

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 September 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

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WITNESSES

Ms Tracy Adams, Chief Executive Officer, yourtown;

Ms Gina Chinnery, National Vocational Services Manager, Orygen, The National Centre for Excellence in Youth Mental Health;

Ms Willow Kellock, Policy Officer, Centre for Multicultural Youth; and

Ms Dianne Garner, Project Manager, Whitelion.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent. 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 and is also being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with LA standing order 234. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

The forum's proceedings will run as a question and answer session. Due to the number of participants obviously our time is limited and it may not be possible for everyone to answer each question. We will hear two or three responses from you and then move to the next question if we can. The Committee is very keen to make sure that all participants have a chance to have a say. If you wish to respond to a question, please raise your hand and wait until invited to speak and state your name clearly for Hansard as well.

If there are important points that you would like to make and did not get the opportunity to, you are welcome to make a supplementary submission to the Committee at a later stage. Thank you for being here today. I think we are going straight into questions.

Ms CONNOLLY: What do you think are the risk factors for long-term unemployment among young people, and what additional support do you want to tell us today that young people require?

Ms ADAMS: I think it is very much related to their own mental health and wellbeing, and also would include social exclusion, the long-term impact on their capacity to be involved in society. Having a job, for a young person, brings dignity, brings respect, brings connectivity; it allows them to have a place. What we see in young people who face long-term unemployment certainly are significant impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, which if they go unresolved, will have lifelong consequences for them, for their families and for their communities.

Ms CHINNERY: You mentioned mental health and wellbeing, and the young people that we heard from earlier mentioned mentors. One of the things that we have started to do is work more with vocational peer workforces or introduce peer workforces to the mental health sector in our individual placement support programs. We have an evidence-based vocational program that we use in mental health services; we have brought in a vocational peer workforce to support young people who are in that program as well. It is young people with their own lived experience of mental ill health supporting other young people around talking about things like what it is like to get a job and manage your mental health or what it is like to disclose your mental health to employers—those kinds of issues. But also, I guess, for those young people that are so disengaged—they might have been out of work for a couple of years, not have any friends or have been completely socially isolated—peer work can be a great way to activate those young people and bring them back into the communities and give them some social skills. That is really lacking when they go into the workforce.

Ms GARNER: We work predominantly with highly vulnerable and disadvantaged youth. In terms of the question, I think it is very much around young people gaining self-esteem, confidence and trust. What we very often see with the long-term unemployed, young people with mental health issues or those that have been engaged in the youth justice or justice system is, I guess, a need to establish and engage with people, which takes quite a time frame. It is not immediate—people come to us certainly not job ready, but I really see that initial phase of engagement as building trust with ourselves as an employment mentor or case manager to actually look at what other supports are available to that young person to become job ready. I think it is at the very front end that it takes a lot of work and resources to do. That is where we feel stretched and under-resourced, in being able to support them adequately through the kinds of programs that people have mentioned in their papers—so peer workers, mentors—but also really actually having the time to work with, stand by, coach and support the learnings as things do not work as much as what does progress through to a job. Yes, we see that as critical.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask in relation to the very important royal commission that we have before us in relation to mental health, and I am sure that at some point each of the organisations will make their submissions in relation to it: we have been making submissions broadly about mental health for youth but also in terms of how we as a State Government can help in terms of long-term unemployed or disadvantaged jobseekers.

Ms ADAMS: We have made a submission, and included in our submission is the intersection of long-term youth unemployment and mental health. We cannot just look at long-term youth unemployment or indeed unemployment of young people without considering their mental health as a major component of that. Many young people present in programs—probably I could speak for all of us—with undiagnosed mental health issues. We still see young people who do not know how to navigate the system. They feel stigmatised by it. There has been obviously great work done in creating spaces, but we still see a lot of undiagnosed young people and young people themselves who are feeling, as they go longer and longer unemployed, that their mental health is being impacted and that therefore they keep regressing because of that. I think the point is very well-made about how we really need to ensure that we are working with the non-vocational elements of young people's barriers to employment as well as seeking to support them in their vocations.

Ms CHINNERY: I would also just reiterate about individual placement support that that model is the most evidence-based model of employment support for people with mental ill health, and that requires co-location of the vocational specialist in a mental health treatment team. We, for example, run Headspace centres, and we have our vocational specialists built into the Headspace centres. They go to clinical review meetings, and it is shared care, so everybody is working together with that young person around their mental health. I think that is really critical. I think we could use technology a little bit better around supporting young people with mental ill health. We have been testing some tech around how to support young people better and access vocational supports through moderated platforms but also mental health support, so combining those two things as well.

Ms KELLOCK: I would also just add, I think, alluding to Emmanuela's story about within schools, I think we know that there is a lot of recent research that has come out about the prevalence of racism in schools and the impact on young people's engagement in education because of that, and the impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Compounding that we know that in a lot of migrant and refugee communities there is a lot of stigma attached around mental health, and we have got a lot of work to do in that space—of effectively supporting young people. But I think there is a long-term trajectory that we can see of that school disengagement, that lack of early intervention support at those points, with further disadvantage with regards to those employment transitions.

Mr BLACKWOOD: How do you think schools could actually do better in that space? What are the ways that we could improve, from a government perspective, how the schools operate in that space?

Ms KELLOCK: Yes, that is a great question. I think there is a lot of good work in terms of skilling up teachers—all those sort of points of contact with young people, but I think they really need more resources. The school welfare coordinators have said to me, 'I can tell you those young people that are already disengaging but they may not be eligible for the Navigator program yet. We know their attendance is sporadic, we know that there might be a lot of issues at home, but we just do not have the capacity to outreach to them. And I think schools often then also get bombarded by a number of community services who do have smaller, various programs, but it is a lot of coordination. I think those partnerships and coordinated approaches—a lot of what the LLENs do—is really critical to bringing all those supports to schools. But I think there is always so much more we could be doing in that early intervention space with those young people for whom we are already seeing those signs, even from that primary to secondary transition. That is going to impact on their employment transition ultimately.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: We heard from a couple of young people just now about some of the cross-cultural issues that they had and also generational gaps. How important is it in assisting young people to include the whole family in that assistance and have a family-centred approach? And have any models worked, and could we expand on them?

Ms GARNER: I would say initially it is an ideal model but not always appropriate for young people—so respecting their consent, their information, their relationship with family and/or I guess their caregivers or important people to them. So it is extending the notion of family into who is important to this young person in

their community and how they can be engaged in longer term support for the young person, whether it is through to employment or not. So I think there is a balance here of what we might want to do but also what fits with the young person's wants and their needs, and that is not always the family as we might see it that is the best support. So I think that is one. But in terms of cultural differences, in one of the programs that we run down in the south with the African community, the engagement of families there is critical in terms of cross-cultural learning for us around their needs and wants and the support of the family in understanding what working here in a job is and actually sort of also teaching the whole family and extended family around what it is to go to work and how to do it, how to be there and to be consistent with that. So, yes, I would support everything I heard before us.

Ms ADAMS: I agree. In an ideal scenario family are a key element in young person's life, but I think we have to acknowledge for many young people their background may be one of family trauma, and the family in and of itself is not always supportive of the young person's journey through education and indeed through to employment. We often can be presented with young people whose parents are almost working against them, seeking to change the life cycle or the life pattern of that family. So I think we do need to acknowledge, as has been stated, the actual individual needs of the young person. We can sometimes take the view that we have a very homogenised approach and that all young people may fit into the same bucket, and certainly that would be very untrue.

I think in the work we do, particularly with Indigenous young people, the significance of the mentors, Indigenous mentors, who take the role of guiding and supporting both from the non-vocational into the vocational is very much playing that role, indeed sometimes with family. That nurturing role, that confidence-building role is very strong. We see a lot of success in that particular approach because it is a collaboration with the young person.

Ms KELLOCK: I would also add that, yes, I think that is absolutely true. We see in CMY's work that bicultural workers are really critical in building that trust and engagement with families and communities. They have that cultural knowledge and understanding of the worlds they have also come from and the worlds of work and careers, but they have that trust and engagement that can then support families to understand the process of what their young people are engaging with, at school or with the employment options out there. But that is a big gap that we see, that schools are not resourced or equipped to adequately engage families in those early career pathways discussions.

It is wonderful to see that the Government is investing in that sort of career advice for young people, but for families we know how critical they are to young people's successful transitions, to their employment success. Families are often entirely in the dark around the systems in Australia and what is a good option for their young person. You know, often they think, 'Study hard and you'll achieve great things', and yet they do not understand the importance of volunteering, of building those broader social networks and that social capital of paid internships, or maybe VCAL or maybe a VET option is going to be a great outcome for this young person, and that is what they are going to be wonderful at and will really enjoy, but that is not a desirable option or they may not know that that option exists. So I think bringing families in on a broader level through the school system and educational system to help them understand, that is something that we need to be really proactive about.

Ms CONNOLLY: Can I ask: how do you think the Victorian Government could better support jobseekers who have had contact with the justice system? What do you think we should be doing that we are not doing now? No-one likes to be critical.

Ms ADAMS: I think young people's engagement with the justice system can come in so many different forms. Much of it is going to come back to really understanding, I think, that life journey of the young person and shaping an intensive support model that is much more individualised than perhaps some of the cookie-cutter approaches that can be. The young person will often present already, dare I say it, 'labelled'. So there is going to have to be an element of how that young person does actually feel that they can have pathways that are going to enable them to secure either re-engagement with education or employment. They are often potentially going to be early school leavers.

Also with I guess the journey through the justice department and the justice system in that space we do see over-representation of certain groups of young people. If we think about Indigenous young people again, they are over-represented in that space. I think there is a real need for programs to recognise and take a very individualised approach and incorporate the elements of need by individual people, and with more intensiveness, rather than necessarily integrating them into mainstream programs that are simply going to be looking to push people through the program towards an employment outcome as fast as they can. There does need to be recognition that it takes time, that it is going to take work and that it will be a journey for that young person, but they can achieve it if the right supports are put in place.

Ms CHINNERY: Again I would say: embed professionals into the youth justice mental health support team—so having a career practitioner, for example, and a peer worker that go in with the youth mental health team that go into the youth justice system to support those young people earlier to give them some hope about what the transition is going to be like once they leave the justice system. There is the potential use again of technology: virtual reality, for example, could be a really good way to engage young people in their career journey while they are in prison. Just sort of thinking outside of the square, but you could have, say, peer workers being able to help with that transition once they are discharged, exited from prison and engaging with whatever the services are.

Say if they had a career practitioner built into that team, they would put together a career plan, and then a peer worker or that career practitioner could help with the engagement with the justice team. Again, training in youth mental health—for any people who are working with mental illness in the career space, it would be great to see them have a youth mental health specialisation built into their postgraduate qualification. The State Government is already funding that for the teachers. I think if you added that next little layer of youth mental health training on top of that, it would be fantastic to support those young people with mental health issues.

Ms KELLOCK: I would add to that as well—having the partnerships between youth services that are culturally competent, that understand the cultural backgrounds of those young people and that can partner with the people with that career advice and employment expertise that can help them link. I think bringing those strengths together is where we are seeing good outcomes rather than expecting one provider to be able to do all those things and become experts in all these areas.

Ms ADDISON: Just thinking about pre-employment training in terms of getting people, young people particularly, to be job ready, what experience have you had in programs or approaches that have been successful, and how should we actually be adapting any of the current programs for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable jobseekers?

Ms ADAMS: I think that a key element here is to make sure that training is associated to where there is going to be employment. I think far too frequently we see young people being signed up or engaged in training programs where at the end of it they cannot see where the employment pathway is going to be. That is setting a young person up to fail, and I think we continue to see far too much of that taking place. Pre-employment training should really be about: what are the aspirations of the young people? What are the employment opportunities that are going to be available to that young person? I think we need to consider place-based approaches. Who are the employers? I think it is also important at pre-employment training to think about the employers—seek those who may be engaged to come and do discussions and showcase what the work is going to look like. Engage them early. Allow the young people to see that there are employers out there who are looking and are going to be able to have positions. So you are really setting young people up for success as soon as possible and I think allowing them to feel that this pre-employment is going to lead to an outcome, not just a payment for a training provider, which may not result in anything for them.

Ms GARNER: I think that is a real tension, just on a day-to-day level—what the best opportunities are for the young person, how to work that through with them and with who else you engage, and also this outcome-based funding model. It is just a bit of a nightmare in terms of—you feel the push; it is fast paced to actually get someone into a place leading to an outcome. And then you are caught with this: what will provide a learning opportunity? Even though there might be a benefit in, ‘I’m not sure if this person is really quite ready for that. They seem interested. Shall we have a go and manage the outcome of that and work with them about that, or is that going to be a negative experience?’. I think that is something that we deal with all the time, because having

a go at stuff does provide other opportunities. But I absolutely support you in saying it is really around what is the best thing in that moment and in that fast pace—you have got to grab it while it is there.

Ms KELLOCK: I would also add—and I think Shadab’s talk highlighted that—we found mentoring is absolutely critical in terms of opening up those broader social networks that connect you to that information, advice, resources and contacts: ‘I know someone who works there. We can have a coffee and they can tell you about it’. For us that has been a really critical thing, I think particularly for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds but I am sure for a lot of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mr ROWSWELL: That was going to be my question. The evidence we heard previously was that mentorships and experience were the turning point, the point at which failure in some respects turned into success. Do you agree with the evidence that was given previously? Is there enough support being given to those mentorships and allowing young people to have experience? And if not in a practical way, what do you suggest from a State Government perspective we can be doing to support mentorships and support young people to get that experience?

Ms KELLOCK: I think definitely those paid internships are critical. We can see the rising bar of education: that now even young people with university degrees, that does not guarantee you a job. There are young people sitting around unemployed. I have heard parents tell stories that their child has won a Dean’s Honours award and after how many years of unsuccessful applications is now sitting around unemployed at home, which is devastating, and also to those communities, with the message that sends. I think that with those brokered opportunities, people that can support those links, that mentoring, as you were saying, but also the paid opportunities within local government, and I think government can lead in that as well. We have got really wonderful examples of what has been done in the Indigenous space, in disability. I think we can create more of those brokered paid opportunities for young people to get their foot in the door but be mentored during that time as well. It is a learning process.

Ms ADAMS: I totally agree. I think there is another avenue and a vehicle with social enterprises—to use social procurement. Particularly on major capital projects or works the money is going to be spent. By quarantining an element of that funding to social enterprises, you are genuinely providing paid work, where young people can learn, be supported through a multidisciplinary team, but where they are actually achieving something: they are learning, they are being mentored by trainers, they can still continue to access the non-vocational supports. And at the end of it the skill that they have learned, the capacity to engage in real work, allows them to be competitive when they are going for different roles. So I think we can see mentoring in the one-to-one basis but also in the role that social enterprises play—that allows them to experience a work environment and the collective, and often major projects are wonderful opportunities. We have seen a lot of success through programs that we have been able to secure with governments in that space, where the outcomes for the young people then and their long-term employment are far higher because they actually have done real work and they can show people: ‘I was involved in that project’. I think that really elevates the capacity of young people to see what they can achieve.

The CHAIR: Can we get your views on the free TAFE policy that we have at the moment and how that is helping disadvantaged jobseekers?

Ms CHINNERY: I actually do not think we have had that many young people in our programs enter into those free—

It is tricky with our Jobs Victoria-funded program. You are not paid for linking people into educational placements. So in traditional IPS, yes, you would focus on education and employment, but the way the funding is structured in that Jobs Victoria program, it is all about placing people into employment. So for this cohort, where it is that transitional sort of age group, we are kind of missing part of the package there. We are not supporting them into education as well because that is not part of that contract. Our consultants would not be working to place young people into those courses because they would be focused on work at the moment.

The CHAIR: But do you think it is helpful in terms of preparing young people for future work?

Ms CHINNERY: I think if it is what they would like to do—I think that is the important thing. If it is not linked to that young person's career goals and their interests and their work values, I think they just will not engage in it at all. So if it is, say, a Certificate III in aged care and they have got no interest in working in that space, or a Cert IV in aged care, I think they are just going to attend a couple of times and then not sort of go through to completion. So it has got to be qualifications that relate to what their long-term career goals are, and I think that brings it back to the workforce that is providing advice to the young people. A lot of people that are working in job services are not career practitioners and they do not have experience in that space, and so they are providing advice not necessarily having training in that sort of area. So they might be saying, 'Oh, well, we've got these free ones, why don't you just go into those?' rather than 'We know that you want to be this, so let's try to find the right pathway for you' and engaging people around what they actually want to do.

Ms CONNOLLY: Free TAFE is obviously for industries where they are screaming out for skilled labour. For those that might be early school leavers or even go to grade 12 but cannot get a job—as you have discussed before about young kids sitting on the couch after doing so well at school—would you say there is a gap between the amount of time that they leave school and disengage with education, and then free TAFE is free on the table to then gain skilled and meaningful employment? Would you say there is a gap in the kids being able to actually enter that classroom and their ability to be job ready, but it is almost TAFE ready? Is there a gap between when they leave school and the ability to walk into a TAFE class?

Ms KELLOCK: I think it is definitely something that I have come across that can be quite intimidating and daunting for some young people, particularly if they have been disengaged from education for a little while. So, yes, I think it can be a barrier.

Ms ADAMS: I think there is actually a gap in the way education and employment work collaboratively. I think at the moment we tend to have very large Federal Government employment strategies and then state-based education strategies that do not actually complement each other. So for young people presenting into employment programs, the organisations are paid by outcome into employment, so by necessity they are going to largely direct a young person into employment.

We are not introducing work into education early enough. When we talk early school leavers we are fundamentally talking about young people predominantly who may have disengaged almost at the beginning of high school. They have not transitioned from primary to high school. They have certainly disengaged maybe as early as Years 9 and 10 and sporadically, so to present to TAFE is something that is daunting, and they feel how will they accomplish that, because maybe they have struggled with numeracy or literacy.

I think we have got to find a way to almost combine these opportunities in the spaces where young people are comfortable and break down some of those barriers to entry by allowing it to come to the spaces of young people. Community-based organisations working in this space could be great conduits, but I think if we are seeking young people who have an early school leaver profile, to present to TAFE may be a step too far to commence. Maybe if we were allowing genuine work to be introduced as part of the school profile, education profile, earlier—we do not see transition happen after a young person has left. That is where the gap starts. There needs to be greater cohesion, I think, between these two major elements, education and employment.

Ms CONNOLLY: Do you think one of the ways to overcome that is through some of these paid traineeships and internships so young people can go and see what it is like to work on some of the big infrastructure projects or in different community services and then determine if they want to go to TAFE?

Ms GARNER: Yes, very much, because what we see is often the first choice, or the first try at a job, is not the one. We typically will see at least two or three goes before a young person will actually settle into that place of employment. There might be a range of reasons—but to actually know and understand what the roles are that they are doing, so it is a sort of trial to actually be able to do that. I think, from an employer perspective, that should work as well. To actually have transition and trial opportunities that are paid and are acknowledged and recognised and coached, I think, would be ideal, so picking up a number of the things that we talk about, but actually have a clear pathway that is incremental in nature so that it is not the outcome of the placement that is acknowledged by anybody—not through funding but the organisation or the young person—but actually being able to acknowledge in very meaningful and resourced ways what actually happens at the start. I think that is really important because then those skills are transferable anywhere through the pathway, whether it is

education into employment, whether it is in out-of-home care. Young people living in out-of-home care are another area of need altogether. I think there is a range of things—a systems response as opposed to just more pockets of things.

The CHAIR: We have run out of time. Thank you for attending today. We appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.