals to speak up but for the community to be supportive as well?

Ms BASSAT — That is an excellent question and I thank you for it. It is almost a Dorothy Dixier. The thing is, yes, because if we are going to ensure that community groups, organisations, schools and synagogues put policies and procedures in place, and that we have to have those audited, obviously there is a cost factor, there is a staff factor in that. But that to me is a primary step — let us get policies and procedures in place; let us have them audited; let us make sure that they are enforced and that everyone understands them — then you have the education aspect of that.

You need to have the teachers trained. You need to have your ancillary staff trained. You need to have everyone working with children, whether it is in a synagogue, a school, or on the sporting field, they need to have appropriate training. So you have that aspect of it, which is a practical thing, and all of these things need government support and help. You then have to educate your children, but you can only educate children up to a point as to what is appropriate behaviour.

Ms HALFPENNY — Can I just ask, when you talk about the schools, do you mean as part of the curriculum to educate the children? Schools already have a program, mandatory reporting, and all those things.

Ms BASSAT — No, they already have that as part of their program. I do not mean that because the curriculum is in place for that as part of their education, but there are specific programs targeted especially at younger children: what is appropriate behaviour and what is not; what you should talk about to your parents and what you should not. This is far more targeted and some of it is ethno-specific, which we would like to implement through our community. So you have that.

Now I am not trying to be as facile as to say that you can educate children to protect themselves; children cannot protect themselves. This is just one tool that can be used. In concert with or together with that, you also need to educate the parents. The staff and people who deal with children have to be educated at one level; then you have to educate children at whatever level you can educate them to; and you have to educate parents, carers and grandparents — people who deal with the children — first of all on how to detect signs and how to protect the children, because protection should be far more of the structure of what we are looking at. Then if anything does happen, how to deal with them: the appropriate way to talk to them; the appropriate way to bring out the questions.

Then of course we also need help lines. We need mechanisms in place that if either a child, a teacher, or a youth worker says, 'I am seeing something untoward: where do I go? What do I do? How do I deal with this?', then we need that sort of mechanism as well. Now none of this is going to happen without funding, but it is not just funding. Funding is only a part of it. The most important thing is that whilst we as a community and all the other communities can put things into place to change the culture, the government also needs to put things into place to change the culture. In the same way as there is a No to Homophobia campaign and just as there is a 'hatred stops with me' campaign, you also need to have in place an understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, and that children must be protected. It is not a matter of let us deal with it after it has happened; let us make sure it does not happen.

Mr O'BRIEN — I am just going to ask you to elaborate initially as to the nature of your organisation as a peak body, or a roof body. I am particularly referring to the submission made by Mr Waks, because it mentions complaints about the leadership by the ECAJ, or Executive Council of Australian Jewry, in particular. But it also refers to some other complaints about the Rabbinical Council of Victoria and of course Yeshiva College. Do any of those organisations fit under your umbrella?

Ms BASSAT — In fact we fit under one umbrella, and some of the others do not fit under our umbrella. Can you bear with me whilst I explain the structure?

Mr O'BRIEN — Yes, please.

Ms BASSAT — Each state has a roof body. In Victoria it is called the Jewish Community Council of Victoria, and each state has an equivalent roof body. They sit under the umbrella of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, which is the federal body and basically represents Jewish community to federal government and internationally. The Victorian council represents Victorian Jewry at the local level. To answer the first part of your question, that is the structure. To answer the second part of the question, Yeshiva College is not one of our affiliates. We do talk to them, and in fact Mr Marlow and I have met with the principal and have inquired as to what procedures and practices they have in place.

Mr MARLOW — He would like to present to the inquiry. I believe he has made an offer, but when you come down that part of the track he is interested in talking about what they have been doing since he has been there.

Ms BASSAT — You mentioned other organisations you were asking about?

Mr O'BRIEN — I was picking up on the ones that had been mentioned in Mr Waks's submission. It is difficult, not just with the Jewish community but with many other religions because of the dichotomy between individual churches, groups or rabbis and the overall collective structure, if there is one, and whether it is hierarchical not. The reason I ask that of you is: how do you believe we as a government need to engage in practices to ensure as best we can that protocols that are put in place are carried through to the community, particularly with leadership? That is where the roles of peak bodies traditionally come in. How do we do that,

and are you the right body, or is the ECAJ the right body? How can we get the spread across the community, or do we have to go to others?

Ms BASSAT — The answer is both ECAJ and JCCV. If you want the message spread Australia-wide, you would go to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. For instance, just to put it into context, when the royal commission takes submissions, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry will be presenting on behalf of the overall Jewish community. Within the Victorian context, yes, we are the right body to come to.

Having said that, we have no compulsive powers over our community. We have persuasive powers and we have representational powers, but there is no way that you can compel anyone in the community to do anything, other than by force of law. Of course all members of our community are encouraged absolutely to the maximum to cooperate within the legal process.

Mr O'BRIEN — I might finish my questioning on that. We have a submission in relation to mandatory reporting on behalf of the Jewish Taskforce Against Family Violence, which talks about extending mandatory reporting to ministers of religion. It is quite a helpful discussion in relation to the tensions that apply to a confessional secrecy within an organisation as opposed to the rules of the state. Does your body have a view, or do you adopt that view? I do not know whether you have read that view.

Ms BASSAT — We think mandatory reporting should go right across the community. I do not think you should isolate teachers or rabbis. For example, there is a dichotomy that psychologists are not obliged to mandatorily report, and that is problematic. I think mandatory reporting, when it comes to child abuse, should be a given. At this stage I am expressing a personal view because it is not something we have discussed within our community, but to me it is a no-brainer, to put it into elegant language.

Mr O'BRIEN — There have been progressive issues of resourcing — questions as to how you then implement that — and there have also been questions as to, in the past, which organisations were the best to target the specific problems that had been identified. I am not defending it, but that is a consideration. Plus there are some organisations that ethically have put up restrictions to mandatory reporting, particularly for reasons of confidentiality. As far as you are aware, are you aware of any restrictions that you would oppose or seek — say, on the confessional?

Ms BASSAT — I will not speak for the medical profession or the legal profession. There are certain professions that are bound professionally not to report, but I actually feel that in the case of child sexual abuse those privileges should not apply, and I feel that quite strongly because we are dealing in an area where the issues are so close to people's hearts that to rely on professional privilege is a cop-out, quite frankly.

The CHAIR — Is that your view, or is that the view of the community council?

Ms BASSAT — That is my view.

Mr MARLOW — I think it would be a pretty common view in the community. We have not had a vote on it.

Ms BASSAT — We have not brought it up for discussion. Well, we have brought it up for discussion, but we have never, as you say, brought it to the vote. If we speak about the Jewish religion — and I am not a religious expert, but I do know enough to say this — compliance with the law and compliance with ethics and morals is what underpins our Jewish religion and has done for millennia, so I cannot see any cultural or religious objection to mandatory reporting.

Mr WAKELING — Thank you both very much for your presentation and attendance today. I am interested in exploring further the issue of policies within community organisations that deal directly with child abuse, and I note that your organisation has a child protection policy. I am interested firstly to see what percentage, to your knowledge, of member organisations that come under your umbrella or group have a similar policy. Are you aware of that, or have you had the opportunity to speak to your membership at this stage? If not, you can take it on notice.

Mr MARLOW — We have not done a specific survey yet — that is one of the things I think we still need to do — but we have talked one on one to a lot of organisations and talked within our plenum to organisations.

Most of the relevant types of organisations, such as the schools, have policies; at least they tell us they have policies. What I would like to do is move forward and, whether the government does it or whether we do it, try to audit those and have a look at what they have, even if it is that they show us the policy and we tick their name off so that we see that they have something. We also have a process in place where the chairman of our reference group plans to meet with a lot of the organisations one on one to more directly audit them, considering that he has expertise in the area which my personal professional staff do not. So we are using the reference group that does have the expertise to help us in that area.

Ms BASSAT — To go beyond that, the briefing paper to which I referred at the outset, as I said, had a risk assessment questionnaire in it that we have asked our affiliates to complete, asking, ‘What policy do you have in place? How are you monitoring it? How often do you have it audited?’. When you ask whether we know what is happening, no, but we have now sent around something to all our affiliates and to all the organisations within the community asking them to respond to that. That is number one.

Number two, to follow on from Mr Marlow, part of our policy itself is not necessarily to ensure that we look at the policies and procedures and audit them but that we are prepared to assist those organisations that are happy for us to do so to have that done by the Safeguarding Children program run by the Australian Childhood Foundation.

Mr WAKELING — Thank you very much. Many of the federation organisations similar to yours that have presented have had varying responses amongst their own memberships on the uptake of policies, so for us it is a good opportunity to understand that it has been a piecemeal approach in organisations in terms of their membership and policy development, which leads me to my next point. Do you believe that the creation of a policy should be a mandatory arrangement that we as a committee should be examining as part of our inquiry in terms of the development of a policy?

Mr MARLOW — Yes.

Ms BASSAT — I am not sure that I understood the question. May I ask you to run that by me again? I was not quite clear on what the actual question was.

Mr WAKELING — In terms of organisations that deal with children, do you believe it should be a mandatory requirement of those organisations to have a policy and procedure in place which also feeds into an education role of its membership in terms of how to appropriately deal with children as a means of avoiding child abuse?

Ms BASSAT — I can only second what Mr Marlow said, which is definitely yes. I just was not sure I grasped what you had said.

Mr WAKELING — That is okay. If that is the case, how do you see that potentially being implemented? Do you believe that it is purely a role for government or, more importantly, do you believe that organisations such as yourselves that understand cultural issues of organisations, particularly in your own community, should have a role, and what role should that be?

Ms BASSAT — I think that is a very interesting question. I think yes, first of all we do have to play a role. The role is one of creating a culture that is responsive and of creating a culture that understands this is an issue — it is not something that does not touch our community; in fact it does — and where a child, or even an adult, will feel comfortable enough to come forward and speak and know that they will be heard and understood and responded to appropriately. I think we definitely have a role to play in creating that process, but it would be very arrogant of me to assume that we as a community body can play that role solely. It is a role that needs to be supported by government. It is a role that needs to be supported by the education system. It is a role that needs to be supported by campaigns such as the ones I mentioned previously.

Mr WAKELING — Finally, in terms of complaints that are dealt with by your member organisations, do you believe your organisation should be part of the process in terms of do you believe that these matters should be referred up to you — not in terms of handling the complaint; obviously the complaint should be handled appropriately by the relevant organisation and involve the police where appropriate — but do you believe that as part of the reporting mechanism there should be a reporting up to an organisation such as yourselves to assist you in identifying whether there are systemic problems within your member organisations?

Ms BASSAT — Yes; from that point of view, yes — I am glad you clarified it — because handling the issues is not within our area of expertise. If I can just draw an analogy, we have a similar system of reporting in the political anti-Semitic area; anti-Semitic incidents are reported to us, and we monitor them very strictly through our security group. We do this at the state and national level, and we then draw statistics from it, and these statistics very greatly assist Vicpol and the other police entities within Australia. I am drawing this analogy because, as I said previously, you do need — data if you are going to get anywhere. Ideally we would like to have a system of data collecting. Whether we do it, whether we do it through an organisation like the welfare organisation Jewish Care, which is also part of our reference group, that mechanism will have to be looked at very, very carefully, but I think it would be very useful to do that. In fact it would be more than useful; it is almost imperative.

Mr WAKELING — Thank you very much.

The CHAIR — I do not believe there are any further questions. Would you like to make any concluding remarks or comments through a statement to the committee, either of you?

Mr MARLOW — There are just a couple of things in terms of what government could possibly do. I think Nina has touched on a lot of these things. If we are going to be changing culture and we are going to be changing people's attitudes, I think we need to focus a lot on adult education for the families. As much as we can teach the children to be aware, teach them about stranger danger and what is appropriate touching and this sort of thing, I think a lot of the focus has to be on the families so that a couple can talk about things, that they are comfortable and create an environment where the children talking to the parents, that they are comfortable in reporting and they know who to report to. Part of what we will be working on will be tools to help parents and organisations in being able to know where to go, where to get advice and where the touch points are. I think in some families there is a bit of confusion as to where is the most appropriate place to go, and they do not always get the best response from certain parties when they go. They might talk to the police where really they need to talk to a psychotherapist, or they go to a psychotherapist when really they should be talking to SECASA, the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault. There are different entities they could be talking to, and I think we need to give parents the tools so they know that if this is the sort of thing you are looking for, that is the organisation you go to. Also, as Nina says, funding is important for the kids' and adults' education, for the families. The policies need to be transparent. When we talk about all the organisations having policies, ideally these would be online and available to parents to see, as well as staff and the kids themselves, especially for the older kids.

Possibly we could consider an accreditation process for organisations that deal with children. As we heard, the working-with-children check goes this far; it does not really help in a lot of cases where the person has not been caught before. It would be nice if we could have some accreditation for organisations so that at least they have their policies in place. If it is mandatory, accreditation becomes less of an issue because it is just something they have to have. Then there needs to be an audit process over the quality of the policy, but the policy and the education have to go together to change the culture.

Ms BASSAT — I think Mr Marlow has said most of what I was going to say. The only thing that I really would like to wind up with is that as a community the Jewish community absolutely cannot and will not condone any form of child abuse, whether it is sexual abuse or any other form of abuse. What we have to learn to understand, because not the entire community understands it — and I do not think the wider community understands it either — is that the ramifications are horrific, the ramifications are longstanding and they affect not only the children who are abused but the entire family. The point that we really need to make, and within the Jewish community we are trying to make, is that it affects the entire fabric of our entire community. Every single child who is abused is a reflection on our community and so the prevention of even one child being abused is what we should be looking at.

What I was trying to say about cultural change is, yes, as individuals we might all be aware of that; as a community, whether it is the Jewish community or the wider community, I am not sure that we are there yet, and that is where we need to get to.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. On behalf the committee I thank you both very much for your time this afternoon and appearing before us. We do appreciate your time and your evidence has been most helpful, thank you.

Ms BASSAT — Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak.

Mr MARLOW — How would you like us to table these?

The CHAIR — I can take that and pass it on to the secretariat, thank you.

Committee adjourned.