

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Supply of Homes in Regional Victoria

Melbourne – Friday 20 June 2025

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair
Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair
Jordan Crugnale
Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham
Martha Haylett
David Hodgett

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Mary Khouri, Manager, Corporate Business, and

Stefano Scalzo, Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing of the Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the Supply of Homes in Regional Victoria. I just need to run through some important formalities before we begin.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website, and you may be quoted in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with us today. My name is Juliana Addison. I am the Member for Wendouree, representing central Ballarat, and Chair of this committee.

Martin CAMERON: Martin Cameron. I am the Deputy Chair of the committee and represent the seat of Morwell, which is the Latrobe Valley and a bit of Gippsland.

Daniela DE MARTINO: I am Daniela De Martino. I am the Member for Monbulk, covering the Dandenong Ranges.

Jordan CRUGNALE: My name is Jordan Crugnale, the state Member for Bass, and I have Pearcedale and sort of the Western Port area down to Phillip Island over to Inverloch.

The CHAIR: Would you like to introduce yourselves for Hansard, please.

Mary KHOURI: My name is Mary Khouri, and I am from Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative, and I do the infrastructure, business and submission end for the Aboriginal community in Robinvale.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for being here today, Mary.

Stefano SCALZO: My name is Stefano Scalzo. I am an infrastructure adviser at the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, of which MVAC is one of our key members.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Well, we are so delighted that MVAC is here to talk to us. We have spent the last 3½ months going around the state, finding out information for our inquiry into regional housing – the supply, the challenges, the barriers and everything like that. We had a great meeting down at GEGAC in Bairnsdale with the Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative. You are our very final people for our whole hearings, so we are really, really pleased that you are with us. Would you like to start off with any comments or are you happy just going straight into questions?

Mary KHOURI: Well, they say the last comments always stay in the head, so thank you for making us last.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mary. Mary, do you want to kick off or do you want us to just start talking?

Mary KHOURI: Well, I guess it would be good for us to start. We own several pieces of land – in fact we own quite a lot of land – in Robinvale. We have up to 40-odd houses for our community. We are on a 22-hectare block of land at the moment, and we have three other properties that are rural properties with sheds on them around the Robinvale area. So we have land, which is fabulous news, and we have a lot of people who are homeless or a lot of people needing housing who are homeless but are not capable or at the stage yet where they are ready to commit to paying rent. I think this is a key point that I would like to bring out: even though there are not enough homes, there are also people that will never be able to live in that kind of environment from our community anyway because they just do not function like that – they cannot afford to pay rent, they have other personal issues going on. One of those cohorts we really do want to address today, so we will get to that a bit further along. I guess our biggest need here is infrastructure, like working with Stefano at the moment

to put an expression of interest in for a grant to Housing Australia. I need power, I need drainage, I need sewerage, I need all these things, and yet the time periods to put these submissions in – and I am here in Robinvale. I am not quite sure whether you know where Robinvale is. It is like a dot point in between Swan Hill and Mildura.

The CHAIR: I have been to Robinvale, and I think it is a beautiful part of Victoria.

Mary KHOURI: I do too. I moved from Queensland to bring my kids up here, that is how much I loved it. But we just need a lot of help in getting housing up for our community.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Stefano, how are you helping with this?

Stefano SCALZO: It is a really good question, Juliana. Obviously, at VACCHO, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, we know that sustainable housing is foundational for good health. We know that is so as much for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community as it is for mainstream Victorians. We recognise, notwithstanding the fact that we are the peak body for health organisations, just how important it is to help our members to prepare the submissions for the funding that is on offer from Housing Australia. As Mary pointed to, this is the current round for the national health infrastructure fund crisis accommodation funding, which you would be more than familiar with, which is available to not only our members but the broader mainstream housing and homelessness providers out there. For us it has been important to document the cohort this housing will support. I think a lot of the time there is a conversation around housing, but people defer to the widgets: 'We've delivered seven houses', 'We've delivered 12 houses' or what have you. Mary told the story of the very unique situation that some of these people are in. There are services that MVAC already provide to many of these residents, but how much more could they be doing if these people were able to have some stable housing? So our support is to document who these people are – these are people before we talk about houses – and their unique situation and to document the care model that MVAC provides. That is the first thing we do.

The second thing we do is translate that service offering into an appropriate accommodation model. I think often people would like to defer to cookie-cutter support – 'Here's a two-bedroom unit that we have done before', 'Here's a three bedroom unit' – whereas these residents have unique needs, which manifest in things like additional space for carers, additional supports for access by wheelchairs or what have you. Then there are the very real cultural safety elements, which enable these young people to ensure that they have the connection to country and to their Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing that so often get missed when people just want cookie-cutter housing responses. For us it is working with Mary to understand their community's needs and to document that in the submission so people who are assessing the submission are made aware of why it is that perhaps this unit might be somewhat more expensive than your usual \$450,000, two-bedroom unit construction cost.

As Mary also alluded to, there are very real barriers like infrastructure, which may be mitigated either by increasing the load that exists – power kiosks and so on – or perhaps thinking differently about these environments going forward. I am sure the committee would be aware of passive house or other types of design solutions which might be available. So it is thinking a bit more broadly about housing – thinking about the people who are being housed, the services that need to be delivered to these people and also the longevity of these sites from a sustainability and resilience point of view. Inadvertently adding 11 houses to this site that Mary has already described does not necessarily yield – we need to bring in an extra kiosk and a substation, all of which need to come out of the bills that MVAC pays for energy, which means that there is less and less money for the provision of services ultimately to these people. Hopefully that gives a bit of a flavour of what we are trying to do to support MVAC and other of our members in some of these housing applications.

Martin CAMERON: Mary, it is Martin here. A question for you: say you have got the land, but we need to get some key infrastructure and so forth in there. I am interested in the housing situation at the moment. How is the day-to-day living of the Aboriginal community up and around Robinvale at the moment? Are there enough houses on the ground right now and services to wrap around your needs at the moment?

Mary KHOURI: Well, I will start from the end. We have services for their needs. We are very fortunate that the DFFH are very active with MVAC, understanding our needs and helping us with funding. Youth justice are also good with their funding. We have just been successful in securing three years of funding for

youth justice programs. So for a lot of the cohort that we want to put in there, we do have funding around supplying that, but on a housing list we would have at least 25 people – families – currently looking for housing that are squashed into housing or have family members living with them.

But the other unique people we are talking about is a gap. It started when Stefan and I went to a youth foyer meeting where they presented these youth foyers and how fabulous they would be, but then we are looking at our kids here, and especially children from out-of-home care who have come from parents who have been involved with drugs and alcohol, and they have got disabilities. Currently they are staying at home playing video games 24 hours a day, and there is not much else in Robinvale for them. So our proposal will be to build these 11 single-bed units to transition all of them maybe to a youth hub or just to teach them the day-to-day living skills. Currently we are funded for these children, especially the ones either through NDIS or through DFFH, so the program content is not the issue for that running of those programs. We might need an extra vehicle or something like that. It is the actual build itself. We are very excited about the program actually, because it will be transitioning these kids. I mean, how long does a carer look after a child in care? What is unique about these kids, too, is they are Indigenous but this is not their country, so they are kind of excluded a little bit from the community because it is not their mob, yet they are still sitting at home with the carers. We have got some of them up to 21 years old, and there is still no progress for them. So our model of care only can go so far. We are still working with them and we take them on events, but they need to learn independent living, which is what this program will do.

This is only one; we have got about five or six projects that we want to do, but that is where it comes back to the infrastructure. This is an old citrus orchard that we have, so getting council on board, getting stormwater drainage put in, getting more power, making sure that we are not in a flood zone or a fire zone – we do not have money to do this when these types of submissions come up, because from our point of view there is no planning we can do around when these submissions come up; they just come up. Accentuating it again, we need the money or some expedited way of getting more power, getting infrastructure we need, building roads on this 20-hectare piece of land here so we can service the community in the unique way in which they are, because there is no transport here for the kids to get on the bus so you go to Mildura, which is an hour away. There are no bus services, there are no train services. They rely heavily on the cooperative here, and so far things are working well, but we could do a lot more.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Questions from the committee.

Daniela DE MARTINO: What are the top three strategies that the Victorian government could undertake to assist you in Robinvale?

Mary KHOURI: I am not understanding what you mean by that.

Daniela DE MARTINO: As a state government, what do you think that we could be doing here? Would it be providing assistance with planning so you can master plan these things and then it is ready to go when grants come up? Is it that kind of practical solution? Are there other things?

Mary KHOURI: The master plan is on the top.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Yes.

Mary KHOURI: Homes Vic are so good with us. We have got VACCHO, and I think Stan understated a little bit of what they actually do. They do a heck of a lot more than that. They put us in contact with electrical engineers, they put us in contact with economists and people like that, because sometimes when we get a submission – I am only an ex-mum, I do not know what it is talking about. These guys have helped me so much to understand what I am doing, to help me in what I am doing. Homes Vic are there at the drop of a hat for any of the ACCOs to help us put our submissions in. We have got a submission in for the social housing round to build 14 homes here. It is all in timeframes, and I think that is one of our biggest issues, that you have got everything in timeframes, and I get why. Sometimes when you are living in a rural community, it is very difficult to meet those timeframes.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Indeed. Something that we have done as a state government has been – this has been for councils, but it is a regional planning hub, and we have just heard from the previous witnesses that it has been a fantastic initiative, because it has assisted rural councils where they do not even have necessarily all the expertise at their fingertips to get things ready. Would something akin to that for organisations such as you be helpful? That is what I am steering you towards.

Mary KHOURI: We get on with our local council very well, but we just sometimes need things expedited. I need to now prove in this submission that council are going to free this piece of land up and allow us to do it.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Yes.

Mary KHOURI: And I cannot wait for council to meet and council this and –

Stefano SCALZO: Sorry, Mary, just to interrupt, but I think there is no doubt that the costs associated with planning and being prepared for grant rounds is the key limiter to ACCOs being able to submit. As the committee would know, ACCOs are funded from a shandy, as we often call it, of resources across the Victorian government, federally as well. They are all service-related funds, there is nothing there for infrastructure, and of course VACCHO has co-authored with Infrastructure Victoria in the first ever deep dive into the state of Victoria's ACO infrastructure, which is a sad read, and I am sure the committee would know that, and the housing portfolio across our member organisation. As I said, VACCHO does not speak on behalf of all ACCOs, only our 34 members, but the parlous state of that portfolio of housing is commensurate with their infrastructure for service provision. What we find is that with any opportunity, as this parliamentary committee would know, you need to have the evidence base for any business case, and you need to have done the capital service and asset planning, all of which costs money, as Mary pointed out. We have stepped into that space somewhat here at VACCHO using our own resources and some from the Department of Health, but as the committee is alluding to, the provision for some funds to undertake that planning, whether it be those funds, whether the ACCOs self-fund and those funds get returned to the ACCOs in due course or some way of provisioning that initial work is important, because without that evidence base there is no case to make.

The CHAIR: Mary, could I just refer you back to the 25 families looking for a house that you referred to earlier. What are some of the issues that contribute to housing insecurity for your families in the Murray Valley?

Mary KHOURI: Well, just the fact that there are not enough houses in Robinvale, and they want to stay on country. That would be the biggest one.

The CHAIR: Yes. Supply.

Mary KHOURI: Some of the other issues are that they want to have that protection of being with MVAC. If they do not pay rent, we have got programs and schemes and other ways to help them, whereas in other organisations they would be hammered with eviction notices and VCAT and all of that. We work with the clients and it is more of a safe place, and especially with the economics as it is, that housing list is growing and growing. We manage it to rent houses; we have got our own houses. They are not social housing, they are not affordable housing, they are just housing, and our tenants pay within their means. Someone might have a four-bedroom house and they are only paying \$180 for it a week because the family can only afford that. So some are a bit less, some are a bit more. But we are still managing those homes, keeping them repaired, and we employ a builder to do that on that kind of rental income. It can be done, because it is in house and it is safe. Of course every other Aboriginal person wants to become part of that. Some of them are definitely homeless. We have got an Auntie who is very sick, so the daughter has moved over to look after her, but she has got four children. They do not think of the fact that they are coming out of a situation and it is going to be worse. They think, 'Oh, Auntie needs help.' That is the way that they think. They say, 'Well, the co-op will help us.' Yes, the co-op will help, but we need the resources to be able to deal with their self-determined way of lifestyle.

The CHAIR: Mary, how does overcrowding impact? With 25 families, do you have issues of chronic overcrowding?

Mary KHOURI: We have got issues of overcrowding, and this comes into that area where a lot of the overcrowding issues are from family members who have problems with drug and alcohol. Therefore that is where your family violence starts. You know, that Uncle or Auntie might be on the lounge in front of all the

kids or on the floor in one of the bedrooms or taken over the bedroom, and there are all those issues being observed other family members. It becomes very disruptive, the kids miss out on school. But that person would never be able to live independently in a house by themselves. That is why I am saying housing and homelessness go together, but homelessness does not always mean, 'I don't have a house.' It means, 'I can't manage a house, and I probably won't be able to manage a house.' So there is another issue at stake in the community.

Jordan CRUGNALE: The houses that your Aboriginal community is renting, at like the \$180 that you spoke about – do you own those houses? Or do you rent them?

Mary KHOURI: Yes. Some of them have caveats on them, but they are managed by MVAC.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Okay.

Mary KHOURI: I think we would pay \$155 for a two-bedroom and \$165 and \$185 for three and four. It is not very much. But like I said, we are keeping above board, we are managing it, we have got a housing officer and we have got a builder.

The CHAIR: Mary, DFFH have portable units, sort of standalone units, that can go into backyards for family members or people you have caring responsibilities for, to have these portable homes through DFFH. Does MVAC have any of those units with the current properties you have got? Because it could be really beneficial, as you were talking about aunts and uncles with alcohol and drugs, if they could live within the property but have a separate space. Are you accessing any of those DFFH portable units?

Mary KHOURI: I think we have got two of them, but they have been there for quite some time.

The CHAIR: Right.

Mary KHOURI: But I do not think the community really like that idea. They want them to be away from their own children. I mean, they would accept it, but I do not know whether it is something that they want. It has never been a popular idea that they say, 'Yes, we want a unit. Yes, we want this.' They just say, 'No. Can you find them housing?'

The CHAIR: Right. That is good to know.

Daniela DE MARTINO: And wanting the distance.

The CHAIR: Yes. Any other questions, committee?

Martin CAMERON: Stefano, just one more before we pack up. With what you are trying to achieve up there, have you been involved in another project like this somewhere around the state that is working, or interstate, around Australia? Is there another set-up with building the kiosk and the 11 units around there; is there somewhere that is working?

Stefano SCALZO: We have not identified the precedent as yet. I mean, this is a unique cohort of residents, and they are going to require a unique and bespoke accommodation solution and the infrastructure to support that solution. I think one of the things – and the committee would know this – that we are very much excited about is to work with Mary and her head of service provision Calvin, to work with this cohort of residents who are very young, and as Mary has pointed out, some of them have some significant challenges, to design something – dare I say, without conflating this – that has never been done before. That may solve a couple of those issues, not the least of which is infrastructure, if we thought about different ways of making these residences self-sustaining, for example, or resilient or what have you. So there are things we know we can do. Admittedly, we are a big peak body; it just so happens that we have an infrastructure advisory capability with a lot of experience in it, including me and some colleagues. But no, there is not something exactly like this. There are similar things, and Mary has alluded to the foyer model, and we will learn from those examples. But I think the aspiration here is to go beyond some of those types.

I think Mary has probably tiptoed around another issue that we found at VACCHO when we audited our members infrastructure, and I am sure the committee has come across this, and that is so much of the accommodation is just culturally unsafe. These are environments that have been designed and solutions that

have been thought through for mainstream Victoria and then get applied – we thought, I am sure with all the best intentions – in these kinds of community settings and they are just not culturally safe, and a lot of them are not bespoke enough to meet the unique needs of the cohorts. That is a roundabout way of saying we have learned from a lot of the examples, we do not think there is one exactly the same and hopefully we can do something unique here.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

Mary KHOURI: Because with these children, we have identified that we have got workforce money, we do have our own medical health system, they have got access to mental health, access to social and emotional wellbeing and we will find them because it is a rural community, which is a horticultural industry. I am sure we are going to try and look for a bit of part-time work for them – half a day, a couple of days a week or something like that. So we have got a plan of what we can do and what we have in our local community. I think to note this and why we have come up with this is that being a very small town and a small community, we know what is going on. We know every family, we have got that reach into the family which has allowed us to identify these kids that have fetal syndrome – is that what it is called?

The CHAIR: Fetal alcohol syndrome.

Mary KHOURI: So this is the generation – and it is 18 to 26-year-olds now that we are talking about.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Those wraparound services are so important. Mary and Stefano, is there anything else that you would like to leave with us in terms of issues? We heard when we were down in Bairnsdale about the difficulties of racism with local real estate agents at private rentals who are often very, very difficult to access because of that racism. Is there anything else in terms of what you would like us to understand? We are hearing supply, we are hearing, obviously self-determination is very important, being able to look after community, and not having the requirements of the Victorian housing requirements and evictions I think is really important in terms of a service to the community. But is there anything else that you would really like us to take away?

Mary KHOURI: Well, I think there are no houses to rent whatsoever or hotels to put people into in Robinvale, so we do not have the real estate problem here, but MVAC currently runs the program for APRAP. You are familiar with the APRAP program?

The CHAIR: I do not think we are.

Mary KHOURI: It is the Aboriginal private rental program.

The CHAIR: No, we have not come across the private rental program.

Mary KHOURI: Yes, it is an Aboriginal private rental program where we have two advocates that work from Swan Hill to Mildura and all the way around. An Aboriginal person can go to them, and they assist them with private rental. We have good relationships with the real estate agents; they know then if this person falls behind in their rent they have got a backup through the ATAR or even the APRAP, one or the other. We can spend up to \$7000 a year on a tenant. I think that maybe that should be extended a lot more and even tapped into in different areas, because at the moment it is only private rental, and if it was accessible for other housing it would stop a lot of issues as well. But the APRAP program runs well, and maybe other ACCOs are not familiar with it.

The CHAIR: That is terrific, and I will certainly speak to Karen Heap at BADAC in Ballarat to find out if we have a similar arrangement.

Mary KHOURI: They will have, but it is just funding it.

Stefano SCALZO: I think, if I may, the committee has already alluded to really straightforward assistance at the front end of projects to be able to plan them, and the other one would be for ACCOs – and TOs, for that matter – to have access to government land which may be deemed to be surplus to requirements. Just to have that right of refusal to access some of that government land would be of enormous benefit, because although ACCOs do own land, as MVAC does, sometimes its development is costly. If they did have access to other

land, that would be of enormous benefit. They are very straightforward, practical things that can be done I think relatively easily.

Mary KHOURI: Another thing that I think is important to point out is that housing was only established in Robinvale in 1965, so Aboriginal people here were only put in houses in 1965; prior to that they lived on the riverbank or on a mission, so that is not a long period of time. There are a lot of other issues that need to be ironed out with moving into houses and paying rents and maintaining yards and homes and things like that; it is not that long a period of time.

The CHAIR: A very important point. Thank you so much for being here with us today and providing us your insights about the great work that Murray Valley Aboriginal co-op is doing as well as your good work at front-end advisory, Stefano – a really important part of the piece that we are putting together, so thank you very much for your time.

If there is any additional information or we have given you some ideas that wish you had raised, please feel free to reach out to the secretariat and provide any further information.

Committee adjourned.