

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 February 2020

MEMBERS

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Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

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Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Mr Nicholas Pearce, Director, and

Ms Danielle Howe, Evaluations Manager, HoMie.

The CHAIR: I declare the meeting open for the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues. All mobiles should please be switched to silent. I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of this land which we are meeting on today, and paying my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge on this issue to the Committee or who are observing from the gallery. Welcome everybody. Just note that this hearing is being broadcast live, so around the world people will be learning from our pearls of wisdom here. We will have other members arriving at times during the day.

The Committee is hearing evidence today in relation to our Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the Constitution Act 1975, and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you give today is protected by law; however, any comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next few days. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the Committee's website.

If you would like to give some opening comments to us—and we appreciate the submission that you have provided to us—then we will open it up to questions from the Committee.

Mr PEARCE: Fantastic. Thanks so much for having us. We would also like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Wurundjeri tribe of the Kulin nation, and pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

My name is Nick, and this is my colleague Dani. We are both from an organisation called HoMie. It has existed for four years now, but it has been a five-year journey, if you will. I guess I preface this chat by saying that we do not come from a background of being experts in homelessness, but we have accumulated obviously now five years or so of intuition and feedback from our beneficiaries, and our approach, we like to think, is quite logical and hopefully is providing a real value-add to the sector.

Obviously everyone here has a really good base-level understanding of homelessness in Australia as well as Victoria. I guess one thing that is really important to note about us is that we are predominantly focused on youth homelessness, and the reason being—and I know it sounds a bit romantic et cetera—really that notion of trying to break the cycle. I guess it is such a well-represented cohort. It is one of the biggest groups of people experiencing homelessness in the country. I think the most recent census was 38, but it is beyond 40 per cent as such now, so it is increasing and it is a very material group of people.

So we decided to try and, I guess, allocate our resource and our efforts to this group because of that notion of really, as I said, trying to break the cycle. Essentially our program itself is really a prevention-based program, so working with at-risk young people, collaborating with local youth homelessness services and also some big retail partners, and I will explain the logic behind that as well, to provide employment opportunities that are meaningful and empathetic as well. So that is kind of us.

Obviously we are an organisation that essentially has a streetwear clothing store, so we are a social enterprise. We are based in Fitzroy. We sell clothing; we are wearing some of it right now. It is also made here in Melbourne. We use the profits to provide a couple of things, but essentially we are providing, I guess, for young people affected by homelessness or hardship—that is the language that we have adopted—the ability to obtain life skills; confidence is a really big thing and obviously the provision of income et cetera to provide that pathway out of homelessness for them.

So that is us as a general snapshot. As I said, we have been trading for four years now. It originated in, I guess, quite an interesting kind of way in the sense that we actually began by talking to people that were living rough

on the streets. That was kind of how this eventuated. Essentially, obviously, we educated ourselves on the reality that no-one was a homeless person but rather a person experiencing homelessness. I know that language is becoming adopted in people's vernacular now, which is fantastic as well. So really for us it was understanding that that situation and circumstances one can get out of if they are afforded the right level of support, care, opportunity et cetera.

That then translated across into, I guess, a physical call to action with our supporters. We had a big Facebook page which was quite popular et cetera, trying to destigmatise the issue of homelessness and provide an insight into these people's situations and circumstances and what we could actually do to help. Flash forward to a big event we did in Fed Square which involved clothing, our online community bringing along brand-new or good-quality clothing and people from the homeless community having a dignified shopping experience et cetera. That then translated across into us creating essentially this brand.

The idea really with HoMie is essentially it is targeted at young people, so our target group of around 18 to 35-year-olds, to try and make caring cool—the idea being that you can, I guess, wear your values on your chest and back. With HoMie we are not an abrasive, in-your-face anti-homelessness organisation as such. I guess for young people, especially university students and children, whether it is at primary school or even secondary school, being able to wear their values is really important and feel part of making the change. So that is kind of how we came to a place of creating a streetwear clothing label.

Beyond that, also, I guess how we came to find our value-add in terms of working with young people essentially was through this VIP shopping experience that we created a while ago, which essentially was inviting members of the homeless community to come into our store with a support service, so by engaging with them to come and shop for free, have this dignified experience and all the rest of it. As it evolved we found that we had a lot of young people coming to our store through these services, and the feedback was, 'I'm finding it hard to get a job. I've tried, I've got it in my resume; I just need some experience and I need that first chance'. Obviously, as we know, clothing does not solve the issue of homelessness, but we decided and we found that providing a meaningful employment opportunity can actually make a real difference. So that evolved over time into what is now our Pathway Alliance program, which is very unique. We have partnered with some of the biggest retailers in the country and also facilitated this program within our own store et cetera to provide a really unique approach and support opportunity for these young people.

I am going to hand over to my colleague Dani to talk a bit about our program, the HoMie Pathway Alliance, which essentially is a very unique—I believe it is the first of its kind in the country—program, given that we are collaborating internally and externally, working with youth homelessness service providers as well as brands like Cotton On, Champion, Bonds and Nike, even, now and all the rest of it and providing employment through their stores. So I will let Dani take it away.

Ms HOWE: To reiterate what Nick was saying, we are really filling this gap in what is essentially the support network for these young people in order to support them to gain full-time, meaningful employment. To reiterate, during the VIP days, we were working and speaking with young people, and they realised that they had faced specific barriers preventing them from entering the workforce, pursuing education and maintaining long-term employment. Of the young people that we work within our Pathway Alliance program, 65 per cent have a history of mental health, 50 per cent report that they are rarely positive or confident and 50 per cent report that they do not feel close with others or have a reliable support network. Because of this 78 per cent are in supported accommodation, 100 per cent are unemployed, 91 per cent were not able to sustain or complete education and 100 per cent are using Newstart allowance. So we began the Pathway Alliance to essentially be an empathetic employer and to really wrap ourselves around these young people to support them to overcome all of their unique barriers so they can have the skills and confidence to be more work ready and better prepared for their future—and it is working.

HoMie has graduated 19 young people. At 12 months since graduating from the program 92 per cent of these young people are meaningfully employed or in further education. If they were living in supported accommodation prior to being at HoMie, at 12 months 100 per cent of them have transitioned into private rentals. At two years since graduating the program 100 per cent remain meaningfully employed and 83 per cent are in full-time senior or management roles and are assets to their team. These are the same young people who were not given an opportunity prior to HoMie to even work in entry-level positions at these stores.

The Pathway Alliance is led by HoMie and comprises a network of community support services and employers. As Nick mentioned, we are working with Cotton On, Haynes Group, which is Champion and Bonds, and RPG, which is Nike, Toms and Timbuk2. So we create this wraparound support for these young people. Our whole ethos is that we treat underperformance with curiosity, we connect the support services with the employers and we use the tools that are provided to us by the support worker that works every day with this young person to teach the employer how to better support this young person through their program. We use specific approaches and tools, and we really, really get around these young people so at the end of the eight months they are fully supported, they have higher self-confidence and more expanded aspirations and can live long, healthy lives.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you. Well, it is inspirational.

Mr PEARCE: Thank you; we appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is really wonderful work that you are doing. I think you said you have had 19 graduates.

Mr PEARCE: Yes.

The CHAIR: I am guessing that you are expanding. So what sort of numbers are you looking at for the next couple of years?

Mr PEARCE: It is a great question. I think for us conscious expansion is a really important component of our work. This is a catch 22, because quality is what has ensured such wonderful results—ensuring that it is done on a kind of case-by-case basis and it is very heavily collaborative, resource intensive and everything else. We certainly have aspirations, and each year we are having relative exponential growth in regard to the size of our organisation, but the numbers of young people—it is not 100 or 1000 as such. So we are really hoping that through the network that we are facilitating and obviously by engaging with these other employers we can hopefully build it up. Our next intake for this year will be 12 young people. Hopefully the next cycle will be 15 or 20.

I guess that is the thing. The reason that it is working is that it is done with real diligence, quality and consideration and it is very comprehensive. Then to try and compromise on that is the challenge, right, because I guess we have realised that we cannot do everything for everyone, but we can do something for someone. We really believe in focusing on this cohort because, as I said, it is back to that notion of breaking the cycle, essentially preventing these people from experiencing chronic homelessness, so to at-risk young people engaged in these services—I guess providing that alternative pathway. Unfortunately we do not work with people who are living rough on the streets, providing relief aid et cetera. We made a conscious decision to obviously focus on this area because we believe in a prevention-based model.

We will see. I guess it is dependent on the amount of partners that we can actually facilitate and the growth of our own business and everything else—you know, we are a small business with growing pains and all the rest of it—as well as, obviously, ensuring quality across these other employers, the beauty being that working with these other employers helps to reduce that workplace stigma for their staff as well. So it is actually not just from a direct employment opportunity; it is also challenging that preconceived notion that the employers may have had previously. If they get on side, obviously they have a great appetite to take on these young people and realise they are fantastic workers and all they required was a bit more support and homes to facilitate that as well. So that is one learning that we have had.

I guess in terms of how we are trying to attack it, and as you say, because we can only right now—limited numbers as such, small in the grand scheme of things, but it is one less person who obviously will revert back into that cycle or, if they do, are far better equipped to be able to manage themselves out of that situation as well.

But the brand itself is great—the clothing that we have. I saw you on the Facebook page I think just before. The idea really is to try and, I guess, educate people about the issue and young people in particular, so there is kind of that awareness and education piece happening there. There is also the direct opportunity happening for these young people in terms of the employment. Then beyond that there is also, I guess, the reduction of the

workplace stigma for these other employers as well. So we are kind of trying to tackle it at multiple angles. Retail, to be honest—you know, we see the climate et cetera right now; people talk about it all the time, it is struggling and everything else—is the biggest employer of young people, and it has been for a long time. Most of us began our professional lives working in hospitality or retail, right? So it is a wonderful launching pad towards other things. We do not expect these people to be involved in retail forever, but it is a great conduit to many other things: developing interpersonal skills and just giving these guys responsibility and accountability and all the rest of it. We truly find—and once again it sounds a bit clichéd—it is confidence building. These people have such low confidence, come from difficult family situations, being told they are not good enough—really, as you say, minimal aspiration. Then we just challenge that and show them that there are a lot of possibilities for them.

Dr KIEU: First of all, I commend you on very good work, particularly in focusing on younger people, and I also congratulate you on the very high success rate. I understand that it is a very intensive process, one-to-one, because there is a very high success rate, even though the number is 19 and may be moving on. I would just like to find out what resources you have for your organisation and the personnel involved, and do you have any plans for further expanding it, because, as you said, it is a very unique model and it seems to be very successful.

Mr PEARCE: Thank you. Well, maybe I can talk from a high level and Dani can get into the minutiae of the program itself. But it relies on community partners, so local youth homelessness service organisations and their staff, to be part of the program as well. So each young person that we get involved in our program has a dedicated support worker, and they have to have a minimum of a check-in once a week as such. So that is a really important buy-in from these staff. Now, another challenge that we face when these young people have that engagement is that often when they are part of this program the support worker has many other young people that do not have an employment opportunity. Then, once again, a challenge there is that often we cannot have at all times as strong a connection as we would like. With everything that we do we find that there are these barriers and these challenges. Obviously with our own organisation—and Dani can talk to that in terms of who our head count is et cetera. Then also we have got the retail partners. So there is a store manager, there is a head of HR. So there are various parties and stakeholders involved in the program as you have identified, but maybe Dani can talk a bit about our team and what is required on our end.

Ms HOWE: I mean, for the pathway alliance specifically, that is an excellent question that we are tackling this year in terms of evaluation, of looking at how efficiently can we scale up without reducing quality of the program. Right now we are working on a six-to-one basis, so six young people to every one HoMie mentor or HoMie project officer. This project officer would then connect these six young people with their employer and with their HoMie support worker. We found that this is so far industry standard for working with young people affected by homelessness or hardship. The outcomes that we have had so far are actually pretty fantastic not only from the young people but from the support workers themselves. We have support workers who have 50 other young people, and so they only have enough time to get this young person a job, and that is just because of the nature of how the system works. But because we act as an empathetic employer, this support worker can actually effect so much more within their role well. So a lot of them, instead of having to just focus on getting this young person a job, can focus on, ‘Okay, well, what are the issues of mental health that we need to address so that you can get to work on time?’, because we have taught the employer, and we continue to facilitate that relationship with the employer and the support worker in how best to support this young person to overcome that barrier.

So we are working on, hopefully, to scale up and potentially maybe get a smaller ratio. We could have more young people to be project officers, but at this moment, again, it is a slow process and we want to make sure that every intake that we do is with quality and with a lot of thought. I would say that would probably be the—

Mr PEARCE: A major challenge for us is expansion and growth et cetera and compromising quality. It is a catch 22. It is like chicken and egg in terms of we can get ahead but then also we can push it too far, and that is why I want to see these other organisations that exist and other social enterprises providing employment in other areas et cetera. But the demand is there. In terms of our intake right now that we are currently facilitating, we have 12 set positions and we have over 50 applicants, so there is a huge appetite for this. Then beyond that, that is what we know through services that we have connected with. There are many other services out there

and many other young people as well. There is definitely a big appetite, but we can only manage so much and ensure quality by doing it with a set amount.

Ms LOVELL: So you are just operating from the one location now. Are you talking about scaling up at that one location?

Mr PEARCE: Yes, it is a good question. I think for us we operate a commercial entity and we pay commercial rent and all of those things, obviously. We have recently been lucky to acquire a warehouse for a period of time, which is going to enable us to diversify our portfolio from a revenue perspective but also hopefully an employment perspective. So for instance, because we are, I guess, a brand, we are creating almost a brand agency as a subset of HoMie to be able to provide that service to other businesses and then also through that hopefully be able to provide employment in that space also with the space that we have in this warehouse. We are looking to provide employment through fulfilment, because obviously we have online orders, picking and packing, potentially graphic design and potentially all these other things. So really it is not just thinking about the customer-facing element of employment, but also obviously there are various other elements that exist.

The beauty of having these big partners like Cotton On, who are the rice bowl of Geelong—they literally have the monopoly there—is taking those young people out there and what they get to see in terms of aspiration in the workplace. It is not just on the shop floor. So we would love to be able to do that again, but it is so expensive to run a commercial operation. One store—rent is not cheap. But we have to think, I guess, almost vertically and horizontally around how we can diversify income for us as an organisation but also employment opportunities. So we are really looking to explore the back end but also look at some other initiatives that we can drive that are manageable but also of interest to these young people. Not every young person wants to work in retail and not every young person wants to work in hospitality, so if we can provide more opportunities but the same level of quality and care in terms of delivery, that is kind of also a real focus for us.

Ms LOVELL: I guess my interest too is in regional Victoria. I am from Shepparton, and obviously we have the same problems in regional cities as you have in Melbourne. And you talked about Geelong and Cotton On. Have you looked at doing an evaluation of your program and seeing if there is any way of partnering with other organisations like Cotton On, which is based in Geelong, to have a model of it into some of the regional cities to help some of those young people?

Mr PEARCE: Certainly it is a thought and consideration. I think we have started to dip our toes in that. It is very timely that you say that. We actually have visited Shepparton before with our VIP day service as such, but obviously that is not the employment side of things, which is required. Essentially the VIP day service is really a means of getting on side and familiarising ourselves with who else is out there and what they are doing. And then, as you say, if we can implement that using the partners that we do have—obviously these brands are national. But once again we also require some hands-on resources from the HoMie perspective there as well—there are only so many of us. So once again it is dependent on how we can fund and support it, but we do have a big appetite for that and have not lost sight of the fact that it is a very real and potentially bigger issue not just within metropolitan areas but also, as you say, these rural communities. So it is certainly our hope that we can get out there and reach that, but we are not there just yet.

Mr BARTON: I apologise for being late.

Mr PEARCE: Not at all, Rod. That is fine.

Mr BARTON: And I have run across the city.

The CHAIR: Anything else?

Mr BARTON: No, no. I missed much of the presentation. I am sorry.

The CHAIR: I am conscious of time as well. Have you considered how government may facilitate you? I think Wendy's notion of looking at the HoMie model and taking it to other small businesses, similar businesses to yourself, to then provide those mentors and do that. Is there some way that we could facilitate you in that?

And I am just also interested a little bit in what it looks like for one of your young people in somewhere like Cotton On—what does that day look like for them?

Ms HOWE: That is a great question. I guess to start as well, as I kind of mentioned, we were kind of filling a gap within the support network of the young person. So in terms of support from the government or policy it would be to have more funding for a hub, a facilitator. Not only do we connect the support worker with the employer—and we are also an employer ourselves—but we actually have a space where we connect every Monday. So every Monday all the young people come into our office, and they will do their certificate III training together but as well we will run sessions for professional development, so building life skills, building resilience and really focusing on that community and that support network, which builds massive confidence—which is a huge barrier which a lot of young people face, as I kind of mentioned earlier in the presentation. So that is a key focus: to not only look at the organisations that are trying to facilitate and keep everyone in their lane, as I mentioned. We know the support workers can do so much more in their role if we take some of their work from them, and the same thing with that employer—we know the job is there, but they also need help facilitating this young person within the role.

Mr PEARCE: Our pipedream is almost like a quasi-university, but an alternative form of education hub for these young people who are slipping through the cracks. University is not for them or schooling has not been—practical experiences but also paid employment through that as well. This warehouse that we have—hypothetically if there was a design studio, a photo studio, also the learning spaces Dani said and our warehouse for film operation all facilitating and providing courses around those things. But also giving them the provision of income during that as well would obviously be kind of an aspiration, and obviously we would require potentially hubs. We would love to be able to think that that could happen nationally as well. That could ensure quality assurance, I guess, for these young people if it was something that was nationally recognised or was more formal in the sense of just like a HoMie graduate but it kind of had some sort of title alongside of it that it was kind of—

The CHAIR: Yes, but that still sounds very cool.

Mr PEARCE: It does, but yes, once again that question around ensuring that delivery is quality and to make sure that there is some sort of tangible asset or resource that these young people can access but also have the appropriate resources in-house as well. You can definitely talk to the journey of a young person working at it.

Ms HOWE: Yes. We actually have done a lot of work with mapping out this journey. Two years ago we undertook a social return on investment and we also every year evaluate all of our stakeholders. We have just completed a two-year evaluation analysis of really what the Pathway Alliance means. Actually the young person, when they start their journey within the Pathway Alliance program, starts in January even though the program actually begins in March. We actually go out to the support services and discuss with the support services what is involved and the commitment level that would be needed from them but then also what they can get out of it as well. It is a very positive experience. So this young person will apply through the HoMie Pathway Alliance through the support services that we are connected with. They come to an info session at our store. They hear all about it. They meet us. They interview for a position. It is a very positive experience; we try to make it the least intimidating possible. We also provide them with some of the questions prior so they can practise with a support worker. We also have that HoMie mentor project officer sitting beside them, so they have someone on their side almost.

When they are offered a position we have realised that they immediately experience increased support and an increased sense of direction, so those are two outcomes that come before the program begins. At the start of the program we have a transition in month. So this is every Monday: the young person begins the program before they are placed into their work placement and we focus on the usual barriers to employment—so time management, presentation. We take the young people out and give them their vouchers, which are already provided by most of the employers, to get their new clothing, their new outfit. We provide them with things that they might not have. Some young people do not have proper shoes and things like that. That is a really, really big community build-up and confidence building before sending them into the workforce.

Along the way we have a lot of focused areas that we have specific activities for, not only within the workplace but also during the professional development Mondays. They experience improved confidence, improved

financial position, improved aspiration, improved resilience, improved professional networks, improved skills and improved belonging and acceptance. On the day of graduation the big outcomes that they have are increased work readiness, improved engagement with education, improved financial position, increased capacity to maintain secure housing and improved wellbeing, so ultimately they are more work ready and better prepared for their future.

We really do start seeing these outcomes happen at the eight-month point. One of our young people last year was offered a senior role and actually offered to move stores within her Hanes location. She was considered an asset to the team and was making decisions, and that is not an uncommon outcome to happen.

Mr PEARCE: A day in the life can involve travelling 2 hours to get to work via public transport. Obviously Mykis and all of those sorts of things—I guess it is showing to them that that is all looked after and all the rest of it. We also pay for the guys to study, so it is a 4-hour commitment on a Monday. For that time they are sponsored by us to obtain their cert III, but also it is a commitment of a minimum of 12 hours from the retailer, at their own discretion. It may increase as well. Traditionally they will work two or three shifts a week on top of obviously the study that they do with us, and then the beauty of also having these partners is that because they have invested six months or so and the way that we have timed the program, it is Christmas time and they need staff. Unless these guys really screw it up—

The CHAIR: They have got a job.

Mr PEARCE: Yes, they have got a job—ongoing as well. So that is also the benefit. Obviously with us at HoMie we have a new cycle each year. The beauty is with these guys we can facilitate them going into these other workplaces, and we help the guys obviously transition across into other employment opportunities, who come from the HoMie store. They get to actually have, as I said, a job ongoing, which is great.

We have a tiered approach. Our store kind of operates working with the high-needs individuals, whether it is learning disabilities and all the rest of it, and then the beauty of these different-paced stores et cetera is that we can kind of facilitate for someone. Readiness is the big piece. Some people are ready to go, to be honest. Some of these young people, all they need is shifts and work and they are ready-made products, for lack of a better term.

The CHAIR: New pair of shoes and off they go.

Mr PEARCE: Exactly, off they go.

Ms LOVELL: For every position that you have to offer, how many people would you interview?

Ms HOWE: This year we are interviewing 16 young people for 12 positions, but we had over 35 applications. But that is after we already went to the support services and kind of gave them the run-down of what is required of this young person. We do require a lot of them. We require on-time attendance, and we are really checking in on them all the time, but we actually give back so much in return. So that would be the application rate, and it will grow with the program. We try not to interview too many people for the position. We usually can kind of gauge things with the information sessions. We do a lot of pre-intake information with the support services. We have our own starting point evaluations so we can gauge where this young person should be best placed within this tiered workplace system, so we kind of pretty much know who we want to interview after the application stage and try to make it as positive as possible.

Ms LOVELL: You talked about making it a positive experience. What support do you give to the kids who miss out?

Ms HOWE: Yes, absolutely. As I mentioned, we work January to the end of February with the support workers, and there is a lot of care going into selecting this person. For the people who are not successful, we contact the support worker first, who knows that young person best in that position. We ask them how best to go forward; if we want to call them, or if they want to let them know, how best to then facilitate the conversation. We rely on the support worker to kind of guide that conversation to make it as positive as possible.

Some of the support workers ask the young people to come in for an interview because that is their level of readiness and they want that to be a learning experience for that young person, and we can know that going in. So we have a lot of communication. A lot of resources go into that first intake.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. We could talk all day.

Mr PEARCE: Appreciate it. Thanks for your time.

The CHAIR: But we cannot because, yes, we are looking forward to speaking to others.

Mr PEARCE: Of course.

The CHAIR: Thank you for the work that you do. Thank you for making the time to meet with us.

Mr PEARCE: Pleasure. It is an honour to be here. Thank you.

The CHAIR: As I mentioned, a transcript will be sent to you.

Mr PEARCE: Brilliant.

The CHAIR: You can have a look and make sure that we did not verbal you or libel you.

Mr PEARCE: No, thanks for your time.

The CHAIR: We really appreciate the work you are doing.

Mr PEARCE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: All the very best, and I will see you at the store soon.

Mr PEARCE: Yes, cheers, guys. Come by the shop—everyone, please come by and visit. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks.

Witnesses withdrew.