

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Bairnsdale—Monday, 2 December 2019

#### MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

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#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

**WITNESSES**

Mr Jamie Williamson, Chief Executive Officer,

Mr Ryan Hedley, Manager, and

Mr Christofer Beal, Operations Manager, Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, everyone. I declare open the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing. I am assuming everyone's mobiles are on silent. It does not mean that you have to be silent, but there we go. 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 I pay 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. And welcome to the gallery. I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Just be aware that this is being recorded by Hansard. This is 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 is further subject to 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 shall be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next few days, and it will ultimately be made available on our website. While we have already had a conversation, I would invite you to make some opening comments. We may ask you some questions and some of them may be the same.

**Mr HEDLEY:** My name is Ryan Hedley. I work for Gippsland & Gippsland East Aboriginal Co-op, and I manage the department's Nungurra Youth Accommodation Services. What Nungurra is is a crisis accommodation facility for young people between the ages of 16 and 21 years old. Our role at the refuge is to invite young people in that are at risk of homelessness or that are deemed as homeless to provide a detailed intake and assessment for the young people that enter our service. We identify any areas that might need a referral for the young people, but our core business is housing.

A lot of the young people that come into our refuge do not have independent living skills, so a part of our role is to teach these young people their independent living skills, to prepare them for living solo in their own property, so supporting themselves. What we will do is we will teach these young people to cook, to clean, to be able to do their own washing and to support themselves. They might have found coming from the environment that they were living in prior to Nungurra that that might have been done for them. This is just to sustain their skills to be able to survive independently.

They have six weeks crisis accommodation with us, and if they are sticking to our program, what is provided, engaging with us, there are options to move into transitional housing. They are managed by Community Housing Limited in Bairnsdale. We do share these properties. There are six two-bedroom youth properties available. We do share them with other homelessness services around Bairnsdale. They do not come up too often. Once a young person is in them, the exit plan for them is limited, as well as for the clients that are leaving our refuge. So the issue we are having is where we are going to refer these young people once they finish their six weeks crisis accommodation with us.

I have got a few stats here. A lot of what I can go over here might answer a lot of the questions that you do have. I will just run through them before we touch base on what we would like to see. Over the last financial year—this is Nungurra alone; this is not any of the other homelessness support providers like Gippsland Lakes Community Health, Community Housing Limited and Quantum. Nungurra received, last financial year, 129 actual referrals for young people between 16 and 21. Out of that, 78 were assisted and we had 51 that were non-assists. Forty-six were male and 32 were female. The reasons, which you would probably all understand, the five main reasons that young people do present to Nungurra for homelessness, are due to family violence or family breakdown—that is our core reason—and other reasons are drug and alcohol issues; mental health issues

is a big one as well; not escaping from but coming from an overcrowded house; and the fifth one is abuse, whether it is neglect or sexual abuse. We see these come through a bit.

Some of the barriers that we find for the young people that do go through the service and engage with us—and engagement means being willing to engage themselves in education; that is part of our agreement that the young people have—the big barrier we have is that the youth allowance at the moment is just not enough money for these young people to move into their independent living.

If I take a step back, the young people that are 16 to 17 years old are unable to sign up for a lease legally. They are too young to go on a lease for a private rental. The young people that are 18-plus are able to, but the exit plan for them is just not affordable if they are engaging in school. The \$220 a week they get on youth allowance is just not affordable for a private rental. The private rental market in Bairnsdale—there is not much under \$250 a week just for a two-bedroom unit. Amongst that they need to be able to pay their utility bills, do their grocery shopping, a lot of them have phone contracts and things like that. The other barrier we have is youth are not successful in sustaining or being considered, really, for community or public housing. We have put nominations in for young people before, but we do find that families or single parents with children have the priority—and it is understandable if there are children involved that they do get priority. We find that our young people are missing out from these opportunities as well.

Some of the issues that we do find is a lot of the young people have drug and alcohol concerns that they come with. They need to be willing to engage in some sort of support services with AOD support. There are plenty out there. GEGAC itself has an AOD service that is provided, and we have also got mainstream as well. What we find is a lot of the young people are not willing at this time to deal with this issue. We cannot force these guys—it is only a recommendation that these guys take up this service—but there generally is a time that the young person will state, ‘Okay, I want this support right now’ because there has been a particular time in their journey that they have identified they need this support. But unfortunately the referral takes time. We can talk two weeks before the service can even be provided. In that time the young person has lapsed, and once the referral day comes they have lost interest in it again. It is the same as detox and rehab. It does take time to get into a detox, and we have our clients take on the detox journey, a week in detox.

**The CHAIR:** At your facility?

**Mr HEDLEY:** We have done one at our facility before, just for the comfort of this person, but it generally happens at the hospital, and there are other options further down, in Melbourne, as well. Between detox and rehab is a real concern for me because there seems to be a two-week minimum gap to come from detox to rehab, and the lapse will generally happen and they cannot enter the rehab if they are not clean—they have to do a test before they go in. So for the young people that do stay clean between the detox and the rehab admission, the support once these young people leave the rehab, they return back to the same environment they are in. There is no ongoing support and that cycle will continue. They fall back into old habits.

We get a lot of young people that are high functioning but have a disability, whether it is autism. A lot of these young people will have a DSP payment, which means if they are 18, they are able to afford a unit, but they are unable to survive. They might have their independent living skills, but they do not have life skills. These young people need to be put into properties and have ongoing support with a support worker that is able to visit them daily to make sure they are going okay. We do understand that the NDIS are able to put supports in, but unfortunately they cannot come on board unless the person has sustainable tenancy, and this is where there is a loop—

**The CHAIR:** And they cannot get sustainable tenancy unless they have support.

**Mr HEDLEY:** They have not got the support. These are just a few of the issues that we find ourselves coming across. So I do have that: access to NDIS without housing—stability is required. Currently the youth properties that we do have are two-bedroom youth properties, and they are managed by Community Housing Limited, which I mentioned before. It is a real shame to see that these two-bedroom units are sitting there, and we are yet to have a success by filling both bedrooms. There is always a conflict. These people have mental health issues or anxiety, and there are a lot of issues to deal with with homelessness or with these young people who are experiencing homelessness. There always seems to be a clash, and this ruins it for both. They both

seem to exit the property or one will move in and upset the other. The other will move out so they are back into the homeless cycle again, and the person that has moved in will generally not last long as well. So it is a shame to see these two-bedroom units with an empty bedroom sitting there when we do have homeless people to fill them.

**Mr BARTON:** Sorry, Ryan, can I just interrupt? How many properties are there?

**Mr HEDLEY:** We have got our hands on six, but that is shared with other homeless networks as well, so it sort of goes into a nomination panel.

**Mr BARTON:** So it is nowhere near enough.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes.

**Mr BEAL:** How many referrals did you have last year—129 with 78 assisted?

**Mr HEDLEY:** One hundred and twenty-nine, yes.

**Mr BEAL:** Six, and how long are the tenancies in the THMs?

**Mr HEDLEY:** They can have up to two years in them.

**Mr BEAL:** So they are tied up?

**Mr HEDLEY:** They are tied up. They are full, so we find ourselves with a backlog. We have got the young people at the refuge that are doing the right thing and they do deserve a youth property, but there are only six. They are full, and they do not come up very often. And when they do, we are in competition with other services to be able to obtain these properties.

One thing I will touch on is mobile phone plans with young people. We find this is a real issue with our young people. These young people that are on a youth allowance and are 18, they all want these brand-new iPhones, the Xs or whatever they are called now.

**The CHAIR:** Lilian's got one.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes, I have seen that today actually. So a lot of these young people, they will come into Nungurra, and we will support them with getting their Centrelink payments; the first thing they will do is go down and sign up. These are \$3000 contracts over two years now. If they lose or break the phone, they will still have to pay that out. The countless number of people that do present to Nungurra with financial debt is, I would say, nine out of 10, and for eight out of 10 it will be a phone contract that they are no longer on and they have had to pay out. There is no official screening of these young people from the service providers. This is like taking a loan.

**The CHAIR:** That is right.

**Mr BARTON:** Sorry, are these kids under 18 that we are talking about?

**Mr HEDLEY:** No, these would be the 18-year-olds.

**Mr BARTON:** Okay.

**Mr HEDLEY:** So it is no different to taking out a personal loan, and there is no screening to see where they have a fixed address, whether they have an income, what the income is like and whether they are able to afford it. It is a major issue to do with homelessness for these guys that are 18 or 19 and are able to sign up to a lease with a debt. It just does not happen.

That sort of brings me to what we need. We need controlled expenditure, especially for the young people between 16 and 21. I do not know how that looks, whether it is a State Trustees kind of scenario or a voucher system. I know that they have trialled this in Victoria before with the older generation

sort of has the life skills of how to budget. These young people do not know how to budget. They just see dollar signs come at them and money thrown at them, and it is not being spent where it needs to be spent—on what they are actually obtaining the payments for.

Early intervention I think we spoke about earlier—so more family support options. A lot of these family supports are identified at the schools. The counsellors will pick up that these supports are needed for certain young people, but a lot of the young people are not engaged at school, so I think a lot of them are being missed. Is there a hub or something that could be made—a bit like Headspace for the young people for adults to attend? Because a lot of adults are having issues with these young people in their home, and they do not know where to reach out, if that makes sense.

These are things that we have identified just through Nungurra. The other services that present today might have the same thing.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Ryan, do you have access to the Navigator program through the department of education?

**Mr HEDLEY:** No.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Because that provides support for kids who are not attending school. It is outreach workers and they are there to work with the young person and the family to help get them back into school and get them engaged in some sort of education or work.

**Mr HEDLEY:** But I think the key is to identify the families that need it. The families, I am not sure they know where to reach out. They do not want to contact child protection because they are frightened that they might be deemed as unfit parents—

**The CHAIR:** And they do not know about Navigator.

**Ms LOVELL:** But even when they do, child protection will not assist them, because the child actually has a home and a family, so often they are just coming up—

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes, and they are 16, 17 as well.

**Ms LOVELL:** That is right. So often parents who want assistance come up against brick walls because the police say it is not their problem, and child support just say, ‘Well, unless you sign over your rights as a parent, they are not our problem’.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Absolutely.

**Ms LOVELL:** There is no avenue for them to get assistance.

**Ms MAXWELL:** But that is where the schools—so there are various programs, and I know Navigator has reached out all over the state, to many areas in the state, so the parents do not have to know where to go because Navigator workers go to them and help to refer them through those pathways that they need. The school should flag that straightaway: ‘We’ve had a child not attending school. Someone needs to get onto them’.

**Mr HEDLEY:** I do not believe—just a personal thing—that that service is available, because that is a personal thing with one of my own stepchildren at the moment not attending school. It has not been picked up.

**Mrs STEVENSON:** Yes, I do not believe it has rolled out in Gippsland yet.

**Mr COE:** Can I interject here for a second? It should be listed. I want to ask a question; all I need is an answer. What is the backbone of a strong society?

**The CHAIR:** Allan, I want to get you on Hansard. Wait, because I want to get you on Hansard and I cannot get you from over there.

**Mr COE:** All right. Okay. Sorry about that.

**The CHAIR:** No, you are right. But I am interested in your question. Thanks, Ryan.

**Mr HEDLEY:** The other thing we need is more accountability from the job network agencies for these young people here. There are multiple agencies available for these young people, and due to their Centrelink requirements they must attend these job agency networks. To be honest, we have not seen a success story come out where one of these agencies has provided—

**The CHAIR:** Not one?

**Mr HEDLEY:** I have not seen one, no. We are fine to do it ourselves. And the young people have stated—we have asked them, ‘What did you do when you went to your appointment?’, and they say they ticked a box and state, ‘Have you got a résumé?’. They will say yes and they will say, ‘All right. Off you go’. This is the reality; this is what we are seeing. We find ourselves as youth workers spending a lot of time on developing these résumés, buying the young people their interview clothes, helping them apply for jobs, and this takes up a lot of our time when we are focusing on housing when we should be outsourcing or referring these kinds of issues to services outside.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** Can I just add to the JSA aspect as well as what Ryan just raised. There is a similar situation with JVEN providers as well, because they are industry specific.

**The CHAIR:** Just for the sake of some of us who do not have the full volume of acronyms that you have got, including Hansard—

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** I think it stands for Jobs Victoria Employment Network.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** It is operated through the department of precincts, in the shorter name. Because they are such industry-specific programs, a number of the participants or those who may be homeless may not want to work in that industry, so they are precluded automatically as well. So there is an added employment barrier as well. Sorry, Ryan.

**Mr HEDLEY:** All good. So the major concern that we are having or the major issue is the young people that go through our refuge, they are there six weeks. Once they do obtain a youth property, say someone that is eligible and there is one available, they are coming normally from perhaps family prior or other family or they might have been referred from other crisis accommodation where they have been in a busy environment. They step into our refuge, where we can have up to 10 other residents living with them. We are staffed 24/7 and are available to these young people throughout their whole journey. The ones that are successful in obtaining a youth property, they get placed into these youth properties where they are all alone. They are not staffed, they have not got friends and they are more or less stuck in this isolated area, which they have never experienced before. We have got to remember that these are kids. They have got their independent living skills, but they have not got life skills. These are 16- or 17-year-old kids that are placed in a property where they have got no-one to answer to. They are able to go out whatever time of night they like, return whenever they like, have visitors come over, and this is where their housing does fall apart, because they end up losing their tenancy due to maybe unruly behaviour that is attracted to these properties where the young people are. That is where we feel there is a real gap, after exiting the crisis accommodation—the transitional gap. Do we develop a model, or is there a model out there at the moment that we are missing in Gippsland, where these young people can show us that they can live independently somewhere a little bit longer term, where they could perhaps have 12 to 24 months in studio-type apartments that are staffed and where they have still got the support—people to pick them up when they hit rock-bottom and work them through their issues once again? It is just seen all too often.

I have got some stats here. Since mid-last year—so this current financial year—out of 58 crisis accommodation support periods we have put in, 14 were between the ages of 16 and 17, 35 were between 18 and 20 and nine were between 20 and 25 years old. Now, we cannot let that stat fool us. Of the thirty-five 18-to-20-year-olds, a good 50 per cent of them would have been through the service at the age of 16 or 17. This is just a financial year stat; it is not an overall stat. The key is to identify and intervene at this early age before they do reach the age of 20 or 21 years old and find themselves going through the service again.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard ‘churn’ a lot. Do you happen to have a figure on how many return clients you have?

**Mr HEDLEY:** I think I put that in there. Prior episodes of homelessness—previously diagnosed—no.

**The CHAIR:** If you do not, that is fine. It is just that we talked about it back at the venue.

**Ms LOVELL:** But, Ryan, you might be able to provide us, later, with some stats on the repeat visits.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Absolutely, yes. I think the key point we are making there is: yes, for the young people that are 21 years old, if we could intervene at the age of 16 and 17 we might stop this cycle happening, because we see the faces come through three and four times throughout the journey. There might be a 12-month, 18-month gap in between before they re-present. They have tried to go out and live with friends or another family and it has broken down again, and they will re-present. We give all these guys another chance and another go, like I said, three or four times. But from the age of 16 we watch these young people grow up into young adults. They come in and out of the service. It is like a spiral going upwards until they are actually too old to engage with our service, and they are still out there, homeless, sleeping on couches and bouncing around. That is where we feel we are missing the transitional supported accommodation, I would say. We do have access to six. We are the supports for these people. We will still go and visit them in their youth properties, but we cannot be there every day. There needs to be a supported, transitional, longer term housing option for the guys that are 16 and 17 years old and are unable to sign up for a lease to give them the support to actually make the episode work.

**The CHAIR:** Chris or Jamie, do you have anything else you would like to add to Ryan?

**Mr BEAL:** Yes, well, I think this is not a recent problem. I think it has been happening since I have been in Australia, which is 15 years. I have come from the UK, and we have introduced foyer models and tried this kind of stuff, and it has had impacts. One of the things for me is around the limited availability of public housing and that these days it is not an option for everybody. It really is a crisis-driven provision now. Initially, when it was set up, it was for everybody as an option, and really and truly for kids and young people coming through now it is not going to be a viable option for them. So we need to have some aspirational expectations as well. We also need to build the capacity of young people with their life skills, as Ryan is so rightly saying, but also education and employment outcomes which are going to give people more options. I think down here in the regions we have a slightly different scenario because of limited availability of work and, in some regards, education. It is the case that a lot of kids will move out of the area for work and employment, but that does leave a large cohort who will remain, and we really need to have something in place, looking at early intervention, to ensure that they have options going forward, because if it is not as bad as it was, it is going to get worse. The rental strain is huge in this area.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Massive.

**Mr BEAL:** We have long waiting lists for public housing, but we also have long waiting lists for transitional housing as well, which again shows the level. I think transitional housing can sometimes skew the homelessness or insecure housing figures. I think the Aboriginal community as well are under-represented in the data for housing and homelessness due to sharing and overcrowding of properties, which again has social impacts. Family violence, increased levels; alcohol and drug, increased levels—mental health outcomes are also affected by this. So in general the Aboriginal community is, I think, a bit of a hidden stat—and I think most definitely in the youth housing and homelessness for Aboriginal communities as well. I think that is something that we need to consider. The models that we have spoken about—the foyer is not the solution for everybody, but it is certainly an option for a good number of people.

We have members of the Aboriginal community but also the general community who are travelling up to 2 hours a day to go to school. The original purpose of Meerindo, which is the original youth refuge, was to provide a place for people to go to so that they could access schooling in town. We really and truly have not moved on much from there. Bairnsdale Secondary and Nagle College are the two major education establishments up to year 12 for pretty much the whole of East Gippsland. There is a small school in Lakes Entrance, but most people are travelling a significant distance, so when we are talking about early intervention,

we are talking about 13-, 14- and 15-year-old kids who need to have options other than what we do have currently now.

It is a good opportunity to be a bit brave and courageous, I think, with how we do stuff. I think we have kind of held the finger in the dam until now, but maybe it is a chance to rebuild that dam and have a look at different ways of doing things. That is my take.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** I think the youth homelessness aspect is just one part of the homelessness factor within East Gippsland and what we deal with each day at the Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Co-operative. We have a number of people who are homeless due to family violence, AOD issues or because they have just been released from prison after being incarcerated. And unfortunately, with the services which we offer through our Nungurra facility, we are unable to provide a service through there. So we are caught in this limbo where we are able to provide some temporary, ad hoc accommodation which, best-case scenario, is for about two or three weeks, and then unfortunately the person is back out looking again, searching for new accommodation. Chris did touch on this in regard to the rental pressures which we are experiencing. It is interesting, when you look at the East Gippsland property market, the sale value of properties have remained the same for the last 10, 15 years, but the rental income and the rental value has increased quite exponentially.

**The CHAIR:** How curious.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Even caravan parks are unaffordable now. There are a few down Lakes Entrance and Swan Reach way—caravan parks that actually have cabins, self-contained cabins. We used to use these a lot for an exit plan for a lot of young people, because it was the only option we had, but at the moment they are sitting around \$220 a week, just for a caravan in the caravan park. When holiday season comes, these young people have to move and go somewhere for six weeks until the holiday period ends and then they are able to move back in again, but that is not even an option anymore—the caravan parks. Not that it really is a home, but it is accommodation and their space.

**Ms LOVELL:** Even outside the tourist period? Is it still unaffordable then?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Absolutely, yes.

**Ms LOVELL:** Unbelievable.

**Mr HEDLEY:** What they charge, generally as a rule, is \$200 a week, and then they charge \$20 a week for their power to come into it. Yes, quite expensive.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is their whole cheque.

**Mr HEDLEY:** And that has really closed off our only real option that we did have when in crisis and we had to find somewhere. That door is closed now. It just cannot happen; there is no money.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** We have recently had a situation where a single mother with two kids found herself homeless, so we managed to get her into a caravan park which was in Swan Reach, approximately 20 minutes away. With the rate which she had to pay for rent for the accommodation and then travel into Bairnsdale to get the kids to school, because they were attending school in Bairnsdale, and then to try and find employment, she was left with effectively nothing. Coming back to what Chris said earlier around overcrowding within Aboriginal housing, she has ended up moving in with her mother with the two kids in a two-bedroom unit. So we have got an elderly lady in her mid-to-late 60s looking after her daughter and her two grandchildren.

**Mr BEAL:** Which is not sustainable.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** No, and that then creates its own additional pressures around mental health and wellbeing.

**Mr BARTON:** That ain't elderly!

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** Within our community, that is.

**The CHAIR:** They are from a youth service.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** From an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective, I will be happy to hit 70.

**The CHAIR:** Very good point, Jamie.

**Mr HEDLEY:** If I could, I think I might have a little bit of an answer to the question before that I have written here. I have actually got this written down as, 'What does homelessness look like?'. For the young people, and this is just young people, out of 58 crisis accommodation support periods—this is for a financial year—39 were new support periods, 18 returned for a second stay and one for a third stay.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, how many for a second? 18?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Eighteen.

**Mr BEAL:** Out of 58.

**The CHAIR:** So that is a 30 per cent return rate.

**Mr HEDLEY:** But we have got to remember that this is for a 12-month period, and this is where I need to get the stat for over a five-year period, and I can produce that.

**The CHAIR:** That would be really interesting, Ryan.

**Ms LOVELL:** Sorry, 58?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Out of 58 crisis accommodation support periods, 39 were new support periods for the year. That does mean they could have been the year before, but in that year 18 returned for their second stay and one for their third. If you are interested in—

**The CHAIR:** Yes, if you could give us that slightly longer period that would be great.

**Mr HEDLEY:** I can do that. I have got a great program where I can push a button and it generates all that. And that is where these stats were coming from, it is from SHIP—the Specialist Homelessness Information Platform.

**Ms LOVELL:** So you have obviously done a lot of research to give us the stats and stuff. Is there anything else you have got there that you want to share with us?

**Mr HEDLEY:** It is only two pages and there is not a lot. I can just write down what I thought might have been important to bring to you guys. The ages I think I touched on before—16 to 17 was 14; 35 and whatnot. The source of referrals, so where we are actually getting the referrals from, I thought it important; and as we were talking about the schools before, we only received three from schools. So 25 come from other agencies or other special homelessness agencies. We received—this is for a financial year—one from child protection, one from AOD services, one from the legal units, three from the schools, one from court, four from family and two from other. And there were 36 self-referrals in that as well. It sort of paints a bit of a picture that we are not getting many from the schools, the courts and things like that. It all seems to be self-referral or from specialist homelessness agencies, which generally means Community Housing Limited—we are the first point of contact if someone presents there—and Gippsland Lakes as well.

**The CHAIR:** I would guess that some of those self-referrals are those people who have been with you before?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes, exactly.

**Mr BEAL:** I think it also lends to the quality of service that people get at Nungurra. Word-of-mouth is a very quick way of communicating I think if the service is well-regarded by the young people—the services they are receiving and the outcomes that they do get, although the long-term and medium-term housing outcomes are not so positive, the support and the assistance they give getting kids back into school is obviously huge.

**The CHAIR:** I have lots of questions but I might let some other people ask some questions in the time we have got left.

**Ms VAGHELA:** You mentioned, Ryan, about the youths in the accommodation going to the job network but not many have got a job through that network. What are the reasons why they are not able to get a job?

**Ms VAGHELA:** Is it that they go for an interview, they go hand over the resume, and it is just a tick in the box? Or does anyone sit in the interview with that youth to find out how they perform during the interview? If this many youths are going to the interviews it becomes really discouraging for the remaining youth in the accommodation that—

**Mr HEDLEY:** Absolutely.

**Ms VAGHELA:** ‘Oh, this is just a tick in a box. We’re not going to get a job anyway’. Have you tried to find out why they are not getting the jobs?

**Mr HEDLEY:** It is a very hard one to answer, and that is why I say we do it ourselves—because we have had good results doing it ourselves. There are jobs out there for these young people. That is why we are asking for more accountability from the job network agencies—because we have not seen the result—but we can pull the result ourselves, if that makes sense. We will sit down and make a resume. We will go shopping and buy them clothes to present in. We will drive them to the interview. We will sit in the interview if they want and give them that support. So it is able to happen, but we are just not seeing it from the job network agencies.

**The CHAIR:** From the people who are paid to do it.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Having worked five years in a homelessness organisation I can absolutely relate to everything that you are saying, which is why I brought up Navigator. So my question is: how many support services within Bairnsdale and the local area that can contribute to supporting these young people and families do you have? Is there enough resourcing? Is there too little for you to be able to refer? I guess that is why when you say schools have only referred three, what is the likelihood that they would actually refer on to a different community service prior to—

**Mr HEDLEY:** What have we got? We have got Gippsland Lakes.

**Mr BEAL:** Yes, we have got GEGAC for the community, obviously. We have justice. There is Headspace, psychological services; there are unemployment agencies. There may be some siloing going on, which might be part of the problem, I think. I would say we are fairly well resourced, but it is maybe around the sort of coordination of those and that more holistic approach. So JSA may deal simply with the employment aspects, Gippsland Lakes Community Health may deal with the social welfare aspect, but the coordination of the cases may be something that could and should be improved to get those better outcomes. Often it is dealt with in isolation as opposed to being a whole-of-person issue. Obviously you can deal with the housing, but they could deal with the employment, the financial stuff. There is a mental health aspect being dealt with—AOD stuff as well.

**Ms MAXWELL:** So I guess, for example, would you or your staff be invited to roundtable case coordination meetings where you have got different stakeholders at the table organising a plan for that young person?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes, we do. Not necessarily for that young person, but it is just a collective of information from all services. There are two that I attend on a monthly basis. To be honest, we do sit around that table and we discuss our issues, we discuss the problems we see; we are all nodding our heads and saying, ‘Yes, we understand’, and that is where it stops.

**Ms MAXWELL:** And it does not go anywhere.

**Ms LOVELL:** Are we just looking at the tip of the iceberg here? You are not getting all the youth referrals; you are just getting the Indigenous youth referrals?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Not Indigenous, no. We are a bit of a unique part of GEGAC so we do have Indigenous and non-Indigenous, but I do believe we would not be getting them all.

**Ms LOVELL:** Right. I was just wondering if that is why only three had come through the schools—because others were being referred elsewhere and only Indigenous to you. So you service the entire community?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Absolutely, yes.

**Ms LOVELL:** What other options are there in youth crisis—?

**Mr BEAL:** For youth accommodation? This should be interesting. What are the other options?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Zilch. There is nothing.

**The CHAIR:** You are it.

**Mr HEDLEY:** It is us or nowhere—in this area. I mean, there is obviously down in the valley and towards Melbourne, but as we spoke on before, the young people are from this community, this area, and they are engaged in school, so we need to keep them in this area. But apart from us—no.

**Mr BEAL:** The unit in the valley is only, what, 12 bedrooms?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes.

**Mr BEAL:** It is not a huge space either.

**Mr HEDLEY:** There is residential care through DHHS, but I think they focus more on the younger side—you know, the 14s and 15s. Once they are sort of 16, that is where we can take over. But the residential care is obviously a much different structure to the way we work. We are voluntary placement, where they must reside there.

**Ms LOVELL:** So we often ask people: if you were given the opportunity to be minister for a day, what would your three priorities be for the Gippsland East community?

**Mr BEAL:** Now is your time to shine, mate.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Absolutely. Obviously the first one is houses—we need houses. I know it is a quick fix—everyone says, ‘Build more houses’. You guys would have heard this over and over: housing. For the younger people to break the cycle, as I explained before, we are missing this transitional facility big-time. We see potential in these young people. Their accommodation ends in six weeks. We will move them on to another family or something, and we getting tired of seeing them come back through the service again because they have not got the supports. We need transitional housing—lots of it—designated for young people and supported. They need support. This facility would have a meeting room or something set aside, because a lot of the young people that are engaged, like I state, in alcohol and other drug support services—psychologists, any sort of appointments—will feel a bit ashamed. They do not want to attend the clinics where these services are run because we are a small community. They know the people that work behind the counter. They might know other people that are receiving service. They do not want to be seen. Fortunately, at Nungurra we are able to bring the workers to Nungurra and sit in the comfort of their own home, and we find the engagement will happen at that time. These are the sorts of things that will need to be implemented into this model if it is able to be built. They need to be small, independent units so it is really comfortable for one, because we are seeing that the outside people are using these places as a hub to hang out, to smoke drugs, to party. The young person has not got it in them to say, ‘No, I don’t want this at my property because you’re going to ruin my tenancy’. They feel that they need to do this because they are under peer group pressure.

**Mr BEAL:** And there is an isolation aspect to it as well.

**Mr HEDLEY:** And the isolation, for sure.

**Mr BARTON:** I am going to ask two questions, since the Chair pinched my other question.

**Ms LOVELL:** We did not get a third thing in mine. It is all right.

**Mr BARTON:** What was your third thing?

**Ms LOVELL:** You did not get three. You gave me houses and you gave us transitional facilities.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** I think the third thing, which would be beneficial not just for the homelessness sector but for the whole social service sector, is the opportunity for greater collaboration and clarity across service delivery. So start to move away from the silos, and greater flexibility within the various funding agreements which we have all signed through either DHHS, justice or Premier and Cabinet.

**Ms LOVELL:** Can I just ask, if you were to get that transitional facility, what sort of bed numbers you would be looking at for the region?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Forty—where do you start? There are so many out there. Forty would fill.

**Mr BEAL:** Yes, tomorrow.

**Mr HEDLEY:** That is just off the top of my head. I would say 500.

**Ms LOVELL:** That is exactly the size of a youth foyer, so there you go. Your case is there.

**Mr BARTON:** I will ask two questions. We are hearing it loud and clear: some of these kids—well, a lot of them—cannot go back to their families. Do you know off the top of your head roughly how many that come through your centre that you are able to transition back to their families—five per cent, 10 per cent?

**Mr HEDLEY:** The rate of that is not—

**Mr BARTON:** It does not have to be gospel. It is just a guesstimate.

**Mr HEDLEY:** No. Just off the top of my head, we have had some good success stories with returning, and it does not necessarily mean the environment they come from—the family home. It is other family. Not a real good success rate at that—and it comes in waves, if that makes sense. Sometimes we might have six months where we might have returned seven or eight, and then we could go another six months where we return no-one.

**Mr BARTON:** So do you get involved with the family and say, ‘Hey, listen, he’s been a bugger’, or, ‘Listen, you lot need to pull your head in’?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes. We do at times. We do refer out to Headspace—within Australia, that work with family reunification. It is only youth workers that we have. We are not professionals. We have advocated for the young people in the families before, and I have done it myself but not as a professional. We have done our best to make it work, but we try and—

**Mr BARTON:** As a good local citizen.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes.

**Mr BARTON:** Just the other thing I would like to know about: it is clear that kids are falling over once they leave you.

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes.

**Mr BARTON:** What do you want? That does say ‘money’. What do you want? How do we do that? We note you say ‘support’, but what support do you want to give them?

**Mr BEAL:** Can I have a chat about this?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes, go for it.

**Mr BEAL:** So the system at the moment we have at Nungurra—which, as we have discussed, is a crisis—is six weeks, so it really is to deal with the presenting issues that are coming in. So, as you said, it could be around finance; it could be around getting their phone contract sorted out, getting that kind of stuff, or looking at health, looking at education, looking at employment, so that they have got a bit of space to breathe. Because obviously it can be overwhelming: you have come from probably not the best home environment, everything is going on, you are struggling at school, you have got all these money worries, all that stuff has happened—so they are coming in and dealing with that. So that is stage 1: give them a bit of a chance to get themselves right, get a bit of breathing space.

The second stage is that really important stage about what is going to be happening long-term. We have dealt with that short-term crisis stuff; now we need an opportunity to get in and have a talk about, ‘What are you going to be doing in two years time? Are you going to finish school? Are you going to go through year 12? What are you going to do after that? What do you want to do for work?’. And that stuff takes more time than that crisis intervention. There is a lot more stuff you need to get in place, so I think it is around allocating a key worker for that person who is going to be with them through that journey, that 12-month to two-year time period, so that there is some consistency. But what we always often hear is a lack of consistency. You have got workers coming in, then you have reached your six weeks, you have got to go to a new program and you get a new worker coming—

**Mr BARTON:** Is that a role that Nungurra can actually extend on?

**Mr BEAL:** Potentially. The way it is set up at the moment, it would not fit with that model, but as we have had a conversation, there is scope to be involved in the longer term life of that young person.

**Mr BARTON:** Just to get them to a point.

**The CHAIR:** I really like that idea. Just on that, is there workforce capacity for that in this region?

**Mr BEAL:** I would say there is. We have a workforce that has gone through significant education and training in the last 18 months. One of the areas where we do not struggle is getting support workers in. Often those people are the ones with that life experience, so in the perfect scenario we have been employing young people to work with those young people. They have been through that journey. They have had that experience. They understand what it is like, as opposed to some old fart like Ryan, who is a dad or whatever. Maybe we look at how we employ people to work with young people—I am only joking, Ryan; I know you do a great job—but maybe being a bit more creative and courageous, again, about how we do that kind of servicing.

**The CHAIR:** Chris, just finally because I know we have got our next thing, you mentioned being brave and courageous, and we have heard the minister-for-a-day response. Is there anything you would want to add? I get the sense that we can keep talking about more housing and we can keep talking about these things, but for this Inquiry to be more expansive and possibly more courageous, where could we go?

**Mr BARTON:** Because no-one knows better than you guys.

**Mr BEAL:** I would say it is about not-short-term interventions. It is about medium- and long-term interventions.

**The CHAIR:** It is about that person having your back for that period—

**Mr BEAL:** Too right, yes. It is almost like a mentor scenario.

**The CHAIR:** So from when you go in, and they have got your back for the next—

**Mr BEAL:** I think, as well, utilising champions is another fantastic way of doing that. It is about aspirations; it is about goal setting for people; it is about people coming out of cycles of poverty and all the stuff that happens with that.

**Mr BARTON:** Dare I say it, a life coach.

**Mr BEAL:** You know, we have generations who have gone through the public housing system. It is great that the public housing system is there, but it is not meeting the demand that there is for it.

**Ms LOVELL:** But there also needs to be an aspiration to move on, or else the system is just clogged up.

**Mr BEAL:** Exactly. That is right. And these young people, they have got, as is so often said, their whole lives ahead of them. We need to make sure that that whole life is something—

**The CHAIR:** That that is something they look forward to.

**Mr BEAL:** that is positive and that there are goals and positive outcomes to come out of that.

**Ms LOVELL:** Can I just ask one more, quickly. You mentioned controlled expenditure. Are you talking about the type of thing that the Commonwealth have been doing with the welfare cards?

**Mr HEDLEY:** Yes.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** Can I just add two very quick things?

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely. We forced you to the table, Jamie.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** Okay. Just in regard to what Wendy mentioned before in regard to aspirations, I think we need to change the conversation from being about aspirations to expectations. So are we as service providers meeting the expectations of those who we are providing the service to? I think we have just focused on aspirations a bit too much and we have lost the true definition of that. I think, with respect—

**Ms LOVELL:** It is just looking at it a different way, because what you are saying is the expectation from them for you to meet their aspiration is not happening.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** No.

**Ms LOVELL:** It is just a different way of saying it.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** And that is not being measured in regard to funding agreements on behalf of DHHS. They are interested in our client contacts.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, and I think we have talked about this. We have talked about your numbers versus your outcomes, and that has really risen to the top in this early part of the Inquiry. Thanks, Jamie; I think that is well said.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** And I am also a strong believer that prevention is better than cure, and I believe that the department of education has a role to play in regard to preventing some of this youth homelessness or being able to get some of these early interventions in place, or early referrals, because they are normally the first point of contact, whether it is through home room teachers—

**Mr BEAL:** Too right.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** or through our Koorie education coordinators or Koorie education support officers who are starting to pick up on these things when principals are starting to see the same kid cycle through his or her offices.

**Ms LOVELL:** It is earlier than that, Jamie; it is maternal and child health.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** I did not want to be too ambitious and go back too far, Wendy.

**Ms LOVELL:** By the time a child is five, 95 per cent of their brain is developed. By the time they are eight they have virtually developed their pattern in life.

**Mr WILLIAMSON:** That is where we need to develop those interventions and demonstrate those changes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for giving us your morning today. We have really appreciated it. It has been a great insight.

**Mr BEAL:** Marvellous; it has been great.

**Mr HEDLEY:** We appreciate you listening.

**Mr BEAL:** Yes, thanks for coming down.

**The CHAIR:** As I said, you will get a copy of the transcript, so if you have been misrepresented, just let us know.

**Witnesses withdrew.**