

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Morwell—Tuesday, 3 December 2019

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WITNESSES

Ms Naomi Webb, Practice Leader, Advocacy and Support,

Ms Cheryl Barnes, Manager, Homelessness Services, and

Ms Nicole Larkin, Practice Leader, Homelessness Support, Quantum Support Services.

The CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you so much for making the time to come and see us today. As you know, this is an Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, and we are the Legal and Social Issues Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is being recorded, but it is also protected by parliamentary privilege. That is provided by our *Constitution Act* and our standing orders of our Legislative Council, so any information you give today is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament. You will receive a transcript of today's session, and feel free to correct it and send it back. Ultimately the transcripts will form part of the evidence that we are deliberating on, but it will also go onto our website. So if you would like to make some opening comments, we would love to hear from you and then open it up to questions.

Ms WEBB: Fantastic. First of all we would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to come and have this discussion today. Quantum will be submitting a very detailed written submission to the Committee—

The CHAIR: Fantastic.

Ms WEBB: but we just wanted to touch on a few very specific points today. We have prepared a bit of a statement, so if it is okay with the Committee I will lead into that and then open up for questions afterwards.

The CHAIR: Perfect.

Ms WEBB: Fantastic. Quantum's commitment to people that are homeless or at risk of homelessness is to provide a quality service; however, at the moment current system and funding models are characterised by placing an emphasis on achieving targets rather than providing a flexible person-centred approach. Our clients often report to us that they feel like a statistic throughout this process. In balancing the need for homelessness reduction targets there also needs to be a focus on outcomes, particularly on the quality of services, which recognises that people have needs that vary enormously. The system needs to be flexible to enable us to respond to them appropriately. The current system is very much designed around time-limited, short periods of care that are one size fits all, and it is very difficult for us to tailor services to respond to those individual needs. For example, we might be dealing with a family of four children; their needs are very different to a single person that has a cat.

These barriers that we face are further exacerbated by the excessive paperwork requirements within the sector, often leaving our workers with the ability to spend about 25 per cent of their time in direct client contact, so it is quite a significant pressure that we face. We certainly strongly advocate for reformed funding models enabling a flexible approach and a system that is able to provide accommodation that meets the needs of our clients, that treats them with respect and that allows them to maintain their dignity. It needs to be flexible to enable workers to spend more time with their clients. It is necessary so that people experiencing homelessness are able to move out of that period of homelessness as quickly as possible and so that the professionalism and the quality of those services provided are increased to reduce the long-term impact on the individual or family. We also see that there is a potential to prevent the recurrence of homelessness with an increase in quality of service. We cannot address homelessness without having an increase to access to safe, affordable and secure accommodation. I am sure you have heard that quite a bit today. Currently there is very little public housing stock. I am sure you are aware that there are over 34 000 people on the current statewide public housing waiting list. We are often seeing people wait for a very long time, based solely on the assessment of their housing needs or the urgency of their situation.

We have very little transitional housing in this area. Rental accommodation is becoming more and more unaffordable for people on a benefit or a Centrelink payment, and statewide we are seeing 92 people turned

away from homelessness services daily, so there is a very significant number. Currently in our region only people with a very, very good rental history, a stable income and, well, I guess very good references are able to access the private rental market in Gippsland. So we are seeing people who are on income support, a Centrelink payment, casual employment not even able to crack the rental market. So we have got people in the Latrobe Valley and Inner Gippsland specifically who need affordable rental housing. Melbourne's growth has put pressure on nearby communities, with many people moving from regional communities in search of cheaper housing. This increased housing demand has negatively impacted the local supply, driven up the price of houses and in turn driven up the price of rental properties.

Quantum continues to record an increase in demand for affordable accommodation. The private rental market is increasingly competitive, unaffordable and difficult to access for low-income Gippslanders. Affordable private rental in Gippsland is drying up for low-income households, while a recent report suggests that Moe and Morwell specifically are areas offering affordable rentals based on the statewide household income average of \$37 800. The average income for households in the state electorate of Morwell is \$29 172 a year, so it has basically priced them out of the private rental market immediately. Nearly one third—I think it is about 27 per cent—of households in Morwell earn less than \$33 800 per annum, which works out to be about \$650 per week per household.

In addition, Gippsland, along with other regional areas of Victoria, reported a decrease in the number of the lettings. The annual change in new lettings to the June quarter of 2017 has decreased by 7.9 per cent. ABS census data from 2016 show that only 12 per cent of properties in the Latrobe Valley region are vacant, so it is creating a more and more competitive market, placing people with disadvantage such as homelessness or limited income at the very bottom of the priority lists.

The urban sprawl that we are noticing is most noticeable in West Gippsland, where crisis support is stretched to the limit. There are very, very minimal if any options for people in the private rental market who might face vulnerabilities. The average price for properties in Morwell is \$275 per week for a unit and \$420 per week for a house. Many people with low incomes cannot afford housing in regional Victoria, pushing people from regional centres into even smaller rural communities, where we are seeing people find themselves with no job opportunities, very limited if any public transport and very little support services. Locally, private rental is obtainable for people on family payments—and we are talking about income support—but it is increasingly difficult for people who might be on Newstart. I guess at this point it is worth noticing that if a single parent's youngest child turns six, they are automatically put on a Newstart payment. So there are still families on those payments, and single people on Newstart can be priced out of the rental market almost immediately because of that. The solutions that they are dealing with are house sharing, which is never very good for their social circles and potentially very bad for their future rental history. So we certainly strongly advocate for more employment options locally to support young people getting off those Newstart payments into sustainable incomes.

I have said this already, but regional communities are crying out for more housing. Quantum advocates for an increase in Housing First programs: moving people with really complex needs experiencing homelessness into permanent housing with flexible and individual support for as long as needed. There is Australian and international evidence that supports this and that it can be a positive move going forward. Further to that, Quantum also advocates for increased funding in programs that take a proactive approach to homelessness.

So quantum has had the funding for the Tenancy Plus program, which has previously been known as SHASP and before that PHAP for 14 years. This program has a component of case management for people to establish a tenancy who have suffered a poor rental history or perhaps an ongoing failure of tenancies in the past. Unfortunately due to insufficient funding we have got a significant waiting list in that program, and what we are seeing is that the program has to prioritise that waiting list and we are consistently dealing with an excessive amount of tenancy at-risk referrals, where our aim is to sustain a tenancy that is in imminent risk of failure. So unfortunately when we have got an opportunity to provide a proactive approach to establish a person's tenancy, we do not have the capacity to deal with that because we are at the other end of the spectrum—

The CHAIR: Trying to keep someone in a house.

Ms WEBB: trying to keep someone in a house when they are at that tipping point of potentially being evicted. Obviously those increased resources would assist us to either not have a waiting list or to at least have a

way that we can support people to establish those tenancies, so that if there is an instance where they have an unexpected change in circumstances that would ordinarily put their tenancy at risk they would have the networks and the contacts to be able to prevent that from ending in crisis.

Quantum stresses that there are not enough transitional properties across Gippsland. These short-term properties are used to house families and individuals. On a weekly basis Quantum has over 10 applications within the transitional housing program and only one or two properties available.

Ms BATH: There are not enough?

Ms WEBB: There are not enough.

Ms BATH: That is all right, because I just thought you said there are, and I just went—

Ms WEBB: No, definitely not. I am just clarifying that there are not enough.

The CHAIR: Because that would have been a shock after everything that we have heard.

Ms BATH: It just got lost on me. Thanks, Naomi.

Ms WEBB: Sorry about that. This is leaving our individuals experiencing vulnerabilities seeking shelter in motels and boarding houses and sleeping in their cars, so that is leaving them unable to access even the most basic of needs. It is also causing further disadvantage, especially around the financial side of things. The person living in a motel does not always have the ability to cook and keep food, so they are spending their money on takeaway food and they are not able to keep those basics. That has been proven to be far more expensive than being able to cook and keep food.

We are also seeing across Gippsland that young homeless people are being even further disadvantaged due to the lack of available options to them specifically. We have seen evidence both Australian-based and internationally that potential hub and foyer models for youth homelessness support can be successful in solving youth homelessness. These models are focused on empowering young people to learn general life skills that they might already lack, including things like cooking, cleaning, budgeting and their rights and duties as a tenant when they go forward.

We do believe that there is more work required by local job providers to invest in and sustain an innovative approach to supporting jobseekers to secure regular ongoing employment to increase their income and reduce their reliance on government-funded income.

In relation to crisis accommodation, we must stop people being moved from one crisis accommodation to another crisis accommodation, and instead look at providing them with some type of long-term accommodation and providing appropriate support services that help them maintain a tenancy. Those Housing First programs that I discussed before are ideal in that situation. Crisis accommodation can only be effectively managed when there are appropriate, affordable and accessible exit options. From the statistics and the evidence that I have given, clearly that is not the case across Gippsland. We are regularly seeing families of upwards of six members in motel rooms. Recently we had one family of 11 people in a motel room, and obviously this is not appropriate, nor is it sustainable. It is causing more and more issues, and I know that the people from the Orange Door just spoke to that really briefly before. Currently Quantum's crisis-funded programs—we do have a number of them—are spending a significant portion of their allocated brokerage on crisis accommodation in local motels and boarding houses. We are very aware of the time of year that we are heading into. The holiday period always—

Mr BARTON: They'll be kicked out.

Ms WEBB: Yes. Obviously we see an increase of people seeking housing support at this time of year, but along with that we see a decrease in the ability to access crisis support accommodation. We are regularly observing services from Melbourne placing their clients in crisis accommodation in the area, which is further pressuring the people of Gippsland to move to even more rural settings, where we do have, again, no job opportunities, no public transport and a genuine lack of support services.

The most common reason we are seeing people facing eviction into homelessness is rental arrears. In most cases a temporary or unexpected situation has caused that client to fall behind in their rent and that has placed them at risk of eviction. It is currently too easy for tenants in Victoria to be evicted for arrears. Without legal representation, it is highly likely that the clients we see will be evicted, but a combination of legal representation, financial brokerage and social work assistance can often prevent these unnecessary evictions from occurring.

We are currently seeing an increase of evictions in private rental due to the current rental reforms that are being rolled out, and we do see this getting worse, unfortunately. While the reforms we acknowledge are designed to better protect tenants, the staggered implementation and advertisement of them has caused some landlords and specifically real estate agents to be miseducated, and what we have seen is a significant increase in tenants being evicted at the end of their fixed-term tenancies so that the landlord can sell the property. Information that we are being given by local real estate agents is that those properties are not being purchased to be re-entered into the rental market, they are being purchased by owner-occupiers, so we are seeing a decrease in those properties. Some of that is happening in some very isolated areas, where the rental market is already very, very tight.

Eighty per cent of tenancies that we see are failing because there is no support around living skills—things like budgeting, mental health and drug and alcohol supports. Quantum staff have also recorded a high number of clients that have repeatedly entered our service. For some of them it is for support to sustain a tenancy; for others it is to escape homelessness. We believe that a reformed system and guidelines would assist us to increase our services and potentially prevent those re-entries of service.

Innovative solutions to homelessness can be few and far between, but we do discuss and have discussed tiny homes in order to help people that are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. It can provide a transitional option for some people—obviously the appropriate people—and with the right supports it can help them reach independence and long-term sustainability of housing. There are a number of employees at Quantum that have discussed an expanded version of this, where we believe that if there was something along the lines of a tiny house village it could be run in conjunction with a program that is designed to rehabilitate someone's rental history or, in the case of a person that does not have a rental history—for instance a young person—it could provide them with the basic skills and knowledge they need going forward. So the idea would be that partnered with a short-term lease in this tiny home village the person would complete that educational program and at the end of it to be provided with some sort of certification that was recognised by landlords and real estate agents, and that would then potentially give them a leg-up and a bit more influence when it does come to their application, where they ordinarily would not have been looked at due to their income or their history.

We would also like to see a streamlining of services and the dissolving of silos that services exist in. Currently the system has fundamental structural shortcomings. Services and programs are not well linked or integrated. From our practice it is evident that people experiencing homelessness often come into contact with family violence services, justice services, child protection and Centrelink. However, these services mostly operate in silos and communication makes it difficult. If they were able to communicate a bit more effectively and easily, we would be able to provide a much more integrated approach to client support. I guess an example of this is that we manage our mental health pathways program, which is aimed at providing housing information, support and advice to patients exiting a secure psychiatric facility who are either experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness on their discharge. In some instances—and I have worked in this program so I can give you direct evidence to it—we are seeing clients that are experiencing mentally ill health being discharged from this facility due to lack of services available, and they are being—

The CHAIR: So there are no beds in the facility so they are being discharged.

Ms WEBB: They are being discharged, and often in my experience the situation is that there is someone coming in in crisis and they have to make a call basically as to who is the least unwell that gets discharged, and they are often discharged into homelessness due to the lack of communication.

Ms LOVELL: They are not supposed to.

The CHAIR: That should be illegal.

Ms LOVELL: Well, they are not supposed to.

Ms BATH: Are we talking our local regional hospitals?

Ms WEBB: Yes, we are, definitely. In essence we really would like the Committee to consider looking at ways to dissolve those silos, consider how to improve links between mental health support services and homelessness and housing assistance services. We think that that needs to be a priority as well. That is going to allow us to achieve better outcomes, and again, it will allow us to facilitate the prevention of those re-entries into homelessness and I guess in a broader sense in this case the re-entry into that psychiatric facility, which will often happen as a result of being homeless and exacerbated mental health. It becomes a really vicious cycle.

The CHAIR: And they will have to push someone else out to let that person in.

Ms WEBB: Effectively, yes. I am happy to leave it there and allow the Committee to ask questions if they like.

Mr BARTON: Good job.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Naomi. I was really looking forward to your submission on this. Before I open it up to the rest of the Committee, you are not the first person to say the siloing and the problem with that communication. Does Quantum have some ideas about how you could break down those silos and how you could create that information sharing more easily?

Ms WEBB: Yes. I think a reformed structure, like I spoke to early on, would allow that. I think as it is we generally work in those silos because we are time pressed. We are very guideline specific and limited to what we can do, so when it comes to providing a person a service I think a lot of the services look at, 'Well, this is the service that I can provide, and if I can do it well within my time-limited approach, that's a good start'. It does not allow us that time. If we have only got 25 per cent of our time to work with clients, it leaves us even less time when we have got to, I guess, attend meetings, potential case plan meetings, and things like that. So the pressure around our time and how it is allocated I think prevents a lot of those services. I can obviously only speak to Quantum, but I think that would be—

The CHAIR: Could you give me an example of what you would like to change?

Ms WEBB: Did you want to answer that one?

Ms BARNES: Yes. Look, from my point of view I think one of our biggest issues in working with people who are at risk of homelessness or who come to us through homelessness is the time-limited period that we have to assist them. So currently on our waiting list in, say, the Tenancy Plus program we have about 60 people. The issue is that we have to work with 89 clients within that program, but we have to keep them open for six months. So if the tenancy is sustained after four weeks, we have to keep them open for six months solely because the department want the outcome at the six-month mark.

Ms LARKIN: And yet in homelessness we have a 13-week period of support. So we have got to solve homelessness in 13 weeks.

Ms BARNES: So if a tenant comes to us with, say, \$300 arrears and we have a tenant come to us who has severe hoarding behaviours, we can work with those people—we have to work with those people—for six months. So \$300, hoarding—I mean, to me it just does not make sense.

The CHAIR: Just an excellent example, Cheryl. Just excellent.

Dr KIEU: Thank you very much for your submission. It is very comprehensive. I have a few questions, if I may. The first thing is to come back to the time limit that is maybe—definitely, not maybe—related to the outcome focus rather than just achieving the targets. Can we come back to that?

Ms WEBB: Yes.

Dr KIEU: Just back to the point you raised a bit earlier about the rental history—of the people that are preventing them, particularly the young people, being able to rent their place—we have heard some submissions from some people from a rural area, which is the north-west, I think. It is not just a good history. Sometimes it is more important to be knowing who and where, because when a landlord receives hundreds of applications, particularly from young people, they actually may not go through them and also only select or trust the people they know through the network. The history is very important but then also the connectedness and the networking.

Ms WEBB: Yes, and obviously being in a rural area we see that. I guess an example can be that if you do not have a rental history but you personally know a property manager, you could walk into a real estate and you are almost guaranteed a property because they will provide a reference for you. But say, for instance, you have just moved to the area and you do not know anyone—whether it be through a sporting club, whether it be through your employment or social circles—you are going to find it very difficult to access a rental property. From my understanding—there are a few real estates that I talk to often—they have advised me that if they have a property that comes up—say, for instance, a three-bedroom or a four-bedroom property—they can sometimes receive upwards of 40 applications for that property. Now, when we are talking about the clientele that we are often dealing with, people escaping homelessness—to the Orange Door discussion before—people who are escaping family violence, they are suffering all these vulnerabilities. But then you have got people that might work at the power station or that might work at the paper mill, and their applications are in there. You know who the landlord is going to consider. Unfortunately we cannot change that bias, but it does exist and it is a reality that our clients are not being considered for those applications specifically because of their current status. If that person knew the landlord or if that person knew the property manager, I think that that would be a very different outcome.

Ms LARKIN: And linked to a support service can be detrimental as well.

Ms WEBB: Yes, and we have done a lot of work around that, especially in the advocacy and support team. My history is tenancy advocacy and I have been doing that for 13 years, so I have a lot of links in with real estates. We have done a lot of work about creating good relationships with real estates. When I show up at a VCAT hearing the real estates will often look at me as the enemy, whereas I am there to advocate for the tenant—for what should be happening anyway. It has been a lot of work. But then there are instances where we get new property managers. We get new real estates popping up quite regularly that do not know what Quantum do and what we are about and our values, and it can be detrimental. So when someone shows up to a house inspection with a support worker, they might be written off immediately. So it is those unconscious biases that we are dealing with as well, which are very difficult to change.

Ms BATH: Thank you very much ladies—amazing work that you do, tremendous. I am interested, and you started off, Naomi, in terms of targets versus flexible approach, and you have touched on that. My comment would be: we, you at the moment, cannot change instant housing. We cannot make it within the next short period of time. But what should governments be doing to support you, Quantum, and other services to really enable you to support your clients to the best that you can? I raise that in the targets versus flexible approach. I am interested in your funding model in terms of: do you seek grants for programs that then must be delivered completely under those programs? What sort of flexibility would Quantum need to be able to make your dollar and personnel stretch further, and what do governments need to listen to you about in order for that to happen?

Ms BARNES: Yes, I think, number one, it is getting more staff on the ground. I think if we look at all the homelessness programs, especially in Quantum, the amount of waiting lists in place compared to the number of staff that we have available to assist is we just do not have the staff on the ground. So we are continually putting people on waiting lists, on waiting lists, on waiting lists. Everywhere that we are trying to refer these clients they are putting them onto waiting lists, whether it is mental health or whether it is drug and alcohol. Wherever it is, the roadblock to us is waiting lists, and the only thing that is going to change that is more staff and more flexibility. So we need flexible support, whether it is low, intermediate or long-term support, rather than our 13-week support or our six-month support.

The CHAIR: Or six weeks, for crisis.

Ms BARNES: Yes, it just does not work. We have seen, for 10 years-plus, it does not work, and we keep putting it back. I have been here for close to 13 years, and that is what I have been struggling with—Nicole as well.

Ms LARKIN: I have been here 15 years.

Ms BARNES: It is just waiting lists, and it is having staff have case loads that are so high, because we want to assist the clients, but then that is adding extra stress to the staff, so we then see a high turnover of staff as well.

Dr KIEU: What are the barriers for the outcome focus? Why has it not been implemented?

Ms BARNES: I do not know.

Ms WEBB: We have very prescriptive guidelines given to us by the funding bodies, so we have to operate the program when we—

Ms BATH: State and federal, Naomi?

Ms WEBB: We do have state and federal funding. I believe that most of it would be state.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, but a large percentage of the state funding you get would be federal funding, because the homelessness funding is two-thirds federal and one-third state but is administered by the State.

Ms WEBB: Yes, issued by the State.

Ms BATH: So flexibility in your operations to meet the needs of your clients—

Ms LARKIN: What we would ideally like is a support package that could wrap around a client—

The CHAIR: A person.

Ms LARKIN: So if a person comes in, which they often do, with complex needs—they are dealing with family violence, traumas, child protection. If you have got all these issues and you have got 13 weeks, we want to be able to provide service that wraps around so we can work with them as long as we need to and address what is going on.

The CHAIR: Or as short as you need to.

Ms LARKIN: Or as short as we need to.

Ms WEBB: Yes, that is exactly right.

Ms LARKIN: So then it wraps around. Because I have a program that is a supporting families at risk program. It is about families who have gone into long-term housing, and it is a 12-month program which can be extended for another 12 months, and another 12 months afterwards. We have had three clients that have gone through that program. They had been three years on this program and have never come back, so it works, having that long-term support—she goes through crisis, we sort that out, we work with her, we get her capacities up. There is one lady who is back in the workforce; she has got her health all organised. She is still in the same relationship, but she is strong and she is independent. So it works, having the long-term programs. This short-term crisis that we do now is not working. They are just bandaids to what we do. We get them housed, and then we do not even get to address some of the issues.

The CHAIR: But then they churn out of that housing—same issues.

Ms BARNES: Yes, we are just putting out fires consistently.

Ms LARKIN: All the time, fires.

Mr BARTON: I want to just touch on some other areas in terms of your funding. You touched on the red tape and the amount of paperwork involved and stuff like that. When you are seeking your funding, how often do you do that? Is that a yearly rolling over, or is it three years?

Ms BARNES: It is generally on a three-year cycle.

Ms LARKIN: Three years, and I think it is going into a five-year cycle.

Mr BARTON: I am certainly keen to see it so that you could have more stability and so you do not have to do so much paperwork around those sorts of areas.

The other thing was the tiny homes. I see that as sort of an avenue, possibly. I found out yesterday that I was elderly, which was a shock to me because yesterday morning I was not. Certainly for some of the more mature people, downsizing out of a four-bedroom house, like I live in now, into a smaller home is an absolute thing that I would like to see happen—much into the future, Chair. There are opportunities there I am certainly aware of. I used to live in the country, northern Victoria. There are certainly opportunities in places out in the country, where we can set up these tiny home villages, but what we do not want to do is create ghettos.

Ms LARKIN: No, we do not.

Ms BARNES: No.

Mr BARTON: So it is just that nice mix we can get there. It is not always going to be people who are in a lot of trouble. It might be people who are just downsizing. And then we have that mixture in there.

Ms LARKIN: And certainly we would like to see some review of the housing stock that we have, because we know that there are single people in large properties. We do not have a lot of large properties down here, but we certainly have large families. Now, what are we going to do with this family of 11? Are we going to try and squash them into a three-bedroom?

Ms WEBB: So we would also advocate for a better utilisation of departmental properties. As it stands, there are specific sections of the *Residential Tenancies Act* that allow for the department to take legal action against people who are no longer eligible for a property. So, for instance, we do see a lot of people in four-bedroom properties where they have raised their family, and while we acknowledge that there is another family that might need to utilise that property while they are living there by themselves, I in my nearly 14 years experience have never seen that section of the Act utilised. We do think that it would be of benefit—not necessarily the legal process but a bit of pressure on the department to better utilise their properties by potentially saying, ‘Okay. You’re in a four-bedroom property. We have this two- or one-bedroom property available. Would you consider moving?’.

Ms LOVELL: The problem is that two- or one-bedroom property being available.

Ms WEBB: That is exactly right.

Ms LOVELL: Richard Wynne, who is the current Minister, in a previous term when he was Minister—prior to 2010—tried to move quite a few people out of the three- and four-bedroom properties, particularly in high-value areas where he wanted to sell the properties. It becomes vexed because a lot of them are elderly ladies in their 80s. They have raised their children there, their husband has died there and they consider it their home because public housing is for life.

Ms WEBB: And it is their home. We acknowledge that.

Ms LOVELL: So then they go to the media, so it becomes very difficult for government to do that, and particularly unless you have got the stock to move them into. When I was Minister we did a development that we started in the Olympic Village. They were homes built in 1956—temporary homes for athletes. We are still housing people 60 years later, and you had again elderly women living in three- and four-bedroom properties with large yards that they could not upkeep. We did a redevelopment there where you could knock down one house and build four units and maybe sell off two, which paid for the redevelopment. We put in 1.5-bedroom

homes that were conducive to ageing in place—they did not have to step over the bath to get into the shower and stuff—which was very successful. But there was enough increase in the value of the properties that you were able to do that at no cost to the state. The problem is having the properties to move the people into in the first place. If you can give them that option, particularly in their own community, they grab it.

Ms WEBB: Yes. So we do have a significant amount of what they call ‘elderly people units’ locally, and in most towns, even some of the more rural towns, which we do see a lot of people move into, there is a high vacancy rate with some of them. I mean, they are suitable. We do see people, and specifically elderly people like you just mentioned, that are in big properties with really big yards.

Ms LOVELL: They cannot keep the yards up. They cannot step over the bath to get in the shower.

Ms WEBB: Yes, of course. Locally we have got properties that might still be on quarter-acre blocks, so for an elderly person to maintain that on a hill, there is just no chance.

Ms BARNES: For anyone, really.

Ms WEBB: Yes. That is where we seeing people’s tenancies become at risk because they have got long lawns. I mean, we are heading into the season where long lawns are a massive issue.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, a big issue.

The CHAIR: That is great. I think that is really interesting. I think yesterday when we spoke to Nungurra and we were talking about the youth apartments there, they had two-bedroom apartments and they had never, ever been able to fill both bedrooms. So you had one person living in a two-bedroom apartment—

Ms LOVELL: Yes—but, Fiona, I would advocate that the department never build a one-bedroom unit. We did 1.5 because people need to have somewhere that someone can come and stay—a carer or something.

The CHAIR: Let me finish my sentence. It is about doing that audit of the properties and seeing: so you have got two-bedroom apartments that are not being used efficiently. I am not saying build one-bedroom apartments; I am just saying looking at how we efficiently use that. Are you aware of whether that kind of real roots-and-branch audit of all properties has been done in Victoria?

Ms WEBB: Not as far as I know.

Ms BARNES: Not that I am aware of.

Ms LOVELL: I can answer it. Yes, when I was Minister we did an audit of every property and the maintenance that was needed on that property and everything. That would now be probably six or seven years old. Whether the current Minister has done another one or not, I do not know.

The CHAIR: Is that public, that audit?

Ms LOVELL: No, I do not think so. We know every property and the number of bedrooms in it. That is a given. Everyone always knows that. But it was the condition of the properties, and we did a property condition report and it was to be a regularly updated thing so that you know the maintenance backlog and the work—

The CHAIR: We might ask DHHS if they have got that.

Ms VAGHELA: Before I ask the question, thanks for your submission. I just want to know, because you provide housing support to people experiencing mental health issues, whether you took the opportunity to make a submission to the royal commission into mental health.

Ms VAGHELA: It is very important to, because you guys do work in both those areas. My question is: are any particular communities more at risk of experiencing homelessness or housing issues in this region?

Ms BARNES: I do not think so. I think if you were to go back 10 years ago it would be a very different story, but from what we are seeing now it could be anyone. We are seeing people who have worked all their

lives now become homeless. We have seen people with marriage breakdowns or family violence become homeless. I guess I do not get surprised any more when I see clients that are coming in to us for assistance that could be your neighbour. Certainly drug and alcohol, mental health and family violence have a big impact, but there are also other factors within the community that are increasing the—

Ms LARKIN: We have a huge contingency of people who are on contracts down this way, so they are not in full-time, permanent work. We have had a couple come through. They are casuals at AGL, but they have not been paid because they may not have worked for two or three weeks. So then they have got into rent arrears, and then they are trying to catch up, and then at the end of the tenancy they are not getting renewed because they have had a bad rental history all the way through. They are the type of people that are coming through generally a lot more now than we ever had in 10 years ago, who were predominantly people who could not—

Mr BARTON: A changing workforce—the working poor.

Ms LARKIN: Yes. We are getting working people through now quite a lot.

The CHAIR: We have run out of time, sadly, because I think this conversation could go all day.

Ms LARKIN: It could go on forever.

The CHAIR: But we really appreciate it.

Ms LOVELL: It was great.

The CHAIR: Yes, exactly. Given Wendy's contribution to that as well, it would be worth talking to DHHS about getting that information from them. Thank you so much. You will receive a transcript of today. We look forward to your submission as well, and I think you have really given us some great information and ideas from the front, so thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.