

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 November 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

#### **WITNESSES**

Mr Matthew Inkster, Manager, People, Capability and Inclusion, Metro Roads Program Alliance, and  
Jasmine, program participant, Fulton Hogan;

Mr Khaled Abdulwahab, Community Engagement Officer, and

Ms Mariam Geme, Intern, Flemington Works, Moonee Valley City Council; and

Mr Aman Bushe, program participant, Work and Learning Centre.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for attending today. It is a very important Inquiry. We are looking into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. Obviously you are here to present us with your story, and that will help us formulate, going forward, some of the recommendations that we make to the Government to help disadvantaged Victorians seek some sustainable employment. You are protected by parliamentary privilege. Anything you say here is protected, but if you say it outside or put it on social media, you may not be afforded that privilege. We will give you a transcript of what you say here and you can proofread that for yourself, and then we will publish it accordingly. Anything you present today will be placed on the Committee's website. If you like, you can do a presentation of a couple of minutes each, and then we will ask some questions along the way. Is that all right? Who wants to start?

**Ms CONNOLLY:** No-one ever wants to start.

**Mr INKSTER:** I am happy to go first. It does not bother me. My name is Matthew. I am the Manager of People, Capability and Inclusion for the Metro Roads Program Alliance, which is one of the level crossing removal alliances around Melbourne. I work for Fulton Hogan, which is the principal contractor on that alliance. My job—one of the many things I do—is to manage the social procurement and manage those targets around the alliance.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Jasmine?

**JASMINE:** I am Jasmine. I work with Fulton Hogan on the Evans Road project. I have been there for four months. I started in a new position. It is really cool.

**The CHAIR:** Are you enjoying it so far?

**JASMINE:** Yes, it is good.

**The CHAIR:** Khaled?

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Yes. Hi. My name is Khaled. I am a youth worker/community development officer. I have been working for about 18 years. I have worked in the different estates, from Footscray to the Fitzroy flats. I currently work at the Flemington estate. I work with a program through Jobs Victoria called Flemington Works, but it is currently under the Moonee Valley City Council. It is a project that was funded for two years, and it is going to end in June 2020. In the program mainly what we do a lot is we have to kind of use Moonee Valley City Council procurements to actually find jobs for young people and the residents, but also change the policies of Moonee Valley City Council in how it recruits.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Aman?

**Mr BUSHE:** Yes. My name is Aman. I have worked in patient transport for the Eye and Ear Hospital for nine years.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Well done. Just in terms of government support, I know Jobs Victoria is one part of it, and obviously there are a number of different programs, both state and federal. How do you think we can work together with the Federal Government in coming up with a better package of programs that organisations can make use of? Do you think that we can do something better as a State Government?

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Yes. I think there is always room for improvement, but at the moment the way we have seen it is just that it is very competitive among the different organisations that are getting funded by Jobs Victoria. Some of them have different requirements, and then what we are seeing at the moment in the field is just that there are a lot of people signing up with different programs and actually not finding employment, and they just keep moving. So it just gives the people looking for work way more options and they are being less patient with the provider that they are actually given to actually work with. There are many other things that we could mention, but probably that is the only thing I will mention.

**The CHAIR:** You mentioned the contract is going to end next year, so do you find that program useful? Do you think that that should continue?

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Yes. So, for example, with Flemington Works we have hired over 107 people over the year, so we feel like it is a very successful program. We have met with several ministers. They all thought the program that we are actually running is one of the best employment programs in Victoria. We have actually worked really hard with Moonee Valley City Council to change their policy but also using the procurements. And now that we have kind of activated the Flemington estate and we have put people into employment, we feel like because we have had the trust of community, we have put the young people that were very work ready into employment. But now as the word is spreading around, we are getting a lot of the more complex young people coming in and asking for assistance. Just to give you guys an example, we had the cleaning contract coming up. It was a three-year, \$3 million contract. There were five companies that kind of made it to the top five, and then Moonee Valley said that the people that were going to get the contract were the ones that showed really good social procurement. So one company said they were going to hire 35 women from the estate over the three years. We have been able to hire 12 women so far, but what has happened is just that it cut out all the middle things, so there was no interview. We were able to do prepackaging and add them straight into the system, and then it was straight into employment. We feel like that model actually helps. We kind of monetise the employment system using council's contracts. We feel that worked really well, but unfortunately now because there is no funding and we have not been promised any funding we are kind of wrapping up the program, which is a program that kind of has a high amount of ministers coming and visiting the Flemington Community Centre. A lot of people spoke highly of it, but unfortunately that is the situation. There is no continuation of it, when the program is actually going really well.

**Ms ADDISON:** Could you give us a bit more of an insight into what Flemington Works does?

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Flemington Works was part of DEDJTR—I think they have changed the name. It was a three-year contract. We realised that we did not want to become another job service provider when we got given the money, and as I was stating earlier, between the JVENs there were a lot of people in that room. And then also the State Government was hoping that all the freeways and all these new major projects would employ a lot of young people, but we have not seen any of that come through. Even through Flemington Works we have not seen much of that come through. So what we have done is that we have decided to look at what power Moonee Valley City Council has. We spend about \$90 million to \$100 million a year on procurement, so we decided to actually work really closely with the companies that actually need something from us, and that way we were able to kind of—what is the right word?—have more power. I do not think that is the right word. And then they also needed us. So at the same time, instead of us chasing the employers, the employers are chasing us.

At the moment we are working on the 10-year procurement with all the leisure centres, and the leisure centres have been very proactive because they know the contract is coming up. So now they are working very closely with us and they have started hiring people from the Flemington estate. Whereas before, that would have never happened. But the reason mainly why that has happened is because they really want that 10-year contract, and Moonee Valley council told them that, 'We now have changed our policy and are working with organisations and companies that actually hire locally', and we feel like that has a big weight on it.

**Ms ADDISON:** And what has been the flow-on for the Flemington estate of limiting works? When you go to the Flemington estate does it feel different? Does it look different? Is there more optimism? Is there—

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Yes. I am going to sound very biased—

**Ms ADDISON:** Please be biased.

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** but I feel like there has been a huge revitalisation. We are working with a group of women who have started their own catering businesses and now they are scoring many small catering contracts. They have just scored the \$12,000 contract for the whole Christmas party for Moonee Valley City Council. So now the Flemington estate is actually more energised and they are more hopeful, because a lot of the time with employment a lot of the young people, when they have been looking for work for two years and then they have been getting rejected everywhere and it is not you that is the problem, but everyone tells you that it is you, it can become quite depressing. So we felt like even by having young people come in—we do not advertise it anywhere—every day we are taking more referrals and we feel like that is because it has just started this snowball effect. Young people are spreading the word of mouth.

We also are providing tangible employment, because a lot of the time a lot of these young people were born here, and they expect better than their parents. For their parents, a factory job would have been good, or a taxidriver job would have been good, but these young people have aspirations. They grew up here. They were born here. They speak really good English, and their grammar is amazing. They are looking at other high schools or at uni and are doing amazing things. So they expect more. With Moonee Valley City Council what we are able to do is actually provide them with very tangible employment, like working with the comms team, working with the accountants, doing the leisure. I am working with a young lady. She is studying sports at the moment. She is becoming a swim teacher.

**Ms ADDISON:** Just one more question, because I just want to drill down deeply: my understanding is that a number of people who live on the Flemington estate would go to Debney Park Secondary College. Is that correct?

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** It is Mount Alexander.

**Ms ADDISON:** What support is there through the school for Flemington? Is there a partnership between Debney Park Secondary College and the Flemington estate or are they standalone?

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** They are very much standalone, and thank you for actually mentioning it, because I also feel like one of the huge issues at the moment is that young people have finished school without having an understanding of what to do in the future. They have just been left on the drawing board. There is no aspiration; there is no career development. We are meeting a lot of young people finishing year 12 not understanding what to do in the future but at the same time having the pressure that they need to come up with something. So we are seeing this a lot. There have been some partnerships when we do the job clubs and things for the young people, but it is also very hard to put young people under the age of 18 into proper employment, because they are more qualified towards KFC, Coles, Red Rooster because they cannot work full-time.

**The CHAIR:** Matthew, did you want to add anything to that or to some of the questions that have been asked? Talk about the level crossing removals. I mean, that is a massive project.

**Mr INKSTER:** From our point of view, personally I would like to say that without organisations like the Brotherhood of St Laurence we would never be able to do the stuff that we do do in terms of the support that they provide. We have big targets that we have to hit in regard to social procurement, and there are a bunch of cohorts that we are required to employ. If the truth be known, it is hard enough getting females into engineering. When I talk about engineering, I am talking about proper, real engineering-type jobs. We also have to broaden our scope now to include a whole bunch of other different cohorts and things like that, which is reasonably new to me. But I have to say that over the past 18 months it has been pretty amazing, some of the things that we have been able to do. It is very hard though. It is very hard the amount of support, training, ongoing support that is required to employ certain cohorts. Certainly for recent migrants, refugees and things like that, who have been through some pretty incredible stories to get here, it does take a lot of effort and a lot of work.

I feel like all the heavy lifting has been given to private enterprise to do, which I can also understand. It is very difficult, but it is also very rewarding. Like I said, without people like the Brotherhood of St Laurence and programs like that, we would not be able to do it. It would be impossible. The amount of support and post-placement support they provide—the awareness, the training and stuff, and also just the avenue to attract the right people and the right candidates and things like that.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Matthew, do you feel like that heavy lifting—I do not know if it is one of the first times the project team and all of that have done this, but do you think that as years go by and there are different projects that people that are employed to work in this space will get used to working with disadvantaged cohorts from a multitude of backgrounds but become better at it, so there are less support services that are actually needed on the coalface because now everything is sort of new and people are not sure what sort of support and training they will need, but eventually it will become more streamlined—become the new norm?

**Mr INKSTER:** Yes, absolutely. I should put a caveat on that, sorry; the heavy lifting is done by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in actually preparing the candidates. We are the benefactors of their hard work,

truth be known. But, yes, I guess part and parcel of that question is that it is not just the contractors—your tier 1s and tier 2s—it is the whole supply chain. The expectations are that the supply chain is lifting and doing the same amount of work, and there is a power of work and years and years of helping. And I guess we are required and we are expected to not only lead the charge in the development of the candidates, the employees and the people we bring into the business but also upskill our subcontractor base and our supply chain and all that sort of stuff. And there is a long way to go in that sense, because we just cannot do it all; there is a bigger picture that needs to be incorporated for the smaller companies and the supply chains, and it needs to be spread throughout the construction industry infrastructure if you want to—

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Is there anything you can kind of point to that is quite tangible that you think you would want to tell us? As MPs—you go, ‘You need to know that this type of social procurement involves da-da-da’ support from the Government—

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** And what Government can do to help you and that sort of thing.

**Mr INKSTER:** From my point of view it is about information. It is about knowing what is actually out there. There was a whole new world that was opened up to me in regard to social—I still do not know. I have only scratched the surface around social enterprises, what is out there and support services, and I think we need to do more around good-news stories and promoting the likes of Khaled and these guys and girls and the work that they are doing out there in the industry. I do not want to say there is negative press about it, but generally it sometimes feels like it is a hard thing to sell. There are so many good stories out there and there are so many good foundations, charities and organisations which put in so much hard work. We need to support that. We need to promote that. We need to let people know what is out there and the good work that is being done, and take away some of that stigma around the employment of some of these cohorts.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** It is a good point, because we do not hear a lot about it; we really do not. It is a good point—not that I want to blow the government up.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Can I just ask one last question. Do you think that employers know about all these great agencies that can offer ongoing support?

**Mr INKSTER:** No. I didn’t—not that I am the be all and end all, but I have been involved in this space for a long time and I did not, truth be known. I had no idea. And now I have come across all these amazing organisations. We partner with a number of different companies now—charities, foundations, organisations. I mean, I don’t even know about Flemington Works, but if we were in that area that is an organisation that we could potentially partner with and offer employment contracts.

**The CHAIR:** That is the point. It is about the communication barriers that exist between various organisations. I mean, there is a lot of work going on with social procurement opportunities. There is over \$100 billion worth of works over the next decade or so, but it is just that communication line. Obviously what you have highlighted today is that that communication line is not open. There are opportunities, but it is just that you may not be aware of them.

Can I just ask the individual program participants about your educational backgrounds, how many jobs you have worked in before, how did you get into the program—just the success story from where you started to where you are.

**JASMINE:** I grew up in the country with just my mum, brother and sister. It was hard on our family. I turned 18 and did not want to live there anymore. There were no opportunities. I moved down here and heard about a program going on for a week.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just ask what region you are from?

**JASMINE:** East Gippsland. I did a five-day program with LXRP. I got my white card out of that and met a lot of people from different companies. After that, I heard about McConnell Dowell. They had a traineeship coming up, so I sat down with them and told them my background and my story. A week later they said, ‘Can you come in and check out the site?’. I went in and liked it. I had never had a job before that; I had only ever just worked with family and community. I started there. I spent, I think, about nine months there and finished

the project. Because I was not employed permanently—I was just casual—after they moved I was just left behind, so that was a bit depressing. I had nowhere to go and did not know what to do. And then about a year later I met with Paula from the Brotherhood. She was like, ‘We’ll get you set up and send your résumé out’. She gave me a call about a week later saying Matt was going to come in. ‘Can you do an interview?’. I was like, ‘Yes, sure’. I went in and talked with Matt about what I did before and all that stuff.

**Mr INKSTER:** I employed her on the spot because Jasmine is amazing—really good.

**Ms ADDISON:** How long ago was that?

**Mr INKSTER:** About three or four months ago, I think.

**JASMINE:** Yes, and ever since then my world has just changed, basically.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** It is because you are a good Gippslander!

**JASMINE:** Yes! No, it is really good.

**The CHAIR:** Mariam, do you want to—

**Ms GEME:** Yes, sure. After I graduated from high school in 2017 I went to university studying architecture, which I am still studying at the moment. Previously I had a casual job at McDonald’s just as a teenager, and during my time at university I managed to score an internship with the Level Crossing Removal Project. That was a three-month summer internship, and I managed to get my hands on that due to another—I guess you could call it—not-for-profit organisation that just basically tried to help youth score mentors. After that I did not really have any form of employment. I was just going through university until I came across Flemington Works. I grew up on the Flemington estate, and the Flemington Works program just seemed to work really well with me. It was very flexible. I went through the interview process. I met Khaled as well. Yes, I have been doing that internship for the past three months, and that is basically how I ended up here.

**Ms ADDISON:** How long have you got of your degree to finish?

**Ms GEME:** I am on my last year.

**Ms ADDISON:** Congratulations.

**The CHAIR:** Were you born here?

**Ms GEME:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Aman, please give us just your educational background and some of the jobs you have held in the past.

**Mr BUSHE:** In my country I studied at high school, and then I came here in 2007. When I came here I could not speak English. It was very hard to communicate with people. Then I went to AMES. I finished my 510 hours, and then I went to NMIT. I studied English for six months, and I did my PSA Certificate III. Then I applied for a job with an agency. I have been working for the Northern Hospital and the Austin Hospital. Finally, I met the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and they helped me to apply for a permanent job. Then I got casual and permanent jobs through the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Now I have been working at the Eye and Ear Hospital for almost nine years in different departments: patient transport, ordering the linen and the stuff for nursing.

At this stage I really appreciate the Brotherhood of St Laurence for helping me—not only me; they are helping all our community. People ask me, when they are struggling looking for work, ‘How did you get the new arrival?’ I say, ‘Go to the Brotherhood of St Laurence. They will help you’. When I came here I finished my PSA Certificate III, and Centrelink is sending me to the job network. The way the job network is helping the immigrant is different to the Brotherhood of St Laurence. When I went to the job network, they are just printing the job plan, you sign it and you go home. The Brotherhood of St Laurence are sitting with you, they are

helping you with how to use the computer and how to apply. If the word is very hard for you, slowly they explain it for you. I really appreciate them at this stage, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Well done. Very good stories. Any further questions?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Jasmine, since you started with Matt, what kind of supports have you had on the job to help you in the transition?

**JASMINE:** I have had Paula with the Brotherhood; she gets in contact with me a lot just to see how I am going, if I need anything. I hear from Matt a lot, seeing if I am going okay. I have got a lot of people at the project helping me and showing me. They are just there if I need. It is going really good.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** So, Matt, you have had no trouble accessing people through this program?

**Mr INKSTER:** No, not at all. The majority of our first four level crossings are in the south-east, so it made sense. I contacted the Brotherhood out of the blue, to be honest. I went down and met with them and had a chat to them about some of the stuff we were looking to do, and they were really good. They provided me with a steady stream of capable, qualified and really keen and eager people to come and get employment, including Jasmine, who has been fantastic. There are varying levels of experience and that sort of stuff. Jasmine has obviously worked in the industry before, so she was prepped and ready to go, to a degree; hence why we put her straight into a traineeship and all that sort of stuff. But a lot of the other candidates require a bit more hands-on, which is fine. But it is, when you think about it, a big reliance on that. The sheer numbers that we are required to employ to meet our targets, it takes a lot of resources to help manage that process.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** So, Matt, in your view, if you did not have those social procurement requirements, is this something that the private sector would do of their own volition, ever?

**Mr INKSTER:** No. Like I say, I am a fan of the targets. It has got to happen—you have to set something. I appreciate that, absolutely. But truthfully, no, I do not think they would. It is hard enough building—

**The CHAIR:** Because it is onerous?

**Mr INKSTER:** It was hard enough building the job in the first place, truth be known, with the way the Government is trying to roll them out and do 75 by 2025. I mean, that is great—do not get me wrong; I work in the infrastructure game, so the more the merrier—but it is hard, and it is a dangerous environment. There are a lot of time constraints, budget, quality, things like that. The resource shortage in the market next year is going to be—

**Ms ADDISON:** Challenging.

**Mr INKSTER:** No-one is here to build these jobs. I do not know. We are not here to talk about that, but it is going to be very hard, very challenging. We have got the Metro Tunnel going to kick off.

**The CHAIR:** A good problem to have, though.

**Mr INKSTER:** Well, if you have got the jobs, yes, I agree. We are happy as we are, but as you know there are billions of dollars of infrastructure being built and there is going to be an intense resource shortage.

**The CHAIR:** What are some of the post-placement supports that we can give as a Government?

**Mr INKSTER:** I think, as I was sort of saying before, it is probably not the key contractors and the authorities and things that you need to be targeting; it is the smaller supply chain sort of companies. They need to do all the lifting as well. You cannot just rely on your Fulton Hogans, your John Hollands, your CPBs and these companies to do everything—your MRPVs and these other organisations. It needs to be supply chain. We are not talking about infrastructure but supply chain. They need to come to the party and help out as well. But how you do that I do not know, whether you set up something—there are probably enough authorities floating around—or whether you set up something that can go out there and actually advise and help and show. We have to educate the subcontractors on what social enterprise is. They have got no idea, so we need to sit down with them and say, ‘Did you know you can buy your goods and services through these companies?’. No idea. It

is that educational piece which would help greatly, because then everybody is pulling in the same direction and you can effect bigger change in that sense.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** It probably broadens out the opportunity too for—

**Mr INKSTER:** And more opportunities for all of these kids coming through these programs to work with not just the big contractors but with the whole supply chain, the whole procurement chain. That would open a lot of doors.

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Can I just say something on this point?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, sure, Khaled.

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** For me, it is for you guys to ask: what is a disadvantaged jobseeker? I feel like a lot of people that have a multicultural name are called disadvantaged jobseekers. What happens with procurement at the moment: for example, a big company will get the procurement contract and then it gets subcontracted and subcontracted and subcontracted because it is not regulated enough. So the people that actually have to hire the people are not hiring them because there is not much regulation when it comes to social procurement. It is also more expensive to hire someone from the procurement thing.

What happens is that a lot of the small companies look at hiring someone with a multicultural background name and it is more expensive than to hire a Matthew. For example, my name is Khaled Abdulwahab, but if I was to change jobs, I am not a disadvantaged jobseeker; I am just like my peers. And potentially for it to happen more, the 'disadvantaged jobseeker' needs to change, because potentially there is a difference—a jobseeker should be identified. Is it someone with a criminal record? Is it someone who has been unemployed for over two years? For young people, for example, like Mariam, who have finished their architecture degree, if she wants to get a job, because of her name she will be looked at as a disadvantaged jobseeker and hence for that company to hire her it will be more expensive. Hence they would rather hire someone else. And you have a young person, she will probably have the same skills as any other person that they might hire, but unfortunately any—

**The CHAIR:** That is the fine line between discrimination and disadvantage, and I think that is what you are trying to highlight.

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Unfortunately there is unconscious bias—

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Very much.

**The CHAIR:** when it comes to certain areas.

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** But also it is the policy. I think it is the policy and that there should be different terms for jobseekers and disadvantaged jobseekers. Not every young person with a multicultural name—

**The CHAIR:** No. It is specific. It is about generational unemployment that exists and its various cohorts. It is the Aboriginal community, it is the elderly, it is the very young population, it is those with a migrant background and refugees. It is a number of different cohorts that fall within that category of disadvantaged jobseekers. That is what we are trying to get to the bottom of.

**Mr ABDULWAHAB:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for being here.

**Witnesses withdrew.**