

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Thursday, 13 August 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

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Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

WITNESSES

Mr Mark Jenkins, Manager, Community Futures, and

Ms Renée Ficarra, Community Development Officer, Mildura Rural City Council;

Mr Gary Simpson, Chief Executive Officer, Mallee Accommodation and Support Program (MASP); and

Mr Trevor Gibbs, General Manager, Mallee, Haven; Home, Safe.

The CHAIR: Welcome back, everyone. As you know, this is the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing into homelessness in Victoria. I really would like to welcome the panellists who will be part of the panel discussion with the committee today. We have Mark Jenkins and Renée Ficarra from Mildura Rural City Council, Gary Simpson from the Mallee Accommodation and Support Program, and Trevor Gibbs from the Mallee Haven; Home, Safe. Welcome. Thank you so much for joining us. Today the committee is comprised of me, Fiona Patten, as the Chair. We have Lee Tarlamis, Wendy Lovell, Kaushaliya Vaghela, Rod Barton, Tanya Maxwell and Enver Erdogan joining us today.

Before we start I just need to make some formal comments to you. All evidence taken at this hearing today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is provided by our *Constitution Act* but also the standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore any information you provide to us today is protected by law; however, if you were to repeat these comments outside this hearing, they may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. Now, all evidence today is being recorded. There are squillions of people behind these tiles listening, and you will receive a transcript of today's hearing. Ultimately the transcript will go up on the committee's website and obviously will form part of the final report of the committee.

We welcome you to make some opening remarks. I wonder if we might do it so all opening remarks are made and then we will open it up to that panel discussion. According to my list, Mark, would you like to kick things off?

Mr JENKINS: Yes, sure. I would just like to start by saying thanks for the opportunity to present today. Obviously we have come as a combined group with the four of us together. We have a bit of a written thing we would like to read out, so I will make a start.

We would like to acknowledge that the submission was completed prior to COVID-19, and we understand that the impact this pandemic is having on all and will continue to have on our homelessness situation will be considerable, but it was not captured in this submission. This submission is a collaborative submission that brought the experts together to inform this collective response. Given the time frame to prepare the submission, we were only able to consult with homelessness services in our community and some of these services working with people who are homeless in our community. We would like to highlight that we, regrettably, did not speak with people with lived experience of homelessness.

First to outline our partnership approach, which is on page 3 of our submission, we felt it was important to do a submission from the council that was reflective of the broader homelessness sector. Council led this submission, but obviously it was important we work with a range of partners. One of those was Hands Up Mallee, which is a collective impact initiative in our local region—and also the five main homelessness services, including Mallee Accommodation and Support Program, represented by Gary today; Haven; Home, Safe, represented by Trevor today; Mallee District Aboriginal Services; the Department of Health and Human Services; and Mallee Sexual Assault Unit and Mallee Domestic Violence Services. We also consulted other services in our local area, including Mildura Base Hospital, Sunraysia Community Health Services, Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council and Jobactive networks. We must also acknowledge the commitment and dedication our homelessness services provide to our community.

A bit about our local region: we are located in Victoria's north-west, as you would be aware, at the intersection of South Australia and New South Wales. Our council covers around 10 per cent of the state's area, 22 000 square kilometres. Our population of 53 000 people includes over 2000 Aboriginal people, making up 3 per cent to 4 per cent of the local population. The region is culturally diverse, with people from 74 different

countries living locally. Comparing our local government area, our level of social disadvantage, to all other LGAs in Victoria, in 2015 we were ranked fifth highest in regard to disadvantage across Victoria.

On the data we used to prepare this submission, services were willing to share their data, which shows strong partnerships locally. Just a small sample of data was presented in this submission that needs further analysis and exploration. According to Homelessness Australia's Everybody's Home data the Mallee has 500 homeless persons and a social housing unmet need of 3000 homes. We rank 15th in all electorates statewide and fourth in rural and regional electorates. It states that one in five people without a home are based in regional and rural electorates, which demonstrates that regional Victoria has a real homelessness issue. Rental data revealed Mildura has the lowest vacancy rate in Victoria, sitting at 0.7 per cent, with 3 per cent needed for a healthy rental market.

We have done some work around mapping systems as well, particularly in the early years sector, which Renée has in fact worked on with Hands Up Mallee. Hands Up Mallee, our local collective impact initiative, had previously done some work in mapping the system from 0 to eight years of age, which we included in this submission. The aim was to try and understand the system that was impacting on and influencing children. The systems map visualises the factors that help or hinder during those first important 1000 days as a web of interconnected factors and behaviours. We found the first 1000 days is characterised by a relationship of trust and engagement between the child's parents, their family and community, the services that are there to support them and the government funding and political system that supports our community to thrive or not. As we know, employment, housing, physical and emotional wellbeing, access to transport, income and parents' own life experiences are all factors in building family security.

The mapping demonstrated a lack of suitable housing increases vulnerability and reduces development opportunities for children. When there is a lack of affordable housing some families are forced to stay in high-risk environments. This places a greater risk on a healthy, welcome and safe start to life. This work highlights that instability of housing in the early years of life can impact greatly on the trajectory of a child's life. I will hand over to Renée now to discuss the next sections.

Ms FICARRA: Hello. Thank you, Mark, and thanks for having me today. I was lucky enough to be able to consult with all of the organisations that are listed in the submission that Mark spoke about before and was able to help bring together some of their stories. You will see that we listed on page 17 of the report a broad range of issues presenting with homelessness locally, and these were identified through our consultations. So all four issues we chose to elaborate further on that are identified as key underlying driving factors for homelessness were domestic violence; mental health and drug and alcohol; employment and unemployment; and CALD issues. We also presented local case studies from services to try to demonstrate the very deep and complex interconnected issues our community is facing and to also try and bring community's voice into this position. During consultation with our stakeholders we were able to identify and document some really key pieces of information, and this is some of the story that we heard. Housing has to come first. People need a safe and secure house and home as a basic need. We must address the key underlying drivers that result in homelessness, like I mentioned above, because homelessness is the end result.

A wraparound service provided to clients on a long-time basis is essential. People are presenting to our mental health unit at the hospital because they literally have no other option. This is putting a huge amount of pressure on our system. There is a lack of supported accommodation to transition people to with a mental health condition after they leave the hospital. They leave the hospital and they are often taken to a caravan park 30 minutes out of town where a lack of transport, isolation and the potential grouping of clients and tenants with various issues is not a therapeutic environment. Supported accommodation is the key to address the cause of homelessness. It is the same in a domestic violence space. There is a very limited supported emergency contact and a lack of exit options, putting extreme pressure on the system.

Complex issues were raised in regard to the CALD community. People are subletting their homes and exploiting families. Visa concerns place people at risk of homelessness because they are not able to access services, and racism was also observed within the regional market by community members. There is a stigma around homelessness within the community that impacts on services being able to book local accommodation. This has, however, been impacted on positively through COVID where there has been a mindset shift with accommodation providers about people who are homeless. Because of our downturn in tourism, they have not been able to kind of pick and choose who they accommodate. So this is a positive for now, but it is not a

long-term solution. In regard to job networks, when speaking about successful long-term outcomes for people who are homeless, the answer was: this is a long journey and it may take many years. True wraparound support is required for successful outcomes.

Going to the summary and recommendations part of our submission on page 29, the following information is taken directly from the submission, but I would really like to reiterate these key messages to you today as they are a summary of what we heard from our consultation. In regard to the housing shortage, services are exhausted and working at capacity in constant crisis mode. The comment that was echoed at the beginning of every conversation I had with services was, 'We need more housing'. There is a limited amount of housing options to move clients to locally, and the pressure on the services in this space is immense. We have limited social and community housing. We have limited public housing. We have limited transitional housing. Services have limited dwellings they can use. We are limited in caravan park options. We have very limited private rental, and we have limited affordable housing options. There is an urgent need for an increased housing supply to meet the demand. This will require an increased provision of housing for those with chronic housing issues. The provision of housing needs a long-term focus, and it needs commitment and investment to ensure all Victorians have safe and affordable housing and accommodation options. If we want our children to have the very best start in life, we need to prioritise families and make sure their basic needs, like housing, are being met.

In regard to our service sector collaboration, Mildura has an advantage because people know the services and homeless providers are familiar with the services that are being offered. The fact that three of our largest housing organisations—two of which are here today—were so willing to share their data shows the respect they have for each other and the willingness they have to work together. This submission has created a lot of energy in this space and has been a catalyst to bring services together.

Since the submission our Northern Mallee homelessness network has been established, which brings together our local providers to discuss current issues. Services need to adopt a more coordinated and collaborative approach to homelessness in our community. Services must adopt a commitment to addressing homelessness through mutually agreed targets and action plans. And finally in regard to a collective response, homelessness in Mildura is a solvable issue. The key is to adopt a collective response from our community, our service providers, our housing organisations, all levels of government, the private sector and essentially anyone else who has an interest in solving this issue. Whilst this submission is service sector focused, we know that the solution will never be achieved by services alone, and we must vocalise the ambition, resources and commitment of all.

Mark, I will pass back to you to speak about council's commitment.

Mr JENKINS: Thanks, Renée. I will probably hand over to Gary now, actually—Gary and Trevor—to speak more specifically about their on-the-ground services and their response to the current issue. So over to either Gary or Trevor.

Mr SIMPSON: Thanks, Mark. Thanks, Renée. My thanks to the chair and your parliamentary colleagues for the opportunity to meet with you today and speak about homelessness in the Mallee. I am the Chief Executive Officer of MASP, Mallee Accommodation and Support Program, and we deliver homelessness in addition to several other social and community-based programs which are quite closely linked. From our perspective as a service provider I think it is a given from what Renée and Mark have outlined that there is a shortage on actual bricks and mortar for people experiencing homelessness or rough sleepers and those at risk of going into homelessness. I think that is widely recognised. Where our organisation sees the real opportunities that we would like to put across to this committee is how service providers work with government and with clients—with homeless people and rough sleepers—moving into the future.

One of the things that we found from our experiences that is absolutely crucial is getting the client voice in all of this. Mark did touch on it, that through time constraints for our submission we did not go out and get people with lived experiences. But we are acutely aware of the government's client voice framework, and we would strongly commend that all future homelessness initiatives should as a compulsory component be required to call upon the client voice framework in developing any frameworks of support and even the modelling around providing for homelessness. We see the model around homelessness as needing to have significant change, particularly in how the model of service delivery or the whole service system as one gets to the core issue of addressing the causes or the barriers.

So the causes of homelessness—we believe that there needs to be more work done with clients in trying to address those. As Renée said, getting a roof over people's heads is an absolute priority. We need to do that first. But we also need to drill down throughout the service sector in how we address those barriers, recognising that everyone is an individual, everyone is going to have different needs, which again comes back to the client voice, finding out from them what their needs are rather than the service sector telling clients, 'This is what I think you need'. So there needs to be a bit of a shift in the mindset in how we go about consulting with clients to find out what they actually need.

There is not a lot of data in our sector. There is plenty of data on the availability of housing supply and demand—there is heaps on that—but there is very little on measuring and reporting against outcomes for people who are experiencing homelessness. Getting them into a house, that is great—no argument there. We tick that box, yes. But that is only part of the equation, because as the Victorian *Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan* mentions, one of the key functions of the service system is to give support to maintain stable accommodation. Through my organisation we do see people who are in an unfortunate cycle of going in and out of homelessness. They are homeless, they are housed, they are homeless, they are housed and so it goes. And the reason that those people are on that cycle is because their barriers to homelessness are not being addressed. So my organisation, we have taken it on ourselves. Notwithstanding the absence of current measurable outcomes, we are embarking on a project to design our own—sorry, I am talking about consistent, across-the-board, driven by the state 'Here are the outcomes in homelessness'. There is nothing like that that exists other than get a roof over their head. But it needs to go further, so we are embarking on a project where we are currently reviewing models of how we might go about assessing the outcomes.

Again, it comes back to the client voice. What we are looking at with our project is getting the feedback from the client—how they are actually feeling at the time. Again, it is not about us saying, 'You've got a roof over your head; that's great'. It needs to go deeper than that. And so by going deeper and following from the client voice how they are actually feeling about the services that we can bring in to help break their cycle of homelessness, that will assist us with some more evidence-based data moving forward. That is a big gap in our sector. In the homelessness sector evidence-based data on what we do that is best to break the cycle of homelessness is almost non-existent. That needs to become business as usual for the service sector.

On the matter of outcomes I think it is also important to recognise that not everyone is going to be fortunate enough to have their barriers addressed and they safely and successfully integrate into the community in private rental situations. Not everyone is going to have that opportunity, because again it is very individualised. Many of our clients in homelessness have many complex, underlying issues. It is really important that organisations delivering services are also trauma informed so they understand why the client is behaving or responding or not responding in the way that they are, through no fault of their own. It may go way back to trauma in the womb before birth. So the system needs to have a shift there again towards the earlier interventions and measuring the actual outcomes for the clients.

What I was trying to say there was a successful outcome for a homeless person may be that they are receiving support services for their life. Now, I am not proposing for a minute that an outcome for everyone has to be, 'You've got a house over your head; we've broken the cycle'. That is not being realistic. But it is quite realistic that some people may need services for life. And if that is the case and those services are helping those people to have a better life than if they were not in the service sector, I would class that as a success. That gets back to the client voice. I am pretty sure that clients will say that to us—because they do. Our clients, by having that constant contact, see that as success, because we are helping them to maintain a level of dignity and a lifestyle that they want. I guess in summary probably the main thing from Mallee Accommodation and Support Program is that intervention, identifying the causes, getting the client voice and being a part of any new service system that better addresses the support to maintain stable accommodation.

Mr GIBBS: Thanks, Gary. Trevor Gibbs. I am the General Manager of Haven; Home, Safe in the Mallee, which covers the four local government areas of the Mallee: Mildura, Swan Hill, Gannawarra and Buloke shires. With Gary, Renée and Mark and with what they have already delivered, the biggest issue in the Mallee is the lack of affordable housing. Just some stats from Haven: we are one of the key entry points for homelessness. Last financial year we had just over 2100 people come through our doors whom we have assisted. The key factors in that are around housing prices and housing affordability. Those are the key issues there. With the demographics across the entire Mallee and with the high rates of domestic violence, teenage pregnancies and males working for under \$400 per week—we are the highest in the state for all those—there

are a lot of issues that compound. But the biggest thing is we just have not got enough affordable housing on the ground. We have got some great programs that we run here at Haven.

We have got the private rental assistance brokerage program, which assists people to maintain their rental properties or actually get them into new rental properties. Last financial year we helped 430 people with that program. Out of that, 185 we got into new rental properties. So the programs do work that are coming out of government that we are getting funding for, but it is just the lack of stock on the ground. Sometimes in Swan Hill you look at the website there and there are only seven rental properties for a shire of 25000 people. So that is the key issue. Speaking of Swan Hill, we got funded to provide an assertive outreach rough sleeper program in Swan Hill for a two-year pilot project. Out of that, over the last 12 months, we have seen 90 individuals that were sleeping rough, whether it was on the riverbanks, in the local parks, in toilet blocks, in their vehicles, at the local racecourse in the stables and that sort of thing.

And we talk about wraparound services. We have got three workers working up in Swan Hill, and we do do a complete wraparound service there from the first time we are actually engaged with the client on the riverbank or wherever the situation is. We follow right through until we actually get them into long-term accommodation. And the history of homelessness and housing in Victoria is once we have got them into housing everything usually drops off. And as Gary said, that does not work. So we deliberately pushed in Swan Hill that once we have somebody housed that we actually continue working with them through the journey while they are in that house, and it is working. Out of the 90, we have housed 24 into long-term accommodation over a long period, and probably more importantly we have reunited 14 of those 90 back with family across Victoria or interstate. So they are the key things we must have, but we have got to have the supports on the ground to actually have that accommodation, and it has got to be affordable accommodation.

So, as Renée said, we cannot do it alone; government cannot do it alone. It has got to be a community thing as well. So we have got the programs there. But the old-type homeless services that are on the ground with case management and intake and that—there have been no dollars put into that for staffing since 2009. And you see the increase each year of homeless people, people in housing crisis, going up and up. So we are getting stretched. You know, the rubber band is nearly ready to ping in a lot of cases across Victoria with a lot of organisations—and particularly with COVID, the pandemic. Since 16 March it has increased, and it has not even hit us yet. We have noticed in Mildura here we have had about 600 people through the door since that time, from March to the end of July. And 70 per cent of those people are a totally new cohort to the individuals we usually see throughout the year. So that is the scary thing we are seeing at the moment, particularly in the Mallee. We just never know where it is going to end.

So the key issue coming out of this is we have got to get more affordable housing on the ground for a lot of different types of individuals, and the wraparound support services are the key. I see it the same as me employing a staff number. I do not employ somebody, drop them in the office at a desk and leave them there. They need training, they need supervision and they need ongoing support. So they are the same principles that we put in place when we are working with somebody that has been put into accommodation. Thank you.

Mr SIMPSON: If I could just add to Trevor's comments a couple of my own, with the wraparound services, there is an internationally known model called the foyer model, which is starting—sorry, it looks like I have hit a nerve with the Chair and her parliamentary colleagues there, as in a good nerve. So the foyer model, as we all know, is about education and training. However, at MASP up here in Mildura we are fortunate enough to be a recipient of some funding from the government through its Victorian Property Fund. So we have taken the foyer model, turned it on its head a little bit and added more into it—not just the training and education component, but with our model of where we are being funded. We will over the next few months commence building 13 units and an onsite service centre which will provide an extra 14 600 bed nights per year up here in the north-west.

We are going to have a model there of addressing the issues impacting those people who come into living in our facility, which we are calling Sunnyside Living because the avenue it is on is called Sunnyside Avenue. So Sunnyside Living will have a wraparound service model where we will work with many external service providers. MASP, for example, is not a specialist provider of alcohol and drug treatment services, and alcohol and drugs are a cause of homelessness. So in instances we will call on our local community health service to come in. And the idea of bringing them on site is again so that we better capture wraparound services for

clients, recognising that some clients have poor physical mobility, some will have intellectual disabilities and others will not have transportation available to them.

So in this Sunnyside Living community we will be able to bring services into that to wrap around them and to work on those barriers that have resulted in them coming into our tenancy. We will do what it takes to address those barriers, and that gets back to my point and Trevor's that the wraparound services are key.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you. Mark, did you want to finish off?

Mr JENKINS: Just to sum up, to say I appreciate the participation of our partners. That probably sums up our submission, I think.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you so much. I think you perfectly encapsulated that notion of those wraparound services and people working together. I know that there is lots of disadvantage to being in regional areas, but it seems somehow your ability to connect with each other and work together is something that we may not see as fulsomely in our metro organisations. You have raised a range of issues, and I think none of them comes as any surprise. I might just start quickly and, Mark, I would like to sort of start with you. Yes, we know you need more housing. We know that we need more housing. Certainly if we can prevent people from falling into homelessness—and I think you have articulated that very well. But how do we get more housing up in Mildura? It is not that you are limited for space; you are limited for housing. Are there partnerships that you can make? Is there interest from the private sector in doing this? Is there interest from the council in some form of inclusionary zoning occurring up there? What barriers are there to actually building more houses in the region?

Mr JENKINS: I suppose other than the obvious one, which is probably financial in terms of actually building housing, which I think is probably a key one in terms of funding to develop affordable housing, I suppose affordable housing comes in different contexts too, because part of our role at council is a planning role. So affordable housing in our context—because Mildura locally is seen as a low-cost purchase area for housing, which I think is deceiving as well. That does not correlate to people actually affording to buy a house. That is probably one potential—I am not sure what Trevor and Gary think—misconception. And also the rental market is very tight here, so again that is deceiving. Because the local market here caters for a lot of industries that have a transient sort of workforce, that influences as well.

In a planning sense there is no restriction in a council sense to development of land. Council, on all the land types, there is a supply available for housing, and social housing—whatever housing type you are talking about is not really restricted in any way—but it does need a bit of support to develop certain housing types that suit the need of this client base and also investment in that type of housing, because inherently most councils are not really that involved in providing public housing or affordable housing. But certainly, for example, in our recent CBD plan we developed for Mildura CBD there is a big tendency for people in Mildura to live in inner-city areas—we call Mildura 'inner city'—and even those housing types are being squeezed out because those housing types are often a lower cost to rent. So even those properties are getting squeezed out by people wanting to move closer to town and obviously purchase, demolish and build higher value properties. So there is a need to sort of specifically plan for investment into smaller affordable low-cost housing. I think it is a bit of a combined responsibility between federal, state and local government to make that work. At the end of the day, as I started with, it certainly is an issue of large funding required to make it happen.

The CHAIR: Yes. I think it was Gary who just mentioned the rental shortage. I mean, it seems like there is a commercial opportunity in the area to build housing. It is just, I guess, how do we guess attract that? And, as you say, certainly there are going to be people who need a much more supported accommodation and a supported structure, but for many people that Housing First model that enables you to then wrap those services around people means independent housing and even entering into the private market are options.

Mr SIMPSON: Yes. Entering into the private market can be a bit of a problem for people who are homeless. My homelessness support team at MASP do a wonderful job by being incredibly passionate people, and they do a magnificent job in helping our clients try to get into private rentals. My staff go out and they do inspections with homeless people. And we help them fill out forms and we advocate for them to landlords and agents. But there is a stigma that is attached to homeless people—unfairly—and I will come back to being trauma informed.

If you are trauma informed, you understand why people are less fortunate than most of us are lucky to be. I am not being critical here; this is a fact: over time the amount of real estate agents and the amount of even caravan parks where we used to be able to go and rent cabins—some cabins are really nice; I have stayed in cabins when I have gone away—we have found that over time businesses have withdrawn that support, and that is because of the stigma associated with homeless clients.

So at MASP it is not uncommon for us to experience a business saying, ‘Sorry, you’re MASP; no, I’m not going to deal with you’, without us even getting a foot in the door. So that is a challenge that my homelessness support workers have on a daily basis, and they do a magnificent job. I think the biggest buzz for me as a CEO is when some of my homelessness people tell me about a successful story, managing to house someone in private rental. I am on a high for a week after that. But the stigma is unfortunate—

Mr GIBBS: And Gary, one thing out of the pandemic we have noticed, with COVID—I do not know whether it is around education and community awareness—with the accommodation providers, whether they are caravan parks, motels or real estate agents, they are more accepting of actually working with us over the last six months than they ever have been before. Is it dollar driven, the opportunity to keep going, or is it the awareness that actually once people are housed and given the opportunity they are running with it? And I think we are going to see a bit of a change in that direction. It will not be great, it will not be huge, but it is there and it is happening. So it is around that community stuff that we need to make people really aware. Homeless—it could happen to any of us tomorrow.

The CHAIR: I think you are right, Trevor, and I think there is a greater understanding and a greater empathy for people. And people have seen that situations can change for everyone. Lee, do you have some questions?

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Renée, Trevor, Gary and Mark for your submission and your presentation today. You mentioned that the submission you made was prepared pre COVID, and I was just wondering, are there any emerging factors or matters or additional points that you wanted to add your submission today that have become apparent? And Trevor touched on one just now in terms of the private rental market being more willing to work, but are there any others [Zoom dropout]

Mr GIBBS: I think the other one is actually the people requiring services over the last five or six months—it is increasing, as I said before. I think there has been a 70 per cent change in the cohort of families or individuals coming through requiring support around financial hardship or housing affordability and crisis, so I think that is going to see the demand drive even higher for accommodation.

Mr SIMPSON: And, through the Chair, if I can respond to Lee as well, COVID-19 is also bringing about a change in the way that homelessness providers go about doing business. So at MASP we are looking at different ways of working with client people moving into the future, particularly from the technology angle. So we are looking at—telehealth is probably not the right word but using more of telehealth and online systems like we are doing now with homeless people. But that in itself throws up another issue about their accessibility to have their own mobile devices to do that or whether the model is to bring them into other locations that are safe to do so where they can participate. But, yes, technology is going to be a big change as a result of COVID-19—for the positive, I would say. That is going to give a lot of more flexibility to organisations but more importantly to clients as well.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thanks. I might leave my question at that so there is time for others.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will go to Rod.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. That was a great presentation, and you have got no arguments with me. I mean, yes to everything you have said. You are absolutely right. What we are really looking for now is: how do we do it? And one of the things that I would like to think about, and I am sure the committee would like to think about, is: how do we fund bricks and mortar? How do we have another look at doing it? We have heard from the Finnish model. I do not know if you are familiar with how they were doing things over there—a combination. We also can work with the private sector and all those areas. Have you got any thoughts about how we build these bricks and mortar? How are we going to fund it—anybody?

Mr SIMPSON: Through the Chair, Rod, this is Gary. The discussions about more government funding are reasonable discussions to have, but you have probably worked out today I have come a lot from the service provider angle and what service providers can actually bring to the party for homelessness. I am going to do that again. I think that the service system needs to be set up in a way where organisations put skin into the game as well. So I am not advocating that government should just throw 100 per cent of funding into everything. Over a period of time organisations like my own—we have accumulated surpluses, and we need that to survive into the future. We need that to do projects.

And probably an example of where I am coming from, Rod, is with the Sunnyside Living project that I mentioned before, the Victorian government has funded us \$2 025 000; MASP has put in \$600 000 cash of its own money. What we do at MASP is every year I have a budget that my board allocates: \$300 000 to go and buy property. We looked at that and we thought, ‘We need to be smarter about how we do our bricks and mortar. Are we being smart in just going out and 300 grand will get you a two- or three-bedroom property in Mildura, no problems at all? So I went to the board, and as a collective we discussed how we can get more bang for our buck, and what we came up with was holding off on a couple of years worth of purchases so that we came to a point where we had \$600 000 in our own bucket and looking at how we could leverage that against government funding.

Enter the Victorian Property Fund. So what we have done is move away from a model of just having individual two- or three-bedroom houses, and for our \$600 000 and the government’s \$2.025 million we are going to build this magnificent wraparound service facility called Sunnyside Living that is going to provide 14 600 bed nights. So that gets back to the service system being a bit smarter, and the service system includes government and it includes service providers. We have got to be a bit more clever in how we use government funds that have come to us over the time. And I really think—some of my colleagues in other organisations might disagree, but my own personal thoughts are—that service providers are morally obligated to physically put something back into the game that gives government a perspective that we are fair dinkum about things and that we are prepared to put our own skin into the game. We are really excited about that project. MASP is also in partnership. It is not a state program; it is a federal program called Safe Places Emergency Accommodation. MASP is the lead agent in that. We have partnered with our local Aboriginal community-controlled organisation and we have also partnered with our local domestic violence service organisation. We have tendered to build 32 units between Swan Hill, Mildura and, over on the New South Wales side, Dareton and Wentworth. That will provide over 30 000 extra bed nights for disadvantaged people.

One other thing, Rod, I would just like to, through the Chair, bring to attention is living and working on a border situation, where we are geographically located. I do not know how to do it—I am not a parliamentarian—but our homeless people are transient, so they move between New South Wales and Victoria. I do not know how they go with the current restrictions—where there is a will there is probably a way—but my point is that there needs to be greater collaboration and a more common approach between state governments that sit on the border, where we are. It is a real thing that happens up here. We will not be unique—I am sure there will be other border-located towns as well—but that is just something I would like to flag with this committee that needs to be recognised, that there are some real pressing border issues where there is not consistency for clients.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and I think that is a great segue to Wendy.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks very much, Fiona, and thank you so much for your presentation. It was a fantastic collaborative effort, and I have to say it was music to my ears, because you are singing from my songbook about working with a collective response, as Renée mentioned. And, Gary, you are talking about that cycle that creates the revolving door of people coming through the system and also your model that you are looking at for working for outcomes rather than throughput and also the youth foyers. As the minister who introduced youth foyers to Victoria I was very pleased to hear you talk about that model, and also the outcomes and collaborative approach is something that we did when we went out to the sector with the innovation action projects that have actually produced such great outcomes for many people in Victoria as well.

So I guess my question is probably more for both Gary and Trevor, and given that you have all talked about that collaborative response and, Gary, you talked about outcomes, one of the things that we know is that currently we are funded for throughput and people get paid by the amount of people they service rather than the outcomes they produce for those people. I was just wondering if you would actually support—and it would

involve recommissioning of services—a move to a model where we fund for collaborative efforts and for outcomes.

Mr SIMPSON: Through the Chair, yes, Wendy, I would support that. We already have a good example of that in Victoria through the Orange Door initiative. My organisation, MASP, is also a partner in that. That was a bit of a new initiative as opposed to a complete recommissioning, but it has certainly proven—I think it is a great example; through the Orange Door, using that as an example—how resources, intellectual property, procedures and everything else can be successfully shared between organisations. So if there was a recommissioning around homelessness services looking for greater collaboration, personally my organisation would support that, because that is the crux of everything that my organisation seeks to achieve in delivering services so that we can get more leverage from working more closely with other service providers.

I mentioned earlier the foyer model that we are going to introduce and bringing in AOD and financial counselling and parenting and other nursing support and the like. That is the way of the future. I think that the days of organisations, homelessness providers, just running solo on things is over, because life has become far more complex. Issues confronting people are a heck of a lot more complex than 30 years ago when I was a much younger man. Life is generally more complex these days, and the service system needs to recognise that the collective impact of bringing in organisations is a much smarter way of doing things to get better outcomes for the clients.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Can I go to—

Ms LOVELL: Did Trevor want to add anything?

The CHAIR: My apologies; sorry, Trevor.

Mr GIBBS: No, I fully agree with you, Wendy—with the outcomes. We want to resolve matters. I think it is the only way to have a funding model in that way. I worked in the public service for 20-odd years before taking on the job here at Haven; Home, Safe. Yes, you are on the money, I think—the outcomes and partnerships moving forward to get results.

Ms LOVELL: Terrific. Thank you both very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Enver?

Mr ERDOGAN: Thank you very much. First of all I wish to thank all of you—Trevor, Gary, Renée, Mark—for your submission and presentation today. It addressed all the criteria in the terms of reference, which is very much appreciated. I do have a few questions that came out of some of the discussion here today. One was the issue about housing affordability, because I did note that, Gary, you mentioned that house prices can be—obviously being in inner Melbourne I guess we have got a different appreciation of affordability here, but what are average rents in the Mallee region?

Mr GIBBS: Through the Chair, Enver, through the private rentals we have seen them go from probably \$250 up to \$350-plus in the last 12 months, and that is for a very, very basic house as well, which some of you are seeing. Some three-bedroom brick veneers are hitting the \$450 or \$500 marks at the moment, and that is right across the Mallee actually, and it is even through the smaller townships—Ouyen, Birchip, Wycheproof, Charlton, those types of townships. If you get somebody on JobSeeker, that is \$294 a week before the subsidy is topped up on top of that, so if that ceases, you are looking at somebody bringing home \$294 per week or a little bit more with rental assistance—it is very, very hard.

Mr ERDOGAN: Sorry. Effectively you are telling me, Trevor, that if someone is unemployed, it would be very difficult for them to afford a rental place in the private market.

Mr GIBBS: Yes, very, very difficult.

Mr ERDOGAN: That is all. I just wanted to understand the situation and put it into perspective. I appreciate that. On those figures that you were just telling me, it sounds like it would be almost impossible to survive on Newstart, what it was—or JobSeeker, as it is called now.

Mr GIBBS: Yes.

Mr ERDOGAN: I appreciate that. I appreciate also that in the submission I saw the four driving factors, and you have nicely identified them. Domestic violence, mental health and drugs and alcohol, culturally and linguistically diverse clients and jobs network feedback are some of the driving factors behind the homelessness issue. What percentage would you say of the homeless in the Mallee region would be due to domestic violence? Do you have any statistics on that, that kind of specific information, or not really? Is it difficult to get that data?

Mr SIMPSON: Through the Chair, it is difficult to get that data. I was saying earlier on that the homelessness sector is not flush with data. It is something that needs to be improved so we can make better evidence-based decisions going into the future. In general terms, yes, family violence and alcohol and drugs would certainly be my top two from what I see that comes through my organisation.

Mr ERDOGAN: I appreciate that. I am noticing a trend with some of the other submissions that there is an intertwining of those two issues that you have identified, Gary. How is the relationship with those other networks and health providers in the region? Mildura hospital is now back in public hands. How is that working?

Mr SIMPSON: From September it officially hands over. I think it is going well, the transition. Your question, through the Chair, Enver, was about the services working with each other. Up here we are fortunate in a regional area—you will probably hear this in other regional areas—that because of our geography we do tend to see the same people at the same meetings, but the beauty of it up here is that we have really close relationships between our organisations, particularly at my level. Trev and I do have very close relationships with other CEOs and GMs across our whole region. So we are able to have those crucial conversations without fearing that we are going to upset or offend any of our colleagues, because we are just as likely to bump into each other at a coffee shop in town—not at the moment but pre-COVID-19. We do have those relationships.

Through some work that is being done locally up here through the council via our Hands Up Mallee initiative that very strongly pulls on the linkage with collective impact. The collective impact is actually a part of the vernacular of service providers in this part of the world when it comes to working with each other. We actually think we do it better than our metro colleagues.

The CHAIR: I think you probably do. Sorry, Enver, we are just—

Mr ERDOGAN: I appreciate, Gary, your comprehensive answer, but due to the time I will leave it there. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. It is probably nice to go back to one of our regional members, Tania Maxwell, who is also one of your representatives.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Chair. Trevor, Renée, Gary and Mark, thank you so much. Look, your submission was fantastic and the presentation that you have given today. I am just going to keep it really brief. One of the areas that you highlighted in your submission was about blacklisting. I am keen to know and to learn more, very quickly, around how you mitigate that. How do we mitigate that risk, which inevitably stops, prevents caravan parks, service providers et cetera being willing to take on people at risk of homelessness or those who are homeless? What can be implemented to mitigate that risk?

Mr GIBBS: Through the Chair. Tania, we had a number of issues with caravan parks and motels and being able to get people in there, but I think it was a misunderstanding between organisations and the accommodation providers around what they could support. If they know you are behind them and supporting them, they will give our clients a go. There were too many times where I think there might have been damage done or no supports put in, and they just had to wear the cost and the burden of anything that happened. So we have reassured them, we give them support, we give them financial backing if something happens and it is on behalf of the client or involved with the client. That has turned things around a lot. It all comes back to working with your community and supporting each other and everybody being on the same page. We have gone from only having one or two crisis emergency accommodation providers to probably 10 just by doing that.

Ms MAXWELL: Fantastic. Look, I just very quickly want to say thank you so much for all the great work you do. I cannot wait for us to be able to travel so I can get over there and thank you all personally.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Tania. Lee?

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair. I do not have any further questions.

The CHAIR: And Kaushaliya, you are okay?

Ms VAGHELA: Yes. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That brings us to the end, and with perfect timing.

Ms VAGHELA: I will be very brief. Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Mark, Trevor, Renée and Gary for your submission and your presentation. The submission by the Mildura Rural City Council has identified four driving factors for homelessness, and one of them is culturally and linguistically diverse clients. You mentioned there are various reasons they experience discrimination from local real estate agents and exploitation of CALD families and so on. What I would like to know is: what actions can be taken to reduce the numbers coming through that driving factor? Anybody? Mark or anyone?

The CHAIR: Renée?

Ms FICARRA: We worked with our local Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council. They do a lot of work with local real estate agents. I obviously just collected all the information that everyone told us; I am not an expert in this area. But Ben, who was the CEO of SMECC, spoke a lot about needing to have personal relationships with real estate agents and going out and doing a lot of that advocating on behalf there. I probably cannot exactly answer your question there, but SMECC are heavily involved in this space and a lot of relationship-building work goes on behind the scenes, I suppose.

The CHAIR: Thank you, all, for just a really informative, almost optimistic—I mean, there are solutions, and I think it is wonderful to hear what you are doing up in the north-west. So Trevor, Gary, Mark, Renée—thank you again, and I am sure that is on behalf of the whole committee, for a really great session. As I mentioned earlier, you are being recorded, and certainly the Hansard team are pulling together a transcript for you, which will be sent to you shortly. Please have a look. Make sure we have not misrepresented you in any way. That will form part of our final report. It will be up on our website. And, again, thank you for the work that you do and taking the time to join us today.

Witnesses withdrew.