

# **TRANSCRIPT**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities**

Dandenong—Monday, 2 December 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

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Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

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Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

#### **WITNESS**

Ms Roxanne Higgins, Director of Services, Noah's Ark

**The CHAIR:** Good morning. Just for protocol, 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. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I invite you to proceed with a brief 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Welcome, Roxanne Higgins, Director of Services for Noah's Ark.

**Ms HIGGINS:** Thank you very much. Noah's Ark was founded in 1971 and has worked very hard during that time to work with CALD communities. We particularly have worked with inclusion for CALD communities in the professional support programs in child care. We certainly have noticed that the engagement with CALD communities is not at the level that is the percentage of the population. At the moment in Australia there are 28.2 per cent, approximately, of people born from different communities and different nationalities. In our services we see a much lower percentage of that in terms of service access and service delivery, and we are keen to understand and work with the Committee to develop or recommend strategies around further engagement for the CALD community.

The findings that we have developed as part of our submission are that, particularly since the introduction of the NDIS, if you look at particularly the northern suburbs, the Brotherhood of St Laurence indicated that only 9 per cent of people accessing the services were from a CALD background, and that is substantially lower than access to the NDIS should be.

We are aware, through our service delivery, that issues that are rising are around access to the service, and that is particularly when the agency calls from an unidentified number and does not leave any message or identification of the message, and people frequently do not pick those calls up. The language spoken by the person calling is not necessarily conducive to communication with the community that they are trying to engage with, so we certainly think there is a barrier to access from that perspective.

In addition to that, once you identify and engage with the agency, there are requirements around the type of plan that you may have managed. It can be portal managed, self-managed or plan managed, and there are high recommendations around self-management. This is an issue for people, to manage the planes individually, if they are managing a complex system that is not accessible in their own language and is not clearly defined.

There is an issue around the access for the service in terms of interpreters and the use of appropriately skilled interpreters engaged with the local communities to ensure that information pertaining to disability services—not just the NDIS but broader community-based services—is available to people from CALD backgrounds.

Our service in and of itself believes that there is an issue around the development of cultural sensitivity training, and that runs across the whole of disability services, and that is a particular issue when you are looking at inclusion support and early childhood education support. Partnering with childcare centres, with the education system and with disability providers to ensure that cultural sensitivity training is an embedded requirement would be something that we would be very interested in progressing.

There have been programs developed with playgroups with CALD community backgrounds, and we believe access to those playgroups is a primary source of referral and networking, where information could be disseminated in a culturally sensitive way, and we would encourage the further progression of playgroups across CALD communities, developed in a way that is community sensitive.

Further to that, we endorse the recommendation of provision of not only accessible information and training but standards of service and a service guarantee to people within a CALD community. The NDIS is currently developing a participant service guarantee, and it would be very interesting to see that there are CALD standards within that, that ensure agencies delivering services are meeting those standards and the quality that all community members deserve.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. I will proceed to Heang for a question.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Roxanne, for your submission. I heard from previous submissions the importance of professionals and service providers understanding the needs of the CALD community pertaining to three-year-old kinder and early childhood education. What would you suggest in terms of training? Would you suggest that the Government should do more in terms of training the professionals to understand, or have a bit more so they can tailor make that service to the CALD community?

**Ms HIGGINS:** I certainly think building cultural sensitivity training in as a requirement across all early education and disability services would be a step in the right direction. If you are working with different communities, you actually need to understand their view of disability and the way to engage with that community in a way that is sensitive and is respectful and recognises their needs. So having individually worked with Afghani communities, there are very clear procedures that I would follow that are quite different to if I was working with a predominantly English, Australian-born community.

**Mr TAK:** Do you think interpreters would—

**Ms HIGGINS:** I think interpreters are essential in terms of being able to provide accurate information. One of the challenges of working with interpreters in smaller communities is always the family member that you are working with trusting that the interpreter works within the context of the conversation that is happening. They may know family members or extended family members, and at times while it is a necessary thing to have an interpreter engaged, there are also challenges that I have heard from working with people from CALD backgrounds with interpreters.

**The CHAIR:** My question is just to follow up in relation to—and I think we have heard it throughout our public hearings—the navigating of the system, the administration process, completing forms and online processes where most people would not have access to go online or may find it difficult. In your experience what better way can be implemented so that some of these barriers can be removed?

**Ms HIGGINS:** I would look at the program that the Brotherhood of St Laurence have attempted in the northern suburbs, but I guess based on my experience I would look at CALD place-based services as being the point of access and engagement. Where you have got a community who is well-known by a service—in Dandenong there are a range of services that are connected well to their community. Having those as an access and entry point rather than a very formal government office, and someone to support access through that process, would be useful. In Doveton we have a multicultural school with a multicultural hub with a range of services embedded within it. There would be a good opportunity to embed access to services through there, rather than, again, having a standalone service that is disconnected from the community.

**The CHAIR:** And do you think that there is a real challenge with CALD families not truly understanding the value of, whether it is playgroups or kindergarten—just understanding their value versus, let us say, going to school?

**Ms HIGGINS:** I think there is a diverse range of CALD communities that have different opinions around that. I certainly think some CALD communities see that as something that is very highly valued and engaged with and for other CALD communities it is not part of their tradition or part of the world that they have come from. So yes and no. I think it is very hard to answer in response to the concept of a CALD community, because I think each of the communities under the banner of what we use as CALD have unique and different experiences and require different understanding and different responses.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you so much for coming along today to give us your experience but also to raise the disability side of it, because we have not heard much on that to date, so thank you for that. You mentioned the cultural awareness, cultural training. I suppose my question is around: do you see the value in people from multicultural communities being skilled up to work in those positions, in early childhood obviously, that we are talking about today? That is the first question. Secondly, how do you see that might happen if it was put in place?

**Ms HIGGINS:** Yes, absolutely. I think it would be fantastic to have a more diverse workforce. If I look at Noah's Ark's workforce, while there is absolutely a level of CALD diversity, it is not the predominant level of our workforce. I would encourage anything that supported a more culturally diverse workforce in early

childhood. In terms of how you do it, we know from the Government's report in terms of the expansion of three-year-old kinder that we are facing an incredible shortage in skilled staff within early childhood settings. So just as the response of the Government to the workforce shortage for disability support workers with the introduction of the NDIS has been to make those courses available at no cost, I would certainly support the access at no cost to appropriate qualifications for people from a CALD background not only to enter early childhood services but to enter therapy roles as well, which would make a significant difference.

**Ms COUZENS:** We have heard a lot about playgroups and the value of playgroups. Do you see a need for specific multicultural playgroups in the communities?

**Ms HIGGINS:** It is an interesting question. Yes, I certainly see the need for culturally sensitive playgroups and understanding that the commencement of that process needs to be where the community is at. So for communities who are disengaged from their broader community, commencing a playgroup that met their culturally specific needs I think is the place to start and then slowly building a transition into broader communities that are equally sensitive, though. So starting out with a very respectful playgroup that meets needs and then transitioning through to enabling access to broader services, because ultimately their children will be going to school with a broader community. So how to facilitate and support that in a culturally sensitive way I think is really important.

**Ms COUZENS:** And access to the playgroups. Are you aware or have you got any knowledge around how multicultural families are accessing the playgroups or early childhood services and whether there are issues around access not only in terms of language and understanding but also around transport and getting access to where those services are?

**Ms HIGGINS:** Certainly in our rural services there are transport issues, yes. Access to our services is typically through word of mouth, so a family who knows someone in the service who values the service that is being delivered will bring a friend along—that is how engagement works—and through our staff attending a whole range of forums. Probably our most effective side of that has been Bendigo. That would be how we have seen it work in the past, but transport is absolutely an issue.

**Ms COUZENS:** Do council workers refer families to Noah's Ark? Is there a referral system at all?

**Ms HIGGINS:** With the transition to the NDIS, with the exception of our inclusion support programs, we now run services through the NDIS. The other way of accessing our service is through continuity of support, and that is for children who do not meet the residency requirements of the NDIS. That referral process would be through the Department of Education and Training, not through local councils, and the other referral source is through the NDIS. We are seeing families who are in the process of trying to obtain residency who are very reluctant to declare if a child has a disability or to apply for either CoS or NDIS services through a perceived fear of that impacting their residency application.

**Ms COUZENS:** So how do we overcome those issues? Have you got a view?

**Ms HIGGINS:** It is a fairly significant structural issue. I think we need to have really clear communication that is accessible and transparent as a starting point and be very clear that having a child with a disability does not affect your residency application.

**Ms COUZENS:** Okay, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Just one question from me. What has been your experience of CALD parents of children—and I know we have touched on a little bit about it—with a disability seeking and receiving appropriate support for their children? What are some things that can be improved, and what has been the impact of the NDIS scheme?

**Ms HIGGINS:** The NDIS scheme is in very early days. It is not fully rolled out. Well, it would say it is fully rolled out in Victoria; however, there are extensive waiting lists still in the west, waiting for those children to be processed. In the western suburbs of Victoria the transition has been the slowest and most challenging for Noah's Ark and for, I understand, our partners in facilitating that. I think in terms of the NDIS the challenge has been what I touched on earlier today, which is around: how do you gain access? It is a complex system. The

people contacting you are not necessarily speaking the language that you speak, and they do not leave messages on the phones; they ring from an unknown number frequently. So I would strongly encourage there to be a CALD strategy around the NDIS that is universally adopted across disability services and partners and the agency itself. Can you repeat the first half of the question for me again?

**The CHAIR:** It was just in relation to what can be improved. I think you have said the impact of the NDIS, but what are some things that can be improved?

**Ms HIGGINS:** I think there are three levels of improvement. One is access to universal early childhood services and delivering information about those services in a way that is accessible. I think the inclusion support program that is embedded within early childhood settings—so it is four-year-old kinder—we are unclear whether that is going to roll into three-year-old kinder, and in fact the inclusion support program is currently under review by the department and is looking at expanding its options with the same pool of money. So there is certainly a concern around that and what that might mean for CALD communities.

I would think specific targeting of inclusion support to CALD communities at a playgroup, three-year-old and four-year-old kinder level and then support to transition into primary school with inclusion support around that would be useful. In the first 12 months in primary school, an extension of inclusion support specifically to CALD communities to build confidence in attending school and managing the challenges that come with school when you have a child with a disability would be useful, and that inclusion support could then potentially be used to assist in accessing the NDIS.

The other obvious ones we have discussed: staff that are culturally sensitive; staff that speak the language of the community and understand where disability sits within the community. For some communities disability is an absolute shame for that family, for other communities it is quite different and then again for other communities it is something to be fixed. If you have a child with a lifelong disability, there are not many that we can fix, so it is working with that concept around support and inclusion and the unique joyous moments that a child with a disability brings to your life.

**The CHAIR:** You mentioned playgroup could be a way of providing information for families with children with disability. Is that currently in practice or not?

**Ms HIGGINS:** Not consistently.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Ms HIGGINS:** It is variable, based on our experience.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for taking the time out to present to the Committee. The next step will be the Committee will deliberate on all the submissions and evidence, and next year we will table a final report to Government, with some strong recommendations. Your evidence will be part of those deliberations. If you would like to keep up to date with the Committee's progress, you could stay in touch with the Committee's web page. Again, thank you so much for taking the time out, on behalf of the Committee, and thank you for the work that you do.

**Witness withdrew.**