

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2007–08

Melbourne — 7 May 2007

Members

Mr G. Barber	Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Dalla-Riva	Mr R. Scott
Ms J. Graley	Mr B. Stensholt
Ms J. Munt	Dr W. Sykes
Mr M. Pakula	Mr K. Wells

Chair: Mr B. Stensholt
Deputy Chair: Mr K. Wells

Staff

Business Support Officer: Ms J. Nathan

Witnesses

Ms J. Allan, Minister for Women's Affairs;
Mr Y. Blacher, secretary;
Mr S. Gregory, chief financial officer; and
Ms F. Sharkie, director, Office of Women's Policy, Department for Victorian Communities.

The CHAIR — I thank the other witnesses for their attendance and welcome Fiona Sharkie, director of the Office of Women's Policy. I ask the minister to give a brief presentation on the women's affairs portfolio.

Ms ALLAN — I will be very brief, Chair, because I am sure we will have plenty of opportunities through questions to talk about some of the new budget initiatives. Can I say at the outset how delighted I am to hold the women's affairs portfolio. It is a great portfolio and provides a great opportunity for me to work with men and women across Victoria to support the whole of the Victorian government's agenda in this area.

Overheads shown.

Ms ALLAN — You can see from the first slide the range of key achievements we have made in this portfolio over the last seven years. They have really been driven by four key themes which are consistent and aligned with the priorities of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

They cover the areas of representation and equity; education, work and economic independence; justice and safety; and health, wellbeing and community strengthening. Whether it is, as you can see, putting single women on boards and committees, celebrating women through the Victorian women's honour roll or the particular work we have been doing in our safety strategy and health and wellbeing strategies, we have had a very strong focus in driving a whole-of-government agenda, working with those key portfolios that deliver services that impact on the lives of women in Victoria.

There has been a range of key achievements in the current financial year in the women's affairs portfolio, particularly against our four themes that I highlighted before, but more particularly the ongoing work this government is doing in the implementation of a family violence reform strategy, an area where we have really seen some very strong policy work being translated into practice on the ground. We have continued working with women to increase their numbers on boards and committees, with a particular focus on supporting CALD and indigenous women in this area — also, through the great activity that is going on around the Queen Victoria Women's Centre, which we are supporting as one of our themes around community strengthening, which I may get a chance to touch on during questions.

You can see on the last slide the government priorities for 07–08, coming largely out of the budget. The new budget initiatives are the final three points — the Safer Families Training program, financial literacy and the centenary of women's suffrage celebrations. The top two are some very important policy work. They are very much the work of the Office of Women's Policy. We do not have so many grant programs or funding programs, it is very much about driving whole-of-government policy, particularly around the broad policy, but especially in key areas like safety, justice and women's health.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister.

Ms GRALEY — I will begin where you finished, Minister, with the Centenary of Women's Suffrage celebrations — a very important event for everybody in Victoria. Can you please explain what is planned?

Ms ALLAN — Absolutely. It is a very important celebration, and I have a handout to demonstrate why. It has some facts and figures. The reason we have allocated funds to celebrate the Centenary of Women's Suffrage is because it is a very important milestone in women's equal participation in our democratic society. If you have a look at the information that is provided you will see that Victorian women got the right to vote in 1908. However, of course it should be noted that indigenous women did not get the right to vote until all indigenous people were granted to right to vote — I think that was in the referendum of 1967.

The CHAIR — Forty years ago.

Ms ALLAN — That is right, 40 years ago. If you have a look at the dates that we have provided there you will see that Victoria was the last state in Australia to grant women the right to vote. We did have a bit more of a battle here in Victoria to get the right to vote. It took 18 bills in the Victorian Parliament between 1889 and 1908 before there was success, and I dare not say that it might have been the upper house holding us back during that time, but we certainly did not see success in getting bills through the Parliament to get women the right to vote.

But it then took another 15 years — it took until 1923 — before women got the right to stand for election. So we got the right to vote in 1908, but we were not able to stand at elections until 1923 — and that is still in people's

lifetimes. Maybe we have parents and grandparents who were alive then, and that is why it is important to mark the centenary of granting women the right to vote with some celebrations and commemorations to remind people that it did take a bit of a battle, that there was a lot of work undertaken and to celebrate particularly the men and women who supported women getting the right to vote, but also use it an opportunity to educate people that there are still a number of areas that we have to work very hard on to ensure that women have equal participation in the community, in the workplace, and also address issues such as family violence.

So we have got a range of activities that are being planned — whether they are, as I said, public events or public lectures. We will do a lot of work with schools and use the opportunity to develop some school curriculum materials. Also there will be some community grants for local women's organisations. Then there will also be a particular focus on the induction of the 2008 women's honour roll.

There has also been a piece of public art that has already been commissioned, and with that to be unveiled in November 2008, because I believe it was November 2003 I think — no, November 23rd, 1908 when women were granted the right to vote. So the culmination of the year's events will be around November next year.

It is a very important milestone. If you think of someone who turns 100 next year was born the year women got the right to vote. So really it is not that long ago in terms of the advancement of equal — —

Dr SYKES — A hundred years!

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister.

Mr BARBER — Minister, some questions about the women's safety strategy where you have done some really good work in justice and you have done some really good work in services. My question is about the Department of Human Services, the health response, if you like. VicHealth says partner violence is the top risk factor in contributing to this in Victoria, bigger than obesity, bigger than anything.

Why has DHS not developed a statewide strategy and policy to ensure that all health providers can address this problem? I think there are some guidelines in place for GPs, but things like making sure health providers can recognise the signs, how to speak to women at that point, all the appropriate referrals and how to do those, which would all be part of this strategy if DHS had that statewide strategy and policy.

Ms ALLAN — Thanks Greg. In terms of your earlier comments around partner violence, I think I mentioned at the very outset a couple of hours ago that family violence is at a cost to the Victorian economy of around \$2 billion a year, so there not only, obviously, the great personal cost and trauma that it causes, but there is also a broader cost to the Victorian economy.

There is a lot of work that has been undertaken since the Women's Safety Strategy was first launched back in 2002 and it is, as I said, a whole-of-government strategy that very much relies on the partnerships that are developed with the major service delivery departments, like health, like education and like justice as well.

In the last couple of years, though, there has been significant work that was initially led out of Victoria Police, and there was a lot of work under Christine Nixon's leadership. They implemented a Victoria Police code of conduct and that has seen a remarkable, I guess, turn around in terms of having Victoria Police both identify and respond to family violence.

Mr BARBER — That is in justice, Minister, I mentioned that in my preamble.

Ms ALLAN — I am getting there. What I am wanting to demonstrate to you is that this is very much a whole-of-government approach, and in terms of DHS's role in terms of its partnership in the Women's Safety Strategy, there is a whole range of areas, and I do not know if you want me to go to through them all, but in terms of child protection —

Mr BARBER — Perhaps provide us with a list; that will do.

Ms ALLAN — They are all available. Actually, I can give you this. I did not mean to hand this out but I was just going to show you that we have a Women's Safety Strategy; this is the updated report from November 2005.

Mr BARBER — Yes, I have got a copy of it right here.

Ms ALLAN — Got it? Excellent!

Mr BARBER — I cannot see anything from DHS, but if there is anything, you could let me know.

Ms ALLAN — In terms of DHS, we can go through; and also if I can just also say the further work that we have got coming this year is the common-risk assessment framework, and that is a piece of work — a whole-of-government piece of work — that I am responsible for as minister for family violence, so there will be work that DHS will be required to undertake as part of that. But we have got things like a resource guide for child protection and family violence services project; we have got research on the safety needs of women in rural areas that DHS is responsible for; a lot of research in recovery from family violence that DHS is responsible for. Support for vulnerable families — there is a range of innovation projects that DHS is responsible for in an ongoing way. There is the women's health and wellbeing strategy which has this as a focus as well. So there is a range of different areas.

The work that DHS does in terms of working with men who are the perpetrators of family violence, particularly in the housing area — that is an important area; the work it does with children who are both victims of and who then in turn become themselves perpetrators of violence, sometimes in the schoolyard, so there is a lot of work going on that DHS is undertaking and I am happy to provide you with some additional information on what some of those projects are, because I want to assure you that it is very much a whole-of-government approach — it is justice. We have a family violence ministers meeting quarterly and there are ministers from DHS, justice, from education, there is myself as the lead minister — I think that covers it — and police, as part of justice. I recognise that is not the end; there is a lot more work to be done in this area; and the common-risk assessment framework is going to be a very important part of that.

Ms MUNT — Across a woman's life, a sense of actual financial independence is vital and key to a woman's security and sense of self — and I tell that to my daughters frequently. I noticed a line item in budget paper 3, page 337, that talks about funding for a financial literacy program, and I was wondering if you could explain what that will provide?

Ms ALLAN — Certainly, thanks Janice. You are absolutely right. All of us understanding what we need to have in terms of financing and our personal finances for our own financial wellbeing is very important, but this is particularly important for women when you consider that 50 per cent of women who have either retired or will retire in the next 10 years will have less than \$20 000 in their superannuation, and another 20 per cent will have less than \$5000 in their superannuation. So when you consider the issues around financial security and retirement, they are going to grow significantly as the population ages, as that proportion of people increases as part of our population.

Last year, late 2005 and 2006 there was a successful pilot where there were 20 workshops held across Victoria on women and money. They were called 'Women and money — workshops for a financially fit future'. We saw more than 500 women participate in these workshops, and they were aged over 40 and 55 plus. The feedback from those workshops was very positive and showed us that 77 per cent of the participants in those workshops had gone on to take action personally towards their own financial planning as a result of that. Anything that increases all of our understandings, but particularly for women given that they historically earn less over their lifetimes and are facing lower levels of superannuation, it is very important that we do all we can to increase the numbers of women who can receive financial literacy training. That is why in the budget last week \$1 million has been allocated over four years for further financial literacy training programs. It is about helping women understand what they need to be financially secure, to help them understand how they could potentially increase their earnings and plan for their retirement. We will also be having a real focus on key groups, whether they be women, indigenous women or women from rural and regional Victoria.

In addition to the workshops we are developing a web-based online training facility. For women who cannot get to the workshops or who are pretty technologically literate, they will be able to participate as part of a self-directed learning tool online. That is really designed to extend the reach of this initiative so we can get to more women in Victoria and really help women to develop what it takes for their own financial literacy. We look forward to working with all members of the committee on how we can promote these workshops to women in our own particular communities.

The CHAIR — They are very good in my electorate.

Mr PAKULA — I have always been interested in the Queen Vic centre because I was a Queen Vic baby!

Ms MUNT — Me too!

Mr DALLA-RIVA — There is a line there, isn't there?

Mr PAKULA — And delivered by a female obstetrician. At budget paper 3, page 243. I am interested how the Queen Victoria Women's Centre is performing against the occupancy target?

Ms ALLAN — Thanks, Martin. We look forward to you participating in our fundraising drive when it is kicked off later this year — and all other Queen Vic babies!

In terms of a bit of history — because I was talking before about the Centenary of Women's Suffrage — it is always important to place these sorts of centres in their historical context. We know the Queen Vic was the first women's hospital in Victoria that was operated by women, for women. It was established in 1897 and had a shilling fund as part of the fundraising drive to set it up. Since the decision was taken back in 1989 — obviously after you were born, Martin! — to relocate the Queen Victoria Hospital site to Monash, there was the opportunity, which was taken up, for the Queen Vic to be put back into a public space. That was a proposal that had bipartisan support at the time. We saw the Queen Victoria Women's Centre Act passed in 1994 for it to be established. It certainly put in place and clarified the independence of the centre, provided a clear and public statement regarding its purpose to really help build the capacity of women and women's organisations. It was opened in February 1997.

Since then we have been able to develop the centre further as a one-stop information hub that supports women and also women's organisations. I am very pleased to report to the committee that the Queen Vic centre now has a 100 per cent occupancy rate for the last year. These are tenants who have a complementary range of services for women, from legal advice to things like breast cancer support as well.

In terms of women who are using the centre — and I think this is really important, because I know the committee is interested in targets and outcomes and the like — we have seen participation by women both either in person or there is — online, of course — the centre has an info-hub website. We have seen so far more than 17 000 women access the centre, and that is up from 3000 people from the same period in 2006. That is quite dramatic, and I think it is a credit to the board of the Queen Victoria Women's Centre, who have worked very hard at getting it tenanted, getting the services connected and also promoting the range of services that the centre provides.

There has been a range of different programs that have been undertaken, which — considering time — I may not go through, but if I can just mention one. I mentioned at the start the fundraising drive; the centre is about to undertake another shilling fund as a fundraising drive. It is a heritage building and they are expensive to maintain and operate, so there is the need to raise funds for the centre, and that will be a feature of the shilling fund, and there will be a lot more publicity around that as that gets kicked off. We also have a new chair being appointed, in Catherine Brown, and further new members to come onto the board. So, as I said, there has been a great period of work that has been undertaken by the board and I think it is now going into a very positive future, considering particularly that it is fully tenanted.

Mr WELLS — How much rent does Emily's List pay, just out of curiosity? I notice they are one of the tenants.

Ms ALLAN — Yes, they are one of the tenants. I can take it on notice. There is a range of really good tenants in the centre.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I refer to BP 3 — my favourite — page 243, women's policy. I noticed, in reviewing last year's PAEC, your predecessor, the Honourable Mary Delahunty, provided the committee with a breakdown of the women's policy output costs for 06–07. I was just wondering if you could provide us with that information as a question on notice?

Ms ALLAN — Sure.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It would be useful because it relates to the question that I have in terms of the total output costs. If you cannot provide that maybe that can be forming part of that initial request. In, again, the

expected outcome for 06–07 in total output costs, 2.9, in 2007–08 there is a total output cost of 4.9. I understand that, and you mentioned in one of your answers, the women’s financial literacy is going to be \$1 million alone. I think you indicated that. I did not know if I picked up the Centenary of Women’s Suffrage celebration — what was that?

Ms ALLAN — That was 700 000 — do you want me to quickly run through?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes, it might be worthwhile. That was what was provided last year; I do not know if that would assist.

The CHAIR — Would you like it on — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes, something similar to what was provided last year.

Ms ALLAN — I can provide the figures now. We can provide it on notice as well, but just what makes up the 4.9; there is 4.95, 07–08: 1.2 is the cost of salaries and the like; operating costs that support a range of things like the Premier’s women’s summit and the honour roll is \$200 000; a couple of grants, one to WIRE — Women’s Information Referral Exchange — 200 000; the Queen Vic women’s centre, 300 000; family violence reform strategy, there is \$1 million next financial year towards that. Just on that point, that is for our coordination role; that is not the whole-of-government contribution; that obviously comes in other departments’ budgets. Women’s suffrage celebrations, 700 000; financial literacy, 250 000 — a quarter of a million dollars over the next four years; and some corporate costs, around 1.1 million. So that is how we get to the — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — The 300 000, just on the Queen Victoria Women’s Centre, what is that specifically aimed at?

Ms ALLAN — That is for all the good work they do; if you give me a few seconds.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — That is all I need.

Ms ALLAN — If I remember rightly — —

The CHAIR — Administration and maintenance, probably; is it?

Ms ALLAN — Yes, it is. It goes back to a commitment of \$1.9 million that was made in last year’s budget, so this is the 330 000 they receive per annum for four years and then I think in last year’s budget they had 770 000 for capital works. As I said before, it is an expensive building. The recurrent funding is for the building repairs and maintenance to go with the building.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Thank you.

Ms ALLAN — Also there is a whole bunch of work that needs to go on down there around bringing it up to contemporary standards, so there are some things like improved security, improving the fire and safety equipment, and the like. So a lot of that work has to go on as well.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Minister. Just as a final question, you can take it on notice, in terms of what resources in staffing and costs do your portfolio departments anticipate applying to serving PAEC hearings and inquiries in the coming year, based on experience over the past four years. I am sure you will share that with your colleague ministers to come up with a departmental answer in that regard.

Ms ALLAN — Certainly.

The CHAIR — That concludes budget estimates for the portfolios of education services, skills, employment and women’s affairs. I thank the minister, Yehudi and all the other departmental officers for their attendance today. It has been a very useful session. Where questions were taken on notice, the committee will follow up with you in writing at a later date and request that written responses to these matters be provided within 30 days, and they will be included in a report to Parliament in due course. Thank you, Minister.

Ms ALLAN — Thank you. I have the TAFE capital figure, if Richard wants it — 51.4 million this year, in total capital spend. As I said, there are new funds that you identified — of 3.2, from memory, I think it was. It was in the budget paper.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — What portfolio was this, again?

Ms ALLAN — Skills — sorry, training, TAFE. We can provide it to you on notice, but we have it if you like.

The CHAIR — There is a further question on notice regarding the sex industry.

Ms ALLAN — Okay.

Committee adjourned.