

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Bairnsdale—Monday, 2 December 2019

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WITNESS

Ms Jane Ponting, Executive Officer, Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network Inc.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. Thank you so much for making the time to see us today. While Rod is otherwise engaged, I will run through the more formal part of this proceeding. We are hearing evidence today in relation to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is via our *Constitution Act* and through our Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide today is protected by law, but if you were to repeat that outside, it would not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, this is being recorded by our Hansard people, and you will be given a copy of the transcript of it, which you will be free to correct. So what we would love is if you could give us some opening remarks. We have got your bio here.

Ms PONTING: Thank you. You have my biography. I am not sure if I included the LLEN—that is how I refer to our organisation. We are a not-for-profit incorporated association. We do not deliver one-to-one support for any of our clients. We broker partnerships that predominantly look at improving education to employment pathways, but also for the last two years we have coordinated the Bairnsdale education and community hub on behalf of the East Gippsland shire. So I am speaking a little bit with my LLEN hat on, but mainly through what we observe at that community hub. Also I am the deputy chair of the Gippsland Regional Partnership, and one of the things that the partnership is looking at this year that I personally find very exciting is the notion of how we line up government strategy and policy to make a difference in unexpected ways sometimes, so I think that is where I can give this Inquiry some value.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Jane.

Ms PONTING: I have included a single sheet for you, with a plan. It is a slightly old plan, so I have circled the two areas I am interested in. When Alice asked me if I would speak, I said I just wanted to give some stories and flavour, before you have a break for something a little more substantial, I hope, for lunch—so perhaps not statistics from me.

I am fairly new to the region. I first became aware, vaguely, of the extent of homelessness having lived in the CBD, in Flinders Lane, and being used to what homelessness looked like in town. The first two things I noticed were that we had a lot of retirees living down on the waterways on their boats—with a car and a boat—and they are not necessarily seen as homeless. The second thing I had noticed was that we had a small office, just on the main street—it is the smaller of the two circles. Campbell's Arcade is an undercover arcade with a series of shopfronts that have recessed doorways; we had an office there for two years and it was not unusual, if I arrived early in the morning, to have someone sleeping in our doorway, out of the rain and out of the wind, in a swag. They were always faceless—indeterminate age and indeterminate status other than that they were sleeping rough.

The notion of homelessness becoming what I have called 'up close and personal' really began in 2015 when I was watching some neighbours who had decided they could not afford rent any longer, so they had a clearance sale, packed everything, including the two dogs, into a caravan and just started driving. Their view of what would keep them alive and sustainable was to keep driving. Issues of things like, 'How do you get health care if you do not have a fixed address? What do you do with bank statements?'—all of that was just not really thought through.

We then had a colleague organisation that had a young woman with two children who walked home and discovered one of the children being abused by her partner, and the response for that did end up in a custodial sentence for the partner, so it was a serious issue. But the trajectory for this young woman, who had been full-time employed in a sustainable workplace, with a good, sustainable family on the surface, turned into emergency accommodation in a motel for several weeks—two young children in one room—through to her eventually being put into a refuge and through to her needing to leave town, and that meant leaving work. In the last few years that woman has not been employed since. She has been volunteering and looking at emergency accommodation and what is possible on the line on the way up to Melbourne. She left town because her

partner's family was quite large and influential, and she found she no longer had a place in a small community in that environment. So it started to become names and faces.

In terms of being at the Hub, we first became aware of the Hub as a potential place for people who are homeless to hang out on the morning that we went in to unlock some of our public toilets. We had been changing from key locks to automatic locks, and we found out that if you put a stone—if you are inside any of our rooms, you can always get out; you cannot get back in without a swipe card, but if you put a stone in the door and just stop it latching, you can come in after we have all left. So we have had people sleeping in the toilets over winter, and I kind of felt you were pretty desperate if you wanted to do that. We first found that in 2017.

The next lesson for us was with a young man who—you kind of have to be the right sort of age, but growing up in the 1950s and 60s and seeing Sunday school pictures, the pictures of Christ always had long blonde hair—was a kind of Christ figure wearing hippie clothes. This young man was sitting on one of the rails, and we were not sure what to do with him. Fortunately we are co-located with a community organisation who said, 'He's okay. He's harmless. He's homeless. He has mental health issues'. This was a lad just pushing 20 who could not look you in the eye, could not speak. It was just terrible, but he hung around the hub. We would catch him doing all sorts of things—washing his clothes and underwear in the kitchen sink. He was having a go, and that is really great, but for the older ladies in the craft groups it was a little bit confronting.

The CHAIR: I guess he did not have a spare set to pop on.

Ms PONTING: No, so that kind of thing. But we honestly had nowhere to really offer him help or support, and we could never find out from him where he went when we lost track of him. So we had a whole winter with him hanging around. He would be in the lounge. He had real hygiene issues and real nutrition issues. I would like to return to that young man in a moment.

Last year in the middle of the year we were approached by a woman in a four-wheel drive with a horse float on the back, a horse and two dogs. Her marriage had broken down. Her landlord had said, 'You can no longer stay where you are', so she was on the road. She said that she would rather die than lose the horse, so she was quite sure about where she saw her fate. She thought it would be a great idea to stay at the community college in the quadrangle, set up camp each night. She was prepared to drive away during the day and come back if we would leave the lounge door open and a toilet door open for her. That was not something we said we could do, because our brief with the shire is to have more classes on over nights and at weekends, and that was just outside our scope for providing homes. Possibly one of the hardest things I have ever done was say no to that woman.

This year we have had a couple of incidents that are potentially more difficult in that we have young women on staff who are of quite small build, and they have been confronting a couple of guys who have been sleeping over, one of them who has managed to gemmy open doors and sleep inside, and despite there being a toilet in the building has managed to defecate through the rooms he is sleeping in. The standard response is, 'Ring 000'. It is always, 'Ring 000', because we do not know if this man is on drugs or not on drugs. It seems a very dire response. I tend to make the call because my first duty is to my staff and their wellbeing, and it is pretty confronting for them.

We have two other lots that visit and head past. We have a young man who we see up and down in the park. He has a nylon humpy that he makes, and he has a small terrier with him. He comes and fills a water bowl and borrows our bowls from the lounge and will feed the dog—also harmless—and then just disappears until we see him again. We often have campervans parked around the edge of the hub, so people coming in.

One story we had that turned into something slightly amusing was when someone asked for a cup of coffee, and we said, 'Sure, get a cup of coffee'. So she brought in the mug and filled it with ground coffee to take away with her, instead of a cup of coffee.

The CHAIR: Like a cup of sugar.

Ms PONTING: Yes. So this is frequent. It is frequent in a very small place, it is frequent in a community asset, but we are not a service provider and we are not somewhere where you would think people would go first up.

I have put on your sheet four things that I think other agencies are generally in a much better place than I to speak about. We know what distance is for a lot of things, so: access to support and services. One challenge that I would see here would be that in a lot of government policy initiatives, rollout into regional areas that have small scale takes a long, long time. So if I look at something like the department of education's Navigator program, which is to help re-engage young people who may have left or been out of school, we will not get Navigator until 2021. That is because—I get it—by necessity the rollout is to areas with scale, so we are at the end all the time. That does not help, and there has to be a clever way of thinking this through a little bit differently for government policy rollout.

I think a second thing, it is the obvious one, is access to employment and sufficient income. When the jobs are tight we have so many young people in particular—this is the LLEN hat on instead of the Hub hat—who have precarious employment, who would rather take casual work than full-time work because the pay is a little bit higher and it helps meet the bills, even though that has long-term impact on their capacity to enter into a rental agreement, for example. So there is the precarious nature of a lot of employment down here.

Mr BARTON: Casual rate?

Ms PONTING: Either casual or short-term contracts where perhaps they are laid off over Christmas, over the summer type of thing, at the end of a contract. I think there is great opportunity to work at different models on how we build. For example, start-ups are seen to be quite big, but we do not have the same sort of support for starting social enterprise that we do for start-ups, where we will get a big company going.

We have limited work-for-the-dole options to get people that leg-up into employment. We had a good provider down here who was getting people into work, so had a good track record, then closed up shop in Bairnsdale and left, which means that there are that many fewer opportunities for people to come off that treadmill into employment, which helps them sustain housing. So I think more capacity to offer work-for-the-dole options would be great.

Access to transport is fairly self-evident, not only in the limited public transport but just the cost of running a vehicle.

I really would just like to finish my bit and perhaps answer some questions around saying I had dinner with a bureaucrat a fortnight ago and was really disappointed to hear strains of a previous Prime Minister, who said something about, 'The taxpayer shouldn't have to fund people's lifestyle choices'. The same thing was being reiterated the other night, and it strikes me that people live here for lots of reasons—sometimes because it is home and it has been home for generations, sometimes because they are escaping from intolerable situations elsewhere, sometimes because the cost of living is generally lower than in urban areas and more accessible when they start, so someone who is coming here to find cheaper accommodation, maybe get a job, but is on that borderline of precariousness. It is not a lifestyle choice. It is not the sea-tree changer that I am fortunate enough to be.

I just want to come back to the young man with the long hair who is not taking drugs and does have a mental health issue, who we had seen for a whole five or six months in 2017 and disappeared in 2018. He came back again this year. He came back, and I happened to be in the lounge as he strolled in quite confidently, looked me in the eyes. I said, 'I haven't seen you for ages and I can't remember your name'. I have never known his name. He told me his name, and he said, 'It's fantastic. I'm doing really well. I have a home. I'm sharing a house in Bruthen', which is a good 20 minutes up the road. He comes down on the bus and he sits at the library and he is borrowing books and he is reading because he can give an address. And he can look you in the eye and he has some hope. That is one good story out of a long list that I have given you, but it is one and we could do better, I think. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Jane, and I think that was a really lovely personal story. I do not have any questions on this. I really appreciate it because it is that lovely insight. You have told it so beautifully and with that lovely perspective on it. I just think this is why we are here and you have just beautifully articulated it.

Ms PONTING: It is something about how we line up. There are so many good things happening in the policy space. Not everything is right; there is not enough necessarily of everything. But there is something around lining it up differently, thinking that through.

The CHAIR: I really appreciate the testimony. This is what also helps us when we are considering the research and the stats and the numbers—the faces you have put on it—so thank you very much for that, Jane. Thanks for making the time.

Ms PONTING: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.