

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Shepparton —Thursday, 24 October 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

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WITNESSES

Ms Sara Noori, Programs Manager of Resilient Communities, and

Ms Allison Schubert, New Arrival Education Coordinator, Uniting Goulburn North East.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you for being here. Before I begin this public hearing, I would like to record that this public hearing is being held on the lands of the Yorta Yorta people, and I wish to acknowledge them as the traditional owners. I would also like to pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders and other communities who may be here today. All mobile phones should be turned to silent. This public hearing is for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. All evidence taken here today is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, these comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to provide a brief of up to 10 minutes, and it will be followed by questions from myself and Chris. Welcome, Sara Noori, Programs Manager for Resilient Communities, Uniting Goulburn North East, and also Allison Schubert from Uniting Goulburn North East.

Ms NOORI: Thanks so much. Allison will be doing the presentation today.

Ms SCHUBERT: Good morning. Thank you for having us and for giving us the opportunity to provide a brief of our experiences with culturally diverse communities. It has been our experience at Uniting that families, parents, communities, stakeholders and service providers all play an important role in supporting early childhood engagement and achieving better outcomes for our children. This hearing opportunity calls us to consider those services in our community which strengthen early childhood engagement and shape the future of our children.

Our refugee families are experts on their children and their feedback is invaluable, so we feel privileged to be able to represent them through our experience with them. Research and our experience have shown that when we all work together the children are able to do better and thrive in life. At Uniting in Shepparton we have been delivering multicultural playgroups for over six years and have in the last two years moved into the space of delivering a trauma-informed playgroup to our refugee and newly arrived families. This trauma-informed playgroup has reported an approximately 70 per cent increase in our newly arrived refugee parents' personal and parenting-related knowledge and a 61 per cent increase in their wellbeing and confidence as parents. Through this playgroup, families are introduced in a culturally safe environment to the theories of attachment and Circle of Security concepts. The program is designed and delivered using trauma-informed practice and group work to create a positive holding environment for parents who have refugee lived experience. This is done through a 10-week block of supported play sessions provided for parents with their children. An engaged assessment process using evaluation tools designed to best capture the unique experience of CALD families provides an ongoing evidence base and information regarding the benefit of the program and the adaptations required for the program to meet the specific needs of CALD families. Evidence-based programs such as this are only available to a limited number of parents due to limited availability of funding. Such connector programs help with trauma and prepare refugees and new arrivals for mainstream life. They are key to strengthening early childhood engagement of culturally diverse communities.

We have observed through our supported playgroups that CALD families are more able to access and benefit from mainstream early childhood services if they first have opportunity to participate in settings which provide the time and specific support they need to commence recovery from trauma and displacement, which assists them to become familiar with and conversant in English and empowers them through safe supportive programs and practising environments to develop confidence to navigate mainstream services in Australia with purpose and dignity. At Uniting in Shepparton, strengthening early childhood engagement of culturally diverse communities is one of our priorities, and we have over the years supported early childhood education

enrolments and registrations at the community level to increase uptake of and access to services within those CALD communities.

We have observed that many of our families are keen to register and enrol their three-year-olds at early start kinder but do not fall into the eligibility criteria for this service. We would like to advocate in this forum that changes be made to the eligibility criteria for ESK—three-year-old kinder—so our refugee families are able to access the service, which we believe strongly supports them to provide better readiness for kinder for both parents and children. At present only families who are involved with child protection or who have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage are able to be funded; otherwise it is about \$1000 a year, which precludes a lot of our families from attending.

Thank you for hearing our concerns and suggestions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your presentation. We heard yesterday that there continues to be a real challenge, and I just want to know if it is a challenge here, when it comes to accessing interpreter services and connecting to and navigating the service. There are two questions there. Do you find similar experiences?

Ms SCHUBERT: We certainly take an initiative to work with the clients that we are able to, to help them to navigate the interpreting service because they do find it confusing or lengthy sometimes. For instance, they are first spoken to for 25 seconds in English. Many of our clients hang up in that time because they do not understand that part, so we talk to them and instruct them and teach them that they need to wait for that time to hear the words ‘which language?’ before they are able to participate in the conversation. So there are those little practical things.

Ms NOORI: And I think from a service provider’s perspective, at Uniting at the moment we have bicultural workers, and most of them are accredited interpreters. We are really fortunate and in the best place to provide that service. However, in my previous work experience when I was working with the Australian Red Cross and we had to engage interpreters it was really difficult. Why it was difficult was because most of the interpreters at the moment at NAATI, for example, or TIS, they will say that they are fluent in Persian, Dari, Hazaragi and Farsi, and not all languages are the same. For example, I speak Hazaragi and I speak Dari. I can understand Farsi and Persian, but when it comes to interpreting complex health issues, for example, or issues in relation to their visa or a letter that they have received from the Department of Home Affairs, it then becomes really difficult for them. Their mother tongue is, for example, Hazaragi or Dari, and they have also at the time kind of thought, ‘Maybe I can speak Persian as well’. So it is really difficult.

The other thing is accessing phone interpreters. Often when we have rung interpreters they have said that they are available for the next 30 minutes and in about 10 minutes they kind of hang up because they have to go and pick up children from school or whatever the reason may be. So for us to go back and start from scratch, that takes another 40 minutes, and for the client to repeat the same story again for us, it is quite traumatising.

The CHAIR: Just on one question, the Committee is aware that some culturally diverse families are not able to attend local playgroups funded by the Victorian Government because they require a healthcare card to participate but are ineligible for one because of their refugee status not yet being confirmed. What other issues do these families experience in accessing early childhood and other services? How can government, on all levels, better support these families?

Ms NOORI: I suppose we are talking about asylum seekers at this point in time. It is a huge issue, in particular after the changes that were made to the eligibility criteria of the SRSS program. I suppose from a Government perspective the best thing that we can do is to have all playgroups. Because they are people who are living in our communities—they are families—we should not make any discrimination based on their visa status or their refugee status. I just think that we should keep it open for anyone who is residing in Shepparton. As long as the eligibility criteria is their postcode, I think that would make it a lot of easier for the service providers, including for Uniting, to say, ‘You are welcome’.

We have made some changes to our programs at our level, and we have made it available for some asylum seekers, but not all service providers would have, I think, the authority to make those decisions, given that some of their funding that comes from the department clearly says that it is either for migrants or refugees and none

of them are asylum seekers, because by definition refugees are the ones whose status has been determined and migrants are the ones who can move out of the country when they want to; it just precludes asylum seekers. As long as we can say, 'Your eligibility will be your postcode', then that kind of includes everyone.

The CHAIR: Do you believe in your experience that migrant communities, or those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, have a true understanding of the value of early education and find it important to have their child participate in playgroup or kinder—that sort of early childhood education?

Ms SCHUBERT: We have found that as we engage with the families in these holding type programs that we tend to provide, from there they do. Sometimes we are hearing back from the community that the families are not valuing the early childhood experience, but that is certainly not the case when we have had time to spend with the families initially. I think in the past perhaps the problem was that we did not have enough of those holding programs, but we are working hard to provide more and more time for the families so that they become conversant with the benefits of these things that are provided in our main stream.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both very much for coming in today. We really appreciate your presentation. You talked about the playgroups and the trauma-informed playgroups, can you just expand on that a little bit more around what activities you are doing, how that is working and any learnings that you have had over the period that you have been doing that?

Ms SCHUBERT: Sure. We enrol approximately six to eight families in a 10-week block, generally, because we find that gives us the best opportunity to provide the intensive support for play modelling and learnings that we are able to do. In that group of workers, we have a childcare educator, we have a counsellor and we have at least one bilingual worker. Currently we are running a multicultural group, which means we require three bilingual workers. Having all those workers on site in that playgroup means the support is amazing, and the benefit to the families then is amazing as well. They have been our learnings, or they have been my personal learnings, that when the support is one-to-one, the relationships are able to be built, which are real to the families, not just context, but they are actual people there who are known by the families and they know that their children are appreciated and loved by those workers as well. That secure environment and the familiarity that is developed there provides a really strong base for the families, and they value it because they just want to be in there; they do not want that group to close. So they have been our learnings.

Ms COUZENS: So what happens after the 10 weeks? Do they move into a mainstream playgroup or would you then finish contact with them? What happens then?

Ms SCHUBERT: The trauma-informed playgroup is more recent. We did have an open, multicultural playgroup for a time, which was less focused on parental learnings—although we did do that in the end if we had sufficient volunteers. This trauma-informed model gives us the opportunity to have a really high level of support. The question I was answering was—

Ms NOORI: What special playgroups and what do we do when we transition.

Ms COUZENS: What happens after.

Ms SCHUBERT: Right, yes. So from that original group that we were working with in the broader multicultural group, many of them stayed with us for—it was not a 10-week block; it was ongoing. So many of them were with us for about three years. That group were extremely successful. They became really keen to be part of the community themselves.

Ms COUZENS: So was that as a playgroup they continued?

Ms SCHUBERT: They found their way to other playgroups that were close to their home environment, whereas they would be travelling quite a distance at times. We taught them how to get on the bus with their children and be independently coming. So all of those experiences—three years though, it did take. It was not as intensive, though, as the informed playgroup that we are doing at the moment. So we are covering more parenting, wellbeing and confidence in this one, but we do have other supportive programs under our other programs.

Ms NOORI: Do you want to talk about the circle of security and theories of attachment?

Ms SCHUBERT: Yes, we cover theories of attachment, so the benefit of that organised attachment in the family; we talk about the circle of security and the parents being a secure base for their children; how to repair rupture in the family; relationships; and the percentage of time that parents need to be doing an excellent job that still is beneficial to their children. So we talk about the gaps as well for them, where they do not feel like they can be everything to their child all the time. Many of them have a lot of children to look after. So we share experiences with them, we talk about our own parenting styles, our own experiences and we talk together, and the women gradually become—they feel familiar in the environment and supported and in a relationship so then they start to thaw, is how I see it. They thaw from being closed up and keeping safe and start to open up and start to talk. It takes a good bit of that 10 weeks for that to happen, so it is quite fundamental progress. But it is so important as a precursor to them being able to manage in our mainstream services. So yes, if they have had that time, I think they then do access the services quite readily—as easily as many of us. But they need that intensive period of time where they are supported and given room to grow and to just thaw from their past experiences.

Ms COUZENS: So when they transition from playgroup to kinder, for example, do you play a role in that? We heard yesterday in Bendigo that there is a very strong connection between the playgroup and the kindergarten, and even school, so do you play a role in that? So for those children that are affected by trauma, is there a stepping stone from that playgroup into kindergarten and then onto primary school?

Ms SCHUBERT: Yes. Many of the kinders have their own playgroups, so we have bilingual workers that support those playgroups to assist the multicultural families that need support to understand how to move then toward kinder or just to be there so that they can be connected in that setting. Some of those families will have been with us first in our playgroups, or they may not; they may have gone straight to the kinder and enrolled through the council. But our bilingual workers will often be the connection for those families, and we have had an increase in enrolments as a result of that, to kinder, haven't we?

Ms NOORI: I suppose we are also talking about a gap over here, which we were able to fill this year. The council had a pool of funding and they contacted us to see if our bilingual workers were happy to go back out into the communities and help mums fill out their kinder forms. As a result, from memory, I think we sorted out 14 forms, but this is in addition to the other forms that our bilingual workers complete at the playgroups at their kinders. So basically this just adds to the uptake in all of the kinder enrolments as well. Most of the mums would just have questions that they can ask of the bilingual workers. When we say 'bilingual workers', they are bicultural workers from their own community who would have young children enrolled at kinder, and there would just be simple questions to answer: 'What do we have to do?' or 'What if my child goes to kinder and says my mum was really angry at me? Will they take my children away?', and things like that. So it kind of really helps ease them a bit around the myths, and they would be best to say, 'These are just myths and we are happy to support you through us just being around there'. Although it is 2 hours practically, they would know that these girls are there and they can ask them anything if they have to. So I think there is a gap, and we were able to do that this year because council had that funding and they approached us. But I think if we have got some funding around that, even if it is with the councils that support those kinders, that would be helpful.

Ms COUZENS: And you mentioned the volunteers. Was that with the playgroup?

Ms SCHUBERT: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Are they specifically trained for that playgroup?

Ms SCHUBERT: One of our volunteers did the training for Through the Looking Glass, yes. In our training we try to involve and allow volunteers always to attend so that they are trained in the same things, because they are giving their time. We have some really skilled ladies working in the playgroup at the moment who are volunteers.

Ms COUZENS: And are they from community?

Ms NOORI: As in from the Shepparton community?

Ms SCHUBERT: Yes, they from the Shepparton community.

Ms COUZENS: But are they from the various multicultural communities?

Ms SCHUBERT: Not from the CALD community no.

Ms NOORI: But we do have volunteers who are from their community as well.

Ms SCHUBERT: As well, that is right.

Ms NOORI: It is a mix.

Ms SCHUBERT: There is a mix of skilled volunteers.

Ms COUZENS: But training is provided to those volunteers.

Ms SCHUBERT: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: And what do you see as being some of the key gaps and barriers?

Ms NOORI: Barriers to access?

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms NOORI: For availability of services?

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Ms SCHUBERT: The limited funding in terms of early childhood services being able to engage bilingual workers themselves. We are probably the first people they ring, but we need our bilingual workers with us. We are engaged with the council because we are trying to be part of the solution, but it would be good if we could employ more bilingual workers across the community, not just from us at Uniting. We are the team in Shepparton but we need our workers for our team.

Ms NOORI: I suppose from a gap perspective the other thing that we would like to also mention is that they really want to see someone who is from their community do well at life. So basically they would kind of look at these bicultural workers, who we have supported and provided the opportunity—and they have been with us for more than three years now—and who are really well trained and doing so well at life and have a secure job at a prestigious organisation as well. They look up to them and often they will ask me and kind of say, ‘If she can do it, and she has just moved to Australia only in the last two years with a little child, then we would like to do it as well’. They would look at Zahra, who is one, and the other Zahra that we have—we have got another one who is not married yet—and of course they are role models. If we give them the opportunity to thrive at life and at work as well, then they would be their role models. If we work closely with them, they would be their inspirations and they would kind of follow them and think if they can do it, why can’t they?

Ms SCHUBERT: And they see us working together, too.

Ms NOORI: Absolutely, and they would also ask Zahra, ‘When did you come to Australia?’, and she would be like, ‘Well I moved five or six years ago’, or even 10 years ago, and they would kind of start thinking, ‘Well, if she came 10 years ago and she’s already working and is quite settled, and I came last year, I could be her in the next nine years’. Then they ask, ‘What did you do when you came to Australia?’.

So I think it is kind of that shadowing as well—an element of shadowing—and these playgroups and the opportunities that we provide are pretty much scaffolding in nature for them to be able to kind of be ready and navigate the system by themselves.

Ms COUZENS: So how many families would you be working with at any one time?

Ms NOORI: At this point in time I think we would have more than 300 families for sure, and the reason for that is we have the HSP program. We have settled 320 people in the last year only in Shepparton, but then we

have the SETS program which is the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support program, which provides support for up to five years. So each year if you add 300 and 300, we would be sitting at 1000 people—or 1000-plus, actually. Our client load is huge. We do try our best to provide that support but would appreciate more of these scaffolding-natured kinds of programs elsewhere as well.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for providing your experiences and your submission today. That will take part in the deliberations for our report that will be handed down in the new year. If you would like to keep up to date, you can follow our Committee's webpage. I also want to, on behalf of the Committee, in particular thank you for the work that you do. I believe that Shepparton is just a real leader when it comes to the support of migrant communities, and that is acknowledged throughout Melbourne. So again thank you.

Ms NOORI: Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.