

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Epping—Thursday, 27 February 2020

MEMBERS

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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

Ms Belinda Leon, Manager, Community Support, and

Ms Emma Antonetti, Equity and Impact Manager, Whittlesea Community Connections.

The CHAIR: I would like to declare open the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria and welcome everyone. If you could put your mobile phones, at the very least, to silent; we do not mind the vibration. This is the first time I think that a committee has come out to Whittlesea, so we are really pleased to be here and we have been really pleased by the welcome and the response that we have had to this public hearing.

Could I begin this hearing by acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of this land that we are meeting on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and family. I particularly want to welcome any elders of our community here today, particularly those who may be coming today who will impart their knowledge on this issue to the Committee, and those who are observing in the gallery. Hansard will be recording this. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by our *Constitution Act* and the Legislative Council standing orders. So this means any information you give to us today is protected by law; however, any comments repeated outside may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. You will get a transcript of this hearing in a few days, once Hansard has got back home, so you will be able to pick up any mistakes we have made—any typos, that sort of thing. But ultimately it will be posted up on our website and it will be made public.

Thank you again for making the time. Thank you for your submission. If you would like to make some opening remarks, then we can open it up for questions.

Ms LEON: We are representing Whittlesea Community Connections this morning. We are an independent place-based, community-led organisation that offers a range of generalist programs, including emergency relief, legal services and settlement programs, to name a few. We do see a number of community members present to us experiencing homelessness or the risk of homelessness. I have got some data at the back here—appendixes—of just how many we are seeing, but that number is continuing to increase over the years.

Ms ANTONETTI: And I think the numbers are often under-represented. People often do not recognise that they are at risk of homelessness or experiencing that, because they might be staying with friends or in an unsafe situation, so often the data does not always capture the story.

The CHAIR: Yes, exactly. Is there anything else you would like to speak to?

Ms LEON: What we are seeing is a real diversity in people experiencing homelessness. It really has shifted away from the single, middle-aged male stereotype from back in the 90s. Now we are seeing newly arrived migrants and refugees in overcrowded homes and at risk of homelessness. We are seeing young people homeless. We are seeing families sleeping rough. We are seeing women experiencing family violence.

Ms ANTONETTI: I think a lot of people are at risk, and often it just takes one little thing to go wrong in someone's life. The traditional services that were set up for homelessness in the past do not really quite meet the needs of what we are really seeing at the moment.

Ms LEON: Anecdotally—I did not provide it in one of these case studies—we worked with a nurse at the local hospital that was homeless and employed, so the face of homelessness is really shifting.

Ms ANTONETTI: I think there are a number of underlying factors that I am sure you have heard before many times: family violence; mental health; health implications; family breakdown; a lack of affordable housing; and not enough diverse housing options in the city of Whittlesea in particular, which is really built for households with families, so the singles often do not have a lot of options in this municipality. So there are a number of underlying factors, and often the response is really responding to one issue and cannot look at a whole range of issues in the response. So we really need a multifaceted response that looks at a lot of those

underlying issues, but ultimately there is just not enough housing. The housing service is built to support people in crisis and then transition and then long term, but the reality is that people get stuck because there is no pathway out. And often the housing options—there are some supports, but I think employment is really key to getting people out into more permanent, stable and secure options. Often the supports are looking at one thing but not a whole range of things.

Ms LEON: And it is just so complex because even though we are in an area where housing is more affordable compared to other municipalities, we still have 53.8 per cent of our residents experiencing some level of housing-related stress.

The CHAIR: Did you say 58 per cent?

Ms LEON: Sorry, 53.8.

The CHAIR: Wow.

Ms LEON: And that is both for mortgage and rentals.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Firstly, Chair, can I say thank you for bringing this Committee out to my community. It is lovely we are out here. The City of Whittlesea is not just the township of Whittlesea. People misunderstand that. It goes down to Lalor, on to Thomastown, to Bundoora, to South Morang—right across the spectrum. Some of those lovely houses with lovely cars in the driveway do not tell the true picture. I would like to ask you both, Emma and Belinda, about emergency housing. I think it is a challenge we have in this area. Would you like to reflect on the availability and supply?

Ms LEON: Absolutely. I am a local. I was born and bred here too, so I am really glad that you have come out and made the time to hear about what is happening in Whittlesea. We do not have any housing-related services or supports out here, apart from some outreach and transitional properties. Our closest access point is Preston. There is no family or youth crisis accommodation in the area, so people are expected to travel in the midst of a crisis to access support.

Ms ANTONETTI: A common scenario for us would be 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon someone comes to us and says, 'We don't have anywhere to stay for the weekend'. So our option is St Kilda crisis services. We had one a couple of weeks ago, and she said, 'I'm not driving to St Kilda; I'm going to sleep in the car'.

The CHAIR: Quite understandably.

Ms ANTONETTI: So we have a lot of scenarios like that: a lot of people sleeping in cars. Often the housing service in question is so inundated they really cannot help. So often it is one night maybe in a motel or a couple of nights in a hotel. There is not really that long-term option, so often people stay in unsafe situations because that is the reality.

Ms LEON: Especially for women with children, to be asked to travel over an hour to keep their children in school while they are in crisis accommodation is a huge ask.

The CHAIR: Absolutely.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, ladies, for coming, and as Craig said, it is a pleasure to be here and be out in this community. As you were giving some of the figures for the homelessness issues in this area, my first thoughts were, 'Surely there are some organisations in this area'. Having a homelessness background, working in the industry, I was thinking, 'Surely there are going to be some organisations or something'. But this is incredible, what you have raised, that there are actually no support services. What I was thinking was that people do not often just arrive at being homeless, and often there are not organisations that can provide that support before it gets to that crisis level. It sounds like that is really an issue out here. You do not have the organisations or the services either to prevent that from happening. Would that be—

Ms LEON: We have got very limited—DPV does have one small housing program that has a very small number of transitional properties, and we have got Merri Health out in Coburg that does outreach out here. But that is once someone is already in the service system, not—

Ms MAXWELL: So nothing in the preventive space.

Ms ANTONETTI: You are right. Absolutely, it is stacked towards a crisis, so often people have to wait until they have got nowhere to stay. Even support around rental arrears, you have to be in arrears in order to get the support. You are already sort of going towards homelessness at that point. You are going to get a notice to vacate or—

Ms MAXWELL: So what other option is there for people, other than to get to that crisis point before they can actually receive support? There is a lot of work to do in that early intervention space, in primary prevention.

The CHAIR: That follows on to a question I have, because obviously what we have heard to date is that the success rate for assisting someone who is at risk of homelessness is far greater than the success rate when someone is already homeless. What percentage of your clients are homeless compared to at risk of homelessness?

Ms LEON: It varies amongst our different funding streams. If we look at our emergency relief program when people come to us in financial need, the number of clients that are homeless far outweighs the number of clients that are at risk. But, like Emma said, we do not feel that it is a true reflection because it relies on people identifying themselves at risk of homelessness, and for some people, just even culturally, their definition of homelessness does not match our definitions.

The CHAIR: Yes. So probably because of a lack of services for people at risk of homelessness, where you are seeing far more people actually in homelessness.

Mr BARTON: A couple of questions: we understand that a very large section of the community is women escaping violence. In Whittlesea we have got no emergency at all. Do you get any government funding or support?

Ms LEON: We support women to access Safe Steps, and they provide the crisis accommodation, and usually that is in a couple of local hotels. The cost associated with that just blows the budgets.

Mr BARTON: There is plenty of new housing development going up here. How is the rental market—I think I already know the answer to this, but I am going to put it on the record there—affordability for people who are on Newstart?

Ms LEON: It is not.

Mr BARTON: It is just none?

Ms LEON: Yes, so we have to often tell people that—when they come to us looking for and wanting private rental—it actually is unaffordable. One, you will not be approved by the rental agency, because they go at 30 per cent of your income, and two, any housing service will only fund or provide you with some rent in advance if your rent is less than 50 per cent of your household income. We know that with Centrelink benefits they have not risen as the same rate as the cost of living or housing affordability.

Ms ANTONETTI: Absolutely. That has got to be part of the solution. I know it is not a State jurisdiction, but Newstart Allowance is a big part of the problem.

Mr BARTON: We have certainly got to address why people are heading into homelessness, and we need to address it and we need to keep people in their homes, where it is safe to do so. So that is something that we are very interested in. One of the things that I am concerned about is the casualisation of the workforce, the gig economy. It is great if you are an investment banker and you are making plenty of money out of the share market and all this stuff, but at some stage someone pays. This financial stress which is sending these people into homelessness, is it about employment there, the casualisation?

I will just say that from my own background, we certainly know—from the taxi and hire car industry—that taxi people are sleeping in their cars.

Ms LEON: We absolutely are seeing an increase in the working poor in this country. There is no doubt about it, and there is no doubt that that has an impact on people's risk of homelessness. There are a number of people living in housing stress that for whatever reason are able to meet their rent, but they are going without in other ways. We do a lot of back-to-school—provide back-to-school funding and support, because outside of rent there is nothing left.

Ms ANTONETTI: Food insecurity in this area is huge, so people are missing out. They are not eating to be able to cover other costs.

Ms LEON: So it is a really complex issue, and I do think you have got a big job ahead of you. There is not one solution for this issue.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Just picking up Mr Barton's point, when Ford closed down and the supply chain got hit, it permeated right across this whole municipality. This is one of the fastest growing areas in Australia. South Morang, postcode 3752, is the fastest growing postcode in the country. What comes with that is a whole lot of different cultures as well, and there are many, many people in this community where English is the second language, and the fastest growing language in this community, Chair, is Punjabi.

So I am interested, when we talk about the challenges—you mentioned Northern Hospital, the busiest hospital in the state, with 60 babies a week—what do we do, what services can we bring to support those where English is not their first language, and they have trouble navigating their way through a system. What do we do about that?

Ms ANTONETTI: I think there are different levels or supports depending on how people come into the country. So we do have a number of people seeking asylum in this community who have no income support whatsoever. So the risk of homelessness for that group is very, very, very high. So I think some basic human rights—attending to those—is one thing. I think for newly arrived refugees who have come from a humanitarian background it is a bit different again, and for skilled migrants—we see a lot of skilled migrants who are doctors back home, engineers, who just really struggle to get jobs, so they end up driving a taxi. So I think for that group they do not get any settlement support. They are not eligible. But I think they do need some support to transition into local employment markets, for sure. So I think it depends where they are from and how they have got here to tailor those supports accordingly.

Ms LEON: And I think it is about developing a model of support or a service system that is flexible and can meet cultural needs, because again we have the assumption that people understand our service system and understand how to access support, and it is totally different.

Ms MAXWELL: Is that something that a TAFE college could provide, do you think?

Ms ANTONETTI: Yes, absolutely. So Melbourne Polytechnic does do a pretty good course for skilled migrants to transition into employment, but it is not enough.

Ms MAXWELL: It is not broad enough.

Ms ANTONETTI: Yes, it probably does not suit everyone, particularly for women who are caring for children. Often they miss out on that integration support into Australian community. They are often locked out, so it takes a little longer for women with caring responsibilities. But absolutely, I think that is probably the solution.

The CHAIR: Do you think that there is something we can do better just in the coordination of existing services? We have heard a lot that there is a bit of siloing, and as I am hearing from you some of that assistance does not kick in until someone is actually on the street.

Ms LEON: I am going to be a bit more radical and say—and if I just think of my family's experience in migrating to this country in the 70s at a time when public housing was considered part of the benefit and entitlement that you received if you were on a working class salary. I think we have shifted to more of an opinion where public housing is not an entitlement—that it is a burden and that it is for a particular type of person. I think if we go back to looking at housing as affordable housing and equitable for all, then I think we

are going to start to address this issue around homelessness and this issue around a complex service system, because the bottom line is that it does fall to bricks and mortar and just more available, diverse properties—and a government investment.

The CHAIR: So start with that and then work backwards?

Ms LEON: Yes, because at the moment the onus really is around individuals when they are experiencing a number of structural disadvantages.

Mr BARTON: I would just like to ask because of the amount of new homes which are being built up here, your view on perhaps a percentage of new homes in these big developments which should be made available for affordable housing? Before you start saying yes—

Ms LEON: Absolutely.

Mr BARTON: is there a downside? Is that going to drive up the price of other property? What is your view on this?

Ms LEON: I do not think there is a downside. Absolutely there needs to be private sector investment, and this needs to be a shared responsibility. I think there is work that can be done with the wider public around acceptance of social housing and reducing that stigma.

Mr BARTON: And there is a stigma, isn't there?

Ms LEON: Absolutely.

Mr BARTON: Certainly this has been happening the UK for—what—30 years? We should not have a stigma for social housing. I think it is a good, responsible—

Ms LEON: And it goes back to being part of—not a package, but it was recognised that if you are a factory worker, you get access to housing.

Mr BARTON: My old dad was a train driver when he first arrived here in 1952, and he had a railway house. We thought it was pretty cool.

The CHAIR: It sounds cool. Did it have a train?

Mr BARTON: I did not get to do it, but my brother certainly got to ride the trains going to the football.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Get over it.

Mr BARTON: I am not letting it go.

Ms ANTONETTI: I think also that goes back to the point around who we think is at risk of homelessness or at risk of housing stress. The stigma is attached to particular ideas of who that is, but in fact it could be anyone.

Mr BARTON: Absolutely.

Ms ANTONETTI: If we change some of those perceptions—we have to have social housing; otherwise these issues are being really pushed to the margin.

The CHAIR: And Belinda made that great analogy with the nurse: that if we want nurses to be living near the Northern Hospital, they need to be able to afford to live here, which means that social housing is not something for the lowest of the low. It should be for a good percentage or a broad sector of our working families and working people.

Ms ANTONETTI: I think because there is not enough social housing that is what has happened. The eligibility criteria have been pushed and pushed, so there are now some real decisions around who is deserving poor and who is not, and that has created, I think, some of the stigma.

Mr ONDARCHIE: I will just make the point that Whittlesea Community Connections do a fantastic job with limited resources. But one of the other challenges that we face in this community is the extreme number of poker machines we have in the City of Whittlesea compared to other places. It adds another social and economic stress to this area as well.

The CHAIR: I was just looking for somewhere with a liquor licence that did not have a poker machine licence the other day, and it was not easy.

Ms MAXWELL: We have raised that a number of times when we have done the hearings. It has been difficult to find.

The CHAIR: We did not find a venue. That is right.

Ms MAXWELL: Chair, could I just ask one final question. Given that there is a high number of clients—49—who have experienced family violence, that would suggest to me that there obviously needs to be an increase in the number of family violence support services available to people and quite possibly a youth sector as well. Because of the complexities of homelessness and that wide plethora of issues that can arise, I think we need to start too with education, even in schools—simple things about budgets and things—so that people can become aware. I know it can happen to anybody at any time that all of a sudden you can find yourself in that position, but I think education has to be the baseline that we start with, which can provide people options of, ‘Well, I know that when I leave school this is the recommended market that I’m going to have to be paying rent, so how am I going to afford that? What do I need to be doing?’. I think improved education in those areas around basic living skills is something that our schools often are not doing enough of. There is so much focus on that academic ability that people are not getting everyday living skills.

Ms ANTONETTI: Yes. Some of the young people we talk to often talk about that being a gap, so often they do not know how to apply for a job or what a good resumé looks like. There is that gap, but also we see people who budget really well with very, very little.

Ms LEON: Also if you look at our youth program, we have got really high exemption rates of young people here in this area—with school. We have got lots of children who have experienced the trauma of family violence or have experienced the trauma of homelessness that are absent from the school system and have literacy and numeracy difficulties.

The CHAIR: And we need to find appropriate support services. I am very conscious that our time with you is running out. I was very interested in the Housing Brokerage and Support Project, which really gives a huge bang for the buck from what I could see there. I am wondering how that is going and note that this review was done a few years ago. Has that project expanded?

Ms LEON: It has. We now provide casework support to women who have experienced family violence to access and obtain private rental as well as have access to the brokerage loan fund. Out of 29 women that we have supported in the last six months, we have only been able to house three. We have gone in and we have tried to work with real estate agents to provide some education around family violence and the value for women and what it means in the recovery from the trauma of family violence to be able to obtain suitable and safe housing, and we are getting knockbacks from real estate agents saying, ‘We’re not keen. We’re not interested. We don’t care. It’s about pleasing the landlord and finding the best applicant’.

Again it goes back to Centrelink benefits and the cost of rent. Even though we are cold-calling real estate agents and saying, ‘Have you got any properties at the moment that are vacant that you’ve struggled to lease?’, we are coming across these real barriers.

The CHAIR: Yes. I wonder if you have got any thoughts on how Government might be able to provide a lever there, whether that is through education or through some sort of incentive model at the real estate level.

Ms LEON: Yes, I think both—I think something mandated and I think incentives.

The CHAIR: What would that look like? Do you know? I do not know what it would look like.

Ms LEON: I do not know the private real estate industry that well, but I do not know if it should be part of their licence that they receive some education around housing and the need for housing and just the benefits that it has to the wider community and to people if they do have access to long-term, suitable accommodation. Then maybe if there can be some incentives, something that would—

The CHAIR: If that person is linked to a support service like yours, then there should be greater trust from the agency.

Ms LEON: Yes. There are other models too with community housing that really try to make affordable rents as well, so maybe more investment in other types of it, because the private market is not going to cut it. We cannot rely on it.

The CHAIR: But they are going to have to be part of the solution.

Ms LEON: Yes, absolutely.

Ms MAXWELL: I have actually had some women come into my office who have experienced family violence and they have said something that could have really helped them was once they have been in the family home they have had to leave: if they have bought the house together, they have had to leave; they have then had to go into rental, which has been difficult and sometimes the housing they have found has not been suitable for them and their children. A number of them have approached me and said, ‘Is there any way that women who have had to leave their home who have experienced family violence could then go again for the first home owner grant?’.

The CHAIR: It is an interesting thought.

Ms MAXWELL: Because they have still got to pay rent, so they could be actually paying off their family home. It is settling; they know they do not have to move again if that house is sold. Would you see that as something—

Ms LEON: Yes, or even stamp duty savings.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Couldn’t they stay another half-hour?

The CHAIR: We should have actually planned for an overnight stay! That was really fantastic, and thank you for the work that you are doing as well. The breadth of it is astounding and really impressive.

Ms ANTONETTI: Thank you and thanks for having us. It is really important.

The CHAIR: As I mentioned, you will receive a transcript of this, so make sure we did not put bubblegum in there or something. Thanks very much.

Witnesses withdrew.