

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Sunshine—Monday, 25 November 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

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WITNESSES

Ms Hutch Hussein, Senior Manager, Diversity Unit,

Ms Zeinab Hosseini, Family Services Practitioner,

Ms Muyassar Mahmod, Tutor, HIPPY Australia, and

Ms Stephanie Johnson, Refugee Child Outreach Coordinator, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. Thank you for being here at the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. First of all, I would like to welcome Hutch Hussein, who is the Senior Manager of the Diversity Unit at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Just for the record can I, beginning at the left, ask you to state your name and your position for Hansard?

Ms HUSSEIN: Just to preface that, Chair, there are two of my colleagues who are also here in other hats as community leaders, so I will just ask them to speak to that as well, if that is okay.

The CHAIR: Okay, that is fine.

Ms HUSSEIN: Stephanie and I will speak from our professional roles.

Ms JOHNSON: My name is Stephanie Johnson. I was the primary researcher and author of the Brotherhood's submission to this Inquiry, and I also coordinate the Refugee Child Outreach program, which runs in Hume and Whittlesea.

Ms MAHMOD: My name is Muyassar and I work for HIPPY Australia as a HIPPY tutor. I came to Australia in 2004 as a political refugee, to remain with my dad. I was born and raised in Eastern Turkestan, now currently occupied by China since 1949. The official name for my region is Xinjiang.

Ms HUSSEIN: Hutch Hussein, Senior Manager of the Diversity Unit at the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Ms HOSSEINI: Hello. How are you? My name is Zeinab Hosseini, and I am working with the Brotherhood of St Laurence as a family services practitioner. I am Iranian, and I came here in 1989. I left Iran and I went to Turkey, Yugoslavia; I lived in a refugee camp in Greece and then came here as a political refugee. I am President of the Iranian Women's Association. We provide the Iranian people with information about the different services and settlement as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. 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 privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, to our right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, any PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from Committee members. Welcome.

Ms HUSSEIN: Terrific. Thank you for having us here. I want to start by saying that the Brotherhood of St Laurence has worked with disadvantaged communities across Melbourne for nearly 90 years and has a strong record of working with culturally diverse communities for just over 60 years. A key part of that is ensuring we have a really grassroots connection with the communities we work with. That is fundamentally enabled by our bicultural and bilingual workers, who have strong connections and can identify and empathise with the communities that we work with. We are going to speak to just a few of our 15 recommendations to give you time to dwell on the ones that you would like to, and in doing so really maximise this time for you to directly hear from our colleagues—who also have lived experience of early childhood services—to give examples from their own lives and/or that of the parents they have supported in their role. Then Stephanie and I are happy to take questions on the broader submission at the conclusion.

We fundamentally believe that awareness is the first step in ensuring greater awareness of early childhood services amongst CALD communities; hence our first two recommendations are around promoting best practices to strengthen the communication between early years services and families of CALD backgrounds, as part of our recommended statewide best practice for cultural inclusiveness toolkit, including forms and information—including kindergarten enrolment forms in the main languages of the surrounding community; adopting uniform enrolment processes and simplifying forms to avoid overly complex back-and-forth processes; and also backing up anything you do with letters or with text messages, which can easily be translated on smartphones to disseminate information.

A second recommendation was around continuing to invest in bicultural services to include bilingual story time, kindergarten and playgroup models. This is followed by affordability; hence our recommendation number 7:

Establish a scaled kindergarten subsidy rate to mitigate the steep jump for families whose income falls just above the health care card cut-off.

At this point I want to invite Zeinab to talk about her experience of finding out about kinder when she first arrived as well as touch on the experience of the Iranian community currently.

Ms HOSSEINI: When I came to Australia, my daughter was two years old, and I did not have any information or any idea because of the language, because of so many different things. That is why she missed out on going to the kindergarten, even the maternal and child health nurse, even immunisation, because I did not have experience. Then when my second child was born, I found out about the kindergarten—about enrolling her to kindergarten. Not three years old, four years old, because three years old was very expensive. I could not afford to pay for three years old. But she attended the four-year-old child care. But for my first one, she missed out on so many things. At the moment I am involved with the Iranian community, mostly asylum seekers and refugees. For most of them, it is the same things. Twenty-nine years ago I had the same issues. It is still happening. Still the people do not have any idea about the services. Even playgroup—accessing the playgroup. Sometimes even they do not know how to fill out the form. They do not know how to access it. They do not know any information about the service.

Ms HUSSEIN: We will touch on more about that shortly. Can I ask Muyassar to talk about her experience of how costs have disincentivised kindergarten for some of the families that she has worked with.

Ms MAHMUD: Most of the families that I go and visit and do HIPPY with, the majority of them are from refugee backgrounds, or English being difficult for them to understand—the English language. For some of them, because their income is just above the healthcare card cut-off, it is expensive for them to pay the amount to enrol their kids to kinder. So that is one reason that they do not enrol their kids to kindergarten. The other reason is that some of the parents do not do immunisation because they think it is not good for the kids. Most of them do not know the sorts of things involved in immunisation. The other part of why parents could not enrol their kids to kindergarten is because they do not know how to enrol through the council—the central enrolment—and also because there is a long waiting list, so they miss out on enrolling earlier. So those are the reasons. That includes my experience as well. The other day I rang up my council to find out the cost and they asked me to pay \$369 for 10 weeks, for a term, because my income is just a little bit, maybe \$15 or \$20 a fortnight, above the healthcare card.

Ms HUSSEIN: So you are choosing child care?

Ms MAHMUD: Yes. And for me it is cheaper to choose child care. If I put my daughter into child care one day, it is long hours with morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea given, but I pay less than for the kinder.

Ms HUSSEIN: The second point we want to make is really around the important bridge that bicultural and bilingual workers play in communities where they bring that shared settlement experience of new arrivals. So recommendation 9 in our submission is where we suggest piloting a community ambassador program that employs community leaders to champion early childhood education, and there is the existing infrastructure of the Refugee Action Program. Recommendation 10 is to:

Increase the availability of programs that strengthen parents' capabilities in their role as their child's first teacher.

And recommendation 11 is to:

Increase the use of home visits to maximise engagement with families by:

- preferencing early years programs that incorporate a home visit component
- resourcing MCH to undertake initial appointments in the home where families of refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds arrive in Victoria with a young child.

I will invite Muyassar to talk about her experiences of HIPPY as a parent.

Ms MAHMUD: Yes. I lived in Adelaide when I came to Australia from 2004 until 2012 or 2013. So I moved to Melbourne, and I enrolled my son in HIPPY. I did not know much about my surroundings or where to go, but my HIPPY tutor—every time she would come, she would bring me pamphlets about events that were being run around the council. I would go and attend them, and it was really helpful for me to go out there and find things around my area.

Also HIPPY focuses on play-based activities for children. When she introduced those kinds of activities to me, I thought that was a joke, because as I said, I did all of my education overseas. For us that is maths, Chinese and English, and anything that is something to do with playing or colouring is not education. But because she had had a similar experience, she navigated me through the idea of play-based activities for fun and also that we need to focus on not only our kids' academics but also on their social wellbeing, so I converted to social play-based activities. Now, when I go out to my parents, I find that 90 per cent of them are saying, 'Muyassar, teach us English and maths. Don't worry about the rest'. But I would say, 'No, we'll come to this. I used to think like that, but play-based activities are really important. It is a fun way to engage kids, and you'll get more out of this'. Also in the HIPPY parents group, we invite someone to come in once a year from the city council to talk about the process of enrolling their kids in kinder. For the majority of them it is new to enrol a year ahead, or even a year and a half, to get a place in a kinder. So that is what we do.

Ms HUSSEIN: Thank you. Can I ask Zeinab to talk about her experience of helping families in our Refugee Child Outreach program, where she helps them navigate the early childhood system as a bilingual worker.

Ms HOSSEINI: I have come across so many families that do not know about the existence even of kindergarten—even filling in the forms or even the period. They do not know that they need to enrol the child earlier to be able to get a place—they do not know. My role is just to help them fill in the form and to help them to send it to the city council or to send it to the organisation, and then they can have a place. Most of them do not have any idea, and because of the language barrier and because they are new to the country, they do not have any idea. Maybe the education system in their country is different from the education system in Australia.

Ms HUSSEIN: The last point we want to finish on is really the importance of the proactive engagement of fathers. We notice that this has not been mentioned in other submissions that we have seen. So recommendation 12 is to:

Actively engage fathers in early years settings by preferencing organisations with a proven commitment to involving fathers and delivering on weekends or after hours.

And this can be, I guess, for any of the working parents. I am going to ask Muyassar to talk about how important it is for fathers to know the benefits and how HIPPY does engage fathers.

Ms MAHMUD: In HIPPY we encourage the fathers to get involved and to have quality time with their children doing the simple activities that we provide for mothers and fathers. Because we run our parents group during the week—Wednesdays in the mornings—mostly the mums will attend and the fathers will not, because most of the dads are working during that time. But when we do our graduation at the end of our HIPPY program, 90 per cent of dads will come and join in, because it is convenient for them because our graduation is held at night-time between 5.50 pm and 7.00 pm.

Ms HUSSEIN: Zeinab, can I ask you to talk about your personal experience of your husband being disengaged, as well as other members of the Iranian community, and how services need to move beyond just the tokenistic Father's Day activity to engage the other parent?

Ms HOSSEINI: For example, in my community the mother has a big role in making the kids engage in the activity and to be engaged. The women are engaged with the child—taking them to school, being there for the parent-teacher interview, being present at the kindergarten and being there if there is any activity, while the dad is not there. He is not available. For example, if it is Father's Day, the centre sends an email or a letter, 'Yes, we want the dad to be present because it is Father's Day'. They do not need to push the mum. The mum is there. But for dad, you have to push the dad to be present with the child and to have playtime together. In my community the dads are working or are busy with their activities. They are not engaged with their children, but we have to do something to make them involved and be engaged, because it is important for the child's future to have a mum and dad together with the child.

Ms HUSSEIN: They are really the main points we want to emphasise, and we are really open to your questions from here.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Hutch. Thank you for your presentation and for providing evidence to this Committee. I note with great interest that the 15 recommendations are all pretty impressive. Just one particular question I had was in relation to your submission outlining the deficiency with the current data collection and the reporting of culturally diverse and in particular refugee background populations, and the trends as well. Just to add onto that, how important is this area, and what more can the Victorian Government and other stakeholders do in relation to data collection?

Ms HUSSEIN: It is really important to know from an access and equity perspective who kindergartens are seeing and who they are not seeing. Our observation is that country of birth and language are collected, and they are really important identifiers, but our community is becoming much more diverse than that. We have people that might be coming from Turkey but they might be Kurdish; or they might be coming from Iraq but they might be Assyrian-Chaldean. So the country of birth is not strictly an identifier. There is a range, as Muyassar's own identity testifies. So we do not pick up on the ethnicities that our people identify, whereas the department of immigration, now the Department of Home Affairs, provides that settlement data based on ethnicity. It is much more specific, so you can actually compare like with like and be able to see who has arrived over the past five years and then see whether they are reflected in the kindergarten enrolments. It enables the Government's proactive engagement work to be much more strategic and much more focused.

The CHAIR: We have heard in previous evidence and also today—and I think it has come out pretty high in the scheme of things—about the navigation. There are all sorts of programs, services, levels of government and levels of organisation. There are so many challenges and barriers to how people navigate, and then add language and technology to that as well. We have spoken about the one-stop hub, where we integrate services so that when a family arrives, they know exactly where to go: your three-year-old enrolment, your four-year-old kindergarten enrolment, your playgroup, your maternal and child health services—everything is in one area. There is also a real lack of information and understanding of what is available to a family, let alone someone that is resettling here. So what would be your view in relation to having a one-stop hub and centralising services so it is much more effective?

Ms HUSSEIN: Steph works on the ground so I will ask her to start, and then I will ask Muyassar and Zeinab to jump in.

Ms JOHNSON: That is something that we do think is really important, which is why it is recommendation 14 of our submission. I suppose a community hub is one aspect of the picture, but it also relies on people exiting their homes and feeling safe and protected to enter a formal charity or a building. It really needs to work in conjunction with other approaches. It definitely does a lot in terms of someone entering the door; it has many advantages. So I think we talk about services being able to collaborate with each other in an allied health and early years capacity, someone finding out about maternal and child health because they are enrolled in the kindergarten. However, in order for that to be an accessible space for families we also need to be visiting those families that we are not seeing through the doors of hubs, and that is through home visits like we talked about but also using communication strategies that communities of different backgrounds already use successfully. For a lot of the families that we work with and that I work with in our refugee child outreach program, word-of-mouth and hearing from community leaders is incredibly important, and that will quite often be very successful in being able to reach members of communities who are not always already involved with formal service provision like a hub. It is one part of the puzzle of the submission in conjunction with those other outreach tools.

Ms MAHMOD: I absolutely agree with Stephanie. Also I think having bicultural workers like me with my experience, because my language is very similar to Turkish, the majority of my families are Turkish and some of my parents have been here for 15 years and are so scared of going out there and finding a job. They do not want to lose the Centrelink. I talked one of them through, 'It's not that scary, and you can find more information about it', we ended up doing some information sessions with Centrelink at one of our parents groups through HIPPIY and then after that she had a great understanding and losing the Centrelink money was not as scary. Not only that—I cannot think of anything, but there are so many examples—filling out the forms, knowing the system and how to navigate it. So I think bilingual or biethnic workers can help.

Ms HOSSEINI: Yes, I agree with you, because we need them to be bilingual. If there is a bilingual, then it is for the people to be trusted. You can trust the people and then you can open up if you trust them. I am from Iran, and I cannot trust the government. I left Iran because of the political background, but it is good you are here and you listen to us and you are going to help the families. You are going to help the people from different backgrounds, and it is really important for the people to have you as a supporter, because when I came I did not have any support—no family, no-one. But it is really good you are here. You are here and it is good; the people can trust you. They know you are here and you can help them. Yes, there is an organisation here, and they are here to help you, to support you. You are not alone; you are not by yourself.

When I came here, even to find a place to live I had to do it by myself. I was two months pregnant and I lost my baby, because I did not know where to go, what to do. I lived in a hostel and they said, ‘Six months you are here; you have to go’. When you do not know—it is a new country, new language, new people, new culture. Everything is new. How can you go and access the police and ask for so many different things? I left Iran and I have never been back. I lost my brother, my dad, my uncle, my aunts—everyone—and I am here and I have so many good people around me. Sorry.

The CHAIR: It came from the heart. Thank you.

Ms JOHNSON: I think, going to what Zeinab really accurately described through lived experience, it is something that we see a lot on the ground in terms of particularly a power distance relationship with government as well. If you have had an experience where the government may be the reason that you have had to leave, that experience of getting a letter with the government’s logo on it, or even the local council’s, can be quite jarring for people. Or the experience of not having had a third sector like family services or child protection, there being that kind of anxiety around, ‘Why does someone want to collect information on me?’—that might be another deterrent to navigating the system as well.

Ms SETTLE: Thank you for sharing with us. I am quite interested in something: we talk about the maternal health care nurse as a soft way in to early childhood, and obviously in that resettlement period, in that six months, as you beautifully described, there is so much going on. How do we find the mothers who have entered with small children like you, given that in that settlement period you are really just trying to feed them and find a house? How do we make sure that we are not losing those children when there is not the maternal health care route?

Ms MAHMUD: I can only speak from my own experience. Like I said, at HIPPIY we go to their house and we get to know them and then they have sometimes a child after, a second or third baby. We congratulate them for having a baby and, ‘There’s a list of things that you can do’—we provide the pamphlet. Again, it goes back to bicultural workers or programs like HIPPIY.

Ms SETTLE: And how do people engage with the HIPPIY program? Are they referred?

Ms MAHMUD: Most of them through word-of-mouth, and also we put out the pamphlets at the childcare or maternal health centres. Also we also had a few mums that came from the social workers.

Ms HUSSEIN: The Federal Government provides those intensive support services in that first six months through the HSS program, humanitarian settlement support, and then there are other providers who provide that settlement grants program. In the ideal world—and it works with people who are not transient—we all exit hospital and the hospital communicates with local government and we get a call and we get that first home visit. But if people have then moved house, then we lose that contact. Recommendation 5 alludes to the second part of it. The first part of it is that if maternal and child health is not able to track down that family in that continuous way from that initial local government referral, there should be a linkage back into that Federal Government data as to where is that family located, or has that family arrived post that initial maternal and child health visit? That linkage needs to be made; otherwise they miss out on the information about immunisation, which then acts as a barrier to child care which then acts as a barrier to kinder.

What we also suggest is there is this great seamlessness about leaving hospital and the maternal and child health, but there is not the same seamlessness because you lose contact after that two-year-old check and then you do not go back to maternal and child health until you are four, and that is if you have stayed in the same

address or changed your address with the post office et cetera. But there needs to be greater linkage between linked maternal and child health and kindergarten information databases, which operate across LGAs, alerting staff if children are not involved in either service—so greater connection across government services.

Ms SETTLE: One of the Brimbank council's initiatives was around maternal health care, doing what they refer to as initial kindergarten, so actually registering them in that first visit as a flag to follow up. But one of the things we have also heard is that there is just a huge variance across councils. Some of them are centrally enrolled, some are—

Ms HUSSEIN: Yes, there is no consistency.

Ms SETTLE: So perhaps your suggestion 5 creates that consistency.

Ms JOHNSON: I suppose just around the practical kind of tools that can be used to help link people in when they do come to Australia, another one that we have thought of is recommendation 6, and there is dot point number three there, which captures what Hutch was saying. It is seeking Federal Government agreement to require providers of status resolution support services—so that is for families seeking asylum—and settlement service for humanitarian entrants to advise local councils of new families in their catchment area. What that would do is provide that federal intensive period of settlement support, and if they are able to link to their workers who are actively working on the ground in those six months and make sure they are referred to local council, that would then hopefully enter them into the linked database that we are proposing.

I know that refugee child outreach works with families mostly within their first year of arrival, really—it is the predominant group that we have—and for many of the families they are in transient housing. Then, as you said, the system is very different enrolling in one council to another. Once you move you have to enrol and navigate a whole other system which is different. But also for many of the families that I have worked with maternal and child health is a very foreign concept. So whilst maternal child health is this fantastic soft point of entry, it is actually much more foreign than even the concept of kindergarten. So if you are introducing it early and having the in-home visit and the link to the kindergarten database and you are getting the Federal Government to notify the local catchment area, that is a systemic thing that we can do to make sure no-one falls through the cracks.

Ms HOSSEINI: Yes, and I think they need the information in their languages as well to make it easier for them to understand the form, understand the process and even what is available for me to use.

Ms SETTLE: And that is, as you say, where the bilingual workers are such incredible value.

Ms JOHNSON: And we have found that varies a lot across councils as well. So some of the councils that have some of the highest proportion of people arriving where English is not their first language—for example, Maribyrnong, just over from here—will have translated kindergarten forms in the top four languages that people speak other than English. However, many of the other councils do not. That is a really big barrier because, for example, in some councils you have a whole group of people who can understand Arabic from lots of different countries, and it could give that kind of autonomy and empowerment to people being able to do that themselves too.

Ms SETTLE: And how do we create that workforce to make sure that we have got the bilingual workforce coming through? Obviously the free TAFE qualifications are great, but how do we get people utilising those services? There are obviously lots of barriers as well in that.

Ms HUSSEIN: I think with the TAFE option we have seen a lot of people step up to that—people who have gone and got their qualifications. I think it is really about maximising that awareness and I think getting the incentive created in an organisation to say that the government values this. It is an incentive. You need to kind of create that incentive right in the tender documents for services—if you are in a high multicultural population, you need to provide a bilingual workforce as part of your workforce. That then creates incentives. People start seeing ads where we value a second or third language because we need our staff to reflect the diversity of the population.

Ms SETTLE: Are you suggesting quotas, Hutch?

Ms HUSSEIN: Maybe! There was a recommendation at one point.

Ms JOHNSON: It also goes to our second recommendation around the early childhood workforce strategy and also the allied health workforce strategy. For a lot of the families who are seeing allied health, like speech pathology, it would be really a great thing for those families if those assessments could occur in their language, because there is often this difficult line between something that might be a developmental delay and something that might be also torture- or trauma-informed—for example, why speech is not developing. So being able to conduct that in language would be really good. But going to what Hutch was saying, having something in a formal early childhood workforce strategy—particularly with the rollout of the three-year-old kindergarten, it is a really strategic time to do it. We are going to have to obviously expand that workforce so much, but also I think something we realised is that the community ambassadors and that relationship with bicultural workers is particularly influential in recruiting to those roles, because we can do things like targeted campaigns in community languages around access and the value of taking on a role in early childhood, but actually the role of a bicultural worker or a community ambassador or a community leader means that you can have that two-way communication; it is not just targeting a particular type of advertisement. That is one way you can actually engage in the conversation and ask questions around the pathway as well.

Ms HUSSEIN: And recommendation 2 does use the word ‘targets’—there you go!

Mr TAK: The Chair will talk more about where to from now, but I would just like to say thank you very much for sharing your experiences. Just the same as you, we are very happy that this Inquiry is going now at this stage, so we are looking forward to how it is all going to pan out. It is going to be for the better for our communities, especially for the CALD or multicultural communities. So thank you for sharing your story and experience.

Ms HUSSEIN: We are heartened that this has been a priority for the Parliament because I think both Muyassar and Zeinab were keen to make sure that the next generation of their fellow countrypeople do not experience the same settlement difficulties and that the kids will not miss out, because we know that that impacts on their life chances.

The CHAIR: On that note, thank you very much for taking the time to present to us and provide the evidence and also share your stories. It is really important for the Committee. The next step, as my colleague Heang has just indicated, will be evaluating and collaborating on all the evidence and submissions. Your submission will take part in our reports, which Committee members will deliberate on this year, and next year we will table the report to the Victorian Parliament Legislative Assembly with some very strong recommendations in relation to this Inquiry. Again I do thank you. Your recommendations have been fantastic and will be part of the final report. Thank you for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.