

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Epping—Thursday, 27 February 2020

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Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESSES

Ms Donna Bennett, CEO, and

Ms Jennifer McAughtrie, Operations Manager, Hope Street Youth and Family Services.

The CHAIR: I just have some formal words to say before we get going. As you know, this is the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under our *Constitution Act* and the standing orders of our Legislative Council; therefore any information that you provide today is protected by law. However, any comments that you might repeat outside this hearing may not be protected and any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, Hansard is here to record you, and from that you will receive a transcript in the next few days. I would encourage you just to check to make sure it is relatively correct—that we have got the accent just right in the transcript!—but ultimately that will go up on our website and be made public. We have got your submissions and information—thank you, Donna.

Ms BENNETT: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: But if you would like to make a few opening comments, and then we will open it up for discussion.

Ms BENNETT: Thank you. First of all, just to introduce myself: as you have seen with my card, I am Donna Bennett. I have actually been in the sector for over 30 years and my background is social work, so I have social work training and I have worked with young people for most of my career. I have also worked in the community development area for most of my career as well. And as you can see, I am the CEO. Jennifer McAughtrie is our operations manager and Jennifer has in excess of 25 years in this type of industry as well.

Hope Street was one of the first youth refuges to be funded in Victoria. We actually think it was about 1979, but I cannot quite get the records to that because we did not have the incorporations Act until 1981, so I need to say to people 1981 but from what other people tell me it was a bit earlier than that. We are youth focused. We are very proud of that. We are non-faith based and we are very proud of that. We have a very strong local-place response. That is the way in which we work. And by that I mean that we work with the wider community, so not just other homelessness services but we work outside of that—so local businesses, other community agencies, groups, schools, clubs and a whole range of different organisations and people who represent their local community. We have strong community integration and we believe that only together as a wider community responsibility—of course this includes government at all levels—can we resolve youth homelessness. It has to be a collective response from everyone.

Hope Street is well known for developing innovative models—models that are different—and I will talk a bit more about that today. We are also a nimble organisation because we are small. We are not a large corporatised organisation; we are small. We currently have an annual revenue base of about 4.3 million and we employ about 36 staff, so we are growing. That is where we need to head, of course, so we do not get caught up in a forced merge or anything. We are basically working towards that, but it means we are nimble, it means we can make decisions quickly and it means we can test things quickly. It means we do not have a whole pile of bureaucratic red tape to go through within our own organisation. It also means that the people in the organisation have good access to me, and I really like that. I think that is important, and I think it is important for me to have good access to the people across our organisation, including our clients.

Why youth focused? Youth focus is a specialist area of practice—an absolutely specialist area. I have been at Hope Street for 20 years. I am very clear about that. Why is it youth focused? Because young people are still in their developmental stages, so neurologically in terms of the brain developing and physiologically in terms of their body growth they require a very different response to adults. So we have to really tailor our services to young people, not expect young people to fit in with our service and the way we design our model—not at all.

Young people absolutely fall through the gaps. Mainstream services that focus primarily on adults—young people fall through them. Young people will turn up, but it does not necessarily mean that they are front and

centre for that agency. Often very simple things such as how welcoming the entrance area of an organisation is will put a young person off. Often services will require a young person to wait, possibly all day, for an appointment. Young people will not wait. It will not work. You will lose them. It is amazing that they have even walked into the front door to seek a service—because they do not trust adults. So we need to change the way that we work. We know young people fall through the gaps because of these most basic, simple things. When I talk about that I know the good work that agencies do. It is a hard area. There is a huge demand on resources. They do great work. Is it right for young people? Most of the time it is not.

Intensive support. We will see support programs funded, but are they wraparound, are they intensive, do they provide workers on site, do they provide workers after hours? That is what young people require and that is what young people tell us they like and they want. Flexible support—we were one of the first agencies to actually support agencies to offer young people after-hours support. To me it is a no-brainer. Young people are not going to be homeless between 9 and 5, and many of them are committed to school if they are in school, so they do not actually want to step out of school because that is the only normalisation that they might have in their life, and yet we do not open our services after hours or on a weekend. I mean, how crazy is that?

Hope Street, with our youth focus cap on, are very much about offering after-hours services. So we have our case managers available on the weekend who can go with a young person to a property inspection. That is about a youth-focused response, that is about flexibility. If we make an appointment with a young person and they do not turn up for whatever reason, fine. We will just make another appointment. What works for the young person? We know young people look at front and centre; they are not great at looking beyond that or planning ahead, and that is because neurologically they are not there yet. So we need to be walking side by side with them in terms of how they access our services.

Mr ONDARCHIE: They do not get punished for missing an appointment.

Ms BENNETT: No, absolutely not. We want to check that they are actually okay: ‘You’ve missed your appointment. Are you okay? Is everything all right?’. That is our focus about the young person.

Are you happy for me to continue with some of these points and then for you to ask questions?

The CHAIR: I am, yes.

Ms BENNETT: Is that working for you?

Mr ONDARCHIE: I could listen to Donna Bennett for hours.

Ms MAXWELL: Donna, before you go onto the next step, Chair, is it okay if I just ask one thing?

The CHAIR: Yes, of course.

Ms MAXWELL: Okay. So talking about young people missing their appointments, one of the issues around that is often you will have a support period that is that long, and if they miss their first six appointments that can be six weeks—boom—gone.

Ms BENNETT: Yes.

Ms MAXWELL: Do you think that there needs to be an increased amount of time for support periods for young people?

Ms BENNETT: Definitely. And I also think this is why it is important to have an intensive one-to-one worker relationship. Young people’s services require a higher level of funding because of that exact thing. It is about sometimes even knocking on the door, you know, ‘Are you up yet? Really important. Can I come in? We’ve got this appointment. Jump in the car. I’ll take you to the appointment’. It is all extremely overwhelming for young people to do any of the things, to navigate systems, to navigate appointments. You know, ‘What do I say when I go in and see the doctor on my own? I’ve never been to see a doctor on my own. How do I tell them what’s wrong? I might feel embarrassed. I don’t know the words. How do I describe it? How do I say to a GP, “I don’t understand what you’re saying to me”?’.

So with appointments we get that young people struggle with that and it is not intentionally. As I said, it is about where they are at. Of course you will always get some young people who will be fine with it, but this is generally speaking; so it is about a higher level of support in terms of workers who can actually be there to provide that one-to-one support. We know through the work that we do with young people and the feedback that we get from young people when they talk about the one thing that is really important to them, it is that relationship with their worker—so having a professional relationship, where they know they can call on their worker and the worker is just for them.

The other aspect that I am very proud of with Hope Street is that the young person is our primary client, not the family. It is a very important distinction. If young people think that you are there for the family and they are not the primary person, they will not trust you—right?—particularly if the family is the cause of their homelessness. So for us to be truly youth focused it is about saying to the young person, ‘You are paramount to us. We’re here to support you’. So when we ask them a question around ‘do you use drugs?’, they tend to be honest and tell us. We say, ‘We’re asking you not to punish you; we’re asking you so we can work out how we can support you in the best possible way’. Of course whatever support we do, we can only do what they agree to.

As you can see, I am very passionate about it, which is probably why I have been in the sector for most of my working life. So 6000 young people in Victoria are homeless—6000. We have 127 refuge beds in Victoria. We have very little social housing, public housing stock allocated for young people, very little transitional housing for young people. Young people represent 40 per cent of all people who are homeless—40 per cent. It is so shameful. It really is, in a First World nation like Australia. They are structurally disadvantaged because their income is the lowest. It is over 40 per cent of the Australian poverty line—34 and 44 per cent below the national poverty line.

Social housing is great, but can we get our young people into it? No, we cannot. They are competing with other people who are on higher incomes. They are competing with other people who are seen as being better tenants. So there is this automatic social perception about young people that young people are problematic. It is not always the case. In fact I would argue most of the time it is not.

In addition to those 6000 young people in Victoria who are homeless, there is a further 8000 living in caravan parks or overcrowded or improvised dwellings—8000. It is astonishing. I cannot believe it.

The CHAIR: Under some definitions they would be considered within the homeless cohort as well.

Ms BENNETT: Yes, that is exactly it, Fiona. That is exactly it.

The CHAIR: Saying 14 000.

Ms BENNETT: Their disadvantage is perpetuated even within the homelessness sector. It is perpetuated within the homelessness sector because they are not given priority. And, look, it is a terrible way to look at it because everyone needs a roof. Everyone needs safety and affordability, but I am here to advocate for young people, including young families. I truly believe that young people are more vulnerable because they are not neurologically fully developed. Physiologically they are not fully developed. Their needs are different.

What we need to provide young people with is stability. We need to keep them in their own community, so local place is very important. We need to reduce their isolation from their friends, from their family. Even if there has been a terrible family relationship, it is still important to a young person that there is some level of connection with the family.

Young people go through a terrible grieving process when they are not able to be with their family, because they are trying to reconcile with themselves as to why they are out of the family and their family is not the family like someone else at school might have. It is a very hard thing for a young person to try and reconcile with themselves. So we offer specialist counselling for young people to assist them with that, because we know that if young people can reconcile that, they are going to move through homelessness better and are less likely to remain homeless.

Keeping them connected to school, to any employment that they might have, and I thought your point earlier about the casualisation of the workforce—a big issue for our young people, highly casualised. One day they might get 3 hours work, and they will not know if they are going to have any work the following day. They cannot possibly—

Mr BARTON: They may not until on the day.

Ms BENNETT: Absolutely, and so trying to be able to plan your financial resources so that you can find somewhere to live and pay rent is very challenging in that situation. It is important that they have links to primary healthcare networks—ones that they actually are familiar with—and even simple things like that they are familiar with the transport system of their local area. In here one of our clients talks about how he had to come from Melton to our refuge in Brunswick and how it took him a while to navigate just the public transport system and how challenging it was having to cross a road with trams and how different it was—more traffic going faster, trams, crossing the road you had to be quick. Those things, when you are already traumatised, when your mental health and nutrition is very poor, when you are away from your loved ones—friends are very important to young people—it snowballs; it has a cumulative effect on young people.

Our recommendations in this report have been based around practices and models that we have tested over time. We know that they work. We see that it works, and this is the wonderful thing about working with young people—young people come with a lot of strengths and hope. They have got resilience, and we know that with certain types of interventions, certain types of support, we can actually successfully divert them from long-term homelessness. We know that. These models work. They are also very cheap models. They are much cheaper than kids being in care. They are much cheaper than young people being in juvenile justice. They are actually very affordable models. I do not need to tell you about the benefits along the way, the rippling effect of the benefits within the community and government et cetera around young people not being homeless or entrenched in homelessness. Would you like me to talk a bit about the models that we are proposing?

The CHAIR: Donna, I think if we can open it up for more open discussion, because I think your telling us about the models will come out in that naturally. I have a feeling people would like to ask you about some of those models and maybe hear from Jennifer as well on some of that. Just before we do open, is there anything you want to add, Jennifer?

Ms McAUGHTRIE: No, not just now, thanks.

Mr ONDARCHIE: I need to declare that I am a big fan of Hope Street and what they do. They are a very agile organisation, and I have learned from my experience with Hope Street that because they are a small, nimble, agile organisation, bigger is not necessarily better. The work that Donna, Jennifer, Olivia and the team do is just amazing. But given I know something about your organisation, I would like you to talk, for the sake of the hearing, a bit more about Boost and a bit more about Hope to Home.

Ms BENNETT: Great. Fantastic. Would you like to start with any of that, Jen?

Ms McAUGHTRIE: I am happy to start with the Hope to Home model. The Hope to Home model focuses not just on the housing needs of a young person, it looks at the holistic approach and it breaks it down, looking at health and wellbeing, the social connections and inclusion within a local community and the employment and training of a young person. But it also looks at how they can sustain private rental moving forward, because it is not a quick fix that we are looking for. This is about changing the life cycle of an individual, and that is where the successes have been. We have had the program evaluated within our Melton area and we have still got it running within Whittlesea, and it is of great success.

There is a longer term of case management that we have with the young people, which is slightly different to the PRAP model that the Government runs. So we can provide that episodic case management support for up to 12 months. That just shows the journey of change that a young person goes through. We recognise that there are hiccups along the way in life and we may have to intensify our support at the beginning, then we may tail it off and then again new situations arise which the young person has not had come around before and has not had the life experience to understand how to navigate, and that is where we might come in and provide that longer term support as well.

What we have noticed with young people who are on Centrelink benefits—Newstart and the Youth Allowance—quite often what we are seeing is that the single males and females are only able to access private rental, but it is shared accommodation, and that is not always the best for that young person. Young families, because they are on the parenting allowance, are able to access a smaller unit to enable that privacy and stabilisation, I suppose, as well, with connections to skills to support the next generation to be a bit more stable moving forward. Is there anything else I have not talked about?

Ms BENNETT: Can I just add to that? Thanks, Jen. That is fantastic. A big part of it are the relationships that we have with real estate agents. How we came about that model was that we found that young people were not accessing private rental; real estate agents were not giving them a go. Melton was one of the poorest areas. The statistics were terrible. So we thought, ‘Okay, we need to do something about this because we cannot get young people into social housing. Where else can we get them in?’. So we thought, ‘Private rental’. Part of the model is about building that one-to-one relationship with the real estate agent: ‘Okay, what security would they like?’, because they are not just going to take our word that our young people are fantastic and fabulous and going to be amazing tenants. Hope Street decided to be a co-lessee, so we signed the lease with them. No other organisation will do that. No other organisation—I say that with confidence. They will headlease a property and sublet it, but we sign our name on that contract with the young person, and that is our tick of confidence to the real estate agent to say, ‘Give this a go’.

The CHAIR: And this gives the young person that rental history that they will not get when there is a headlease and a sublease.

Ms BENNETT: Spot on. Totally. And apparently—because it has been a long time since I rented when I was a student—these days it takes six months before you can get a rental history. So we said, ‘We’ll be on the lease for six months, and then you can transfer the lease into your name’. That has worked well. So out of the number of tenancies that we have had—so 31—21 were sustainable beyond the six months. Twenty-one—how fantastic is that? How fantastic is that of young people? Because we do not make that happen; young people make that happen. But a part of the service that we provide, of course, because often it is their first experience, is that we have to have as part of our model that the worker can go and visit them on a regular basis. They can contact the worker. If something happens on a weekend, they have got someone to contact and speak to. We have flexible brokerage, where we are saying, ‘The first thing you need to do is pay your rent, but if you need money for food, we’ll give you some brokerage for food; we’ll give you some brokerage to help get your electricity connected; we’ll give you some brokerage for getting the lawns mowed so you pass the condition report’. You know, things like that.

The CHAIR: Getting some new sheets.

Ms McAUGHTRIE: Cleaning up the house as well.

Ms BENNETT: Yes, all of that stuff. You are involving them in the process; you know, ‘This is your home. Make it the way you want it’. It is an interesting point that Jen talked about with PRAP. Sorry, before I go onto PRAP, now we have real estate agents ringing us, and now we do not have to sign as many leases together because the real estate agents are happy. Part of the role of that worker is also to run workshops with—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Donna, I am just thinking that some of the previous people that we have heard from had completely the opposite experience with real estate agents—they do not want to hear about it, do not want to do it.

Ms BENNETT: Right. Wow! That is incredible.

The CHAIR: So with your Hope to Home program, which is so great and such a good use of that brokerage, do you think that this is a model that could be scaled up, maybe not by Hope Street but maybe this is a model that other organisations should be considering?

Ms McAUGHTRIE: Yes, definitely. And just now we are actually putting in a submission to try and get the program back up and running again in Melton. But what we have recognised is that there were some gaps in our initial model. We are now linking in with another organisation as a partnership to provide that access to employment and education, so we have got specialists who again focus on youths to partner with ourselves. We

provide that emergency accommodation and that wraparound support—whether it is housing, but it is also that emotional support—and encourage that young person to move forward and—

The CHAIR: And then you have got someone else actually helping them find those education and employment pathways.

Ms BENNETT: That is right, and it is important not to create a dependency on our organisation. It is important that young people develop their networks in their local community themselves—obviously while they are with us with our support, if that is what they want, but then when we are no longer as much a part of their life they can feel confident that they know who to go to for what. So that is a really important part of doing it.

We are a very relational organisation. We know that in order for us to provide proper, good-quality support to young people, where young people can achieve some great outcomes, we have to engage really well with a range of stakeholders in the community; we cannot do it on our own. And that is one of the benefits of being a smaller organisation, where we do not have lots of internal programs that we go to and sometimes not utilise the wider community as much.

Mr ONDARCHIE: It gives that flexibility, doesn't it?

Ms BENNETT: It gives that flexibility, but we want it to be lasting for the young person. We do not want them to think that if they want a particular type of service, then they just go to the agency like us.

The model was piloted with funding from Gandel Philanthropy and then the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation. We have gone to the department requesting funding. They are saying it is not a priority at the moment, but we definitely see that this is an important model. The PRAP model, which was announced by the Minister for Housing a couple of years ago, and then the PRAP enhanced or—

Ms McAUGHTRIE: PRAP Plus.

Ms BENNETT: PRAP Plus, thank you—we got the statistic from an agency that 8 per cent of young people have accessed the resource. Now, a huge amount of money has been thrown at that.

Ms McAUGHTRIE: But it is not youth specific.

Ms BENNETT: It is not youth specific, and even though PRAP Plus is about having outreach workers, they are outreach workers who will do a very quick visit, if that. For young people, they need a much higher level of support. It seems like, and is, a bigger investment initially, but it will save long term.

The CHAIR: So if we were looking at the PRAP model and, as you say, something that is a youth-focused PRAP model, which is exactly what you are offering, the Government should look at that and it should look different. It is different and it should look different, so the PRAP Plus junior—

Ms BENNETT: Hope to Home.

The CHAIR: aka Hope to Home, looks different. Because there is also that relationship with real estate agents, which really almost everyone has said has been a major hurdle in the north.

Ms BENNETT: Yes, well, we have had a fantastic outcome with that, which has been great.

The other one is the Boost program, getting back to Craig's question. The Boost program is a youth refuge enhanced program and it is about providing support to young people after hours. We have an emergency bed allocated in our refuge for the young person where they can stay for up to one week, so they get absolutely intensive support. Primarily it is based on an outreach model where the workers will go out to where young people are. So it is not sitting at your desk and providing support, it is getting in the car and going to where the young person is. When we first had that evaluated some years ago the results came back as 48 per cent of the young people who were referred to that service or who received a service from us were diverted from homelessness, so we prevented them from entering into the homelessness service system because it has that preventative focus. It was often young people who might have been in shared housing or other housing

situations and it was at risk of falling down. It could have been family situations, so we were able to link them in with our reconciliation program for counselling. We were able to intervene at that point and catch them so that they did not lose their housing. That is a significant figure, 48 per cent, and that program continues to divert.

We also made sure we had staff case managers working on weekends, particularly on Saturdays. So they could go with the young person to property inspections and speak with real estate agents with them, assist them with that type of work. So once again, that is really important. It is like if I went with my daughter to have a look at a property, I would go with her and we would look at it together. Young people need the same type of reassurance, and you talk to them about how to present themselves and that type of thing as well.

So the Boost program—we have combined the Boost program with our Melton model, because we know how well the Boost program works. We have developed what we have called the Hope Street First Response model, which is a refuge plus an outreach component. The Ian Potter Foundation has funded the outreach component with Hope Street—so it is in partnership with Hope Street—for four years.

This was quite an achievement for us. It speaks to our capability. I do not want people to think because we are smaller we do not have the capacity—we do, and we are very capable. So for four years funding for the outreach program, we had a target on that of 100 young people a year. This is in Melton. Within seven months, we achieved our target. For the first year it was over 170 young people who received a support through that outreach model.

We are building a refuge out there because we understand that growth corridors need more services. We need youth refuges. Refuges help stabilise young people. They keep them in their local community. We are able to link them so they can have diagnoses and treatment plans. All of those things are really critical. I will send you an invitation. We are due to open our new refuge in Melton at the end of April. So we are really thrilled about that. The design has been based on trauma-informed practice—what type of design of the building do we need to have so that it works well with young people and helps them in their recovery from their trauma, basically.

That leads me on to the Hope to Home first response, which is what we are wanting to do in the City of Whittlesea—the same type of program in the City of Whittlesea. Already the City of Whittlesea have allocated a piece of land, so the council has passed a resolution allocating a piece of land for that to be built. We have been meeting with various Members of Parliament, seeking their support for funding. We will put in a budget submission this year, so we will put that in towards the end.

The CHAIR: Now?

Ms BENNETT: Yes, yes.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Yes, sooner rather than later.

Ms BENNETT: Okay. We had an evaluation.

Ms McAUGHTRIE: We are doing the evaluation this year.

Ms BENNETT: For First Response? Yes, so we are engaging a company. It might be Deakin University; it could be Victoria University. We are undertaking a two-year evaluation of the model, but we do not want to wait for that to be finished before we build. We want to basically secure the funding for it. So we will be asking for capital funding as well as for operational funding to cover both aspects of that.

The CHAIR: That is fantastic, Donna.

Tania, are you okay?

Ms MAXWELL: Yes, I'm fine.

The CHAIR: Okay, Rod?

Ms MAXWELL: No, no. I have got a question, sorry.

The CHAIR: Sorry, you have got a question—pardon me.

Ms MAXWELL: That is fine. Donna, do you have programs like ASP and Reconnect?

Ms BENNETT: No. We have what is called youth reconciliation or family reconciliation. We call it ‘youth reconciliation’. We do not call it counselling on purpose, because it puts young people off enormously if they think they are getting counselling, and we deliberately—it comes under the funding of family.

The CHAIR: That is not a vegetable.

Ms MAXWELL: Because you talked before about that the young person is the client, and I just wondered how much work is done to try and re-engage them with the family?

The CHAIR: And we certainly heard earlier that the family is such a crucial part.

Ms BENNETT: And it is. What we find is by the time young people often enter the homelessness service system—so that needs to be at an age of 16, because it is 16 to 25—things have pretty much broken down. Probably realistically very few young people will go back and live at home, but it is important that they have a good relationship with their family and their extended family. So our program is about working with the young person to reconcile where the situation is at and how they might have a positive relationship with their family without living with them, if that is what they want, but where they can visit but on their terms.

Remember for most young people there has been family violence, and that is the primary cause of their reason for being out of the home. So there is a huge power imbalance that they feel with returning to the home. If a young person says to us, ‘Yes, I’m interested in family mediation’, we will do it, but it has to come from the young person.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you very much for that. My next question is: is there a stakeholders annual meeting or quarterly meeting with all youth organisations? Because everybody seems to run their own different programs. I am just wondering whether at any stage you all get together and talk about the programs that you have initiated within your organisation so that people can take bits and pieces and then model it.

The CHAIR: And not reinvent the wheel.

Ms MAXWELL: Or submissions for Boost, well, yes, we know that other organisations have tweaked something that sounds like what we were doing. Does that happen?

Ms BENNETT: There is a group called the Local Area Services Network, LASN. For many years I chaired that and sat on the reference committee. I am still on the reference committee, so that is Meredith and Sarah. Middle management sit on that group because we want decision-makers on there, and we share a whole range of information. That is right across—that is all the homelessness agencies in the north and the west.

When I first started work at Hope Street, I realised that there was no youth network. So I took the initiative to develop a youth homelessness network in the area, and that operated for many years. I needed to step off because of other priorities with Hope Street, and that sort of slowed and now that is back working really well, and Jen and her team are involved in that. That is so that we can keep that youth focus occurring.

Through that network we have been able to advocate for increased resources into the sector for young people. So we are not pushing for our own individual service; it is about how we can improve the system and what types of resources we need to bring into the system to assist our client groups as a whole. It is very important to have those types of networks.

Having said that, it is a highly competitive area. There used to be lots of smaller agencies.

The CHAIR: It is so annoying, hearing that.

Ms BENNETT: But it is highly competitive. We were almost at a point where we were looking at a forced merger. Luckily we did not go down that path, but we know that if we do not grow, we are still vulnerable, no

matter how good we are. So it is an unfortunate reality, and I never thought as a social worker that I would be thinking in these terms.

Ms MAXWELL: Absolutely it is.

Ms BENNETT: It is the reality. There are people who can pick up the phone and get a meeting with various people in Parliament. At Hope Street, we have to work differently, and this is another reason why I like working with the wider community, because if we have got the support of the wider community—local businesses, philanthropy et cetera—then it gives us more of a presence to influence. So we go about it in a different way, and to be honest with you, the way in which we approach it I prefer.

Mr ONDARCHIE: You can get a meeting with me anytime you like.

Ms BENNETT: I know!

Mr BARTON: Just touching on what Ms Maxwell was talking about, one of my concerns is that there is competition between the agencies, and I am concerned that with competition there is cost, and those costs are not being spent on homelessness services where we should be. Is there a role for Government to step in, or do you think the industry can do it without Government stepping in?

Ms BENNETT: Gee, that is a big question.

The CHAIR: Do not make me come into the room!

Mr BARTON: Because I will.

Ms BENNETT: That is a big question. Of course, there is a whole pile of regulation and compliance and reporting that services do in this sector at the moment. I think that it depends on the processes that Government puts in place. For example, if you put out a tender—not everything goes out to tender, number one. So I think that if you put things out to tender with a fair and open process, that is one thing. I think that looking at agencies on their merit, so sometimes that might be about how well an agency is performing or not performing and of course they will know that, so looking at agencies on merit. I think it is about process, to be honest. I think it is about Government having open and transparent processes with they are releasing funds for new initiatives rather than already coming in with a mindset about who might be best positioned to do it, because how do you know unless if other people cannot even make a submission, cannot even put forward what their ideas are, cannot even put forward their cost-benefit analysis and so forth? How do you know? How is that assessed? You do not. You cannot assess. You are relying on the same, same, basically because their branding is bigger.

The CHAIR: Are there any parting words that you would like to give us?

Ms BENNETT: Youth-focused services are essential. If we want to address and truly prevent long-term homelessness and the cost of that to the community but more importantly to an individual's life and what that means, we need to intervene and put a lot more resources into it earlier. I know my colleagues at VincentCare and Haven; Home, Safe really well; love them to bits. They do a great job. Social housing must have places for young people quarantined. We cannot just say, 'Yes, we will increase social housing; here you go', because agencies do not do it.

The CHAIR: I think that is a very compelling point. It is very compelling.

Ms BENNETT: I just want to make another note around the distinction for our young people as well. Young people are homeless primarily because of family violence, lack of housing, poor income and lack of job security. In terms of family violence, when we think of that, we think about mum and the kids leaving a situation or police coming and removing dad. But the kids who we see, they are young people leaving on their own. They have not got mum with them or any siblings with them. That is a part of their grief and loss. Also, most of the young people who we see are not kids in care, so they are not being picked up through foster care. They are not being picked up in that system. They are on their own, so they do not have the backup of that type of system. For me, when you think about the vulnerabilities of the cohort who come into our type of service, I cannot argue strongly enough about the importance of making sure that we provide more youth-specific

resources. And I think they have to go to youth-specific agencies, to be honest, because of the level of knowledge and expertise that we have about what works with young people.

The CHAIR: Thank you both so much. Thank you for the work you do and the passion that just bubbles out of you. It is infectious.

Ms BENNETT: Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity. We are really thrilled to be here.

The CHAIR: Look forward to seeing that submission for Whittlesea.

Ms BENNETT: Yes. I will be in touch.

The CHAIR: Please do.

Witnesses withdrew.