

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Dandenong—Monday, 2 December 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ms Leanne Roberts, Head of Public Policy and Media, and

Ms Abigail Lewis, Policy and Project Officer, Berry Street.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. I welcome you here today, first of all Jenny McNaughton and also Abigail Lewis from Berry Street.

Ms ROBERTS: Jenny is an apology, and it is Leanne Roberts, who is the Head of Public Policy at Berry Street, as well as Abigail, appearing.

The CHAIR: Thank you for stating that for the record. 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 left. You will be provided with a proof of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any transcripts, presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website. I now invite you to proceed with a brief, followed by questions by the Committee.

Ms ROBERTS: Thank you very much, honourable Chair and members of the Committee. Thank you so much for inviting us to appear today. I will start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and paying my respects to elders past, present and emerging and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

I will start by just saying a bit about Berry Street and then going on to some of the key elements of our submission. Berry Street is a child and family service provider. We are one of the largest providers of out-of-home care in Victoria. We believe that children, young people and families should be safe, thriving and hopeful. Our experience is built on 140 years of experience, but we continue to innovate and update our services as the world around us evolves. We are committed to diversity and inclusion across our organisation. That includes diversity within our workforce as well as the people who we support day-to-day.

The child and family service system in Victoria has quite a broad remit, from child protection and out-of-home care through to early intervention services and providing parenting supports. We believe the system needs to be designed to respond effectively and safely to the diverse community within which we serve. We are talking about a population, as you would be well aware, from 200 different countries, with 200-plus different languages and 140-something different religious groups.

We see four key challenges within the system. One is getting a deep and rich understanding of the way in which our service system responds to diverse communities. We know that there is a lack of data to give us a really robust picture of service usage in our system. We also see the need for further work to engage culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We are currently aware that there are a range of challenges in engaging communities, particularly with a system under pressure and with a need to engage earlier amongst those communities. There is a need to look at the design of our system to be much more diverse and inclusive and to think about the systemic barriers which prevent engagement of diverse communities. Then also we need to think about the workforce and how we ensure we do engage a much more diverse group of people across our workforce so that it is much more representative of the community within which we serve. Our submission covers off recommendations across those four domains, and you would be well aware of our recommendations from reading our submission.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission. I will probably start with one question. We have heard quite a lot about the navigation of the system being very difficult. Not only are there language barriers, there are IT barriers; it is a very complicated system. What would be your view on streamlining this system?

Ms ROBERTS: It is very much a system under pressure. I think a recent report signalled there was a 470 per cent increase in demand on Child First services within the last 10 years, which is quite significant.

Child First, having been established in order to be able to help navigate the system for all families, but particularly as we have been getting a much more diverse population, I would certainly be saying one of the key things we can do is actually start to ease the pressure on the front door—ensuring that it is actually funded appropriately and to be able to help navigate and support people to navigate through the system. One component of that would be ensuring that families who do require additional support have a key worker to actually help them navigate that system.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Leanne. For those from migrant communities, especially the newly arrived ones, how do they come to know about your service? Basically, how are they referred to your service?

Ms ROBERTS: Some of the challenge is the dissemination of information to communities. What we are aware of through some of our services like the ELF program is that it is often word of mouth about engagement. So once one family has a positive engagement, word of mouth is able to spread amongst the community, which goes to it being incumbent on us ensuring that the service that someone receives is actually responsive to their diverse needs and that that is then a key element of them then sharing it amongst their community. So that is certainly our experience to date. We would see a need for further work to actually engage in that outreach into diverse communities who we know have particular needs and support needs.

Ms LEWIS: Something that I would add to that as well is that one of our recommendations is around data collection at those points of entry, so like other child and family service organisations—and we have heard from some people today about referrals coming in from diverse places and those referrals are different in nature and ask different questions—there is not that standard of collecting data that can be useful in terms of delivering services to those specific communities. We have included some in our submission—for example, L17 forms coming in from Victoria Police to our family violence services. Really low data capture of country of birth of children under the age of eight that are present at family violence incidents. Also low data capture around where the mother is identified as the victim/survivor, whether she needs an interpreter, that kind of thing. That then makes it really difficult for the service provider, whether it is us or another service provider, to adequately cater to the needs of those communities and those families.

Mr TAK: Perhaps just a quick follow-up question, just to follow that: what are the barriers? What prevents families from accessing services such as Berry Street? Is it more language issues, transportation, apart from what you already said?

Ms LEWIS: It can be language. It can be transportation. It can be low understanding or low awareness of the child and family services system or low awareness of what is a statutory service—what is child protection and what is a support service and the differences between the two. Really a range of barriers like that.

Ms ROBERTS: Through the lack of understanding of what is actually available and without services actually outreaching into community to improve that understanding, there can be just a barrier of knowledge. Then it can be around language and also feeling culturally safe more broadly across the service system. We aim to look at various ways in which we can engage diverse communities at Berry Street, whether that be through the use of language services or through ensuring that we do provide a responsive service that is being shared through word-of-mouth amongst the community.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you for your time today. We really appreciate it. I feel my questions have just been answered, but on the workforce and trying to, I suppose—and we have heard a bit about this today—reflect our community, and given the lack of those from CALD communities working in early childhood, which could actually engage people if they were, what is your view, and does Berry Street have a vision about how that might happen?

Ms ROBERTS: At Berry Street we are currently looking at the way in which we recruit and transform our service to be much more diverse and inclusive more broadly, from looking at the way in which we describe position descriptions—to actually be able to take out those criteria which may work against particular communities—to how we actually make people feel included once they are actually part of the workforce, so it is thinking right across the life cycle from identification and getting people to actually want to apply to work with our service right through to ensuring that there are appropriate supports and progression opportunities within our organisation. I would say that is an area that we are looking at, and we are doing a range of activities through our people and culture area quite consciously aiming to do that, which also means looking at the way in which our current workforce actually learn to actually create an inclusive and diverse environment that supports workers.

Ms COUZENS: Given we have a massive skill shortage and it will be even greater as we roll out three-year-old kinder, do you see the benefits to organisations, say, like Berry Street in actually promoting and using

the free TAFE system to direct CALD individuals into training in those areas? Would you see that as beneficial?

Ms ROBERTS: I would certainly be supporting any activity that actually helps promote the children and families service workforce as a pathway for a much more diverse community. We already know that it is a growing area of need for the workforce, and education is that pipeline into that. So certainly opportunities to create that pathway would be supported.

Ms LEWIS: I think to kind of sum up on moving towards a more representative workforce there are three pillars to that that I see. The first is recruitment of bicultural workers, and that is free TAFE and the outreach that Leanne mentioned and different strategies for recruiting bicultural workers into the sector. Pillar two is upskilling and resourcing the staff that we currently have. There was a great point made earlier about cultural competence of mainstream service providers who are not necessarily bicultural but have the knowledge and the expertise to interact with CALD communities. The third pillar, which we mentioned in our submission and which I wanted to talk about, is the possibility of bicultural support workers as a kind of paraprofessional group, and this is done in New South Wales—recruitment of a paraprofessional group of bicultural support workers that are available on demand for a time limited period of time. If a service has a particular requirement to settle, for example, a child from a CALD background into a service, then there is someone available that they can call on just for that particular time period. And that is the third pillar, I think, that could be useful as we build towards a more diverse workforce in this sector.

Ms COUZENS: So is that a program currently running in New South Wales?

Ms LEWIS: Yes, in New South Wales it is run by the Ethnic Community Services Co-operative. It is called New South Wales bicultural support and is State Government funded. They have about 350 bilingual and bicultural children's services. They are called inclusion workers, and they are kind of available on demand on a time limited basis. In Victoria VICSEG does something relatively similar. They have a family mentoring program that pairs a bicultural support worker with a family to kind of work through the system together. So, yes, there are definitely opportunities, I think, to expand that in Victoria.

Ms COUZENS: Do you offer playgroups at Berry Street?

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, we do.

Ms COUZENS: Are any of those culturally specific, or are they just mainstream playgroups?

Ms LEWIS: They are mainstream playgroups, but they are run in our northern region, which is one of our more culturally diverse regions so there are some insights from the team that offers those playgroups that I can share with you around particularly CALD women's access to those playgroups, because there are barriers to CALD women accessing those playgroups. I think important aspects for families to access playgroups, which we have also heard about today, are geographical location, so accessible by public transport, accessible by walking; groups that are located or attached to universal services, that single point of entry that we have also heard about today; no stigma, so that you are not there because you need parenting support, you are there because there are universal services available and playgroup is just one of those things; cost neutral to the family, so if it is, even by public transport, very expensive to get there, that is obviously going to be a barrier for entry; welcoming and inclusive, so obviously culturally competent, anti-discriminatory, not a sense of judging parenting practices that may be unfamiliar to Australian child service workers; and outreach in the community, so advertising in multiple languages and outreach that is going out specifically.

Ms COUZENS: So do you engage community leaders, for example, in the different multicultural groups?

Ms LEWIS: I do not think there is a specific strategy to do so, but one of the main ways that we find families access those playgroups is through word-of-mouth. So one way that that could be promoted is if someone in the playgroup has been there for a while—they run for 12 months, so it is medium-term support; there is a lot of opportunity to build confidence and build those relationships—they could then go back into the community and communicate about the availability of those playgroups in that area.

Ms SULEYMAN: Just on a final question on the contribution of early childhood services such as education, parenting programs and other services in changing the life journey of vulnerable and at-risk children from culturally diverse families, could you just explain what is the contribution of that journey, of having these services very early in their life?

Ms ROBERTS: We certainly are aware that the early years are crucial in a child's development and attachment to family and ensuring that a family can support a young person through the various stages of their childhood. We know that where that does not occur the risk of homelessness, of engagement with the out-of-home care system and a variety of other high-cost systems are actually the result. So what the early childhood services system is able to do is ensure that the foundations for a better future for child and family are in place.

Ms LEWIS: I think this is also where the gaps in the research and the data collection come in as well. We know, for example, that CALD families in Australia are less likely to access early education and early childhood services and less likely to know what services are available. We also know that CALD young people in Australia have lower health service utilisation rates, lower workforce participation, lower sport and recreation. There is not the research necessarily to show that causation because there is that gap in the research and in the literature, because the data is not being collected robustly and the research is not being done. So, yes, I think that is also relevant to your question.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Leanne and Abigail, for taking the time to be here today and providing evidence to us. The next steps will be that a report will be delivered to Parliament next year. The Committee will deliberate in the next coming months and your evidence will take part in the final recommendations. There will be strong recommendations, of course, to Government. You can remain up to date with the progress of the Committee through the Committee's web page. Again, on behalf of the Committee, thank you so much and thank you for all the work that you do at Berry Street.

Ms LEWIS: Thank you for having us.

Ms ROBERTS: Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.