

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 5 June 2025

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Natalie Hutchins MP, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence; and

Peta McCammon, Secretary, and

Melanie Heenan, Deputy Secretary, Family Safety Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2025–26 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence taken today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during the hearings and anything you say may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it quietly.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence the Honourable Natalie Hutchins as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time the committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the committee for the opportunity to present on the prevention of family violence portfolio today. Could I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and paying my respects to their elders past and present. We recognise the lived experience and powerful advocacy of victim-survivors of family violence and sexual assault, including the members of the Victorian Survivors' Advisory Council, and we remember the women whose lives have been taken.

Visual presentation.

Natalie HUTCHINS: The prevention of family violence portfolio is focused on building a connected, responsive and inclusive system that addresses family and sexual violence in Victoria. We are committed to self-determination, truth and treaty and placing the lived experience at the centre of all we do, addressing the intersecting risks and the barriers that Victorians face.

The 2024–25 state budget supported critical frontline responses for victim-survivors and perpetrator interventions and equipped workers to identify and manage family violence risks. The May 2024 strengthening women's safety package boost expanded these efforts for victim-survivors, invested in nation-leading primary prevention and changed laws to hold perpetrators to account. I had the privilege in March of launching the Safe at Home pilot in Geelong, being delivered by McAuley Community Services for Women and Meli. This three-year trial reverses the default system of women being forced to escape violence by supporting them to stay in their homes. In addition, there is the Ballarat community saturation model, which is an evidence-based, nation-leading program to reduce men's violence against women in line with the best international practice on a place-based level.

We are targeting our efforts across the continuum from prevention to response. Respect Victoria's What Kind of Man Do You Want to Be? campaign, launched in March, this year reached approximately 1.6 million men

throughout Victoria. Twenty-seven Aboriginal-led prevention activities were recently funded through the Aboriginal Community Initiatives Fund, and over 35,000 participants have been reached since 2021 through the supporting multicultural and faith communities to prevent family violence grants. We know that increasing community awareness and changing attitudes means that family and sexual violence in Victoria is becoming increasingly visible. Victoria Police recorded family violence and sexual assault reports both increased dramatically in 2020. The Orange Door responded to more than 213,000 people in 2024. Nearly 1000 victim-survivor households needing immediate access to safe accommodation received a refuge response last financial year, totalling almost 60,000 nights. Children and young people are victim-survivors in their own right, and that is why 40 per cent of the funding for therapeutic intervention goes to trauma-informed support like art and play therapies for children and young people. More people who use violence are now accessing services aimed at changing behaviours and reducing harm. Since 2023, nearly 6000 practitioners have been trained to respond to people who use violence through the multi-agency risk assessment and management program framework, commonly known as MARAM.

In 2025–26 the Victorian government is continuing to invest in the family violence system: \$79.7 million over four years to prevent and respond to family violence through continuing investment in Respect Victoria and programs with multicultural communities, ongoing statewide funding for the adolescent violence in the home program and investment in family violence case management and specialised therapeutic interventions for children. There is \$26.5 million over two years to continue funding for specialist sexual assault support services and \$16.9 million over two years to support agencies and practitioners to strengthen Victoria's MARAM framework and information-sharing schemes. I look forward to continuing to work with you all to build a future where Victorians are safe and living free from family violence and sexual violence.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. We are going to go to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Good morning again, Minister. Budget paper 3, page 124 – clear budget cuts are shown for family violence service delivery from the revised budget. There is a reduction of more than \$24 million. What services are being cut and who authorised it? Was that a decision that you and your department made, or is this something that has been forced upon you?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thanks for the question. The prevention of family violence portfolio consists of two outputs in the budget papers: family violence service delivery and primary prevention. Sorry, did your question go to prevention or –

Jade BENHAM: Both. There are cuts in both, Minister.

Natalie HUTCHINS: The portfolio has a total output budget of \$812.2 million across the financial year. This is 4 per cent higher than last year's budget.

Jade BENHAM: No – 2024–25 is \$811 million; 2025–26 is \$786 million.

Peta McCAMMON: I am happy to help with the question. The numbers that you are referring to – I guess there are three data points for us in terms of our output budget. There is our budget that is set in 2024–25, which is usually about April before the financial year, and then there is similar for the 2025–26 budget. So that is the best indication of our base budget.

Jade BENHAM: Secretary, we know the figures. The figures are there. What I am trying to get to is: are services being cut? Where are they being cut, and who made that decision? The data is very, very clear with family violence and violence against women in this state. I am, as someone with lived experience, very concerned that there are services being cut.

Peta McCAMMON: So, short answer: no services have been cut.

Jade BENHAM: No service delivery has been cut?

Peta McCAMMON: No service delivery has been cut.

Jade BENHAM: No-one is going to miss out?

Peta McCAMMON: There have been no service delivery cuts.

Jade BENHAM: So what is the – if you could explain that, please.

Peta McCAMMON: I am happy to, absolutely. The 2024–25 budget to the 2025–26 budget, if I look at the service delivery, is the best indication of our base budget. So that is \$748 million to \$786 million. The revised budget decisions are taken post May, so that does account in that 2024–25 revised figure. There were some decisions after the May budget in relation to the women's safety package. There were some decisions in relation to the national partnership, and there may also be some carryover. So if we do not spend money in one financial year, we seek approval to move that into the next financial year. You can actually see, for the whole department, that is quite common across the whole department. So I can confirm there are no service delivery cuts, but it is not unusual for us to have budget movements throughout the year, which is what you can see in that revised figure.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. As far as the programs ending, there are no programs ending?

Peta McCAMMON: To be completely transparent, in the primary prevention budget – so you can see the 30 to the 25 – there are two-fixed term initiatives.

Jade BENHAM: Which are?

Peta McCAMMON: They are affirmative consent, which Mel could give some more detail to, and there is some campaign funding from Respect Victoria that has been completed.

Jade BENHAM: Been completed?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes, but I am happy if you want to give a bit more detail. The Deputy Secretary has a bit more detail.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, I would like a little bit more clarity on how we see programs in this space as being complete, because as far as I can see they are never complete.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes.

Melanie HEENAN: I absolutely understand the question. The supporting affirmative consent program was always to be a fixed-term project. So that was being led or coordinated through the peak body, Sexual Assault Services Victoria. It was for local providers to be able to build education approaches for the new laws that came in a couple of years ago now. It shifted the model of consent in law to be a communicative model, so it was referred to as the affirmative model of consent. There was quite specific funding allocated for that work to be done. It was always to be fixed term, and the providers have been able to produce a lot of material that will then be going into the respectful relationships education programs to be continued and embedded into those materials.

Jade BENHAM: So is there another program to replace that, because this is ongoing, important work, and there is budget movement and programs have been completed – you can say it is moving or whatever – but that still says to me that there is not the work being done. It is still budget cuts to me, as far as I can see, if it is not being replaced.

Melanie HEENAN: Yes. I mean, I absolutely understand the assumption under the question. I think for this particular body of work, though, there was never an intention for that work to be continued. It was to be able to build the resources in the first instance and then to be able to embed them in the primary prevention activity that is happening across communities. So with respectful relationships in schools and sometimes in non-education settings, that work will go into those contexts. What was funded was to have a real boost, a real acceleration of building understanding of what the new consent laws were doing. But that was always then going to be – now we know what they are – that they will be embedded into the curriculum and into the materials that are being used for respectful relationships approaches.

Jade BENHAM: Okay, but there have not been any other angles or programs identified that need to be delivered so that this can keep expanding and keep evolving?

Melanie HEENAN: Well, I think the work in prevention continues to evolve, and that work will absolutely be going into those contexts. So we have got primary prevention work happening, particularly in schools. The respectful relationships program is now being delivered in over 2000 schools.

Jade BENHAM: No specialist projects?

Melanie HEENAN: There are multicultural agencies on the ground, more than 30, which are delivering prevention programs across communities in a really grassroots sense; it is a brilliant program of work, actually. Local councils are driving work. Women's health services are driving work in prevention. So all of that, and I guess the frameworks around prevention – Change the Story is the national Our Watch framework that we really use to guide our prevention approaches. We have got a 10-year strategy in the *Free from Violence* strategy. So all of that work is a big commitment –

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Natalie HUTCHINS: And I just want to make the point that with the \$123.2 million that we are investing combined with last year's package, there is no other state that is spending more on primary prevention than us.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going straight to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I want to talk about that funding on page 42, because there is substantial funding for responding to family violence in the budget. I just want to focus in on the specialist family violence case management that is described there. How do you provide that to victim-survivors?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thanks for the question. Look, helping victim-survivors to get an assessment around the risk that they face is probably one of the most important things that we can do, and then we need to plan for the safety of them and potentially their family and support their long-term needs. They are the three really key things that we do – and also helping them to navigate the system. Case management can really vary in length and intensity, and quite frankly, sometimes the situations can be really intense and quite complex, particularly with financial debts and liabilities that have been created by the abusive partner and that the victim is caught up in. So it can take quite a lot of effort and impact for the victim to really come forward and be able to get the help that they need.

The funding will sustain vital frontline family violence services like Berry Street, GenWest and VACCA so that victim-survivors, including children and young people, can get that specialist support and stay safe and recover. Victim-survivors can access case management through the Orange Door as well. We have seen a real increase in self-referrals coming through the Orange Door; I think it is about a 30 per cent increase. Flexible funding plays a really important role in case management. Through that flexible funding support package, case managers can help with practical safety measures, whether they are house alarms, improved safety cameras, duress alarms or fencing, and that is identified through a personal safety initiative. These supports can make a real difference to someone being able to stay safely in their home. Those flexible packages can also support victim-survivors to transition from crisis to long-term recovery as well. We know it is really important for families to stay connected to their local areas, rather than to have to be uprooted and move, so that is a really important part of it. In recognition of the importance of this suite of supports for victim-survivors, the budget invests \$79.7 million over four years to ensure the continuation of these specialist family violence cases, as well as managing 940 flexible support packages to be available each year.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I think there is growing recognition now that children are victim-survivors in their own right, separately, so what is the government doing to support them through this budget?

Natalie HUTCHINS: We know that for kids who are affected or young adults who are affected by family violence it can have a lifelong impact on their mental health, their physical health and their wellbeing, and sometimes it can impact their development and even their engagement in education and employment long term. We need to recognise victim-survivors in their own right, and we need them to feel safe and to be able to heal and be supported, so we are committed to supporting children and young people at every stage of the family violence system, from prevention through to early intervention and through to response and recovery. A significant proportion of the \$79.7 million that I referred to before in the state budget is dedicated for supporting children and young people, and this includes funding for case management, therapeutic services,

flexible support packages and crisis brokerage. At least 40 per cent of therapeutic family violence services are directed specifically to children and young people, including play, art and music therapy. I was really pleased to be at the launch of GenWest's new child and young people's therapeutic centre that they launched not long ago.

One of the most important ways that children and young people can access support is still through the Orange Door. In the year 2023–24 more than 86,000 children accessed tailored and trauma-informed support through the Orange Door as a way of support. This budget also funds targeted support for children in refugees, including recovery, emotional regulation and continued education and safe relationships work. This includes resources such as in-reach therapeutic services, specialist family violence practitioners and training for staff. It is really important that we have a specific program fit for 15- to 19-year-olds who are experiencing homelessness due to family violence. Unfortunately we are seeing a rise in this, and we need to continue to build the capability of youth services to meet the demands of this. In addition to these initiatives, we are currently developing a new MARAM practice guide to focus on children and young people, because we know these resources need to be able to identify, access and manage the risk for children as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you very much, Minister. I note page 30 of the questionnaire goes to the question from Ms Benham around the difference between the actual and revised budget for 2024–25, the special appropriations from the national partnership agreement. Are you able to access how accessing additional Commonwealth money demonstrates that there is no reduction in Victorian government funding?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Certainly.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. We are going to go to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, I just want to talk about crisis accommodation. Page 40 of the 'Department Performance Statement' shows 959 family violence victim-survivors received refuge responses last year, and over 60,000 nights of refuge accommodation was provided to victim-survivors of family violence – that is on page 41. It is an average of 63 nights. You can tell me if I am wrong, but I think it is 63 nights – nine weeks. Does 'refuge response' include nights spent in motels?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I might ask Mel to clarify that, but before I do –

Richard WELCH: Just a yes or a no really.

Melanie HEENAN: The answer is no.

Richard WELCH: If no, how many women and families have been forced to stay in motels for more than a week because appropriate accommodation could not be found? Can you provide that figure?

Melanie HEENAN: I can tell you the number of households that stay in motels on any given night. So 120 households will be accommodated in a motel or emergency accommodation option, and those accommodation options are organised through either the Orange Door or family violence case management.

Richard WELCH: Sorry, is that an average or a total?

Melanie HEENAN: That is an average.

Richard WELCH: An average. Can you provide a total?

Melanie HEENAN: A total across the year? I should be able to get that figure for you.

Richard WELCH: Can you provide that on notice?

Melanie HEENAN: I am happy to get that.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. So on any given night how many women and families are spending a night in a motel? You just mentioned it.

Melanie HEENAN: In a motel or emergency accommodation – 120 households.

Richard WELCH: And how many in a motel?

Melanie HEENAN: Most of those will be in a motel, Mr Welch. The difficulty we have still with the system which we rely on – it is a Commonwealth system – is that we do not yet have, or we have only recently got, the ability to actually identify the dwelling type. That has not been possible within that system prior to May this year. So by this time next year we will know exactly that number for motels or hotels.

Richard WELCH: What do you mean by ‘dwelling type’? What is the definition? How do you define that?

Melanie HEENAN: The system that we do have to rely on now has a range of dwelling types that could be used in emergency accommodation.

Richard WELCH: Motels being one of them.

Melanie HEENAN: So it would be a motel and other –

Natalie HUTCHINS: Airbnb is another.

Melanie HEENAN: Exactly, or even other forms of emergency accommodation.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. So would you agree that motel accommodation is not ideal, and are you concerned for the safety of women and families staying in motels?

Melanie HEENAN: I think definitely, Mr Welch, we would want to keep moving away from motels and be able to, over time, offer more refuge placements, and we will be able to do that as the continuation of the refuge redevelopment program is completed. Motels do, though, really play an important role for some families. For some families the idea of going into protective hiding, which is what a refuge will mean – they are taken out of their communities, their kids out of school. They may not want to do that, and it may be because they are actually waiting for something to be put in place in their own home. It might be CCTV equipment, it might be other safety measures that could be taken.

Richard WELCH: Long-term social housing, perhaps?

Melanie HEENAN: Long-term social housing is absolutely where we would like family violence victim-survivors and their families to be heading.

Richard WELCH: On page 50 it shows that the average waiting time for long-term social housing is just shy of 18 months. How do you explain that delay?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I think that is better answered by the Minister for Housing and Building rather than my department.

Richard WELCH: That is the minister for housing’s fault.

Natalie HUTCHINS: No, I am just saying the Big Build is going to deliver 1000 new social housing projects specifically for women who are experiencing family violence, but I would say the progress on those things is up to the minister for housing.

Jade BENHAM: Minister – sorry to interject – is this a priority of yours? Are you working with the minister for housing to make sure that they are available and a priority for victim-survivors of family violence?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Absolutely. And to have a commitment of 1000 new social housing properties dedicated just to victims-survivors is a really big step forward.

Jade BENHAM: When is the due date on those?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I am not going to talk on behalf of the other minister who is administering –

Jade BENHAM: No, no. But if you are working with the minister for housing and this is a priority point for you, surely there have been conversations and ideas around when these might be available –

Natalie HUTCHINS: And I am going to leave that to her to answer.

Jade BENHAM: because we know that motels are just, in a lot of cases, not safe.

Natalie HUTCHINS: And in some cases they are the best option, as we have just heard.

Jade BENHAM: In some they are. But as was said earlier, long-term social housing would absolutely be the priority.

Natalie HUTCHINS: And this government has taken our refugees from down here to up here. We are on target to deliver 35 of them, which is a major increase. We have rebuilt 17 of them, or they are in the middle of being rebuilt and expanded, so the system has been invested in and will continue to be invested in.

Richard WELCH: Minister, are you aware of the Safe Steps organisation?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Of course I am.

Richard WELCH: They are looking for \$3.9 million in operational funding for 28 high-security crisis shelter units, which could accommodate around a thousand women and children each year. Isn't money better spent on here than on motels?

Natalie HUTCHINS: The Safe Steps commitment to expanding their service that is known as the Sanctuary absolutely needs to be commended, and we have funded beds. There were beds funded out of our last budget for that.

Richard WELCH: How much compared to motels? What is the comparison with motels?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, obviously motels continue to be a backup for us.

Richard WELCH: So what is the quantum? How much has been spent on hotels versus Safe Steps?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, we just gave you the numbers of people that stay in hotels.

Richard WELCH: I am asking the amount.

Natalie HUTCHINS: One hundred and twenty households were accommodated in crisis accommodation.

Richard WELCH: No. Sorry, Minister, if you did not understand the question, I am asking how much was spent on motels versus Safe Steps.

Natalie HUTCHINS: They are not the same thing, though.

Melanie HEENAN: Mr Welch, we will be able to provide that figure in terms of the number of nights of motels and then look at what would be an average cost of a hotel. I think the comparisons that are sometimes made in relation to Sanctuary –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Heenan. We are going to go to Mr Galea.

Richard WELCH: Okay. We will take it on notice then.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr Welch. Let me make this extremely clear: your time is up. You ask questions, and the witnesses before us are afforded an opportunity to answer. That question is not taken on notice.

Jade BENHAM: Point of order.

The CHAIR: On a point of order, Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: On a point of order, it was already agreed that those details would be provided, before the time ran out.

Lauren KATHAGE: On the point of order.

The CHAIR: Ms Kathage, on the point of order.

Lauren KATHAGE: On the point of order, Chair, the Deputy Secretary offered to provide the cost of hotel stays.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That is exactly what I thought. There is no point of order. Please continue, Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and officials. Minister, budget paper 3, page 38, discusses support for Victoria's response to sexual violence. We know that reporting of these incidents is increasing in the community. Minister, how will this budget output be supporting people who need it most?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thank you for the question. It is always a really hard topic to talk about, but I am pleased to be talking about initiatives that prevent and respond to sexual violence with the aim of trying to drive it down. Unfortunately across the state we are seeing more women in particular reporting sexual assault. In Victoria our specialist sexual assault support services are offering up some pretty important trauma-informed support to both adults but also children and young people, including those that are impacted by historical abuse as well. In 2023–24 more than 18,000 adults, children and young people accessed these services in Victoria, including children, young people and adults affected by recent or past sexual violence, adult survivors of child sexual assault, non-offending family members and support people, with access to a sexual assault crisis line and flexible support funding to meet urgent and practical needs of those victims.

Continued investment is also being targeted with the sexually abusive behaviours treatment service, a nationally recognised early intervention program for children and young people under 18 who display harmful sexual behaviours. These programs address both the behaviour and the underlying development, psychological and social needs of the child or the young person using trauma-informed, family-inclusive and evidence-based approaches. Young people are referred to these services in Victoria through self-referral, family members, schools, community services, sporting clubs and medical and health professionals. These services support over 1200 children and young people a year. The investment ensures young people with complex needs receive timely intervention and change their harmful behaviours. In the long term these programs are providing a point of critical and early intervention that reduces the risk of future offending into adulthood. In addition, this year's budget will support all victim-survivors of sexual violence through frontline sexual assault support services for people who have experienced sexual abuse. These include flexible funding for victim-survivors of sexual assault and a statewide sexual assault crisis line with after-hours counselling.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. If I can draw your attention now to the multi-agency risk assessment and management framework, or the MARAM framework, which I know you are very familiar with. In relation to budget paper 3, page 42, there is discussion around family violence risk assessment and information sharing schemes. Minister, what is the importance of funding for schemes like MARAM, and how will this funding be used?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thanks. There is a commitment in this year's budget for \$16.9 million over two years for the output funding for sustained critical family violence risk management and information sharing. This is to be supported as a big part of MARAM but also our FVISS and CISS reforms as well. So they are two other information sharing services that go across the family services portfolios. The MARAM framework is really the cornerstone of Victoria's response to family violence, and it plays a really critical role in making sure a victim does not have to retell their story when they go to a new service or get referred to another service, ensuring that identity can be protected and that the risk assessment is consistent and evidence based. This is something that I know the Commonwealth have asked us to work with them on as a model that can be uplifted. We are really pleased to be able to do that work with them. MARAM is a really amazing whole-of-government reform. It has over 6500 organisations, including police, health, schools, justice and specialist family violence services, that are able to input information into this system.

Since 2018 professionals across the sector have been able to complete almost 350,000 training modules to build their skills so that they can respond to this information-sharing and know how to use it. It is one of the largest and most ambitious workforce and system reforms in the country, and it is essential that we invest in it to keep on strengthening it, training people in it, but most importantly keeping victims safe. These reforms are underpinned by legislation which requires DFFH to maintain a strong legal framework, update practice guidance through continuous improvement and report regularly on progress.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, secretaries. Also thank you to the secretaries who throughout the course of our work in any given year do liaise with us as individual members in the work that we do with a number of women and men and children, so thank you for that. I will start with a couple of quick questions, if I can, perhaps for the secretaries. I know that the Orange Door funding last year was about \$231 million. Do we know what that figure is going to look like for this next financial year and the forward estimates?

Melanie HEENAN: I do, Mr McGowan. I can take that question. Just bear with me.

Nick McGOWAN: Sure.

Melanie HEENAN: For 2023–24 the amount was \$226 million that was invested in the Orange Door network, and \$188.5 million of that was invested with the partner agencies in the Orange Door. That is the 51 partner agencies that support the full network.

Nick McGOWAN: And for the next financial year?

Melanie HEENAN: It will be the same amount. This is the kind of funding that Orange Door needs to function.

Nick McGOWAN: So that is a set amount each year?

Melanie HEENAN: It is for now.

Nick McGOWAN: And when does that expire? When is that due for review, so to speak?

Melanie HEENAN: I believe it is ongoing, but I can just check that for you.

Nick McGOWAN: Would they give bids for an increase at any point in time, or is that a matter that is just under discussion constantly?

Melanie HEENAN: I think the latter, because we are now faced with obviously pretty significant demand, and the Orange Door is a much more visible place. It was always intended to be, for local community, a really visible place for victim-survivors and others impacted by family violence to go, and that visibility is only increasing. And of course we do have some demand increases as well by virtue of the incidence of family violence being on the rise.

Nick McGOWAN: Any plans to extend that program beyond the 9 to 5, Monday to Friday? That is one of the constant things I hear back in the community obviously.

Melanie HEENAN: Not at this stage, and that is because we do have Safe Steps as the 24/7 crisis response statewide service. It does pick up at the point at which the Orange Door business hours close and then takes, via referrals, sometimes secondary consults if necessary, back into the business hours of the Orange Door.

Nick McGOWAN: Sure. I understand that. Just to clarify for my purposes, before we were talking about hotels, motels, Airbnb – when you say 120, does that figure cover all those categories per night, or is that just the motel stays?

Melanie HEENAN: It is just the emergency accommodation, so that issue around dwelling. Most of them will be motels, we are confident, but we just cannot say for certain. It does not include the refuge nights for households, which is at 170 capacity at the moment. At the conclusion of the refuge redevelopment program it will be up to 199 household placements in refuge.

Nick McGOWAN: Just to be clear, the 120 on average each night includes in that category motels, hotels, Airbnb stays – whatever other categories there are, they are all included in that subset?

Melanie HEENAN: It will predominantly be motels and hotels, though.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay, and you can come back to us with a money figure of how much we spent the last 12 months to the extent possible – or going forward from May? I think you said you will have a clearer picture going forward, right?

Melanie HEENAN: I will, absolutely, through the changes to the SHIP system. It is important in terms of the costings that go into that emergency accommodation option that we ensure case management support goes alongside it. There is a crisis response model that operates in Victoria, and that includes support for people to go into emergency accommodation, so that means that families are not coming out of their local communities and going into motels without case management support. That is the local specialist family violence services that will be providing support to people who are in motels.

Nick McGOWAN: Sure. A question perhaps for the minister more so: is the government looking at or contemplating any legislation that would require the offender – traditionally the male – to leave the family home rather than the woman and the children having to flee their home, as is repeatedly the case, sadly?

Natalie HUTCHINS: We are just trialling a new program, which I launched back in March I think it was, to basically remove the perpetrator from the home and to keep the victim in the home. We want to see how that goes. We need to have the structures in place before we consider legislation to be able to support women to safely stay in the home, but it is a preference for us to be able to keep families in their home and remove the perpetrator, if we can do that.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Perhaps a question for the Secretary: you referred earlier on to the movement of the budget and that the envelope for 2025–26 is larger because there is perhaps a carryover. What was the carryover from that previous year, which makes it look –

Peta McCAMMON: I am sorry, I do not have that detail with me today in terms of what that amount or –

Nick McGOWAN: That is okay. Would you mind taking that on notice?

Peta McCAMMON: We can look at what we can provide.

Nick McGOWAN: Would you also be able to tell us what that carryover was then used for? Because obviously it looks like a spike at \$811 million versus the \$786 million for 2025–26.

Peta McCAMMON: I guess the rules governing carryover for us are that we need to spend it on the original purpose. It is not unusual if we have a delay that we will seek from the Treasurer, ‘Can we move that into a new financial year?’, but the commitment is that we will spend that in line with the original purpose of the funding.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you mind coming back to us on what that purpose was and confirming where that money envelope was spent?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. We can look at what we can provide in relation to the carryover, yes.

Nick McGOWAN: Can you also tell us how many L17 referrals there were from Victoria Police? Do we know that?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes, we do.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Do you want that now?

Nick McGOWAN: If you have it. I am happy to take it on notice. The other thing I am curious about is how many of those L17s were issued between 5 pm Friday and 9 am Monday?

Melanie HEENAN: I will not be able to give you that figure, Mr McGowan, but I can tell you that the number of family violence incidents recorded by police was 104,786. Those will have been L17s, essentially. Certainly we have the rate of family violence related offences that were recorded by police as well for 2024, which was 123,380.

Nick McGOWAN: I understand there was something in the order of 60,000 that were reported over the weekend, essentially, and I am trying to understand if that is accurate. Would you be able to provide any figures that either dispel that or provide detail?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr McGowan. We are going straight to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I am interested in early intervention and program campaigns in terms of intervention. Respect Victoria is a leading body for the primary prevention of family violence. Minister, referring to budget paper 3, page 42, where funding for Respect Victoria is allocated to prevent family violence and violence against women, can you talk about what kind of work Respect Victoria is doing to achieve this?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. Thanks. Respect Victoria are delivering campaigns that really challenge the attitudes that contribute to family violence. Their bread and butter is in the prevention space of their work. Just yesterday we launched a new program, an online campaign called What Kind of Man Do You Want to Be? It is a new set of social media with men being interviewed about their experiences with family violence, sexual violence or poor behaviours and how they see change needs to happen. Respect Victoria's campaign asks Victorian men to consider what type of man they would like to be and creates space for reflection on how gendered expectations, emotional expression and power dynamics shape their lives and relationships.

It could not come at a more important time than releasing this yesterday, because the day before the national government released a one-in-10-year report into perpetrator violence against women. We have seen a shift over 10 years of one in four men using abuse or violence in their relationships to one in three men as a result of that, and there is some clear evidence coming out of that research around the lack of mental support and the lack of connection to family and friends being really core connectors to those men that are using abuse and violence. So to have this campaign running alongside those results right now could not be more timely. Being rooted in primary prevention, we know we need to reframe, and men are a really important and active part of us doing that. This is not just a challenge for women in our society; this is a bigger challenge for us all and for men. The social norms that enable violence ultimately contribute, and making change and contributing to a safer community are really up to everybody.

Additionally, we are supporting organisations like Jesuit Social Services, who deliver an early intervention program that engages at-risk young men between the ages of 12 and 25 to change problematic attitudes and behaviours that can lead to violence. It has delivered the program to 16 pilot sites across a range of community centres and secondary and flexible learning schools as well. We also have workforce development sessions that are being conducted alongside the program, with over 200 teachers and support workers being educated in this program, and it is helping young people improve their problem-solving skills and build better social norms as well. So there is a big challenge, but Respect Victoria are best placed in the work that they are doing to take it up.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. I also note on page 42, budget paper 3, that funding is allocated for delivering prevention and early intervention work within the multicultural community. Minister, can you talk to the committee about how you have engaged the multicultural community in primary prevention?

Natalie HUTCHINS: This is really important work that we are doing in the prevention space in the multicultural space. There is the supporting multicultural and faith communities to prevent family violence program. It is not a short name, but it is an important program that funds 32 projects across the state currently. The program aims to strengthen the capacity of Victorian multicultural and faith communities to address family violence and all forms of violence against women through innovative, culturally appropriate and tailored primary prevention responses. I have hosted a number of round tables in my own electorate for multicultural leaders, who have spoken to me at length about the number of women coming forward who are experiencing family violence in their communities. Those women do not always know what is available to them under the law, let alone what resources can be available. Information is one thing; prevention is another. I think we can successfully deliver both, but we need to engage our faith and community leaders to be the voice of that prevention work. Activities have been underway through these programs that are really engaging adults and young adults to increase awareness and understanding of family violence and respectful relationships. This particular program funds organisations like Africare, the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human

Rights, the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association, the Centre for Multicultural Youth, Jewish Care, Wellsprings for Women and many others.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Africare is in my electorate, and I am looking forward to welcoming you to visit the centre once again when you have got time, Minister. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tak. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Chair. Good morning. Just starting on budget paper 3, page 124, the department output summary and following up some earlier questions, Minister, can you explain why the government chose not to allocate the \$3.9 million in operational funding requested by Safe Steps to those 28 crisis units that are sitting empty?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I thank the member for the question and again acknowledge the great work that is being undertaken by Safe Steps in helping us direct so many victims into support services and refuges, hotels and emergency accommodation where it is needed, but in particular I note that the extension to the sanctuary was funded by the federal government and certainly there may be a role for the federal government in the ongoing responsibility of how those beds are funded into the future. But our government is focused on the priorities that we have already identified, and that is ramping up our current refuges and our plans around reaching that 35 as a total in the state as a priority with our funding.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I ask what steps you are taking to ensure that those purpose-built, currently empty units are opened?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I have had conversations with my counterparts in Canberra around this, but certainly we will continue to work with Safe Steps about what options come out of national funding that we receive here as a state into the future. We want to see these beds open; there is no doubt about that. It will be support for the whole system to see this happen, but we need to make sure that it happens safely and with ongoing commitments into the future.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Minister, can I ask: how does this budget's allocation for refuge operations compare to the 2024–25 budget?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Given I was not the minister last year, I might ask Mel to supplement that one.

Melanie HEENAN: Yes, happy to do that. The funding for the operation of refuges was contained in last year's budget, so it will have another year to go. We will certainly be ensuring that that is a focus for next year's budget requests.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So are there any relevant figures for this year in this budget?

Melanie HEENAN: Principally around the crisis brokerage, and that is for Safe Steps to be able to utilise that crisis brokerage. Essentially they use their crisis brokerage for sanctuary, as a substitute. There was certainly that outcome, and there was also an outcome in relation to refuges for children, which is a really, really important aspect of the program of course, for them to be able to access educational supports and other therapeutic supports in refuges.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I ask: what is the budget allocation for those items that you have just listed?

Melanie HEENAN: I will try and get that for you in terms of the children in refuge amount. I do not want to guess it, but I can get that for you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you; much appreciated. There was a figure given earlier of how many people are staying in motels as crisis accommodation. Can the committee be provided with a breakdown of how many motels and hotels the government currently has contracts with for crisis accommodation?

Melanie HEENAN: The way it tends to work is that local family violence organisations will have a relationship with their local motels, and that is a good thing because they obviously can forge those and cultivate those and make sure that motels are alert to what they will need to have in place, particularly in relation to security and support and knowing that workers will be coming onsite. There is a motel

accommodation registry that is run by McAuley Community Services for Women. That is a kind of mapping database so that we know which motels are most likely to be used for victim-survivors of family violence. There are some motels that are used for people who use violence. That motel mapping database run by McAuley is utilised by most specialist family violence services to make sure they have got safe options in their local communities. There is also some fantastic work, I might just very quickly add, being done by Elizabeth Morgan House, which is an Aboriginal specialist family violence service. They do capability building with local motels as well, so that work is sometimes done by local services. I think that is a good thing.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Minister, could I ask: are you aware of comments made by Safe Steps chief executive Chelsea Tobin that 93 per cent of critical incidents involving multiple emergency services, including suicide, self-harm and child abduction, happen in motels? Are you aware of those comments?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I cannot recall her saying that, but I have no doubt that she probably has said that. There are also victims that do not want to go to refuges, and we have to respect what victims want and what suits them. Really our focus is 'How do we provide as many safe options as we can to those that need them?' I think having the balance right between growing our refuge system combined with better arrangements so that we have got line of sight of what hotels we have where, where we have got people placed and how safe they are is really important to the system.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Minister, just to move on to another topic, can I ask what investments you are making to support Aboriginal community controlled organisations to achieve Rainbow Tick accreditation in line with the royal commission recommendation?

Natalie HUTCHINS: We might have to get back to you specifically on Rainbow Tick. There are a number of programs. Obviously we are funding, through Dhelk Dja, arrangements with Aboriginal organisations to implement a whole range of programs. I might have to come back to you, if I can, on the Rainbow Tick.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Much appreciated.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair. Minister, in my time working as a family violence worker and in homelessness shelters I found being able to refer people to hotels in the middle of the night, particularly people who lived in regional or somewhat remote areas that were not close by to a refuge, and to have those relationships with hotels and be able to access safe accommodation for people at the drop of a hat when they most needed it, was a really essential part of the whole web of services that were available. Minister, we have spent a bit of time speaking about hotels and motels today, but I wondered if you wanted to emphasise something else within that ecosystem that you are particularly proud of.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thank you. I think talking about our investment in refuges is really important, and the fact that we are growing our core-and-cluster model, where we have facilities onsite to deliver all of the needs to rehabilitate and work in a therapeutic manner with the families that are onsite. The flexibility and the upgrades that we are doing to our refuges are amazing to see in practice. Some of our facilities have these sliding doors where we can turn two side-by-side units with three-bedrooms in each one into a six-bedroom facility – one six-bedroom or one one-bedroom and one five-bedroom – depending on the size of the family. We know in certain geographical areas across the state that we will have much larger families and in other areas we will have much smaller families. To have that flexibility within one refuge where you can actually still have your own kitchen and bathroom and bedroom but access to extra bedrooms for the number of kids that you might have – to be supported in that sense makes sense, and it is good architecture, to be honest.

But more important is the architecture that sits behind therapeutic services that those kids will get from being in that facility for that time. I am really proud of the fact that we have rebuilt or have plans to rebuild 17 of those refuges and to grow the system to 35. Would I like to see double that one day? Yes, absolutely. Would I like us to seek to minimise our current usage of emergency accommodation? Yes, I would. But I would also like to see more permanent housing, and we have committed to 1000 dedicated spaces. That is something that I think is really important, that security – I hear it time and time again from services as I travel the state. Homelessness is a big part of the challenge of getting women away from abusive relationships in particular.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. It is something to be proud of.

Mathew HILAKARI: Minister, I might ask a question on the Orange Door program. It is also one that is dispersed across all of Victoria, and that is a very important matter. I refer to the presentation in particular. There are some really important facts in there: one out of three people referred themselves to the Orange Door in 2024. I am just hoping you could talk a little through the process of the Orange Door, how victims and survivors and families are coming into contact with the Orange Door and what sorts of services the Orange Door provides to them.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thanks. Look, quite often when we talk about increased reporting, people automatically think increased levels of violence, and it does not always go hand in hand. I remember 15 years ago as a new MP setting up a stall at a community fete and having some pamphlets about family violence on my table, and so many women confided in me that they had been victims of family violence on the spot. It was something I just did not expect or anticipate. They had never even seen a flyer of where they could report outside of a police station, and that was the first time they had seen flyers about the topic. So much has changed in 15 years: a royal commission, lots of recommendations, the establishment of Orange Doors as a place to go. I was hearing from those victims back then that they would not call the police, because of the stigma of having a divvy van out the front of their home – it was not something that they were willing to do – nor would they be seen walking into a police station.

Having the option to go somewhere else, a different door to get services, to get help, means that we are just seeing so many more people report. Thirty per cent growth in self-reporting is a lot, but I think it has just been something that we are encouraging women to feel safe to come forward and talk about. Are we seeing poorer behaviours from men in our society now compared to 50 years ago? I think the research that was released this week probably says yes, but I think it is a good thing, a positive sign, that we are getting more women reaching out and gender-diverse people as well. People who are experiencing that and men that are experiencing family violence are reaching out to say that they are ready to get help. They want a response, and they want to be prioritised. People can contact the Orange Door not just by walking in the door but also by phone and by email, and they will be responded to. There are 18 Orange Doors across the state currently; they are the primary sites. We have 19 access points, and then we have 28 outposts. Our outposts are the places where our specialists can go and meet people, particularly in rural areas, where it might be a dedicated room provided by a council or a library that can be booked and used for a consultation.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this morning. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for youth at 11:30 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.