

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Shepparton—Wednesday, 11 March 2020

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WITNESS

Ms Marie Murfet, Hub Manager, Hume Community Hub, VincentCare.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming, Marie, and thank you for your submission. Just to explain: all evidence taken at this hearing today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and by the standing orders of our Legislative Council. This means that any information you give today is protected by law. However, any comment that is repeated outside may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. This is being recorded for our Hansard. You will receive a transcript of that. They also have your submission so they can understand some of the words. When you get that, if you could just have a quick look at it and make sure that we have not made any real errors in it. Eventually that will go up on our website and will form part of our Inquiry and no doubt part of our recommendations.

Marie, if you would like to start with a few opening comments, and I think you have got a PowerPoint for us, and then we will open it up to the Committee's questions.

Ms MURFET: All right. First of all I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Yorta Yorta and Bangerang peoples of the Kulin nation, and to pay my respects to elders past and present. I am here on behalf of VincentCare, of course. My colleague Paul Turton sends his apologies, as does Rachel, who is the manager of the specialist family violence program that I manage within the Hume Community Hub in Shepparton. She is actually at a round table in Melbourne—Refuge Round Table—looking at the pathways in and out of refuge for our women impacted by family violence, and children of course.

Of course VincentCare welcomes the parliamentary Inquiry. It provides homelessness supports as well as other supports to disadvantaged people within the communities of Victoria. They have a range of outlets, of course, but I am just going to make more reference, I suppose, to the programs that we have or that we facilitate out of the Hume hub.

Visual presentation.

Ms MURFET: Sections of this PowerPoint you would have already seen Paul and our colleagues in northern present.

The CHAIR: In Epping, yes.

Ms MURFET: But there are a couple of particular slides that I just wanted to make reference to around the end. Of course we support the CHP's call for urgent investment in social housing, talking about the early and responsive engagement improving outcomes—as we know—and the integrated support that sustains housing and participation. I think the previous speakers also mentioned this—this collegiate support and collaboration and sharing of information and sustained support. Not just working for two hours here or three days here and handing them on to another agency—it is this whole-of-collegiate support and wraparound models of care to our most vulnerable.

The next slide just shows the increase, of course, in the data in homelessness over the years, and I think Paul would have spoken to that at the last presentation. I guess the crux of the matter is that we are looking at Victoria's housing stock to meet the national average of 4.5 for all housing. I guess that is the purpose of the Inquiry—to see where there are some failings and lack of contingencies or synergies across the sector. The demand is greater than the quality of beds, and that is probably the understatement of the hearing. When we can look at early and responsive engagement, I think the first thing is to look at: what quality availability of beds do we have across the state?

The two largest causes, of course, of homelessness are the accommodation needs and domestic and family violence. Just these two causes alone average 76 per cent of all presentations that we know of, particularly across our program field. And I just wanted to talk to our specialist family service model that we facilitate here in Shepparton. It is a crisis response, which means it is short-term, specialist family violence care. We have a 24/7 on-call model and we have a dispersed model of refuge properties—four of those—that are managed by BeyondHousing, but we manage the client base in there. As it is, it is only a six-week term, and from that we

try to work to facilitate a safe, effective pathway for women. So women will come into refuge—it can be from anywhere across the state. We do not house women from Shepparton in refuge because of the high propensity for compromise of property and the risk of safety to them. And it is all negotiated through Safe Steps—about where the woman feels there is no connection, where she might be safe. So she will come here into refuge.

Children are not schooled while they are in refuge because perpetrators seem to always find out where they live. So it is a really sensitive area of support, and while you are doing that you are trying to transition them out to a safer place to live where they are going to feel supported. So we rely on our sector supports across other areas: Bendigo, Ballarat. It could Mildura; it could be anywhere. But it is hard to uproot them from Dandenong to here and then say, 'Well, you can't go back to Dandenong'. You might not necessarily want to stay here, so where do you choose to live? So then you have got to spend that time first of all trying to sort through all the legal stuff and the complications of child protection coming into all of that, where children can, you know, quite often be removed if the woman is not in stable accommodation. I will get to one of the slides that talks about the number of women coming from accommodation into refuge or into supports, basically stepping down from accommodation into homelessness.

I will get to a scenario shortly. Okay, this says it all—'motels and misery':

The time when I first left my husband due to DV, I was in a motel and that was not appropriate for me and my children.

Unsafe, staying in their room—it is just so unsafe for them to come out and share the pool or the playground with the other kids, and mums do not have a place where they feel safe. I am just trying to find the slide—sorry. Here we go: 'integrated support'. This is just for the year 2019, January to December last year. We had a 252 total of women come into the service with 343 children. The issue that we have and that I will talk about is those 343 children are at risk of generational homelessness. I really think that in most of the services, and certainly in this program, we are ill equipped to deal with this next generation, particularly when they have got to miss out on school—just seeing them come into the office before we put them into refuge and what little supports we can provide for the children while mum is still having a debrief and telling her story, sometimes for the sixth or 10th time. That is one of the issues that we try and work with when we are doing handovers or supporting them from refuge into accommodation or into moving on into a safe space. It could be family that they end up going on to. Again that is pretty risky. Particularly here in Shepparton, if they choose to live here in Shepparton, there are no short-term, transitional spaces or good, long-term, safe accommodation to bring them out of refuge so that we know we can start planning—'Okay, we've got stock available. We need you here for six months while we wrap some care around you here—crisis intensive care. With that we're going to work with the schools, we're going to work with the other service providers, and we'll hand you over to, for example, Primary Care Connect, who will then take you on that journey further'. That is the gap that we have, and I think it is a huge gap—not only for the mums, but it is a huge gap for how we manage to safely bring those kids into accepting. They have been exposed to family violence, now they are exposed to homelessness.

The CHAIR: Do they get counselling at the same time?

Ms MURFET: We outsource counselling. We have a number of programs that sit alongside our specialist family violence program, and one of them is flexible support programs so that we can then link them into counselling for mum and the children, specifically for the children. Another program is for CALD women without visa and with no income. We have a couple of small buckets of money, but again the complexities that come with CALD or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients are those family connections and those family ties and historical familiarities that are so hard to break for anybody, but more particularly, I think, for CALD women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children. One of the things that we have to do is connect them back to community and culture. It is one of our obligations to do that. We cannot, you know. To some degree we cannot meet those obligations that we have because linking them back to country or back to family is often quite unsafe. So it is managing all those complexities and getting the full story so that you know what supports to bring in to wrap around them where they feel like someone is listening and there is light at the end of the tunnel—they are going to have their own home again and a space where they are going to feel safe. Mind you, it might be loaded with CCTV and all sorts of other security mechanisms, but it is home. One hundred and sixty-one of those women had children. The other 91 were single women.

The next slide over shows over 100 of those women who presented last year actually were the primary leaseholders or the primary nominated people for the lease or the ownership of the house, so they have walked straight out of that into homelessness. So when you think of it in that context—it is really not until you hear

some of the other stories as well and you just add this one thing onto another—it is just not fair, and it is: how do you deal with that? What are the answers? We can keep them safe for six weeks. In some cases, in the last six months, two of our properties have been compromised, and that is because the perpetrators found out where they are. So we have had to hand those back and get another one from BeyondHousing. I do not think that the dispersed model works. After the family violence royal commission, of course, one of the recommendations was the core and cluster model, which is something that we are looking at in partnership with BeyondHousing. But again that is short-term crisis and only three different sets of accommodation. It also gives mum and the kids an opportunity to share stories if they want to—be in a normal kind of backyard, playground.

The CHAIR: Kids to have someone to play with.

Ms MURFET: Kids to have something. They are just being retraumatised day after day, and our specialist case managers take into consideration the whole of the family needs, not just Mum's. But, of course, if she is unwell then that is just going to flow on down to the kids.

As I say, we are poorly equipped, and I think most agencies will say that, unless they are specifically child-specific agencies. This is where we have the issue, I think, and the added imposition of child protection in that there is always the risk once they step out of secure accommodation into homelessness that they are going to lose their children, so the sooner we can get them through that pathway from refuge into safe, secure and long-term accommodation—not just short-term, because it is only going to disrupt learning again and risk the safety again.

One thing I think we do well here to a degree is—I am speaking specifically for the specialist family violence program—we do have a really good collaborative approach, but we all come together and at the end of the road there is still nothing there. I think that is why you are here. I am not sure what the answers are, but if you are coming from a trauma-informed recovery approach to people's healing or helping them to heal, then part of that of course—and the most substantive part of that—is housing and safety within that home. We work to the strengths of the woman, and the children even to a degree. But when they are at their lowest and escaping family violence it is really hard for them to consider their strengths as well. But just look at the deficits: 'I now don't have a home. My children don't go to school. Where am I going to live? I don't have an income'. So all those things are taken into consideration when we are trying to work on this pathway to a safe place to live.

The CHAIR: Yes, a future.

Ms MURFET: So do you have any questions?

The CHAIR: If you have got any recommendations that you want to leave us with, then we will open it up for some questions.

Ms MURFET: Okay. I guess the two recommendations we have are: safe, secure and sustainable housing stock; and integrated, long-term shared care to independence, I think, for women and children—not just women and children but all those. I think the shared care approach, because we just cannot do it on our own and they cannot. Our clients do not really care where the funding comes from. They are not interested in that. They are just interested in the supports and the genuine, honest supports that can be promoted and put around them.

The scenario I have is: we have had a woman in refuge. She is a CALD lady. Her mum speaks very little English—five children, comes from south of Melbourne. The reason why she is here is there is no connection and no risks, but the tentacles reach so far from the perpetrator's component of it, or his family side, it is really difficult to sustain them in refuge. We are getting now up to our six weeks, so we really need to be looking at it. But she is so afraid to leave that because we do not have a lot to offer and she is not sure where to go. She has not lived in Australia all her life so she does not know how far Bendigo is or Ballarat or Mildura or even Sydney: 'Can we move to Sydney? Will I be safe in Sydney?'. 'Well, what are your connections to Sydney? What do you know about Sydney?'. So all these complexities you just have to consider, and I really put my hat off to the workers that work with them. They do not have the answers, but what they do is try and support them out of crises into long-term safe accommodation.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Marie, and I think certainly that shared care approach has been one of the themes that has been coming through, in enabling funding to support that approach because that requires some flexibility.

Ms MAXWELL: Marie, firstly I would just like to say that sitting here—and over the other towns that we have visited and hearing similar stories—I cannot help but think that, particular around family violence, this whole system is just so backwards in that we continue to have to remove women and children from a home. Why aren't we doing that with the men that are perpetrating? I do understand that they are your fundings, but there have got to be devices or frameworks that we can use to be able to remove them. I mean, they can still work or whatever, but we are uprooting these children who, as you just have said, then do not access education.

Ms MURFET: In the time they are in the refuge.

Ms MAXWELL: What do they do in that refuge all day? It is horrendous. So we are actually contributing to that trauma by having to move them, and then they are concerned about their safety. So these children are being removed out of the home that they know.

Ms MURFET: All their beds, their clothes, toys.

Ms MAXWELL: So that is something that we certainly need to have consideration for in this Inquiry. That just seems ridiculous to me.

The other thing that I would ask, if you could just expand on a little bit, is: one of the things that you have noted here is dedicated housing stock for exiting prisoners or psychiatric units. Can you explain a little bit more about what that could perhaps look like?

Ms MURFET: I think in that context that would be more metropolitan based. However, my past history was in Corrections Victoria, and one of the issues we had was transitioning them from prison, of course, into home. When they are released they have got to have accommodation. So therefore aunty, uncle or cousin or sister will say, 'Yes, he's got a room here'—well, he actually doesn't; he has a couch, or she has a couch—not understanding that that is a form of homelessness, and there are not those facilities. We do not have halfway houses that are for just prisoners to move from prison to there and then from there they have got work—they start looking for employment, and hopefully the employment will lead into being able to afford to pay longer term accommodation or their own safe home, safe space. While I was with corrections—and I just digress a bit—I did a Churchill Fellowship on the responsiveness of corrections across the nation. Probably the best one I ever saw around transition supports and responsive supports exiting prison was in Canada, where they bought old motels and they had actually done the motels up. So each exiting prisoner—they had male motels and those for females—would go from prison into one of the rooms. They would still have a central point where they would check in and out. Some of them might have been on community-based orders. But they had the opportunity from there to go out to work every day—be paid, and then be supported into accommodation. That is the model that I would like to see—that core and cluster model—for, I think, lots of areas of disadvantage, where you have still got this central point of security. That is not just to keep you safe and secure but all the others. So that in and of itself.

But when we talk about the refuges, I asked the very same question: what are we doing? Why are we not doing this? Why are we not bringing in the supports? You cannot in the dispersed model. With the core and cluster model you may be able to, and in fact our refuge in the Northern Territory, in Tenant Creek—that I had the opportunity to spend some time being the CEO of and developing their new information sharing guidelines—was a refuge in and of itself where you could bring people like Centrelink in. You could bring the educators in, the schools in, or children would be picked up and taken to school. So there was no restriction on their access to the services—their important life services, like education. I think we have got funding for what is called 'keeping women safe at home'. So that means if he leaves—or removing him—but that is generally if he is incarcerated in prison, or where she feels safe. Again you have got to get in, change the locks, do the security things. That is a good model, but she is still unsafe because if the perpetrator is intent on being a perpetrator, then it is not really going to keep her safe for a long time. So what is being done around the perpetrators? What programs and services are there to mitigate the risk to her and the kids? The ideal would be to keep them at home. That is their home. They are entitled to be safe there. And then I will go on another tangent: remove him, do this, put him—you know, yes.

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks, Marie. One of the measures that you have mentioned over here is prisoners social housing. We all want to see that. But the other one is a realistic cap on rental charges. How do we do that? You are saying that there is a shortage of affordable rental properties, especially one bedroom. So how do we put a

realistic cap? What are the ways that we can do that so that it is more affordable for people who are on some sort of allowance?

Ms MURFET: It is the one-size-does-not-fit-all basket. I think that you need to be assessed. If I am a woman who is escaping family violence and I have got two or three or five kids and I am only getting Centrelink as my main income, then I do not just want the \$75 a fortnight, or whatever it is, rent rebate. I need my situation to be assessed independently. I know that is in some cases unrealistic, but it is the only way so that you are paying within your means and you are able to live within your means. One of the things to support that is that we have got a financial counselling capability team within the hub as well. They will quite often work with the women and Centrelink on their financial needs and trying to sort out their financial aspects so that they are able to budget and accommodate the expenses around rent and other things, so long-term—not just short-term but long-term—supports around how they are going to manage that. Especially if he is incarcerated, she is not getting any extra, unless he is out working. To consider that one size just does not fit all and to look at each independent case on its own—

Ms LOVELL: But each independent case is looked at on its own now, because whilst they say that public housing is 25 per cent of income as rent, there are all sorts of allowances that are exempted. So someone with four or five kids would probably only be paying 14 per cent their income. Because when I was Minister, we did a review of all the rent. There are a lot of allowances that are exempted from the income test, and it is only their base pension that is actually assessed. With multiple children they are paying down about 14 per cent of income as rent.

Ms MURFET: I think for them to be able to budget around that—but if they have not been the primary income earner, they have not been the primary money holder, that can be difficult. That is just another area that needs to be worked on around the collective supports.

Mr BARTON: Marie, if I can just take you into another space, which I find very difficult: we have got mums escaping violent relationships, getting moved into accommodation which is not appropriate, and those mums then are having their children removed. Is that a thing, and how big a thing is it?

Ms MURFET: It is a significant thing, and quite often women who come to us are generally already in the sights of child protection or working with child protection. That is just another complication for us to consider, because child protection will come through the child's eye and the safety of the child rather than the whole of family violence. It is not always a good place to be, I think, because all you want is to keep your little family together and you have got child protection pulling the kids one way, or pulling you one way, and us trying to pull you in another way because our mandate is to keep you as safe as we possibly can. Sometimes you butt heads a little bit, but you have got to try and work around that. Each case is always a little bit different. It does not always work out for the best, and it can be quite sad in that case. But I think in a smaller town, in a place like Shepparton, you know who you can work with and how you can work with each other for the best outcome. It is just that the mum is the foreign one in this because she is not from Shepparton. If she is in refuge, she is from somewhere else, so this is all alien to her. Not even being able to go to the shops on your own and do your shopping is pretty hard, so we have got to get stock in or take them shopping. So not only are your homeless but you lose your independence, and that is a pretty scary thing.

Ms LOVELL: Marie, very early on in your presentation you spoke about the need for more safe, secure housing. Do you have any idea of the numbers of houses statewide or particularly here locally in our Shepparton catchment—what sort of numbers you are looking at needing?

Ms MURFET: No, sorry, I did not. I should have got that information from BeyondHousing, who have our numbers, but I did not, so—

The CHAIR: That is all right. They are coming. We will ask them.

Ms VAGHELA: Marie, in your submission you said one of the measures is about public and private funding to develop community housing. Has that been done before by anyone?

Ms MURFET: Sorry?

Ms VAGHELA: The public and private funding for community housing is one of the measures that you are suggesting in the submission that I have over here. Has that been done by anyone before? What sort of partnership? Are we talking about just a private organisation? And public?

Ms MURFET: Yes, I think VincentCare overall have their partnership arrangements. It is more metropolitan based than here. When we look at what we do here, we are not a homeless service out of Shepparton. We are primarily the specialist family violence, as much as we would like to—we get quite a number of calls for homelessness help and we have to refer them on to, for example, BeyondHousing and other agencies who do that in the area.

The CHAIR: Marie, thank you so much. Please pass on our thanks to the rest of St Vinnies. Great work, and it was wonderful hearing the passion from you. When did you do your Churchill?

Ms MURFET: In 2009–10.

The CHAIR: Actually, if you would not mind forwarding one on—

Ms MURFET: Yes, because it was an exceptional model and it is one that should be looked at being duplicated.

The CHAIR: Yes, if you would forward that on to Lilian, that would be really helpful.

Ms MURFET: I will.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.