

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Thursday, 10 September 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

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Mr Rodney Barton

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Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Ms Rachel Gellatly, Executive General Manager, Operations, North, Haven; Home, Safe, Sidney Myer Haven;

Ms Donna Gillard, General Manager, Support Services, North, Haven; Home, Safe, HeyVan; and

Mr Terry Westaway, Chairperson, and

Mr Matthew Parkinson, Bendigo Winter Night Shelter.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome back. I would like to reopen the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. As those who were watching from home before lunch know, we are up in the Bendigo-Central Highlands region of Victoria today, and we are very pleased to be joined by Rachel Gellatly from Haven; Home, Safe, the Sidney Myer Haven; Donna Gillard from the HeyVan, which we will hear more about; and Terry Westaway and Matthew Parkinson from the Bendigo Winter Night Shelter.

Joining me today on the committee are Kaushaliya Vaghela, Rod Barton, Tania Maxwell and Wendy Lovell, and I am Fiona Patten, the Chair.

For our witnesses today, just to let you know that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is provided by our *Constitution Act* but also the standing orders of our Legislative Council. This means that any information that you provide during this hearing is protected by law, but if you were to repeat those comments outside, you may not receive the same protection. Any false evidence or misleading of the committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament.

We have a great team helping make today happen, and that includes our Hansard team. They will be transcribing every word, and you will be provided with a transcript of today's proceedings. I encourage you to have a look at that, make sure that we did not misrepresent you in anyway as that transcript will become part of our report. The information that you provide obviously will help us in our deliberations on our report, and the transcript will be available on the committee's website.

Again, thank you so much for making the time to join us today, we very much appreciate it. I will let you know that I think you are our very last witnesses for our public hearings as part of this really terrific inquiry into homelessness. So I welcome you to make some opening comments. I am getting the impression that Terry might be starting, and then we will open it up to the committee for further debate.

Mr WESTAWAY: Okay; thank you very much. I thought we would just say a little bit about who we are—12 local churches that have come together and worked collaboratively with the local community. We have had a very strong response from the local community. We ended up with great support from the churches and the community, with nearly 300 volunteers.

I have got just a few stats on the shelter. We would have supplied 142 beds and something in the form of 215 meals—so 4.73—in June; 210 beds, an average of 6.77 guests, in July and 315 meals; and 154 beds in August and about 230 meals. So we are averaging 5.13. The average stay over the whole of the shelter was five and a half. The most nights for a guest was 87, and the least nights for a guest was one; that is out of 92 nights. The average stay for our guests was 25.3 nights. Based on the 92 nights and having 13 volunteers for each night, that is nearly 1200 volunteer shifts. Seventeen per cent of our guests are now in rental accommodation, and 25 per cent of our guests are enjoying a period of accommodation at havens contributing to that funding to that. This did have an impact on our numbers towards the end of the shelter.

We take comfort in the benefit our guests got from the personal space, the ample showers, the heating, the good food, the great pastoral presence and shelter that they got from MADCOW, which has had a positive effect on our guests, and lives have been changed. Our guests have established a sense of community amongst themselves, as evidenced on our last night. We were very fortunate, in spite of the difficulties COVID-19 posed, to find accommodation that we could use. We actually ended up using the Koolamurt scout camp. They were not able to receive any other guests, but we could operate because of the legislation saying we are an essential service. Our guests really enjoyed that facility, because they had virtually a room to themselves, they had heating in their room, they had plenty of showers, they had access to a laundry, they were getting fed and

so on. So that really did work well for us, and we are in negotiations with the scout camp to use them again in 2021.

I will pass to you, Matt, for your part, and could you just flick back to me for one last little thing.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. Matthew.

Mr PARKINSON: G'day. Thanks for the time today. I speak as a board member of the winter night shelter. The MADCOW Terry referred to is a local charity that I am the CEO of here in Bendigo. We work with the homeless. I just want to give a quick perspective of really journeying on a day-to-day basis with those that are homeless. I think it is important to get that feeling, and how they are perceived by others plays a big part. When you deal with people in their darkest time, it takes a lot to gain trust; I think that is a really important part of it. To quote one man that we have worked with for quite a while when he first came to see us, it was, 'I couldn't believe you weren't looking straight past me, and you treated me like a real person'.

The value of pastoral care, a meal and some shelter and investing time over a long period of time is underestimated. It takes a lot of time to gain trust. We are not professionals in this space at all, but we do play a significant role in here. There is value of community that is formed when you deal with people and have a prolonged approach. It becomes part of the recovery when you work with the homeless and you hear their stories and you journey with them for that long period of time. Everyone here will know that there is no single reason why they are homeless. The only thing over many years of talking with people and hearing their stories that I can really say is a thread through most of them is generally missing or broken family relationships. So the community we form with them becomes really valuable in the relationship and in the journey with them.

The winter shelter provides that focused period of time where we can provide some rest and food, and we literally see the changes in people—physically, emotionally, mentally. And the relationships become really important, and I think that is what has worked this year, the relationships also with other organisations. It is the same as with our guests; it is a matter of trust over time. There is no single answer to this, but this year in particular we saw some really good partnerships grow, just casual partnerships really with MADCOW, the Winter Night Shelter and Haven; Home, Safe. We were able to offer almost an exit plan, so to speak, out of the shelter, which gave a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel for some of these guys. I think working across three organisations together has made a difference this year in particular, and I think that is where in the future we need to see more of the local and state governments playing a part in this role, seeing a bit more proactivity. I think in the last two years I have seen the Bendigo council improve dramatically in this area. I would love to see more around land release and those sorts of things, and I am sure Haven will speak a lot about that.

I just thought I would share one quick story with you. It is the first sentence out of an email from a mum, that sort of vindicates the sustained approach needed. This came from a mum who reached out to us and did not know if we were the right people. This was just a couple of months ago. She said:

I have just received one of the most positive messages from my son that I've had for a long long time ... it seems he has come across some very positive people in a supportive system. People who are willing to help those in real need, regardless of how tough it seems to be on both sides.

See homelessness is not something you can catch and it is not something that is particularly nice or pretty, but as a community we have got a role to see the person, and I think those that work closely with the homeless, our role is to help our community see the people and not the circumstances of the situation. I think that is the part that we play in this scenario. Thanks.

Mr WESTAWAY: If I could just reflect on this. We had a form that we asked our guests to fill in, and this is just one quote from one question, and the question was, 'What did you particularly enjoy about the program and your stay?'. The answer was:

The volunteers are excellent people who take their time to help you and to talk to you and genuinely care. Meeting others in the same position as you and talking your problems away. Bed, heaters, food, showers, company. An excellent program. It is needed everywhere and very much appreciated. Thank you all.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Terry. Thanks, Matthew. Rachel and Donna, who would like to speak first?

Ms GELLATLY: I will go first. Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, everybody. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Dja Dja Wurrung people, as it is their land that I speak to you from today and I pay my respects to them, their elders and leaders past, present and emerging.

I have been asked today to speak specifically about the Sidney Myer Haven program, which is an initiative of Haven; Home, Safe to address not only housing but also the support needs for people experiencing homelessness. Haven; Home, Safe is a housing and homelessness service. We have offices in Mildura—and I believe you heard from my colleague Trevor from Mildura a couple of weeks ago—also Preston, Geelong, Bendigo, Echuca and Kyabram. Haven; Home, Safe exists to provide affordable housing and to provide people with the supports they need to keep that housing. Often we do that in partnership with other services, but we also have a range of support services that we deliver directly. My colleague Donna will be speaking to another of those initiatives shortly.

We know that there is a significant shortfall of affordable housing available, and we strive to contribute to the supply of more affordable housing, but we also know that sometimes housing is just not enough. Sometimes poverty and disadvantage are entrenched and sometimes people's lives have been so filled with trauma that they require not only a safe, affordable place to live but also appropriate support and guidance to maintain that housing—support that is time appropriate and available when required, not just within funding time frames or business hours. And this is what the Sidney Myer Haven program in Bendigo aims to achieve, and the results so far show us that it has done just that.

Haven; Home, Safe's Sidney Myer Haven project in Bendigo is a unique combination of affordable rental housing and therapeutic support programs and skill development programs known as the Shared Futures program. The model is designed to break the cycle of long-term homelessness and generational disadvantage and accommodates residents within its 19 two-bedroom units within a gated complex. On site there is also a shared space known as the education centre, where activities and programs are carried out and where other community service providers come to visit with residents and run programs. Overall, the Sidney Myer Haven site provides a safe, secure and positive environment for residents to engage in their program and make the change from homelessness to self-sustainability. Tenure for the program is for two years, giving residents the opportunity to make real progress towards their goals. All of the residents who have successfully exited have done so into private rental or affordable housing, ensuring that their ongoing housing is sustainable.

We know that for people to be self-sustaining, to be successful tenants and to have a place to call home, they need to have good financial control, living skills and a healthy social network in the process. But for many people who have experienced homelessness, first they need to be healthy in mind, body and spirit, and have enough self-respect to consider themselves worthy of self-improvement before they can begin learning job skills. This is what the Sidney Myer Haven model and the Shared Futures program provide, given the individualised nature of the program, the proximity of residents to the education centre and consequently, and very importantly, the amount of time this allows staff to engage with residents.

Just as significant as the needs of Sidney Myer Haven's adult residents are the needs of their children. Studies show that a child's experiences and environment in the first few years of life are critical to their social, emotional and cognitive development. Experiencing neglect, instability, violence and poor health in the first few years of life can have significant scarring effects that persist throughout their life course and negatively influence a child's life opportunities and outcomes. There have been 45 children in total living at Sidney Myer Haven since 2015, with 16 of those born whilst their parents were residing at Sidney Myer Haven. All children, when age appropriate, attended day care, kinder or school and were up to date with immunisations as well as receiving allied health referrals where required, due to Sidney Myer Haven's relationships with local services. By supporting parents and their children in their first years of life, Sidney Myer Haven sets children on a more positive life path and breaks the cycle of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage.

The program has been the recipient of five industry awards, including the inaugural Australasian Housing Institute Anthony Hardy award for Excellence in Social Housing in Victoria, PowerHousing Australia's Excellence in Tenant Engagement and Social Inclusion award, Community Sector Banking's Housing Impact Award for innovation and the 2017 Australasian Housing Institute award for Excellence in Social Housing.

Sidney Myer Haven provides an environment where each resident works with staff to create an individualised program that is designed to meet their specific needs whilst utilising a trauma-informed practice framework to

ensure residents are engaged, empowered and feel emotionally and physically safe whilst on their journey. The social curriculum incorporates many elements that are crucial to success, such as personal growth and development programs, training and employability skills, home management and tenancy skills, financial management and self-advocacy, and leadership skills, to mention a few. All of these elements are tailored to specific needs and agreed upon with residents, who have regular reviews to health check their program and ensure they are engaged and motivated to continue to change their trajectory.

Nothing solves homelessness like housing, but housing on its own is sometimes not enough. We must also provide targeted, customised support, life skills and education programs at the exact moment of need and for a period that ensures that changes are made and the disadvantages faced by people are able to be effectively addressed. Sidney Myer Haven's social curriculum is designed to do exactly that and is achieving those aims, evidenced by the several awards received for its innovation and excellence, and the residents who have successfully graduated from the program. In 2018 Haven; Home, Safe engaged an external party to undertake an independent social return on investment evaluation of the outcomes achieved at Sidney Myer Haven. This evaluation found that for every \$1 invested in Sidney Myer Haven up to \$12 of social and economic value was created. This includes value to Sidney Myer Haven residents and their children, and significant value to the Victorian state government in avoided costs.

Residents experienced the majority of this value created, at 51 per cent, and this was experienced in the form of better mental health, expanded healthy social networks, increased personal safety for those escaping family violence, expanded confidence and capability to parent, and better emotional health. The Victorian government experienced 31 per cent, or just over \$7 million, of the total value. Forty-nine per cent of this value related to the avoided costs for government as a result of the outcomes realised for children and 51 per cent related to the avoided costs resulting from the outcomes realised for the adult participants. These figures are considered to be conservative as they do not account for the avoided costs over a lifetime. Children experienced 16 per cent of the total value. The majority of this is from improved social and emotional development, and again this is considered to be conservative.

I just have a very quick case study. K entered Sidney Myer Haven after experiencing significant domestic violence and being homeless. She moved in with her three-year-old son, who had significant developmental delay. She had limited parenting ability and her mental health was severely compromised. She had only completed year 8 at school and had never held a job. It took staff several months to stabilise K's mental health and get her engaged in a routine and parenting plan, and she persevered through many months of difficulty, participating in all the services offered at Sidney Myer Haven, and she is now studying part-time with a solid parenting plan in place. Her son is now speaking and has reached his developmental markers. K and her son will continue to work with specialised services to ensure that progress is maintained. Her mental health is stable, and she has developed insight and understanding of her illness, enabling her to function well in the community and as a responsible and responsive parent. She has now exited Sidney Myer Haven and has moved into private rental accommodation.

COVID has meant that we have had to rapidly adapt how the program is delivered to ensure residents remain engaged and focused on their long-term goals. We have done this by digitising the program and undertaking group and individual sessions via Zoom and incorporating engaging activities for health and wellbeing. We are continuing to work on this model in recognition that others, not just the residents onsite, could benefit from this wraparound customised program. The primary goal of the online Shared Futures program is to combat social isolation and increase capacity and capability in our clients by providing a platform where they can engage and collaborate in a digital environment. This will be done by providing a full suite of services online, incorporating health, wellness, education and life skills.

Sidney Myer Haven, incorporating the Shared Futures program, is enabling people to transform their lives and the lives of their children and families in the most profound ways. Individuals come to Sidney Myer Haven after experiencing family violence, homelessness, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse or financial insecurity, many have a young baby or child. Upon entry at Sidney Myer Haven they find an affordable and safe roof over their head, a network of support tailored to meet their individual needs and aspirations and a social program to equip them with the skills and mindsets needed to make a positive change in their lives. It is more than just safe and affordable housing; it is a trusting, learning and healing living environment which is non-judgemental, caring and safe and in which participants can realise long-term positive change for themselves and their families. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rachel. That sounds like a wonderful place. Donna?

Ms GILLARD: I am here, committee.

The CHAIR: I am just conscious of the time. We have got until 2.30 today to hold this panel.

Ms GILLARD: Okay, mine will not be too long. Thank you, Rachel, and thank you, Fiona, and thank you for the opportunity to talk with yourself and the committee today. I would like to acknowledge that I am meeting on Dja Dja Wurrung land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

The HeyVan is Haven; Home, Safe's response to assertive, street-based outreach for engaging with rough sleepers. The program is funded for two years and was launched in March 2019. The HeyVan is a Toyota HiAce bus. It is bright blue in colour with sign-writing boldly written on the side stating 'Mobile outreach service—HeyVan', with a speech bubble on the door stating 'Come and have a chat with us'. HeyVan is a mobile office fitted out with a fully functioning office space, including a television, where educational videos may be shown, and storage space for blankets, toiletries and non-perishables. The rear door opens up to a fully equipped coffee machine, a pie warmer and a small fridge. There is an awning off the side of the van that provides shelter from the weather. The space in and around the HeyVan allows for casual chats and getting to know rough sleepers and also the privacy of an office space within the van for more confidential conversations.

We know that there are people who are sleeping rough in various settings who require assistance with accommodation and health and wellbeing services. However, they will not enter an office-based nine-to-five service. These people are disengaged with the social service system, often as a result of repeated system failures, so we go to them in the HeyVan with operational hours of 9 am to 9 pm in a setting where they are comfortable and more likely to engage. HeyVan has a regular route, stopping at car parks, bush reserves, lakes, recreational parks and known squats. These interactions with rough sleepers allow the staff to build rapport whilst providing them with their primary needs and assistance with short-term accommodation, access to health services, material aid, food blankets, toiletries and clothes.

Many rough sleepers we come into contact with have a significant mental health illness and psychosocial behaviours as well as alcohol and drug addictions. Having this regular contact assists with building trust and the ability for us to further engage with chronic rough sleepers and assist them with better health outcomes.

We partner with Bendigo Community Health Services and their social enterprise Fork In The Road, which is a community hub that helps the disadvantaged, vulnerable, lonely and homeless in Bendigo. They have a free soup kitchen every Thursday afternoon where HeyVan will collect several meals and deliver to rough sleepers who are not yet ready to engage in that cafe setting.

You have heard Terry and Matt speak about the Bendigo Winter Night Shelter and MADCOW. We quite often have known clients who we refer back and forth between our services. So we work closely with the team, with referrals to the shelter and to provide specialist housing support for those who are ready to engage and who are willing to work toward gaining safe, affordable accommodation. We can also assist with case planning around life goals and plans to set them up for a healthy future. Feedback we hear about the Bendigo Winter Night Shelter is very positive, and it has given many rough sleepers a place for social connection.

I have some statistics. In the last financial year we supported a total of 174 individuals. We have two staff on the HeyVan. Sixty-one individuals are currently receiving services from a mental health service or have done so in the past. For 41 individuals it has been more than a year since their last permanent address, and for nine people it has been more than five years since they have had a permanent address. Seventy-four per cent are on JobSeeker or a disability support pension, whilst 7 per cent of people have no income at all. This is a massive disadvantage in the private rental sector, as most rentals are unaffordable, particularly for those on JobSeeker. The top five reasons for people seeking the assistance are housing crisis—so eviction—financial difficulties, housing affordability stress, mental health issues and lack of family and/or community support.

Just a couple of outcomes—we had a male client who was long-term homeless, had mental health issues, was not engaging and was living on the streets at times with no blankets or shelter. There was a coordinated response with ambulance and police to get assistance. He was admitted to the acute adult unit to receive much-needed mental health treatment and nutrition. Without this intervention we believe this man would have

died on the street. Another male client is successfully in a public housing unit. He is no longer drinking alcohol, and he has re-engaged with his adult children.

A quote from one of our clients early in the program: ‘For me, the hole was so deep and dark that when I put my hand up for help no-one would have seen it unless someone was actively looking’.

For us to provide a housing first solution we require an increase in affordable and social housing. Access to private rental is competitive, and for someone on JobSeeker with no references it is near impossible. The public housing waiting list is extensive, and it can be years before someone is offered a property. There is a sense of hopelessness for chronic rough sleepers due to the limited access to suitable housing. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Donna, and thank you all—literally lifesaving, as you have just told us. I will start the questions. We have got about 15 or 20 minutes. Terry, you were talking about some of the statistics at the beginning. I think I heard you say that about 70 per cent of your guests have now found accommodation?

Mr WESTAWAY: Yes, 17 per cent had found rental accommodation and 25 per cent had got onto some subsidised accommodation, so that is 42 per cent. In 2019, 33 per cent of people found some form of accommodation, that had been through the homeless shelter.

The CHAIR: That is terrific. With that 17 per cent that I am assuming found accommodation in the private sector, how did that happen, given how difficult it is?

Mr WESTAWAY: I think that quite often people would also be connecting with Haven, and Haven would be assisting them to get into accommodation. But some of the people that we knew that found accommodation could not really get into a normal rental. They would rent a room off somebody in a house. The thing that we notice with the shelter is that people know that they have got a certainty of having a bed, and as long as they are adhering to our protocols—because all our guests sign an agreement, all our volunteers sign an agreement, and they are pretty much the same—you just see the difference in the people over the time, which Matt has spoken to as well. They get proper sleep and they start to think in a straight line. They are getting nourishing food, and they are enjoying that. They are getting company, they have got access to a hot shower and access to a laundry, and so there is some certainty that comes in. You can see them starting to think better, and they are more receptive to some help.

The CHAIR: Yes. So once in that shelter they can get life on track to start looking at—

Mr WESTAWAY: Yes. As Matt said, it is the trust; you are building the trust. And it is the fact that you are consistently there. We enforce our protocols, we have to be strict, but we are not rigid, if you like; we are not forceful in the way that we do it. And they know that the people who are there, the volunteers, do not have to be there, so they realise that people care, and there is just that consistency, and that is what I think is so transformational.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. It was really wonderful and inspiring hearing from all of you. Wendy Lovell.

Ms LOVELL: Hi, everyone. It is fantastic to hear from you all. It is always good to see good stuff going on in Bendigo. We are very lucky to have Haven located there because it does create a real centre for homelessness and housing services in the region. Rachel, I am just really interested in how the Sidney Myer Haven is going, because obviously I was the housing minister that provided the funding for that and am very proud of that model. Someone mentioned this morning that you were using it for young people with education, almost like we use the foyer. I was just wondering about the demand in Bendigo and whether it would be more beneficial to have a dedicated youth foyer so that the Sidney Myer Haven could be used for other people to access those same wraparound-type services.

Ms GELLATLY: Yes. Look, there are certainly some similarities between a youth foyer and the model that operates at Sidney Myer Haven but it is not a youth foyer, and I think that is primarily around the age group that is at Sidney Myer Haven. There are some young people there but there is also a mixture of older people as well. It is a mix reflective of a normal community mix, I suppose, rather than youth focused. There is certainly a need for a youth foyer as well in Bendigo, most definitely. I do not have the stats on hand that are around youth homelessness in the area at the moment, but that would be something that would most definitely be utilised.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks. Certainly the CEO that was at TAFE a few years ago—I am not sure if he is still there, he came from Kangan—he was originally from Geelong, and he had not been very keen on the youth foyer model, and then went to Broadmeadows, where we have a youth foyer, and became keen on it and wanted one for Bendigo. Yes, so I think it has been in the mix for a little while there.

Housing in Bendigo—there has always been a huge waiting list, and we have got well over 2000 people on the waiting list. But I am particularly interested in the condition of some of the properties. For instance, the ones out on the hill at Eaglehawk and out around Long Gully—they are pretty old. I just wondered if any of you had any comment on the quality of the public housing stock and what needs to be done in the region besides providing new stock but also improvements to older stock.

Ms GELLATLY: I will just jump back to the youth foyer, Wendy. There is actually a group at the moment involved with Anglicare, Haven; Home, Safe and Kangan TAFE to look at pursuing a youth foyer in Bendigo, so it is on the cards at the moment.

In regard to the public housing stock, Virginia Hill is currently under redevelopment. I think DHHS would be able to speak more specifically, but it is in the early phase of the redevelopment of that project. I believe the community consultations have occurred with Virginia Hill—so that is the Eaglehawk development group—to discuss what can be done there to make it a more viable housing development. I am not sure about other public housing stock in Bendigo, which has been a particularly troublesome area that is currently being redeveloped.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Rachel. We are expecting to get some quite detailed information from DHHS any day now. Tania?

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Chair. And thank you to everyone for imparting your knowledge to us today. It has been very, very useful. Terry, I just wanted to quickly go back to some of the things you said about having that space where people can go, and I think that you are right: volunteers in our community play a far greater role than what a lot of us give credit for. I think that for people to know that they can go in and have a warm meal, as you say, and to know that they are volunteers, that they do not have to be there, is fantastic. I am wondering what capacity you would have to continue that. While it is certainly not the panacea, it is a way for people to approach without feeling confronted.

Mr WESTAWAY: Look, we would have to say that the goodwill within the community has been extremely strong. We have been fortunate to be able to operate with a surplus because of grants and donations. The churches basically provide the food, so they prepare the meals and bring them along. Because of COVID-19 the guests cannot help themselves, so everything has to be served and brought to them. The model works. I know that the shelters are operating elsewhere in Victoria as well, so the model does work. It just needs some organising, because it really does change and it is a lot of work to actually bring it together. We have very clear protocols, we have those agreements. We have to communicate, obviously, with all the different groups that are hosting the nights—those sorts of things.

We have to get the message out there so that people know all about it. We are asked to speak to a number of events as well, because people want to know, and they want to be informed. We have had pretty good coverage with the local paper, *Bendigo Advertiser*, getting in church bulletins and some of the church papers that they distribute. But we have been interviewed on television and one of the radio stations and those sorts of things, so we do work to get the message out there, and we have a very gifted board, I think. We are very lucky that we have got people with diverse skills as well as 300 volunteers; it is a pretty good effort.

Ms MAXWELL: Well, I certainly wish you all the best in continuing that, and to everybody else that has come along today, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Kaushaliya, then Rod.

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Terry, Matthew, Rachel and Donna, for your presentation. The social curriculum of Sidney Myer Haven looks really impressive. We visited the youth foyer in Shepparton. I wish we could also visit the residential complex of Sidney Myer Haven in Bendigo. Hopefully we are able to do that one day and see the great work that you guys do over there.

My question to whoever wants to answer out of the four of you is: what are the core challenges that you guys face in terms of homelessness and housing issues particularly in the Bendigo region? And in your view what should be the government's focus in addressing these issues?

Ms GILLARD: I am happy to take this. There is firstly the lack of affordable long-term housing, obviously, but there is also a lack of crisis accommodation. We only have a small handful of motels who will take our clients, unfortunately, particularly rough sleepers who have behavioural issues. The biggest thing that gets them banned from facilities is smoking in the rooms, unfortunately. We have chronic rough sleepers who suffer with alcoholism, so they require a certain amount of alcohol, and then that is perceived as a behavioural issue if the motel owner sees them with a bottle or a can. The second part of your question is: what do we need? Is that correct?

Ms VAGHELA: Yes. What should be the government's focus in addressing the homelessness issue?

Ms GILLARD: Yes, I think building more social and public housing. The three programs that you have heard from today would then work together. If we have a house to put someone in, then we can do the wraparound services and the supports. I am the General Manager of Support Services, and as well as the HeyVan, I oversee 12 other support programs with various different skills and ways that we support and engage with clients. So, yes, housing first.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Donna. Rod.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everybody. Terry, I visited you last year, and I was really impressed—really impressed. The committee members will have read your submission, but for others watching in, it is about how you engage with the homeless and the opportunity, which I really like, not just for accommodation for tonight to get out of the cold; it is about, 'Let's get them in there for a few days—five days. Let's get some food into them. Let's get them warmed up and give them some clean clothes'. Like you said previously, then they can be more receptive to say, 'Hey, have you got medication you're not taking? Perhaps we should go down and do that'. Can you just explain how that works and how you then transition into trying to get them a little bit more permanent accommodation?

Mr WESTAWAY: I think maybe Matt might be better equipped to answer that.

Mr PARKINSON: Thanks, Terry. Thanks, Rod. I think we play a role a bit like the uncle or the aunty in this scenario. Sometimes the housing is what they are after; Haven can provide that, so they are seen as the organisation that they have got to answer to, so to speak. What we can do is come in as a brother or an uncle or an aunty and perhaps give them the virtual clip on the ear and say, 'What're you doing?', and making sure we are feeding them, loving them. You know, you are treating them like a teenage child sometimes: you have got to love them and tell them off at the same time. It is that trust that you get through that, and so, 'Are you on your medication?' or 'How about the behaviour that happened down the street the other day?'. You know, those sorts of things. It happens through this continual process, and that way if they are going to present to Haven to say, 'I want some housing', 'Well, if you're going to do this, you're not going to get it'. Rather than hearing it from the authority, so to speak, it can be a little softer approach. Terry was saying before about how we are strict with the rules, but we are not rigid with them. We get to play that a little bit easier.

Those conversations that come out of a good night's sleep and a good meal are quite extraordinary, and like Donna touched on, we have a no alcohol, no drugs policy, but we know if they need to have a drink during the day, they need to have it. So as long as they are not full when they get there of an evening, it is all good, and they actually work okay with that. We have got a bit of a softer approach we can play in the game, and I think it does help.

Mr BARTON: Well, it is overwhelming. The message is: build more houses, and wraparound services.

Mr PARKINSON: Absolutely, because you want somewhere they can go into, and like Donna said, there are limited motels that will put up with them, and you cannot blame them either.

Mr BARTON: Challenges, yes.

Mr PARKINSON: We need more; we definitely need more. And there is a particularly good one in Chapel Street in Bendigo too that works well for a longer term from Haven.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Matt.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Wendy? Yes, yes—unmute yourself.

Ms LOVELL: Sorry, I was just going to say: I funded the Chapel Street one too. I did want to ask just another question of Terry if possible. Terry, with the night shelter, all of the experts in the homelessness field do not necessarily endorse the night shelters, and being a former housing minister, I have been into some fairly nasty situations, or I have seen some nasty situations in some of the shelters in Melbourne. I just wondered: have you had any problems at all in the night shelter and what level of cover do you actually have to have to cover yourself legally in case there are incidents?

Mr WESTAWAY: Well, in the two years that we have been operating, we have had to call the police once.

Ms LOVELL: That is good.

Mr WESTAWAY: If there is a difficulty with a guest, we will let them know that there is a difficulty, and ‘How can we deal with this?’. So that is a nicer, softer approach. If the behaviour continues, we may give them a warning letter, and if they cannot comply, then we might say, ‘Well, you can take a break. Disappear for a week and you can come back when you can behave yourself’—that type of approach.

We make sure we have got experienced people. We have a leader on every shift, so we have got somebody who actually knows all the drill. We train every volunteer. We have got training videos, which are on our website. So we are very clear about what we are doing and how we are doing it, is really what I am saying. So we would not have a disaster. We have certainly had a few awkward moments, because of the people that we are dealing with, and certainly some people are told, ‘Don’t come back. You’re not welcome’. You know, ‘You’re being disruptive’.

Ms LOVELL: How do you accommodate people? Is it just a hall with camp beds, or what is the accommodation?

Mr WESTAWAY: Last year we had 14 church venues, and we moved our camp-type beds around in a trailer. This year we have used the Koolamurt scout camp.

Ms LOVELL: That is good.

Mr WESTAWAY: They have eight cabins, so when you are only averaging five and a half, everybody can have a cabin. So they have got personal space, and they really enjoyed that—heated room, showers, everything. It is all laid on. So they know it was good, and I think our guests really enjoyed that, more so than being in the church venues.

Ms LOVELL: Absolutely. The scout camp sounds ideal because, as you said, they can have their own space or a family can have one cabin. If you have got a family in a hall with several other male guests or whatever, it is not really a great environment. If there are kids crying in the night and disrupting other people, they might be quite grumpy.

Mr WESTAWAY: I think Rod experienced that when he visited us. He would have heard the various noises the guests were making through their sleep. That did not make for restful nights for the light sleepers, that is for sure.

Ms LOVELL: Do you have to take out a certain level of coverage to cover yourself legally?

Mr WESTAWAY: Yes. We are incorporated as a not for profit and we have got public liability insurance and so on. They are the things we recognise you have to do. We had to pay rent to the Scouts, and we looked after them pretty well in terms of they got one and a half times the money that they asked for and we also covered the energy costs for while we were there. We also had to pay for the cleaners even though I think it was done at cost for us. We had to have that cleaning. So we picked up quite a bit of extra expense that we would not have had in 2019. But we have also got wonderful support. Bendigo Dry Cleaners were taking all our

bedding and sorting all that out at no charge. We had pizza places providing us with meals and things like that. One of our guests brought a washing machine and dryer so they could do their laundry.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Terry. That is terrific. We unfortunately are out of time. Thank you. It really has been inspiring; the compassion that you have all exhibited is humbling. We very much appreciate your time. We appreciate the information that you have provided for us. As I mentioned, you will receive a transcript, so please have a look at that. This will certainly help us in our deliberations and in the development of our report, and we will start that process very soon. So thank you all.

Thanks to everybody who has been following this online. We appreciate everybody's involvement in this most important issue for our society and for our communities. Thank you all. I hereby call the hearing closed.

Mr WESTAWAY: Thanks for the opportunity.

Ms GELLATLY: Thanks very much.

Committee adjourned.