

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Epping—Thursday, 27 February 2020

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WITNESS

Ms Gerda Zimmermann, Senior Housing Case Manager, DPV Health Whittlesea.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Gerda, for your patience there for a minute. Welcome. I just need to give you a couple of more formal messages before we start. This is a public Inquiry into homelessness and we are the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is through our *Constitution Act* as well as the standing orders of the Legislative Council. That means any information that you give today is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside this hearing may not get the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As you can see, Hansard is here. They are recording everything. You will receive a transcript of that, which I encourage you to have a look at and make sure that we represent you honestly and correctly. Eventually that will go up on our website and it will form part of the information that forms part of our report.

So, Gerda, if you would like to just give us some opening remarks, introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your work, then we will have a conversation with the Committee.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes, sure. My name is Gerda. I am the team leader of the homelessness team at DPV Health, which is a community health service. We are really uniquely placed, being part of a community health service, because most people think of community health as being occupational therapy, allied health and those sorts of things. So it is quite unusual that we are placed there.

The CHAIR: Are you the only one?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Amazing.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: We were Whittlesea Housing—I cannot remember when—before my time, and then Plenty Valley Community Health got the funding and we became part of Plenty Valley, which is now DPV. Our role is as a case management service, so we are not a crisis service. All our referrals come from Haven; Home, Safe, and I am sure Haven explained that they have a prioritisation list of people who come in for their IAP assessments and then, depending on need, they will refer them to our service when we have a vacancy. Generally these are people with multiple and complex needs around homelessness, maybe multiple incidences of homelessness. Our role is in long-term case management. We advocate generally for people to go into transitional housing, depending on their level of support need. So generally people with high-support needs are advocated for transitional properties.

In the local area of Whittlesea we are seeing families generally escaping family violence as the main reason for their homelessness. Generally those people may be couch surfing, staying with friends, staying in motels, staying in cars. The accommodation is substandard and not great because there is no crisis accommodation here for them to go into. Our role is generally to support people long term while wrapping services around those people as well, so looking at ending their cycle of homelessness but also looking at the other contributors that assisted them—not assisted, but you know—

Mr BARTON: Got them there.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Got them there, thank you. That sounds smart. That might be mental health or family violence support. The children are our clients as well, so we look at the whole family as a unit. Even though a parent is the main person that we support, children also come into the work that we do.

As I was saying, transitional housing is generally the sort of exit point that we are looking at to get people into as a support service, and as a safe, affordable housing option. I think the longest it has taken for someone to get a property in recent times is 15 months, just for a transitional property. We advocate to Haven; Home, Safe, who have the properties. If there is capacity and using maybe rapid rehousing options, then we will look at private rental as an option. Often the support needs are really high so private rental would not be sustainable.

We do not want to put people into properties and then the tenancies break down. We are looking at ending cycles of homelessness, not just sort of putting bandaids on and things.

At the moment we have probably got about 60 clients. Because people sit in transitional housing for such a long time now, they still have to have case management support while they are in those properties, so we continue to work with them even though maybe they do not have the same support issues anymore. We might have worked on those already over a 12-month or two-year period. People are getting into education and employment, maybe looking at building capacity in themselves and their own lives. They still might not have the income to sustain private rental so they are still in transitional. They do not really need our service anymore, but because they are in transitional housing we have to keep working with them.

Mr BARTON: Get engaged there.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes. Which means we cannot take new people.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: So there is a real bottleneck.

The CHAIR: So these people have been settled? Those mental health problems have largely been settled?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes. They have been supported. They have got counselling for family violence issues.

The CHAIR: The kids are in school.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: They have had a flexible support package to get some new furniture. The kids are settled in school. They have got some counselling.

The CHAIR: They just cannot get into a home.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: No. There is no exit point. People do go on to study and that is our role too, to build that capacity in people to help people help themselves. A hand up, not a hand down I guess is the way we look at it.

The CHAIR: I like that.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: There is no way to move forward from that so we are advocating to Haven; Home, Safe all the time for people for transitional because when we do take a new person we are also battling with WISHIN and MOSS—other case management services—for the same properties. It is kind of like the squeaky wheel gets the oil. It is the person who jumps up and down the loudest, if you are lucky. So advocacy obviously is a big part of our role.

We are generally seeing families, but sometimes we will get a single person come, and the options for a single person are less than for a family so we will have to look at a rooming house for that person, which is unsafe and insecure and you do not know who is going to move in next week. It might be a great group of people this week, but then Joe Bloggs moves out and Mr Kerfoops moves in and it all turns, so there is real instability around that. Once you are stuck in that rooming house cycle I think it is so expensive that you cannot get out of it. If you are paying \$300 for one room a week—you could get a flat for that, but if you do not have a rental history—

Mr BARTON: That is the hurdle, isn't it?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes.

Ms MAXWELL: Gerda, can you access and HEF, TILA and CEEP for your clients?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: No. Only HEF. PRAP, yes, and we do use a lot of the rapid rehousing Moving On program where it is suitable. So for people who do have really high support needs, and we have got a lot of women who have lots of trauma out of family violence, they are not ready to go into those properties; maybe

later on down the track. But for Moving On we have got a few clients. We do use HEF, but we are really limited on what we can access within the scope of our practice, so that makes it a little bit more challenging as well to look at other options for housing.

Then we will get refugee and asylum seeker clients who are not eligible for transitional housing or for public housing and so we will have to try and support them into private rental, which I will take short term and then it took me eight months to get a lady a property because she kept being knocked back because of no rental reference. That was meant to be a short-term, like three-week little window of case management that turned into eight months because we do not want to leave people languishing either where situations get worse. This woman with her four children had nowhere to go. So that is a problem that we face.

We are actually doing a lot of amazing case management work. I do not actually know how sometimes we are housing people. I really do not.

The CHAIR: I do not know how you are doing it either.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: The majority of the clients, I think there is probably two at the moment who are waiting maybe for a transitional property or maybe for a Moving On property. We do not have brokerage funding at all. We rely on our connections within the community, so Whittlesea Community Connections and lots of other services through the LASN, the local area services network, which we sit on; lots and lots of connections through community for that support and for the support of clients because we are running out of options. Back in the day—I have been in homelessness for a really long time—that transitional public housing used to really cycle. You would get a new client, they would move through transitional housing for six to 12 months, they would get a public housing property and off they would go. It was a really smooth transition. But now there are blockages everywhere, so for Haven, for us for case management there are blockages. In every step there is another hurdle to overcome, and that is our biggest challenge.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Gerda.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: No, that is all right.

The CHAIR: It is great to see you are managing, surprisingly, to house—

Ms ZIMMERMANN: And I am really proud of the work that we do. We are a really small team: there are only five of us. We are actually waiting to employ a new person, so there are only four of us at the moment. There are other support services—WISHIN and MOSS—that cover Whittlesea. They are a little bit bigger than us, so we are the teeny-tiny team, kind of like Donna was saying with Hope Street.

The CHAIR: Yes, but you actually sit within a health service.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: We do. So they get heaps of funding for all that stuff, and they are fee for service and they are this and that, and then we are this tiny little service. We are actually getting a bit more of a profile, though, with our new CEO, which is kind of good.

The CHAIR: Excellent.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: But we have never had the opportunity to apply for funding elsewhere, so philanthropically or anything else, because when we were Plenty Valley we were not allowed to. So I am hoping that might change under the new DPV rules, that we can apply through Ian Potter or something. Even just a little bucket of money that we can use to support our clients for, you know, mowing the lawn or getting a skip bin, just doing those basic little things. Paying a bill when they are large, those sorts of things.

The CHAIR: You mentioned the LASN, the local area service networks. We have had some comments from some of the previous people suggesting that that could be reorganised to be more effective and work, probably like you, more nimbly or connect people more easily. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: They have got a really difficult job, and I fully acknowledge that. In terms of communication, we do not really know what is happening. Until we meet every three months or whatever, there is no real communication about what is happening with the department, what is happening with this, what is

happening with that, what work is actually being done by the LASN. Like, we are kind of kept in the dark about that. I would like a little bit more transparency around that, particularly because of the work that we do and the work that Donna does and Haven and everybody else does. We are all working for the same outcome.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: I would like to know a little bit about what is happening in that space. I do not know how it could be done differently. There is always a way to do things differently and a better way to do things. Because it has been done the same way forever, we are not really getting any positive outcome. Nothing is changing.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Well, demand is.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Definitely. But the way that they are working, the way that the LASN works, has not changed for—I have been in housing nearly 15 years, and the LASN back then was working the same as the LASN is now. But the face of homelessness has changed, so maybe it needs to be stepped up.

The CHAIR: That move through to public housing or the move through out of transition used to occur.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: It does not now.

Mr BARTON: It just stops now.

The CHAIR: Yes, there are those clogs.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Is that a lack of housing? There is a massive lack of social housing, absolutely, and social housing for everybody, like Donna was saying about young people. People with disabilities—there is no purpose-built properties for disabilities. Properties for older people—we are seeing a lot of older people, people that are ageing.

The CHAIR: Are you?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Absolutely, homeless older people. Generally they are single people. So are they going to end up in a rooming house, this person who has worked all their life and has had their own home and for whatever reason that has fallen down? Yes, so we are seeing a lot of older people. I think something specific to support that cohort of people. Because we are an ageing population anyway, I think that is going to perpetuate it. It is not a one-off. I think that is going to—

The CHAIR: Yes, so while Donna was saying we need to really carve out and ensure that there is a quota for young people, you would suggest doing the same for the older people.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Absolutely. I totally support what Donna is saying too—for older people, for sure. It is really unfortunate that there is more presentation at Haven; Home, Safe of older people. I have got some older clients too. We have got a few in our service.

Mr BARTON: It is one of those things, isn't it? We have got a lot of people living longer. As we all know, women over 55 are the biggest ones at risk now of moving into homelessness. They have got no superannuation. Rents are beyond them. There is a whole—

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes, completely, because they are on Newstart allowance. They are not even on a pension, some of them. If you are on Newstart—

Mr BARTON: Gerda, can I just ask, we have had mixed messages this afternoon about trying to get people into the private market: do you have trouble with real estate agents?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Absolutely. We have got a relationship with one agent—with one agency—that is great, but we cannot rely on them solely every single time. We have had a lot of pushback from agents. I guess that we are trying to get a message across to agents, because we do go out with clients, we do outreach, so we go out with clients to house inspections and make sure that they have got their packs ready with their

information and those sorts of things. It is about educating people as well as building that capacity. It is really hard to change the mindset of an agent who thinks that a working person has a more secure income than a person on a disability support pension. It is actually not true. A person with a disability support pension is not going to lose their money. I could lose my job next week with a funding cut—

Mr ONDARCHIE: Could you not?

The CHAIR: Please don't.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: I have. I have been made redundant from a job because of a funding cut. I had four weeks notice. Sure, having a job and being employed is fantastic, but getting a disability support pension is a guaranteed income. But changing the mindset of real estate agents is really difficult because they are still seeing it as a benefit that comes from Centrelink and getting money from a job means more, it is more worthy or something.

Mr BARTON: It is bizarre. I think the Chair referred to: could the Government have more levers? I actually think: should the Government have a bigger stick? Is there anything else we can do? What should we think about?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: In terms of private rental real estate agents?

Mr BARTON: Yes.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: I think it is more around education, really. What I have noticed—and I have been a renter for a long time—is that the person that you meet when you go to rent a property or you go to inspect a property is generally a really young person. And I might be generalising, but I have been to a lot of house inspections and they are quite young.

The CHAIR: They are getting younger, aren't they?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes, and maybe a little bit judgemental. So I do think it is just around education. Maybe they do not see that they are actually seen as being in positions of power to these people—to the clients that we support—because they are going to say yes or no, 'You can have this house'. To those people that means having a roof or not. So there is a real sense of authority put into a real estate agent from our clients' perspective. So maybe it is a little bit about educating them. It is just people. It does not matter where your money comes from. If you can pay the rent, who cares?

Ms MAXWELL: Gerda, how much influence do you think the person that actually owns the home that then goes through the real estate agent to have that let has—how much influence do you think they have behind the decision?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: The landlord, as opposed to—

Ms MAXWELL: Yes.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Probably a fair bit. I have been a landlord.

Ms MAXWELL: Because I am wondering whether that is another area, another level, that needs to be discussed and determined, because if ultimately they are the ones having the say then we can say, 'Oh, the real estate agents will not do it', but it may not in fact be the real estate agents—

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes, it does come back down to the person who owns the home.

Ms MAXWELL: It could actually be the landlord who says, 'This is the criteria of who will go into my house'. So maybe we need to have a more flexible approach that real estate agents hold a certain number of rental properties that do not have that strict criteria on them.

The CHAIR: Or again for the house owner, whether it is again using those incentives of a discount on rates or a discount if they lease that property to certain cohorts of people.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes, that is where social housing works brilliantly—or community housing—because they do look at people who work but are on a lower income or someone who is working but only part-time, and there is that tiered rental scheme, where it caters for lots of different people. That works brilliantly, and I live in community, and I work. So, you know, the people who work help fund it.

The CHAIR: That is right. Yes, exactly.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: And it keeps growing and growing.

The CHAIR: That is exactly right.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: It is brilliant in that respect.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Do you want me to talk about the things that might help?

The CHAIR: You would like some change?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Yes, please do.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: So I have already talked about the social housing aspect and all people with all abilities, long-term, safe, affordable. I also think there could be an Opening Doors access point—so I have talked with Haven; Home, Safe about this—out more in the northern growth corridor, because people are travelling to Preston to go and see somebody from a crisis service. It is a long way to go if you are in Mernda or Doreen or Whittlesea. So you could look at even just an outpost one or two days a week further north that people can access and know that they are going to be there on a Tuesday or a Thursday, and we would be willing to partner with them in that, because we do a bit of short-term case management as well, to be there on site to see people, to offer that support—the stuff that Haven cannot do in the short term.

I think that would prevent that big load of people turning up to Haven; Home, Safe on a Monday morning too, where they are out the door and on the street because it is the only access point in Whittlesea.

The CHAIR: So establishing something possibly around Epping?

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Absolutely, yes, and we have talked about it with Whittlesea Community Connections, and that being a possibility.

The CHAIR: Were they—

Ms ZIMMERMANN: They did, yes.

The CHAIR: That was certainly part of our conversation with them too.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Sure. I think if the rapid rehousing program and the Moving On program—those initiatives for families who can avoid the homelessness system altogether, like divert it completely—could continue, that would be fantastic. We rely on those a lot. We are working with people who have had their own homes and just need to be diverted out of that, rehoused quickly and not even come near your Haven; Home, Safes of the world.

We need more of our services for people, because there are 700 people on the waiting list just at Haven; Home, Safe, waiting for case management support. And because we cannot push people through and exit them, they just languish on that list. So, yes, more case management would be great—really good services—or even expanding the ones that are there already, that exist already, I think, doing really great work. We just need more bums on seats really.

The CHAIR: And providing something that is slightly closer to home for this growth corridor.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Absolutely, yes. And we need to increase rent assistance, I think, just so that people can stay in their private rental. I realise that this is really difficult, and they are the people that we are also seeing the most as well—people who have rented the majority of their life. They have never had an incidence of homelessness ever, and their rent has gone up, they have lost shifts at work.

The CHAIR: Yes, exactly.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: It only takes that and living pay to pay—a lot of people do—for you to end up with a notice to vacate, and then you are kicked out. I think in the northern growth corridor, too, people are spending a lot of money building these houses or they are renting really expensive new, lovely houses, and then something will happen, there will be a breakdown somewhere and—

The CHAIR: That is that.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: that is that. It sounds really simple, and it kind of is.

Mr BARTON: Two of them working, one of them loses their job.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes.

Mr BARTON: Good job, Gerda.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Just to wrap up Gerda's presentation, Chair, I would not be too worried about DPV's profile. Don and Debbie and others are doing a really good job.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Oh, great.

Mr ONDARCHIE: I would not worry about it.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Don, yes, he is championing us at the moment.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I think it is really interesting to hear from a program that actually sits within a health service, because the links between homelessness and health are just—

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Oh, yes. I did not mention that.

The CHAIR: It is so intertwined.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: We do have the capacity to refer into those services, and we do that a lot more than—

The CHAIR: Than others that would have that capacity because they are next door.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Oh, absolutely—because it is just internal.

The CHAIR: That is right. Gerda, thank you so much for coming in.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: That is okay.

The CHAIR: It was great. It was really interesting, and it really helped us. I think yet again it reaffirms the desperate need for more localised services in this fast-growing area.

Ms ZIMMERMANN: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Gerda.

Witness withdrew.