

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Geelong—Wednesday, 20 November 2019

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WITNESS

Ms Rhona Pedretti, Manager Family Services, City of Greater Geelong.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you for being here. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and the custodians of the land on which we are meeting today: the Wathaurong people. I also pay my respects to their elders, past and present. I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. I welcome Rhona Pedretti, the Manager for Family Services for the City of Greater Geelong, who is here today. All evidence taken by this Committee 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, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard to my right, and you will be provided with a proof of 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. Thank you again for being here, and I invite you to provide a brief.

Ms PEDRETTI: Thank you very much for the opportunity to present today. It is a great privilege to speak to this, and an inquiry into the barriers facing our CALD communities is really important. So thank you. The City of Greater Geelong, through their municipal early years plan, has a commitment to providing accessible and inclusive services. As well as our council plan, I just wanted to provide you with a brief overview of our work that we refer to as our MEYP. Probably the most important theme is around providing accessible and inclusive services. I would like to reference that in starting so that you have got a copy of it. But certainly, our council plan looks at a more inclusive and diverse community and at some key priorities around improving engagement with our culturally diverse population, supporting activities that improve social connections in our community, improving access to facilities and programs for people of all abilities, advocating for inclusive multicultural activities and respect for cultural diversity. So we have got a big focus on that.

The department that I manage is the family services department, and we have a number of programs that we undertake. The first one is parenting in a new culture. It is a program that is provided to members of our CALD communities who are seeking support in better understanding the complexities of living in Australia, specifically developing strategies that support and strengthen the family unit. We have been developing the program over the past five years with the purpose of strengthening relationships, to support families, to improve children's wellbeing and to increase participation in the community. It has been an outstanding program. We have actually engaged Afghani, Iraqi and Serbian families.

We run the program with a group of men and then we run it with a group of women. Sometimes issues may come up with the women and it may be around some child-rearing practices—it could be smacking children and different ways of disciplining children—and the women will discuss it in the group, and then it is a really great opportunity to open up the discussion to men and to talk about different ways of guiding children's behaviour. We had some feedback from one of the men who participated and just said, 'I used to come home from work, just sit down, have my dinner, go to sleep and that was it'. But through engagement with the program and thinking about other ways he said, 'We play Uno and we go on excursions: we go to the beach'. You know, the waterfront is so beautiful here. He said, 'We go to parks. We have picnics'. And he said his children are so happy to have that engagement, and his wife is so happy that, they are speaking again. It is all of those different ways of, integrating into an Australian culture that people have not had any experience of doing before. So it is a fantastic program.

We also have a facilitated playgroup that council supports, so this is fully funded by council, and there are approximately 30 families enrolled in the playgroup at any given time. It assists families to make connections with their own community and at the same time assists parents and children to adapt to a new environment, encouraging play and developing strategies to assist with learning and development. It also provides an opportunity to talk about other early childhood programs, encouraging them to access maternal and child health, kindergarten programs, childcare centres and so forth. We have found that to be really effective. That has been running for about five years, so that is a great one.

Supported playgroups: the City of Greater Geelong operate 13 supported playgroups that are funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, and they are targeted towards families that are potentially vulnerable—139 families were from CALD backgrounds accessed the playgroup this year. They are evidence

based. We run the Smalltalk program. It is really around educating families about the importance of play, how that can actually improve children's development, and also linking them into other services as well.

Our City Learning and Care Corio childcare centre supports parents who are accessing the AMEP program, which is the Adult Migrant English Program. The program provides free child care; we provide the child care. This is a really valuable program. Over the past 12 months we have had 25 children enrolled in the program, and the time ranges from one term up to four terms. It is a really effective. It is like an introduction into child care for families, which is really beneficial. I will speak to some of the barriers as we go.

We also have an early childhood language program, which Christine came to see in action—a very passionate kindergarten teacher teaching Mandarin to the children. It has been a funded program by the State Government, and it has been quite fantastic and well taken up. We have a couple of Auslan programs as well, but the Mandarin has been amazing. They incorporate everyday learning. Even though Claudia sat down and did some specific activities, they try and incorporate the language within the day, so in different activities that they are doing, they will use different languages.

Of course, our maternal and child health service is a fantastic service. The key ages and stages visits is one component—support around breastfeeding, nutrition, growth and development—but also referral to other support services for families, which is really important. Also, we have a lot of translated materials from the MCH website, which are utilised and distributed to families.

I have got a list of the barriers that families face. Some of the barriers we have identified are the challenges around access to bilingual support services. It is required to help families with the enrolment and the orientation transition into early years services. Sometimes the availability of interpreters and the appropriateness can be quite challenging. We find that sometimes it is difficult if it is someone known to the family. It can be quite comfortable for the family, but then some of the things discussed may be confidential—that they do not really want their friend knowing about. Or if we have male interpreters—due to cultural issues, the male interpreter may feel uncomfortable discussing certain things about the mother's wellbeing and so forth, so that is an issue.

Sometimes families are not aware of the interpreter service available to them, so that can be a barrier. There can be a fear or misunderstanding around the role of the early years services, such as maternal and child health, which may be different from their home experience and may be seen as negative. Sometimes we have had feedback from the actual maternal and child health nurse, people were saying, 'My child is not sick. I don't need a nurse'. It is educating around those sorts of services better. You do not know that people think that. Sometimes they do not actually say it, but it is in their mind. There is a lack of engagement and understanding sometimes around the benefits of new parent groups, community playgroups and early childhood services, and that is probably due to language and potential cultural safety barriers.

There is a funding deficit in relation to the time of maternal and child health consultations required for CALD families and the effect around targets and so forth. That can be challenging. There is also a lack of translated information available that can be provided to families about early years services they can utilise and attend, and sometimes some of the information to be translated around rebates, free kinder, healthcare cards—the difficulty with MyGov accounts is actually a minefield for anyone, to be quite honest. To actually have that added burden is really quite significant. I suppose online processes to enrol in kindergarten can be a barrier to child care. There is a range of online barriers, I think, for families—especially having an email address, things like that, even access to the internet—so that can be certainly challenging. We send SMS reminders for appointments in English, so there is another barrier.

There is a fear of government organisations. Being local government, that can be certainly an issue. There is a lack of transport. Often our families will rely on a husband or a family friend, and it may be only in his lunch hour that he can actually come home from work, take someone to an appointment and so forth. There can be conflict between cultural groups. Sometimes we think that we are starting a group with Sri Lankan families and we do not understand that parts of Sri Lanka may be a barrier for other groups. I think we have got a lack of a diverse workforce and we have a lot of difficulties attracting qualified bilingual staff. Regulated services can be overwhelming with too many rules, and it is just a minefield. Sometimes it is for us, too, but I think coming from a CALD background it is even more difficult. For some families, seeing fences and gates around children's centres can be really intimidating given their past experience, so that can be an issue too.

And just in finishing I will refer to some of the issues that families and workers have reported. If they access the AMEP service and they get—I think it is—500 hours of free child care, once that course is done then they are required to pay for the child care, and it almost sets up an expectation where, ‘Oh, hang on, I can’t afford that. It was free to access’. There are programs that are run after AMEP to help parents participate in the workforce or provide further training, but if they are not accredited they are not eligible for what is known as JET, which covers the full cost of the child care. So that can certainly be a barrier. Also, if they do not really understand the subsidies available and they are on a healthcare card, it can be tricky because they will get a bill for the full fee without knowing, ‘Oh, I can produce a healthcare card?’. They may be asked about a healthcare card and they may not understand what card they have got. Again, it is just around that communication and around having that support.

And of course, you know, if they are in a centre that they are not really comfortable with or that is not very culturally aware, once that program finishes they will not re-engage. And if they have a second child they will not put the child into care and they will not take it up again. So that is really disappointing.

Some families utilise programs—and an example that we have is family day care programs—that are not actually charging a fee at all. It is not actually appropriate or legal, what is happening, but it does happen. The schemes will just not charge the families the fee and the educator will just claim the childcare subsidy amount direct to them. It is not actually permissible to do that, but that is what happens. So then, if they are not happy with the care, if it is not regulated well enough and they come to use a council program, we will be following the guidelines and then there will be a cost. So that becomes a barrier because it is hard to find money when you are not used to paying for care. That can be really quite challenging.

And sometimes families are just not confident in asking for assistance. They do not want to appear needy and so forth. We had a family who said that they stopped going to the maternal and child health service because they lost their green book and they did not know how to ask for another one. They were not sure of the process and they were not sure if they were in trouble. So that was really disappointing to hear. That is just a brief overview.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you very much for coming today. We really appreciate your submission and also the fact that you are here to speak to it. It is really important for us. You mentioned a funding deficit in your presentation. Can you just expand on that a little bit and what impact that is having?

Ms PEDRETTI: Absolutely. So with our key age and stage visits, it is 6.75 hours across the 10 key age and stage visits. The maternal and child health coordinator is making sure that I am on track. The visits are actually allocated a certain amount of time. It might be 30 minutes, and I am just making this up, or 45 minutes for some visits. So when we have a CALD family it will take longer, especially if we have got a translator. We actually have to be able to allow more time in the diaries, but of course we have targets that we have to achieve. It is just really challenging to fit everybody in and provide the level of service in relation to that.

Ms COUZENS: What do you think the answer to that is? What could be put in place to address that particular issue?

Ms PEDRETTI: I think recognition that it does take longer and there is additional time required, even to understand the simple things that we take for granted. It can be quite confusing; it is a minefield and it is a different way of parenting. We have our enhanced services, as you know, so our enhance service nurses will provide that time, and we have new parent groups and so forth, but it is just actually about encouraging families to access that. But it has to be delivered in their language. So it does take additional time. I think that it is important to actually invest in that time and recognise that and have specific groups, but also being able to educate the families as to the benefits of that.

Ms COUZENS: You mentioned the workforce. Is council looking at any way of how they can increase the number of CALD workers in the community?

Ms PEDRETTI: We actually are, in my team in particular. We are taking on a Vietnamese maternal and child health student in the next financial year—in January—which will be great. So we are always looking for opportunities, a lot around the Aboriginal community as well, which is fantastic. There is very much a focus in

on that. It is just I suppose, as you would understand for maternal and child health, that it is triple certificate. They are highly trained professionals. I have a number of educators from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, which is fantastic, but I suppose it is about having them in the centres at that time. Claudia is a perfect example at Belmont. We have a lot more Mandarin families coming to Belmont because of Claudia. So we know when we have those workers it does make families feel more comfortable, and it is so beneficial to the whole group.

Ms COUZENS: We know that in the northern suburbs, for example, and to some degree the eastern suburbs, we have a large grouping of multicultural communities. Are any of those community services being targeted to build that workforce, the CALD workforce, at all?

Ms PEDRETTI: I suppose through that parenting and the new culture group is an amazing way of actually talking about job opportunities, especially when we start talking about the services and we identify people. I know our family day care team in particular have done a lot of work in that space to try and get home-based educators—family day care is a home-based childcare service—but it is challenging. It is really challenging. There are a lot of rules, there are a lot of regulations and it is quite different to what they are used to, but certainly, in saying that, we are really keen because we know the benefits. So it is certainly front and centre. We are aware of it—it is just how to get there.

Ms COUZENS: We have heard a lot about the value of playgroups. Would you agree that that is a significant component for CALD communities and early learning?

Ms PEDRETTI: Absolutely. I really do, because I suppose it is very informal. You get to be there with your child. It is not getting someone else to care for your child. You are there, there are people to role model, there are other parents to talk to, there are ways of actually understanding child development and it is a way for a facilitator to really talk about what the benefits are. No-one wants to be talked at but to be brought along. Finding situations where a child may be throwing a tantrum and talking about, ‘That’s pretty normal’ and ‘We’ll give them some time. Let’s just relax’ and all those sorts of role-modelling opportunities are really important. And is getting it at the time—that is so much more beneficial and meaningful, I think.

Ms COUZENS: Has council targeted multicultural playgroups at all, specifically?

Ms PEDRETTI: I am unaware if we have specifically. I know we run ours, and we certainly run a number of supported playgroups around those groups. So I suppose we have created them through funding, but I do not know that we are actually going to other supported playgroups, to be honest. I would have to check that.

Ms SETTLE: I am interested in that initial engagement. Obviously maternal and health nurses are an incredibly important part. But, for example, you talked about the parenting program: how do you find people to join that? Is it solely through maternal health or is there more outreach to it?

Ms PEDRETTI: I think it is through the settlement groups, so when we know that new communities are coming. I know that the Smith Family do a lot of work in that space. They actually will have a number of groups, so we will then link in with them. Our maternal and child health coordinator sits on the settlement strategy group, so she would be aware of the groups coming through and then that information gets shared that way.

Mr TAK: Thank you for your insights and information. I am also interested in that initial contact. Would you sort of agree or would you see that connecting through their own community faith-based organisation would also be a good idea?

Ms PEDRETTI: Absolutely, yes. And Diversitat does a lot of really good work in this community with that as well. We work really well with Diversitat. I could follow up more information around those initial contacts for you, if you like.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, that would be excellent.

Ms PEDRETTI: Yes? Okay; I will do that.

Mr TAK: Do you think that the CALD communities are aware of the benefit of early childhood education?

Ms PEDRETTI: I think not in some cases, and I think it must be really overwhelming to come to a new country with so much to take on, with housing and employment and just the language barriers and things like that. I think it is a big thing to put them in school. School is mandated, so there is no option not to send your child to school, but early childhood is not and maternal and child health is not and kindergarten is not. So really it is a choice that people make to actually engage or not engage. We can encourage them as much as we can and we can try and promote the benefits, but it is not an expectation, I suppose, that they do that. It can be tricky, and if people have had past experience where they have not been made to feel welcome, that becomes another barrier. They sort of say, 'Don't go there. It really doesn't feel safe for me' or 'They aren't really very understanding', so you need to have the centres and the educators that are really switched on, and the nurses of course.

The CHAIR: I will just add to that: I think you have spoken about the complexity of the system, whether it is seeking information in another language or the translation service, and we have heard this consistently—the navigating of the first step seems to be biggest barrier. Would you like to add further to that or perhaps even suggest how we simplify that?

Ms PEDRETTI: That is a great question. It is so difficult. I know our centre managers will sit with families with low literacy and so forth just to actually help them get through the system and navigate it, so perhaps it is about actually having that support there. I think someone who is a bilingual support worker, unless they have a really good understanding of early childhood, the systems, they are actually not really going to be that helpful. While they can translate information, if they do not understand it or their interpretation of what they are reading, it is almost like we need that next level of, yes, bilingual, but with an early years maybe qualification or even education so they are very, very clear about how to do that and perhaps present it. Years ago I worked for the City of Richmond and we had a really high Vietnamese community. I was really aware of the importance of some documents translated into Vietnamese and I was very pleased with myself once we had them. They had not had anything done before—this is going back 25 years; I am very old. When we did that, Nga, who was my field worker, read it and just sort of went, 'Oh, my gosh'. It was at university level. She said, 'Our educators and families are not going to understand any of this'.

Mr TAK: Correct, yes.

Ms PEDRETTI: I was like, 'Oh, my gosh'. So much for that big idea. So we need people who can actually explain it in layman's terms.

The CHAIR: Basic.

Ms PEDRETTI: Yes, who really get it, so then they can actually pass it on in a simplified way.

The CHAIR: Okay. And what do you think about having a sort of one-stop, I suppose, facility or service hub? Because at the moment to me it seems some are doing it better than others and have that one on one. As we know, in the community that I represent most people do not have access to emails, let alone the internet. They require that support when it comes to doing things online.

Ms PEDRETTI: That is right.

The CHAIR: So is it also about having a one-stop hub or an area where it just deals with process, getting you to that first step at least?

Ms PEDRETTI: Yes. I think that would be absolutely fantastic because then you are getting all the information and you are not being sent from pillar to post and it is not overwhelming and it is not going through the whole thing again and you are very clear and you have got a safe place to go where you know, 'Look, I have Christine I can go to, I know she will help me'. It could be a whole range of things, but I do not have to go to 20 different people to actually get the info.

The CHAIR: And there are no surprises as well. You just spoke about that 500 hours—it would just cause so much anxiety for someone to then get a bill, and it would be quite an expensive bill.

Ms PEDRETTI: Of course, yes. Definitely.

The CHAIR: So perhaps that could be something that is reviewed in this too and having that one hub with all your service providers and information there.

Ms PEDRETTI: Yes.

The CHAIR: We have spoken about the interpreting services and how to keep up of course the new emerging ones. You know, you have got your traditional languages, which have been pretty much covered—your Vietnamese, Turkish, Macedonian and Greek and many other languages—but now you got the new ones emerging. How does a council, I suppose, keep up with the new migrants that are coming in and how do you in a sense find out what languages you are now needing?

Ms PEDRETTI: So I suppose that is through census data. That is the way I think we find out about it. We certainly have our top languages. We have done a little demographic profile. But, yes, it is challenging. I think we do rely on obviously the new settlement information, so we will find out that way, but the census data would provide that information. But you are right, it is really challenging. It is interesting too to understand the level of English that people have, so a lot of people have a second language but they do have English as a language as well, which can be helpful. You really need to understand what languages the documents need to be translated into and again, the complexity and making sure that it is simple language. Obviously, we do not know, because we cannot read it ourselves. So then you rely on someone else to tell you, ‘Is this simple? Does this make sense?’.

The CHAIR: Even English, we need to simplify that because there is no point having something so academic that you just do not understand, so it is going back to the basics.

Ms PEDRETTI: Absolutely, yes. I did think the information that was provided to me, probably from Ray, with links to the simple English, that was really good. I thought that was really fantastic. Good work! I thought it was plain English.

The CHAIR: Absolutely, plain English.

Mr TAK: It may not be a question, but especially it is the mother and the women that would care for the children most of the time, especially in the CALD community, and some of the community may be better informed not in written language but maybe spoken language; would you think that social media or the ethnic radio—for example, SBS or 3ZZZ, those multilingual programs—have a role in disseminating information?

Ms PEDRETTI: I am not sure. If they are tuning in, yes, obviously. But I am just not sure, to be quite honest with you; I do not know how much they tune into those.

Mr TAK: Would Facebook help?

Ms PEDRETTI: Maybe Facebook, yes. A lot of the information that we put on Facebook obviously is in English, which really we need to look at.

Ms COUZENS: Just a couple more questions. Do you monitor where the referrals come from?

Ms PEDRETTI: Into our services?

Ms COUZENS: Into your early learning services?

Ms PEDRETTI: Probably not as well as we could, to be honest. I think we could do that better. We do to some extent, like we will know where they have come from especially if it is an agency. Centre managers at that level would know, but I do not have that information.

Ms COUZENS: So they would know?

Ms PEDRETTI: Why they are coming to that centre? Yes.

Ms COUZENS: And the only other question that I have is: are there any innovative ideas that your team have been looking at to engage CALD communities in terms of early childhood?

Ms PEDRETTI: I know our family day care scheme have been really good. Our support workers have been going out and attending different cultural groups to speak about family day care, because we are trying to get women into the workforce as well. We know if we get an educator from a certain cultural background then the families will come to her because they will feel really comfortable. But it has just been that barrier because they will say, 'Our families, they won't pay. They won't pay for that'. We do home safety checks. We are a regulated service, so there are certain expectations. We have put a lovely educator on recently, and she is just like, 'The rules! There are so many rules! What's with all the rules?' But we are regulated, and we are licensed, so we cannot afford to not follow the rules, and it is just tricky because for her, she is just like, 'Yeah, yeah, but I agree with everything'. We say, 'You haven't done it', and she says 'Yes, yes, I'll do it'. But it is a different approach, so it can be tricky. Even just being able to go to the cultural groups and talk about the services with them, even if they do not end up being educators, to talk about the services available and talk about child development and talk about games to play with children—play-based learning is so important.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for your submission. What will happen next is that of course we have got a few more public hearings, a couple more to go. All the submissions will be deliberated on by the Committee and a report will be presented to Parliament next year with some recommendations. Hopefully those recommendations will include your submission that you have presented today. So thank you again.

Ms PEDRETTI: Fantastic. Thank you. Would you like me to follow up those questions and send that in to Ray?

The CHAIR: Yes. Thanks.

Witness withdrew.