

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Shepparton—Wednesday, 11 March 2020

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WITNESSES

Ms Melinda Lawley, CEO, and

Ms Renae Ford, Program Manager, Youth and Family Support, The Bridge Youth Services, Shepparton.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming today. All evidence taken at this hearing today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under our *Constitution Act* and the standing orders of our Legislative Council. Therefore, the information that you provide today is protected by law; however, any comments you may make outside may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, all evidence is being recorded by our parliamentary Hansard. You will receive a proof transcript of that over the next few days, and we encourage you to have a look at that and make any corrections. Ultimately that will go up on the website of the Committee and form part of our Inquiry process into homelessness. If you would like to give a few opening statements, then we can open it up for questions. Thank you.

Ms LAWLEY: I will start. Thank you for the opportunity to present our expertise and local knowledge of how young people experience homelessness in the Shepparton and broader areas. The Bridge Youth Service is a locally based and governed incorporated association, which began about 26 years ago to address youth homelessness. It was then called the Goulburn accommodation program. Specialising in young people between 12 and 25, it has delivered the specialist homelessness services we mentioned earlier for young people between 12 and 25. It also now has two other broad areas of support: we provide family services predominantly funded by DHHS and education re-engagement support program funded by the Department of Education and Training. So they are our three major program areas.

Each year the Bridge receives funding to provide the specialist homelessness services, and this includes addressing immediate homelessness needs and then looking for opportunities for family reconciliation and family mediation and referrals to other services for specialist support, such as mental illness and misuse of alcohol and other drugs. We work really closely with child protection, with approximately 100 young people who are heading towards the child protection system or may be involved with youth justice. Many of these may need support when they become homeless, so they are overlapping programs. The other area we have is our family services program, where we support young parents under 25. Our service continuum begins with pregnancy options and counselling and progresses to antenatal classes and then parenting programs, and as a Child FIRST provider we support very vulnerable young mothers who are more than likely experiencing family violence and homelessness. We of course have many examples of young people who utilise a number of our programs—and sometimes all of them—over a period of many years.

So today we thought we would provide a point of difference. We know you have heard lots of presentations about programs and facts and research. What we thought we would focus on today is what it is like on the ground—what it is like for young people, what it is like for the workforce. As the CEO I am very mindful of the type of work that our staff do. So the intention is that this provides a snapshot of what it is like when policies interact, when programs interact and when there are consequences that were not really foreseen. To do this our presentation will begin with a focus on the details of the local homelessness and housing system, which Renae is going to provide for you, and then we will focus on the workforce, like I said, and then our solution to youth homelessness—or trying, anyway. I will pass over to Renae now, and I will speak a little bit later.

Ms FORD: I am speaking on behalf of young people at risk or experiencing homelessness. Youth homelessness is significantly different to adult homelessness. As a youth organisation we are continuously ensuring we develop responses based on the needs of the developing young people, such as their age; adolescent development; physical, emotional and social development; experience; and dependency and supports. Housing needs to be safe, affordable and appropriate based on the needs and abilities of the developing young person. Most young people who are experiencing homelessness may be forced to leave their home due to family breakdown, violence or their family being evicted into homelessness after a crisis. That is when we are responding. The response is returning to family and friends: supporting a young person to attempt to mediate and reconcile the relationship with their family if deemed appropriate as there are no other reasonable or realistic options—‘What happened?’, ‘Can you go back and work it out?’, ‘Can we talk to your

parent or carer?', 'Can we make some changes?', 'Are you sure you can't go back there?', 'Can you stay with someone else in the meantime?', 'Are you able to go back?'—and we keep looking at other options.

At times young people return home or somewhere temporary to couch surf in order to have that roof over their head. This response may buy some time; however, the young person can remain vulnerable and at risk—at times further risk of exposure to violence, substances, crime and/or sexual exploitation.

The next response is utilising what we have locally: so supported accommodation options, supporting young people to utilise what the community has available to them. Given these supports are always at capacity and given the high need, when there is a vacancy there is an extensive process to gain access to these supports, depending on personal factors—things like age, risk, need, mental health, education, training, relationship status or if they have dependants of their own. We are talking about our local youth refuge. We have got one in Shepparton; the next closest are Wodonga and Melbourne. We were talking about our local youth foyer, who were here today; they are also in Shepparton and Melbourne. And there is our local residential rehabilitation; we have one in Shepparton, and the next closest are in Wodonga, Ballarat, Bendigo, Warrnambool and Traralgon.

Ultimately the response is independent living: supporting a young person to access independent housing options, such as transitional housing; ideally short-term housing responses to clients in need; the highest priority, as per opening doors in our community. Many organisations are putting forward the most vulnerable client in their organisation—limited capacity, sporadic meetings—given the high demand and backlog of public and social housing. We have no youth-specific properties in our area, and BeyondHousing manage these.

Private rentals: inspecting and applying for a house, depending on affordability, only to not be considered. Young people 18-plus can legally sign a lease. Affordability: a youth allowance payment is \$460 per fortnight, and a one- to two-bedroom in Shepparton is approximately \$400 per fortnight, leaving \$60 for everything else. Real estate agents and landlords will not consider this sustainable. It is highly competitive, and there is high demand and discrimination against our young people because they have no references, therefore they are a liability. Social housing, public and community housing, application processes, registers of interests, priority access, homelessness support—you are put on a waiting list with limited capacity for turnover and high demand. How long is the wait locally? In the last six months we supported 159 young people. The Bridge Youth Service successfully supported and transitioned four young people into this social housing option after 12 months of accessing our support.

Last crisis response, emergency accommodation: if all responses are exhausted and the young person has nowhere to go as of tonight, emergency accommodation is explored, mostly paid by HEF—Housing Establishment Fund—towards our local hotel-motels, caravan parks, cabins, camping sites and even shipping containers. There are limited vacancies. They are hesitant to accept our young people or community members who are supported by homelessness agencies, and they are known to inflate costs—minimum \$300 per week. A young person cannot sustain this independently. It is setting them up to fail and be in the same situation in one week's time, rotating through the cycle of the responses I have mentioned above.

Shared amenities that are barely acceptable is substandard living. Further, there is exposure to trauma and ongoing concerns for their own personal safety. Young people constantly circulate between these options until something safe, secure and sustainable comes along. Sometimes, when there are no options left, young people resort to sleeping rough in their cars, in tents, in unoccupied houses or in improvised dwellings. Further, what if a young person is under 18? What if they have children? What if they are a victim of family violence? What if they have a disability or a significant mental health diagnosis? Depending on the answers, these unfortunately further limit and complicate the options I have presented before you. Last year Melinda and I attended the Victorian Homelessness Conference, where the keynote speaker, Melanie Redman, reminded us of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data analysis that revealed 40 per cent of homeless Australian young people aged 15 to 24 who seek help from homelessness agencies are still unhoused at the end of their support period due to the lack of permanent housing options for young people. We resonate with this in Shepparton—in fact we believe there are more there. Further, the longer it takes to resolve a young person's homelessness the greater risk of lifelong impacts, including mental ill health, disengagement from work and education, justice system involvement and recurrent homelessness. We have asked the people what they need: they have told us they need a home. We are continuously working within a system that does not have enough solutions. The solutions are houses to call a safe, secure and sustainable home. Young people need a home.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Renae. Now, have you got the answer?

Ms LAWLEY: The answer? Well, I do want to reiterate what it is like to work in that field every day, and I think that is what we wanted to bring across today. It is a very difficult position to front up every day. When you do not really know about homelessness services, you go to the Bridge and you go, 'Well, you've got houses, haven't you?'. No, we have not, but you cannot say that. So it is this continual juggling. It is like a holding pattern at the airport. It is a 13-week support period. Well, that is not going to find a solution.

What I wanted to draw attention to today is what it is like for that workforce. How do you support a workforce where they know they cannot provide the very solution that the person is asking for for them? They build rapport; they look for other opportunities. Before I go on to the solution, I do want to say that what we can do with that time we are with them is to build the skills, similar to what the foyer said. You take that strength-based approach. I was going to point out that we say to them, 'Can you find a housing solution? Use your best practice frameworks, use a strength-based approach. Remember to emphasise and promote self-determination, but make sure you don't get them dependent. We don't want them to be dependent on the system', so they go, 'Arrgh!', and everything is going round and round and round. I suppose I just wanted to reiterate that. As a CEO I need to protect that workforce.

Then if we move on to 'What can we do?', I would like to draw attention to what is happening in Geelong. It is called the Geelong Project, and it is an opportunity to provide support earlier. If we have got this fantastic workforce that can work with the young people, work with the families, do family mediation, why can't we do that earlier? At the moment if you think of our response to youth homelessness as a continuum, the Bridge would be near the end. We are at the crisis end; we are up there with the youth refuge. We are trying to find a solution that is not really forever, but we will put something there as much as we can. So what if we use that workforce at the beginning, before the young person even knows they are homeless? I have worked with young people for a long time; they might not even recognise that they are about to be homeless. Why can't we use the expertise of that workforce earlier? That is what they are doing in Geelong.

What happens in Geelong is that they use a survey within a school setting, and that helps to determine the risk: the risk of youth homelessness, the risk of school disengagement and also—not as well researched, but it is still looking very good—of mental illness. So between those three risk factors, there is your risk of homelessness. That is what we would be dealing with when it gets bad enough. Well, we do not want to wait until it is bad enough. We want to work with them now, with a really skilled workforce that really, really values young people and can see their promise.

With this survey, the schools do it once a year. The results are then put into three tiers—the most critical, the ones that we should watch and do the most early intervention with and the other ones that are not so bad and that maybe just the school welfare system can support. So the concept is you use our workforce to go in there and start the family mediation then, start the communication skills, focus on that relationship not breaking down. What they have found in their evaluation is that reduced youth homelessness by 40 per cent, and that was in a very short time. They were seeing around 200 a year, and it did drop that much. Have you had the opportunity to listen to it yet?

The CHAIR: Not yet. We will.

Ms LAWLEY: So, yes, we have been really, really promoting that approach. It is also known as the COSS model—so the community of schools and services—and it talks about us all working earlier, so redirecting that effort and doing it within the school, which still provides a protective factor, they are still connected. Because we know that what happens with young people who are at risk of homelessness: they drop off from school very early. So that is our solution, and we are really happy to talk a little bit more about it. I have lots here, but—

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you so much, Melinda,

Ms LAWLEY: Questions?

The CHAIR: Absolutely. Just seeing that sort of Wizard of Oz whizzing-around cyclone that you are sitting in there, yes, being proactive and early would be so much more rewarding to your—

Ms LAWLEY: Well, just to hear those figures over six months: 159 young people, four into transitional housing, maybe four or five into the foyer—that leaves 150, 145, still not really housed appropriately. I suppose the other interesting point for me was we have got HEF—that is for these sorts of situations—but I do not know whether you would be really pleased with what we are paying for, you know?

The CHAIR: No, that is right, like a shipping container or a week in a tent.

Ms LOVELL: Really dodgy motels.

Ms LAWLEY: There are a lot of things happening in the system where they go, ‘Oh, are youth agencies involved—maybe it’s now \$20 more a week’, you know? It is not the best use of the funds, and of course we are not going to not put a roof over someone’s head, but it is not ideal, and I suppose that is what this circling is, this holding pattern.

The CHAIR: And working that 13-week model as well.

Ms LAWLEY: Yes, and then in Shepparton you think about we have events here, where young people are the first to lose their accommodation. We have fruit pickers come in. There are a whole lot of other things that are—

Ms FORD: Local to our community.

Ms LAWLEY: local to the community that are in this mix as well. That is what we needed to draw attention to.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, ladies. From our travels and what we are learning from overseas, Housing First is a key motivator. Clearly the youth issues and the demand for housing up here for the kids are a disaster—for getting kids into transitional let alone getting them into affordable housing. Obviously our goal is to keep people in their homes where it is safe to do so. From a social responsibility view, that is what we should be doing, but how do we generate and how do we push? I am only going to say this because I have a farm not too far from here, so I am familiar with the area, but in terms of having affordable housing options—I do not want to say tiny houses, because I hate that term—are there affordable housing models? How do you see affordable housing models—what we can do?

Ms LAWLEY: The foyer is a type of affordable housing model, but otherwise it is some sort of use of the houses that are already here, and it is using that social conscience, pushing social conscience on landlords. It is just saying, ‘How can you make that available?’. We have a workforce that would support young people while they are in the homes. At the moment we are looking at: is it possible for us to get some dedicated youth-specific houses, and then we support them?

One of our programs is called Cradle to Kinder. It is for young women under 25 with children, and it is a four-year program. If we could find a house, we can do the four years. We have this terrible situation that has just occurred where the young person is pregnant, about to have the child; the child will not be able to stay with this young person because they are going to be discharged into homelessness. So not only is this young person not in a home, we are now putting pressure on the child protection system to find a home for this child. This young person has done everything right. They have come to our antenatal classes—they are totally involved—and yet they are living in a youth refuge and cannot stay there. It is where all the different systems touch together, and this is what we are talking about.

So we have a worker who will work with this young person for four years. Once that baby is born we can stay in there and support. We need the landlords to be aware of the fact that if they say to this real estate, ‘I’m willing to take a young person that has got support’, whatever, they are the sorts of changes we need to make.

Mr BARTON: And what work have you done around that sort of stuff, and how successful? Because I hate to say this: it does not sound very successful so far.

Ms LAWLEY: Well, yes. We got a solution to that one, didn’t we?

Ms FORD: Yes.

Ms LAWLEY: Just a week ago?

Ms FORD: Yes, and a lot of funding, a lot of advocacy. The young person is incredibly determined as well, and ultimately a bit of timing—something came up at the right time.

Mr BARTON: Are the landlords saying to you, ‘Look, we don’t trust you’re going to pay the rent’? Is that what the core problem is?

Ms FORD: Yes, ups and downs.

Ms LAWLEY: I think it is just there is so much demand on the houses, why take a risk? That is what I am talking about—that social conscience.

Mr BARTON: Kids matter; that is why we take the risk.

Ms LAWLEY: Yes, that is why we take the risk; that is right. But that is not always the case. So it is those sorts of opportunities. We are working with the Women’s Property Initiatives in Melbourne at the moment trying to say, ‘Can we afford to have a place that is just for, say, four young mothers to start with?’, because that is the one where we can have the biggest impact—it is two lives. So we are looking at that at the moment. Our board is very keen to work with them and see if we can basically purchase or fund a house that we can work with. So that is what we are talking about.

Mr BARTON: Just one more question. I am just curious. With the pickers coming into the area, are you saying that they come in and the rents get artificially pumped up when it is picking season?

Ms LAWLEY: Well, it is an artificial situation because it is the buyers’ market. Everyone is more desperate than normal.

The CHAIR: It is a sellers’ market, maybe.

Ms LAWLEY: Yes, a sellers’ market; that is right. We ought to get that right.

Ms MAXWELL: Just very quickly I would like to say thank you for the work that you do. I have worked in the homelessness sector and know how difficult it is—Melinda, what you were saying about looking after your staff—and I commend you guys so highly for the work that you do and the contribution that you make to those young people’s lives. Thank you.

Ms FORD: Thank you.

Ms LAWLEY: Thank you.

Ms LOVELL: I was just going to add, the reason why you are having so much trouble, and you have got 155 kids you cannot get into accommodation, is the public housing waiting lists here in Shepparton, which over the last five years have increased by 116 per cent. So we have gone from 600 in September 2014 to 1297 in December 2019 waiting to get access to public housing. So there is a big gap there. But also, even more importantly, the priority waiting list for the public housing has increased by 253 per cent—so from 180 to 636 families waiting on that priority list, and they are people who are actually at risk of homelessness, are escaping domestic violence and have special housing needs. So we need far more investment in that public housing space from this Government to assist you to do the great work that you do.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. I loved your proactive approach of saying, ‘If we could’, and I am guessing that we need to be recommending that funding models look a bit different, so something like the COSS program can be implemented here and enable you to provide that support earlier and possibly for longer than nine or 13 weeks.

Ms LAWLEY: That is right, and what is interesting about that model is it has been picked up around the world. We have just been emailed a link to the *Seattle Times* because we went to a conference late last year and there was a reporter there, because they were so interested in the work that we are doing here. But we have got one site, and what we are trying to say is that there are other sites where we could be trialling this, and it is about the departments working together. Because it is done in a school, does that mean it is the department of

education? Or because it is the workforces coming from DHHS, do they own it? Who owns it? It is actually together, and it is that community. We all have to be working together to say, 'We've got the solution; how about you thinking about how to pay for it or realign it?', because that is what it actually is. They have the workforce, it is just they are waiting up here at the cliff.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Ms LAWLEY: Why can't we start it earlier?

The CHAIR: Yes, create a fence back there. Again, just to reiterate, and I am sure on behalf of the Committee, thank you so much for the work you are doing. Thank you so much for spending the time and giving a really thoughtful snapshot of what it is like to be in the middle of that hurricane. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.