

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria**

Morwell—Tuesday, 3 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 Corey Harrison, Executive Manager, and

Mr Navinda Wickramasinghe, Team Leader, Youth Services, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much and thank you for coming today. We have been having really interesting conversations, and certainly your role in this area is something that we are really interested in exploring. Just before we start, I would just like to explain that obviously we are the Legal and Social Issues Committee, and this is the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. That means that any information that you give today is protected by law. However, any comment that you might repeat outside may not have the same protection, and any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament—not that that has ever happened in this Committee to date. As you can see Hansard is here and they are recording this. You will receive a transcript of this conversation. Have a look at it, and if you would like to correct it, feel free to do so. The transcript is obviously used by us in deliberating on this report, but it will also go up on our website to be shared with others. If you would like to maybe open up with a few remarks, and then we can follow on with a conversation.

**Mr HARRISON:** Okay. What kind of remarks do you want?

**The CHAIR:** Well, what are you doing and what is the solution? We would just like to know what the answer is.

**Mr HARRISON:** So as in our program and what we are doing with our program?

**The CHAIR:** Tell us a bit about your program, and—

**Mr HARRISON:** Sorry if I am asking these questions, because I feel like—

**The CHAIR:** No, Corey, don't be.

**Mr HARRISON:** I actually feel like I am at court giving evidence with these microphones in front of me.

**The CHAIR:** Look, if we could change the way that we do this, I would like to. If we could do it more as a kind of karaoke number and have people up on stage—

**Mr HARRISON:** Play some music in the background.

**The CHAIR:** I guess, yes, we would love to hear a bit about your program and also where you think governments can improve. We understand that we have a housing crisis and—

**Mr HARRISON:** Definitely.

**The CHAIR:** we have a homelessness crisis. We are sincerely trying to work out what we can do differently to make things better.

**Mr HARRISON:** Do you want to talk about the program?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Great.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** At VACCA we do have a program called Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program, which covers Latrobe and Baw Baw shires. Our main target group is young Aboriginal kids, who are from 16 up to 25, but we are flexible on age, because there are no other services for Aboriginal kids or young people in this area. So what we mainly provide is help to individuals, families or kids to prevent them from homelessness, or if they are at risk of being homeless, we will advocate on behalf of them. If they are homeless, we will help them with crisis accommodation, case management and all that. The main issue that we are facing

here is, as you said, the housing crisis, especially for young people with their income. With Youth Allowance and all that, private rental is unsustainable.

**The CHAIR:** Impossible.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Impossible, for a lot of them. You cannot get a rental down here for \$150 or \$160 now. So they are spending more than 55 per cent of their income just for rent. Also, not only housing—even let us say we give them housing and all that, they still need other support: getting to work, addressing their trauma, all that; also other mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues and all that.

**Mr HARRISON:** I think a lack of employment opportunities and that, too, impacts on this. I think affordability, as Nav was talking about, is a real challenge. Even just entering into private rentals—there are not many people that want to take on young people, but not only young people; there are a lot of people out there who have issues with taking Aboriginal people into their private rentals as well.

**The CHAIR:** We heard that yesterday, that people were actually asking that question: is the person Aboriginal?

**Mr HARRISON:** We have elders and that that get knocked back on their housing applications because they have put on it that they are Aboriginal. I myself—and I work in a good job—over the years have experienced this sort of stuff. I would never put that I was Aboriginal on my application or that I work—

**The CHAIR:** Or who you work for.

**Mr HARRISON:** for the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. I just would write that I work for VACCA.

**Dr KIEU:** Because they can identify you?

**Mr HARRISON:** Because of that, yes. Because if they did, there is a good chance I would not have got private rentals when I started to rent privately myself, and that is an issue for me and I am in a good job with good pay. So I can just imagine what it is like for the people out here.

**The CHAIR:** Do you guys work in with Nungurra?

**Mr HARRISON:** Who?

**The CHAIR:** It is a place up in Bairnsdale that was a youth crisis—

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Not really, but sometimes when the kids present as homeless we refer them. We inquire with them whether they have any vacancies and all that, but we do not work with them that often. Normally we use Quantum youth refuge for young homelessness.

**Mr HARRISON:** Did Nungurra used to be Meerindoo? Because I remember Meerindoo years ago.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is right. Now it is a new facility there. So what are the most common reasons that someone comes to see you?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Mainly homelessness for young people.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, sorry, and what are the reasons they have found themselves there?

**Mr BARTON:** Are the kids sort of escaping? If you have got, you were saying, 16- and 17-year-olds, are they escaping family violence at home or are there other issues going on? Is that the main trigger that drives them out of the home, or overcrowding?

**Mr HARRISON:** A bit of it all.

**Mr BARTON:** All of that stuff?

**Mr HARRISON:** They are in crisis. They have got family problems. They could be from out-of-home care. We get referrals for kids that are in out-of-home care, and we have got to look at some sort of transitional placement for them as they leave the system as well. What else, Nav?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Mainly overcrowding as well, because we are lucky, in a sense, that a lot of kids we are dealing with are from the community. So even if they are in crisis, they are couch surfing. They can stay somewhere for a night or so, but that place could be overcrowded and they cannot stay there for longer. So we get a lot of people. And the other thing is some kids do have drug and alcohol issues or a past criminal history and all that, so they burn their bridges and they have got nowhere else to go.

**The CHAIR:** So family is not prepared to go through it all again with them?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Yes, exactly. Because they feel like they are repeating everything, over and over again.

**The CHAIR:** What is the answer?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** It is hard. It is not as easy as, 'Let's build units', or whatever. We have got to have housing plus adequate support for them as well. There is no point putting someone with drug addiction or mental health issues, just for 'All right, let's solve the housing crisis. We'll put you in public housing, and that's it now'. We have got to provide them with more support, more ongoing support—train them to come into the workforce, healing, all that.

**Mr HARRISON:** And giving them independent living skills as well.

**The CHAIR:** Do you guys do some of that sort of training?

**Mr HARRISON:** We do. In some of our programs we do work with it. It just depends which program. I do not know—I do not think Navin and his team have enough time to do an awful lot of that sort of stuff. They are always dealing with referrals. At this time of year, or from the rollover from the last financial year, they are rolling over with a lot of clients that they have had, so they are continuing to work with them as well and then pick up new referrals too. It can be quite challenging for them.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** But we do have a program for youth crime prevention we call the Kickback program. That is for youth who are involved with corrections. We do try to do group activities and all that.

**The CHAIR:** Tell us a bit more about the Kickback program.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** It is mainly for young people who are involved with juvenile justice and all that. We do run a program every Thursday. It is a collaborative program with us, Anglicare, Vic Police and Quantum, so we all get together and meet up with the kids every Thursday. We do outside activities, in-house activities like cooking programs. We take them to restaurants and stuff to give them social skills and all that. It has been running for over four years now, but unfortunately we do not get ongoing funding for that.

**Mr HARRISON:** And another problem with that, too, is that there is only a certain group that goes to that. We do not get to work with all of the kids or all of the people that are in Nav's program in that group. It is not a small amount of people, but there is a small group and it is usually the kids that have been in trouble or that are at risk of getting in trouble. But where the other kids have come in that do not have those skills, that are not getting themselves in trouble, they are the ones that are missing out as well.

**Mr BARTON:** How many kids go through your program each year?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Through homeless or Kickback?

**Mr BARTON:** Kickback.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Roughly we have 15 in one session, 12 to 15 in one session, but some weeks we get only four or five.

**The CHAIR:** How many are in your homelessness program?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** At this stage we have got nearly 57 open files, but in saying that half of them are in transitional properties or living with relatives and all that.

**Mr HARRISON:** Are you talking about the homelessness program or the Kickback program?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Homelessness.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, yes.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** In the last month we had seven new clients coming in to us. The majority of them are homeless, couch surfing. The other issue that we face down here is we do not have any short-term options. There are a couple of rooming houses, but we cannot put 16-year-olds or 18-year-olds into a rooming house. We would be pretty much setting them up for failure. Quantum have a youth refuge but it has very limited spaces.

**The CHAIR:** Nungurra has it, but again probably—

**Mr HARRISON:** And caravan parks will not touch us. Those sorts of spaces will not take us on, and that could be due to past people that have been sent into those.

**The CHAIR:** Without support.

**Mr HARRISON:** Yes, so it is challenging for us.

**The CHAIR:** And your clients may run amok.

**Mr HARRISON:** These guys are always thinking, they are always trying to problem-solve, always thinking outside the square.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you for coming here. Working with the Aboriginal young people, is there a magnified level of problems like unemployment, like drug and alcohol abuse, like past convictions, racial discrimination? Is there anything unique about the cohort of your community that are suffering or have to go through especially big, difficult problems finding a home?

**Mr HARRISON:** I think a lot of the young people are—I would not say suffering—but they are impacted by transgenerational trauma that they have experienced and that their families have experienced throughout the generations. That has impacted on them today, and there are issues around their thinking and their confidence and being able to go out and find work or being able to fit into an education system that is not set up or designed for them.

**Dr KIEU:** So it is cultural and generational.

**Mr HARRISON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** The organisation has been running for 40 years. Have you found that what you are doing today is quite different to what you might have been doing five years ago, or that the types of clients that you are seeing today are different from the ones you were seeing five years ago?

**Mr HARRISON:** It depends on what program. I have been around in VACCA for nearly 10 years.

**The CHAIR:** What has changed?

**Mr HARRISON:** Well, we have got more programs. We do have some more funding that is coming in these days, so we can provide some more services, but the problem is that we are seeing the numbers of people, or kids, coming in and entering out-of-home care—that is going up. I think some of the other challenges that I have seen are that kids of people that we have already worked with in the system are coming through.

**The CHAIR:** So you are seeing second-generation—

**Mr HARRISON:** We are seeing probably two, three, and in some cases there are four generations of families that are coming through the system that we are working with. This area here is probably one of the most underprivileged areas to work in. I have worked in other regions and that as well and we seem to not do okay but be on a bit more of a level playing field; out here it is very different.

**The CHAIR:** And is that the discrimination, or just—

**Mr HARRISON:** I think it is all of it.

**The CHAIR:** It is generally an area of disadvantage.

**Mr HARRISON:** Well, it is. It is an area where there is a lot of poverty. There is not a lot of work going on out here. There are not a lot of opportunities for young people and their families to get education or employment or have access to that. Programs get shut down all the time.

I think it is a tough area to work in. If you look at all the statistics that we have around here around family violence, out-of-home care, incarceration and crime, I think we are either number one or number two for the state for every one of those areas.

**Ms VAGHELA:** In terms of the number of clients, how many would you have right now where you are helping them with short-term accommodation and long-term? And how many of them are still waiting, seeking crisis accommodation and long-term?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** With the crisis accommodation, we try to address it then and there immediately. As I said, luckily the clients we deal with are from the community so they can stay or couch surf with family and friends, but—

**Ms VAGHELA:** Long-term?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Long-term, it is a hard question, because even a private rental is safe and secure accommodation, but I do not like to call it long-term because even if you have been good with the rental agent or whatever, one complaint against you from your neighbour and a lot of these realtors will just give you a breach notice and evict you within a couple of weeks. So long-term public housing—we have got clients who are in THM for over 12 months now, waiting to get public housing.

**Ms VAGHELA:** And would there be any number? How many clients would be waiting? Because that way it sort of gives us an indication.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** With the THM, I cannot give you an exact number, but roughly I would say at least 15 families at this stage would be in transitional properties waiting to get off of public housing, because a lot of these people who are in transitional properties cannot get private rentals. The reason is previous rental histories, all that. Then again, as Corey said, sometimes you see the last name and that is it—unfortunately.

**Ms VAGHELA:** So what are the core challenges you see in homelessness and housing support?

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Especially with us, for the Kurnai homelessness program, we do not get much funding compared to mainstream agencies. We just get a bare minimum. But there are programs that we could use, like the Private Rental Assistance Program and all that. But to get a young person into a private rental, it is the biggest challenge because real estates will not even look at the application as they are young and do not have a private rental history or anything, so no-one is prepared to give them a chance.

**Mr BARTON:** Give them a break.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Yes.

**Mr BARTON:** The pressure must be enormous on these kids.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Yes, it is.

**Mr HARRISON:** It is. Just to elaborate a bit more on what Nav was talking about, our program is only funded for probably two workers. We pay for Nav's position ourselves, and we fund that to support the program because the program needs an actual worker to take on all the cases that we have. We have HEF, which is the Housing Establishment Fund, so that is something like \$6000 extra a year. That is for crisis accommodation. Our targets with that are, like, 21.73, which does not make a lot of money when you have got people coming to you all the time or a couple of people come to us every week looking for crisis accommodation. That money can be used up really quickly. We do get topped up by the department from time to time, but that comes with extra targets and all that sort of stuff. But there is a lot of pressure around how we manage that money to help provide crisis accommodation for people when they come in.

**The CHAIR:** So Gippsland has one of the only traditional owner settlement agreements in Victoria. Do you know anything about that?

**Mr HARRISON:** No.

**The CHAIR:** That is fine. We were just wondering whether that had made any difference to the work that you are doing, but obviously not if it is not something that—

**Mr HARRISON:** So when you talk about these settlement agreements, what do you mean by that? What is that about?

**Ms PETRIE:** As far as I am aware, Gunnai/Kurnai have a traditional owner settlement agreement. It was one of the first here in Victoria. It would be interesting to know what impact, if any, that has had on community and disadvantage and whether that plays into rates of homelessness in the area.

**Mr HARRISON:** Well, what does the agreement mean and what is it about?

**Ms PETRIE:** So it is an agreement that came out of the native title determination. With the State of Victoria there was an agreement—and I do not have the specifics on me—but just in terms of funding models and the difference supports for the Gunnai/Kurnai community to be able to start up different programs particularly for their community.

**Mr HARRISON:** Look, we have about 11 traditional owners up there. I am one myself, and we work out here. We get an awful lot of funding around Gunnai/Kurnai funding. I think about 87 per cent of our funding comes from the department, and then the rest comes from philanthropic money and all that sort of stuff. We had not heard of any money coming from Gunnai/Kurnai. I think maybe that sort of stuff goes through GLAWAC and that, but that does not filter out into here, I do not think. If it does, it probably goes to maybe some of the other ACCOs in the area, and we do not necessarily see that.

**Mr BARTON:** You tell us: what do you think we need to help battle homelessness in the young people here? Because they have obviously got special needs. You are in an environment where there is no employment and the kids are dropping out of school. Is that correct?

**Mr HARRISON:** Yes.

**Mr BARTON:** And they are escaping things. We have to address some of these issues so they do not end up homeless. So that is one of our challenges. What would you like to see happen?

**Mr HARRISON:** Probably we need more funding. We need more resources. That is probably at the top of the list. I suppose we need some support. There probably needs to be more—

**Mr BARTON:** Longer support, I think.

**Mr HARRISON:** Yes, longer support. We have the supports and that through programs, especially around kids in out-of-home care—there are some supports around programs like that—but as for the other kids that are not in the system, I do not think there are an awful lot of supports around that. So it would be great to have some sort of supports for them—supports for them around housing and entering housing and learning transitional skills or independent skills.

**Mr BARTON:** Or to know how you are going to get into the private market, because the hurdles for you are enormous.

**Mr HARRISON:** There is no way we are going to get it. It does not matter what you do, I do not think, unless you are willing to chuck money at them and say, 'This is an incentive', like they do with jobs for Indigenous people and that. But I do not see how that is going to work; it is a really tough thing, it is a big challenge.

**The CHAIR:** Is there any way that the sector itself could be better organised—so how you work with other child-support organisations, how you might work with other Aboriginal organisations, Aboriginal housing? Do you think there are ways to improve the coordination of this sector?

**Mr HARRISON:** There is not enough Aboriginal housing around really—

**The CHAIR:** Yes, there is not enough.

**Mr HARRISON:** As soon as people get on the waitlist, they are on the waitlist for years, especially in the area down in somewhere like Baw Baw shire, the Warragul/Drouin area—they would be lucky to get a place down there. They would be on that list for four or five years I think before they even get a place so it is really tough, unless you are a priority, and to be a priority you have got to be a woman with children or you have got to some sort of specific need. Aboriginal men, they get nothing. There is nothing out there for them really. What happens is they continue down that cycle and become hopeless. They end up in situations, and all of a sudden they are incarcerated and then that cycle happens and it continues. Then children in that cycle—

**The CHAIR:** Then that becomes the safest place for them.

**Mr HARRISON:** Safest place for them—and then the children see their fathers and their uncles in jail, and then they end up either incarcerated themselves or in the system themselves in some other way, so it is an ongoing cycle.

**The CHAIR:** I remember someone saying to me quite recently—she was speaking from an Aboriginal perspective—that sometimes when the men get picked up on a breach of bail or something like that and they end up back in remand or back in prison, they may be the single breadwinner of that family so all of a sudden the father or husband has a roof over his head but then the family becomes—

**Mr HARRISON:** The family are left without.

**The CHAIR:** Left without, and then they get resentful, where we could have stepped in and actually just covered that rent for that time. Does that ring true with you?

**Mr HARRISON:** That is home. That is a normal thing for us. It is the average thing. I also think about the mental and emotional wellbeing of the families that are left behind as well and how that impacts on the system in other areas too. It is over something that is very simple.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, and to keep that family structure together under those circumstances.

**Mr HARRISON:** When it comes to those sorts of things, when that sort of stuff happens, they end up in the system—they end up with us anyway—but it is in another area. They end up in out-of-home care, and that is the only roof they got over their head then and they could be jumping between 30 different placements. That is just what it is.

**The CHAIR:** So more money.

**Mr HARRISON:** We just need resources.

**Mr BARTON:** Well, the Government has got to understand, I hope, that by allowing things to fall over, people are losing their homes. It is more expensive for them.

**Mr HARRISON:** Exactly. People talk a lot these days about self-determination. Is it just lip-service or do you really believe in it?

**Mr BARTON:** We are about to find out.

**Mr HARRISON:** And if you really believe in it, well then you have got to put these things in place.

**The CHAIR:** That is something that we are all very conscious of—yes, walk the walk in this.

**Ms MAXWELL:** I think right across the board over the last few days the themes have constantly been the same. Whilst it is appalling to hear those stories of what people are going through, in many ways it is actually great for us to be able to have some really good, insightful knowledge that we can then present to the Government with an impact and say, ‘Everybody across the board in this region came in and pretty much identified exactly the same issues over and over and over again, so you can’t ignore that’. People are not coming in and just saying what he is saying. It is your own stories which reflect everything that we have heard and the issues that you are faced with.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, and each time we also hear that in the Aboriginal community it is even more acute, whether it is real estate agents or a caravan park saying, ‘What colour is your client?’. In the 21st century it is just incredible that anyone would have the audacity to ask that question.

Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to tell us off on or tell us?

**Mr HARRISON:** No! Thank you for giving us the opportunity to come in and speak. I think it is important.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, we really appreciate it. I think this is a really important area, and I think raising self-determination is also really important, so if any information comes to mind or anything occurs over the next few months that you think we should know of, please stay in touch with us. We do want this Inquiry to do more than just talk; we want to come through with some solutions that will work. Thank you so much.

**Mr WICKRAMASINGHE:** Thank you.

**Mr HARRISON:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, everyone. I think we can close the Committee hearings for today.

**Committee adjourned.**