

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Bairnsdale—Monday, 2 December 2019

#### MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

**WITNESSES**

Mr Robert Ashton, Initial Assessment and Planning Officer and Fulham Correctional Centre Outreach Officer,  
and

Ms Paula Healey, Private Rental Assistance Program Worker, Community Housing (Vic) Ltd.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for making the time to see us. I just have some slight formal information to provide to you prior to starting. As you know, we are here—and we thank you again for being here—for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. All the evidence that is taken here at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under our *Constitution Act* and under some Legislative Council standing orders. That means that the information you give today is protected by law. However, any comment that you might repeat outside this place may not have the same protection, and anything deliberately false or misleading the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, we are recording today, and you will get a copy of that transcript. Eventually that information will go up on our website, and the most important thing is it will form part of the information and evidence that we are pulling together for this Inquiry. If you would like to give us some opening comments, then we can move into a conversation.

**Ms HEALEY:** I guess I was thrown into this at the last minute.

**The CHAIR:** Well, Robert, then you take the lead.

**Mr ASHTON:** I think we were both thrown in. Just to introduce ourselves—it does say on our little labels there, but I work here in Bairnsdale. I have been in Community Housing there for 11½ years. I am an Initial Assessment and Planning Worker, so I see people as they come in off the street presenting as homeless. More recently my role has changed and in most of my role now I am working with the prisoners at Fulham Correctional Centre. It is not part of East Gippsland shire, but it is part of the outer Gippsland region. I have been doing that for seven years, most of that time on a sort of a 0.5 basis but in the last 12 months pretty much full time. I would like to speak briefly about that today because it is a little bit of an area I am passionate about.

**The CHAIR:** Great.

**Ms HEALEY:** I obviously am Paula. I work actually in our Morwell office. I have also been an IAP Worker—an Initial Assessment and Planning Worker. More recently I have moved over to the Private Rental Assistance Program for Wellington and East Gippsland, so for this area up here.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thank you both. Robert, if you would like to speak a little bit more about your work.

**Mr ASHTON:** Would you like me to do that now?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, fire away. And then, Paula, we will ask you the same.

**Mr ASHTON:** I have been going out to Fulham Correctional Centre for just over seven years now, and I guess during that time I have become very aware—several years ago a prison officer said to me, ‘The people here are not bad people; they’re people who do bad things’. I often reflect on that comment. It seems to me that in a place like Fulham, which is a minimum- to medium-security prison, a lot of the people out there are people who are basically struggling to cope with life. That I think is the main reason why they end up there. It is a sad reflection I think on our society that people in prison tend to do very well. I see it here when people are released. They will come in to our office. They will be doing very poorly and sometimes they will say to me, ‘I’m nearly ready to go back inside’, and sometimes I will say to myself, ‘They’re nearly ready to go back inside’. I will see them out there at Fulham and they will be doing really well.

The reasons for that are that prison provides for all their needs, apart from freedom. So we are talking about the price of freedom. That is all they lose. They have everything else that they need there, to a large extent. There are lots of boundaries, lots of routine, things that a lot of people struggle with in the community. They know where they are going to sleep at night, they know they will have three meals a day, if they get sick there are

medical facilities, they can get an education. There are a lot of things there which they have access to that on the outside they cannot access or are unable to access. As I say, that is a bit of a sad reflection on our society—that we have to send people to prison to get those things that they need.

I just wrote down some notes. I might just read those, if that is okay.

Every week I listen to prisoners who state that the lack of stable housing contributes to their offending. Many prisoners believe they would not offend if they had stable housing. I believe the lack of accommodation options and in particular, stable accommodation options in East Gippsland is a contributing factor to reoffending. The lack of appropriate accommodation options reduces the likelihood of prisoners being offered parole. For example there are no Transitional Housing properties available for prison releases in the East Gippsland Shire. Many people exiting prison are now required to complete a Community Corrections Order. This order may last for up to 3 years. The lack of stable accommodation can make it difficult for them to comply with the requirements of their order, placing them at risk of returning to prison. Intervention orders are becoming more common which requires alternative accommodation to be sourced. The lack of alternative accommodation increases the likelihood that the perpetrator may attempt to return to the family home ...

ultimately resulting in a prison sentence.

One of the things I think is really important: I urge the Government to divert some of the funds being spent on constructing new prisons into providing housing for released prisoners. All prisoners being released into homelessness should be provided with stable accommodation and ongoing support to help them maintain their tenancy and hopefully reduce the likelihood of them reoffending. Many of the prisoners we see who have come into prison from homelessness, we do not have the capacity to provide them with stable accommodation when they leave. Rooming houses are just not a good option, and there are many prisoners who will state, 'I'd rather live on the streets than go to a rooming house'. And the thing is that when they go to the rooming houses there are many people with similar issues to what they have, and it tends to be a very bad situation for them, especially if they are trying to break away from drug use, when they go to a rooming house and they are faced with it. Prisoners tell me that at the motels that we put people into there will be people knocking on the doors in the middle of the night offering them drugs the day they get out, so it makes it very difficult for them to have any chance of making it a new start. A lot of people, as I say, say to us that if they had stable housing, they would be less likely to offend. There is certainly truth in that, although it is not entirely true, because we do get a lot of people in prison who are public housing tenants that we have to keep their tenancies for, but I do agree that there would be a certain percentage—I do not know what percentage that would be—who if they had stable housing would be less likely to offend or maybe offend as often.

**The CHAIR:** Before we move to questions with you, Robert, I might get Paula to give some introductory remarks as well.

**Ms HEALEY:** So what I have been asked to do is, I guess, give a little bit of an overview of the clients that we see and how we see homelessness. I have only got stats from 2018–19 because our SHIP, where we record our information; for that period of time it is for all of Gippsland. We could not get the—

**The CHAIR:** Narrow it down, yes.

**Ms HEALEY:** However, moving forward we can, so we have got different work groups now. So for the 2018–19 year in community housing we saw 2425 new clients. That is across both offices. However, they are new clients; they are not representing our returning clients as well. So of the new clients, they represented 47.1 per cent of the clients that we saw, so there is still a huge amount of people that are returning through our door, which indicates that something is not working. Of those clients, 57 per cent of those were male, 43 per cent were female; the average age range that we saw was between 26 and 45; 12.2 per cent were identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders; and 92 per cent were born in Australia. Of those clients that we saw, 143 were from outside our local area—they were sent through from other agencies because they had nowhere to house them.

So just some stats on where they were in the month prior to presenting to our offices: 57 per cent were in short-term or emergency accommodation; 9 per cent was sleeping rough, and that means cars, abandoned properties, squatting, out in the elements; and, of those presenting, 60 per cent were singles. That is important to remember when we talk about housing affordability. Our average length of support time has increased over the last four years. In 2016–17 it was 28.1 days that we had somebody for. For this financial year—2019–20—it has

increased to 38.9 days. So there has been a slow increase over the last four years. Of our clients that have presented, 45.7 per cent identified—and lots of them do not identify—as having a mental health diagnosis, and only 35 per cent of those were actually seeking assistance for that. So there are lots out there that are not seeking any assistance. Four-hundred and fifty-three clients had exited a psychiatric hospital or unit in the past 12 months prior to presenting.

**The CHAIR:** Forty-five?

**Ms HEALEY:** Four-hundred and fifty-three from a hospital or psychiatric hospital.

**The CHAIR:** Out of 2400?

**Ms HEALEY:** Yes. Unfortunately we do not collect stats on drug and alcohol. However, the vast majority of our clients present with drug and alcohol issues—a huge contributing factor.

**Mr ASHTON:** And often they will have both mental health and drug and alcohol—

**The CHAIR:** Yes, they go hand in hand.

**Mr ASHTON:** They do. Yes, indeed.

**Ms HEALEY:** So if we can go back to our 60 per cent for the singles, the main income when presenting, with 31 per cent, which is our highest representative, is Newstart. That is again important to remember when we discuss housing affordability. Four per cent of our presentees were employed, so they had employee income. However, of those employed only 37 people were employed full-time. That means that the vast majority of those that were employed—part-time or casual—are still living below the poverty line.

**Mr BARTON:** This is the great underemployed.

**Ms HEALEY:** Yes. In addition to what we do, Community Housing also provide transitional properties, and the guys before spoke about the need for additional transitional properties. This might explain a little bit of that as well. We have 130 THM properties across Gippsland—that is, inner and outer Gippsland.

**The CHAIR:** That is transitional housing?

**Ms HEALEY:** Transitional housing properties, yes. In 2016–17 in East Gippsland there were 70 people tenanted in a property. Thinking that transitional property is only supposed to be for the short-term, across the Latrobe Valley, there were 189 people housed in transitional properties, and we have 130 transitional properties. So that means that the turnover is not happening.

**Mr BARTON:** They have got nowhere to go.

**Ms HEALEY:** That was 2016–17. In 2018–19 we had 154 tenancies. So it is a decrease of 22 per cent in the availability over the last three years. That is just that people either have nowhere to go, they are priced out of the private rental market or the supports that are supposed to be supporting them in the tenancies are just not there. Community Housing heavily relies on the private rental market as a housing solution. We have just seen the THM properties, and the waitlist for Office of Housing property is just huge. If we go back to our figures from before, that the majority of clients that we see—60 per cent—are single, that equates to 1462 single people experiencing homelessness. However, in the latest September report from DHHS, it is identified that there are 25 one-bedroom properties identified as affordable throughout all of Gippsland. In Wellington there are two properties and in East Gippsland for a one-bedroom property there are also two properties available, so in this whole area there are four properties that are deemed affordable for somebody on Newstart, and that is the vast majority of the people that we see.

**Mr BARTON:** I dread to think what the quality of the properties is like.

**Ms HEALEY:** Yes, and that is what I would like to discuss later: accountability—accountability for boarding houses and rental properties, yes, the state of them. And the prices are increasing because of lack of properties; it is hideous what people have to live in. So, yes, those are our stats on who we see and how we see

homelessness. I guess I can talk a little bit about the Private Rental Assistance Program, which is what I predominantly work on up here in this area. I am not sure if you have heard about that.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard a bit, but certainly I think from a regional perspective it is probably slightly different to what we heard in metropolitan. I think also what I would love to hear is—I think you were getting to it—about some of the issues and solutions that you might see.

**Ms HEALEY:** Yes. The Private Rental Assistance Program is an initiative by the Government to, I guess, reduce or eliminate homelessness by early intervention. It is working with the real estate and the local support agencies to pinpoint problems before they get too big—before it ends in eviction. I think it is a wonderful program which has saved a lot of tenancies, especially for people who have not been able to access support through HEF, which is the Housing Establishment Fund. We see lots of singles that we are able to support, lots of families—it is a vast array of people—and also people that maybe go above the income threshold a little bit, so that is little bit more lenient so that we can provide some assistance to people that otherwise would have missed out. We have had a significant injection of funds that has been able to assist 308 households to maintain or secure private rental in the East Gippsland and Wellington areas. Last financial year we were at 368 per cent of the target that we had to achieve.

**Ms LOVELL:** That is great.

**Mr ASHTON:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** Well done; that is excellent.

**Ms HEALEY:** There are some gaps in the program, however, so we are not able to assist people in social or public housing.

**The CHAIR:** That are at risk of eviction?

**Ms HEALEY:** That are at risk of eviction. It is the program. It is the Private Rental Assistance Program. I think the whole aim of it was to reduce the people in social housing so that we can—

**Ms LOVELL:** It is to take the pressure off social housing by keeping people in private rentals.

**Ms HEALEY:** Yes, to keep people in private rentals. However, the issue is that we do not have affordable private rentals, because of what we spoke about before. It was once one-off assistance; however, with the new reform and the PRAP Plus that is coming out that has been changed, so that will be a little bit more lenient. My other issue with PRAP was that I often felt like we were bandaiding a solution and we could not work to address the issues that led to the presenting problem.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms HEALEY:** However, with PRAP Plus we will now address that. It is a support program to work with people after they have had assistance, so that you can identify the areas that need more work, so they will be case managed for a short period of time to work with that. So, yes, Robert has spoken about PRAP.

**Ms LOVELL:** Paula, what about the money—I am trying to think of the name of the program; it is just escaping me at the moment—for you to purchase accommodation for people who present as homeless?

**Mr ASHTON:** HEF, the Housing Establishment Fund.

**Ms LOVELL:** Is that HEF?

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes.

**Ms LOVELL:** How well resourced are you for HEF?

**Ms HEALEY:** We always need more money.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes. Look, we certainly need more HEF resources. The issue with HEF is that it is not as flexible as it needs to be, and that is where I guess PRAP has been providing better outcomes, but the limits are lower. The other issue that we have at the moment because of the lack of short-term accommodation options is that we are having to put people into motels longer, and that chews up HEF. We would love to spend our HEF on rent in advance or rent arrears, but increasingly we are finding we are spending it more on crisis accommodation, which is a waste of money really.

**The CHAIR:** That is right. Please continue, Paula.

**Ms HEALEY:** Do you have anything to add on how to solve this?

**Mr ASHTON:** I made some notes, which I will read if that is okay, just in terms of a response to the three questions or points that were laid out for the Inquiry. It really relates, I guess, mainly to East Gippsland shire. I do not know whether you are aware that the East Gippsland shire covers some 10 per cent of the landmass of Victoria, so it is a very large area. The population of course is not 10 per cent of the population.

So just looking at: what does homelessness look like in East Gippsland? Homelessness is largely hidden in East Gippsland. Unlike the centre of Melbourne where people sleep on the city streets, in East Gippsland most homeless people reside with friends or relatives. People who do not live with friends or relatives tend to camp in the bush or along the banks of local rivers or sleep in cars. A recent exception to this situation has been a homeless camp set up at the port of Bairnsdale. It is probably really the first very visible situation that we have had.

**The CHAIR:** Do you know when that camp became apparent?

**Mr ASHTON:** Just in the last few weeks. We have actually had people come into our office who have been moved on from that camp by local shire rangers.

**Ms LOVELL:** Where is it at?

**Mr ASHTON:** It is at the port of Bairnsdale, which is on the Mitchell River. So it is probably the first really visible issue that we have had. Occasionally you get people who might sleep at the station and things like that, but it is not really highly visible to people just walking down the street.

One of the points I wanted to make too in terms of homelessness: East Gippsland has a large Aboriginal population compared to many other areas of Victoria. Discrimination is a contributing cause of homelessness for Aboriginal people, and that is a real issue in this area, as I am sure it is in other areas, and it is a real barrier for Aboriginal people to be housed, which is a reason why so many of them stay with friends or relatives.

**Mr BARTON:** Sorry, Chair, I have got to ask the question: so the discrimination is that they cannot get private rental?

**Mr ASHTON:** Not just private rental, but yes, that is certainly an issue. For example, I know in the past we have had caravan park operators, and when we have inquired about vacancies the very first question is: 'Are they black or white?'

**Mr BARTON:** Okay.

**Mr ASHTON:** The very first question. So discrimination is an issue.

**Ms HEALEY:** We have also had that in the Latrobe Valley, asked: 'Are they ice addicts?'

**Mr ASHTON:** Just looking at the scale of the problem of homelessness, we have given figures here today but does it really tell the full picture? The point I was going to make is the scale of homelessness can be difficult to accurately determine, as homeless people often only seek assistance when their accommodation breaks down, they are forced to leave the property where they reside or adverse weather conditions force them to seek alternative shelter. We have had people come in during days of 40 degrees or torrential rain who have

been living out in the bush, and they say, 'I can't do it anymore', but if they had not come in, they would have been out there and we would not have known they were there.

Some homeless people choose not to present at the homelessness service as they are aware of the limited accommodation options available in the local area. So there are those homeless people who say, 'What's the point of going in there; they can't help me', and that is a figure that is hard to measure. So we do not really know accurately how many homeless people there are. We only know about those who present at services. Short-term accommodation options in Bairnsdale are very limited. Although living with friends and relatives provides accommodation and support for homeless people, it often leads to overcrowding, placing the entire household at risk of becoming homeless. There is pressure within the local Aboriginal community to take people in, which places strain on all household members. We are finding that this type of accommodation is a contributing factor in issues of family violence.

We have overcrowding in houses because people take other homeless people in, and then of course there is no privacy and tempers get hot and we have issues of violence. The other thing is that by taking people in, if you are in public housing, Aboriginal housing or a private rental, having extra people in the household can actually place your tenancy at risk.

**The CHAIR:** Put you at risk of being evicted, yes.

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes. There are no caravan parks that offer long-term accommodation in Bairnsdale. The closest caravan park offering ongoing accommodation is situated 25 kilometres out of town. There is one hotel and one registered rooming house we can access for accommodation. We have not placed anyone in the rooming house for more than three years due to a lack of availability and a refusal to accept our clients. There are several caravan parks offering ongoing accommodation in Lakes Entrance; however, there are few vacancies due to heavy demand for accommodation, and the availability of accommodation can be determined by tourism. This is a tourist area, and we find that the accommodation that we use for short-term stays, at certain times of the year, is just not available. Some of the park operators say to us at the beginning of December, 'Don't send anyone till after Easter'.

There is a supported residential service facility at Eagle Point, about 8 kilometres from Bairnsdale. We have begun to use this facility for general clients, to provide accommodation for some homeless singles. Short-term accommodation options have decreased in recent years and some of the remaining providers are making it more difficult to access accommodation. In the time I have been with Community Housing, the number of short-term accommodation providers has decreased. People get sick of our clients. Some facilities change hands, so the new owners do not want to deal with our clients.

I mentioned before about the caravan park 25 kilometres out of town. Five years ago, it was an owner-operated park. The man there had a very retentive memory, and if you rang up to find out if he had a vacancy, he could tell you if he had had that person before and whether that person was good or bad. If he did not know the person, we would have a bit of a chat about them and he would make a decision on the spot. If he agreed to accept them, the two weeks rent was paid, so we could actually house that person the day they presented.

That same park is now owned by a company—an interstate company. There are managers in the park. Now you have to fill out an application form; for people who have limited literacy skills, they have got to detail their rental references and things like that. It can take up to a week for this application to be processed, so we have a week's limbo where—do we put them in a motel for a week while we wait for an outcome, which may be a negative outcome? In addition to two weeks rent they are now asking for two weeks bond, and most recently they now refuse to take anyone on Newstart allowance, because they deem their accommodation unaffordable. So those are the sorts of things that we are facing.

**The CHAIR:** And that is 60 per cent?

**Ms HEALEY:** Sixty per cent.

**Mr ASHTON:** Short-term accommodation is only suitable for singles, couples and families with a single child. We have no short-term accommodation options for larger families. For example, we had a fellow present

last Thursday; he had five children with him, and he had been living in his car and a tent. They had been doing this—

**Mr BARTON:** This is a single dad, I think, is it?

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes, a single dad—five children with him. There is no short-term accommodation that we could put him in.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I have no doubt that the Committee would love to ask you some specific questions. Given the time, are there any final comments you want to make before we do open it up to some questions?

**Ms HEALEY:** I think just on how we solve this: it is more complex than just ‘build houses’.

**Ms LOVELL:** It is more complex.

**Ms HEALEY:** I think we need to look at systemic and personal issues, so that both can be worked on together to be resolved. Definitely we need a significant investment in affordable housing, and that can be in many different forms. I am sure you have all thought about that before. We need regulation of the rental market. People are priced out of property, especially our 60 per cent. We need increased suitable short-term accommodation, inclusive of all sorts of people and inclusive of pets. Lots of our people present with animals; they are their lifeline. They cannot go to a boarding house or a caravan park—

**Mr ASHTON:** Some people will choose to remain homeless rather than give up their pets.

**Ms HEALEY:** They will.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, of course.

**Ms HEALEY:** We need regulation of the type of accommodation people are going into. People need to be accountable for the accommodation that they are providing. Rental prices are going up—

**The CHAIR:** Quality is going down.

**Ms HEALEY:** Quality and status are going down, yes, and that is just because there is a lack of housing. People can put whatever price they want on the market. We need increased capacity for services to provide longer term support—so transitional support. The PRAP program, you know, that is excellent that that is being provided, but we also need increased accountability for all support agencies, because there are a lot of people out there that are not being supported and they are supposed to be supported by agencies. We need supports for THM. We need support so that clients are not handballed from agency to agency and have to retell their story. It is not good. Most of these people are in crisis; they do not want to retell their story.

**The CHAIR:** No.

**Ms HEALEY:** And if they are told, ‘Oh, no, you can’t get service from here, but you can go to this service’, and then, you know, we may tell them, ‘No, you’re not in our area. You have to go to this service’. It is frustrating for us; I can only imagine what it is like for that person that is in crisis.

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely.

**Ms HEALEY:** Clients need to be accountable as well, but I think that comes back to supports—drug and alcohol support, mental health support. We have clients present that are ready for support, but there is a waitlist and they cannot get that support. And when support is available, they have already gone back to whatever they were doing. And we need integration of allied services such as mental health, drug and alcohol and family violence so that we are all working together. Do you have anything to add to that?

**Mr ASHTON:** Just that—and I think it was mentioned in the previous presentation—early intervention I think is the key to preventing homelessness. Sustaining existing tenancies before tenants are evicted reduces the prevalence of homelessness. We have already mentioned PRAP, and I think it is a great program, but it is really

essential that this program is expanded to include all social and public housing tenancies in addition to private rental. We also need to examine the type and cost of housing we provide for homeless people. Not everyone needs a mansion to live in. We need to embrace concepts such as that of the tiny house and prefabricated housing, and we also need to look at the successful affordable housing programs that have been implemented in other countries and see whether they might be models for us to follow.

The cost and availability of land is a major limitation in the provision of affordable housing. I believe at the moment there is some 2600 hectares of land which the Government is considering selling. I read that in the paper the other day; I do not know whether that is true or not. But I would certainly urge the Government to make available all of that land that is suitable for housing for the purpose of public and social housing programs. Obviously some of it is not suitable for that.

The other thing, in 2018 the population of Victoria increased by approximately 182 000 people. I believe it is essential for the Government to make a commitment to provide social or public housing each year based on a percentage of the annual population increase to ensure that those people who cannot secure housing are housed. I am not sure what percentage we would need to have. Obviously there would be a formula to work it out.

**The CHAIR:** A lot more than we have got now.

**Mr ASHTON:** A lot more than we have now, absolutely. But if we are able to do that each year based on the increase in the population, that would help the housing situation from becoming worse each year.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We have just got a few more minutes, and I know that everyone has got questions.

**Ms VAGHELA:** Just a quick one about people approaching you, seeking support. How many people would not be able to get support in terms of numbers?

**Ms HEALEY:** I actually have figures on that. We were not able to assist 248 people in the 2018–19 period.

**Ms VAGHELA:** Two-hundred and forty-eight?

**The CHAIR:** Ten per cent of your numbers.

**Ms HEALEY:** Yes. Well, we have seen more people than that; that was just our new clients. However, a lot of our clients that may present—and we do have figures that they are clients—may not have been able to sustain any accommodation or obtain accommodation. So they therefore would be unassisted as well.

**Mr ASHTON:** The other issue, going back to singles under the age of 55, is there are support programs for youth, there are support programs for the aged and there are support programs for families, but single people under the age of 55 we generally cannot provide any program or offer housing support. The fact is that single people are struggling to maintain housing and there is no support for them either. They, to me, are the most neglected.

**The CHAIR:** A very good point, Robert. Thank you.

**Mr ASHTON:** The other thing is that recent censuses have noted that every census there is an increase in single-person households, so it is becoming a much bigger group, but we ignore them.

**The CHAIR:** I have got a quick question. Robert, just specifically looking at your clients from Fulham, I would have gathered that some of them probably qualify for the NDIS.

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes, but again, whether they actually access that, I do not think that many of them do. They probably do not while they are in prison, because it is a fairly new scheme—so those who have been incarcerated for a while, probably not. I doubt that very many of them would be NDIS clients at this time.

**The CHAIR:** Even though from the way you were describing some of those clients, by the sound of their intellectual disability, they would be absolutely entitled?

**Mr ASHTON:** They would be entitled. Absolutely, yes.

**Ms HEALEY:** It is hard to get assistance through the NDIS as well. It is a lengthy process. We have seen a few clients—

**Ms MAXWELL:** For a lot of people it is just too hard.

**Ms HEALEY:** It is too hard.

**Ms MAXWELL:** And without a case manager to support them through that process it is diabolical.

**Mr ASHTON:** Absolutely, yes.

**Ms HEALEY:** You cannot do it.

**Mr BARTON:** I am very interested in the prison program. If we can get any proper data of how many people end up being reincarcerated because they have not had stable housing, that would be awesome. Do you think you could get that at a later stage?

**Mr ASHTON:** I will try. I am not sure, but—

**Mr COE:** I can tell you it is a lot of them. It is like a revolving door.

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes, it is a lot of them.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes, I would imagine.

**Mr ASHTON:** I had a fellow, he is actually a public housing tenant, and he was applying for his 14th temporary absence from his public housing property.

**Mr BARTON:** You can understand why they give up.

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes, and that is not the first person I have had who has had 14 sentences.

**The CHAIR:** And that was someone who had housing.

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes, that one was. Unfortunately these people cannot cope in society. They go back to things that they are familiar with, that they are used to, which are not good things, and they end up back inside—and as I said, a lot of them do quite well in prison.

**Ms LOVELL:** I am just interested in your comment about making the rental brokerage available to public housing tenants. When I was the minister, not paying your rent did not cause eviction; it just triggered a rental repayment plan, which can be very low. If you had debts to the Office of Housing, it did not restrict you from being rehoused as long as you entered into a repayment plan, which was just about a joke—they would never pay off their debts. So has there been a change in policy that people are being evicted from public housing or cannot re-enter?

**Mr ASHTON:** People do get evicted from public housing, but obviously—

**Ms LOVELL:** People get evicted, but it is usually a very, very long process.

**Mr ASHTON:** It is a long process for sure. It is a long process, and there is more leeway than they would have if they were in a private rental for sure. But people going into public housing, for example, often have no furniture or whitegoods. PRAP can buy a fridge and a washing machine. I think all parts of PRAP are applicable, so why should someone going into a private rental get a fridge and someone going into public housing not? Let's give these people a good start, regardless of their housing.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it is about that balance.

**Ms LOVELL:** So it is about using parts of it, not all of it.

**Mr ASHTON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you both so much. That was really insightful.

**Mr ASHTON:** I do have copies of the presentations if you want them.

**The CHAIR:** That would be very appreciated.

**Ms HEALEY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. As I said, the transcript of this conversation will be sent to you and you will have an opportunity to edit it.

**Mr ASHTON:** It has been a wonderful opportunity to have a say.

**The CHAIR:** Look, we have really appreciated it. We are at the beginning of this Inquiry, but you have really raised some new issues for us, which is what we want, and some solutions.

**Mr ASHTON:** Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**