

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 23 June 2020

Hearing via videoconference

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WITNESS

Ms Ruth Gordon, Homelessness Network Coordinator, Southern Region, Southern Homelessness Services Network.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. Please, if you could make sure that your mobile phones are on silent, and maybe at times when we are not talking keep your mics muted, but keep an eye on them before you start talking.

Before we begin, I would like to respectfully acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the many lands that we are meeting on today, and pay my respects to their elders both past and present. I would like to welcome any elders or community members who will be providing us with advice and evidence today but also anyone who is watching the broadcast of these proceedings as well. In saying that, I would like to welcome everyone who is watching the proceedings from their homes or their offices or somewhere around the world today.

I just have to provide you with a little bit of information, Ruth, before I invite you to make some opening remarks. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is provided under our *Constitution Act* but also under the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore any information you provide to us today is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As you may have noticed from all of the introductions that I have made, this is being broadcast but it is also being recorded, and this is very much for us to have a transcript of the evidence that you are providing for us today, Ruth. We will send you a transcript in the next little while so you can have a look at it and make sure that we have not misunderstood or misrepresented you. Ultimately that transcript will go up on our website. Thank you again, Ruth, for making the time to meet with us today, and thank you also for your very considered submission. All of the members have got a copy of that submission with them or have got it in their papers. If you would like to make some opening remarks for about 10 minutes and then we will open it up for questions.

Ms GORDON: Thanks, Fiona, and thanks to everyone for inviting me to address you today. I too would like to pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are all meeting today. And on behalf of our network, the Southern Homelessness Services Network, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today, and we appreciate the efforts that you have gone to to ensure that the inquiry resumes its important work at this time.

So I will just give an overview of my submission—obviously it is quite a detailed submission—and then briefly discuss some of the issues coming out of the coronavirus pandemic before taking some questions. So we made the submission in January, which seems like a lifetime ago now. I think everyone feels like we are in a bit of a time warp at the moment; I know I do. So I think we feel there are many myths and stereotypes associated with homelessness and the people who have experienced it, and the inquiry provides an excellent opportunity to look behind these myths and to look at the facts and figures about homelessness and to learn from the experiences of real people that sit behind those statistics, so the people that have lived and experienced homelessness and also the people that work with them.

So our network, the Southern Homelessness Services Network, is made up of all the government-funded homelessness services in the Southern Region. We have over 20 member agencies, some of whom you have already heard from, like Launch Housing, Sacred Heart Mission, Salvation Army. We cover 10 local government areas from Port Phillip to Mornington Peninsula across to Casey and Cardinia and everything in-between, so we are very large and diverse, and in my submission I tried to give a flavour of the diversity of the issues facing our region. You are going to be hearing from some of our member agencies later today and also from some of our very engaged local councils in the panel session, and they are a real asset in our region—I am not sure if other regions have those engaged councils—so that is great that you get to talk to them as well.

Our submission is drawn from a member survey that we did to inform the submission and also includes quotes from a consumer survey from the people that use our services that we conducted last year, as well as the usual

data sources. It provides an overview of the relevant stats and facts about homelessness in our region, which I am not going to go into in a lot of detail because it is there to read. But I will just give a few key points from our region and also talk a bit about solutions, which I think you are particularly interested in.

I guess one point I would like to make is there are consistently large groups that make up the majority of people presenting to our services. So these are primarily women and children escaping family violence, young people and single people. Single people and young people on Centrelink incomes are very limited in the housing they can afford and access due to their extremely low incomes. So while there are new emerging groups experiencing homelessness that often capture the public's attention, these groups are often relatively small compared to the majority of people experiencing homelessness. Now, I think strategies and plans to end homelessness should focus on responding to the larger groups to make the biggest impact, not get caught up in the latest emerging trends—and this is common across the regions.

One particular thing in our region is we have a lot of rooming houses—we have about 500 registered rooming houses across our region—and this fills a market gap for people who cannot access housing. It is expensive: it is about \$220 to \$250 a week. You may get your own room, you may be sharing a room for that price. You are definitely sharing bathrooms and cooking facilities with up to nine other people, which in this time of hygiene and social distancing is a bit incomprehensible really. So this type of housing is not housing of choice. To me it is housing of no choice, it is housing of desperation. Only 2 per cent of people in our consumer survey said they were actually looking for rooming house accommodation. Most people are looking for private rental or public housing. Yet this is often all that we have to offer single people that come to our services for help.

Overcrowding is another big issue in our region. As you can tell from the submission, the census data on overcrowding in our region is just huge. According to the census, of people living in severely crowded and crowded dwellings—that is two categories combined—in Victoria, 22 per cent live in three of our local government areas of Casey, Cardinia and Dandenong, and that totals over 6400 people. So the question about this trend is: how will homelessness services cope if and when an additional 6000 people living in crowded dwellings need our assistance? And that could happen at this time, during the pandemic. We do not know.

In our submission we talk about the policies and factors impacting on homelessness, we describe how poverty and low incomes contribute to increasing homelessness, we present the data about the housing market failure in our region, particularly for the lowest income groups, and we discuss the failure in the provision of accessible, affordable and appropriate housing sufficient to meet demand. We describe the system's failure that exacerbates homelessness, the mental health and health systems, the corrections and justice systems—the list goes on. I do have a quote I would like to read out from one of our members from our members survey. It is a staff member working in one of our services. They say:

Where do I begin? I can only speak from what I have seen from working in the homeless sector for 5 years. So often people who are not provided an early opportunity to access support and safe housing end up in the cycle of homelessness. This can be because of a breakdown of housing, and then not being able to access crisis accommodation and then put into unsafe housing situations. For example a rooming house, a friend who wants sexual favours in return for a bed or on the floor of somebodies already overcrowded house. Often this can be single men and women as there is less available for this cohort. I have seen many clients who then turn to legal and illegal drug use to handle the trauma that they experience from this. If there had been more options available when someone first entered the 'system' so much of this could not have to have happened.

I guess the good news is that we do know what the solutions are. We know what works. We know we need wholesale change to end homelessness in Victoria. One hundred houses here or there will not make a dent in the problem that we currently have. We have let it go on for too long.

When I talked to my local MP about this he suggested we need more innovation to end homelessness, yet we have so many innovative programs and projects that work, and I know Wendy has been part of that in her time as a minister. We know what works but we do not have them at the scale to make a big enough impact. We need to take those innovative projects to scale and include the housing and support components to have a real impact on ending homelessness.

As I said, the solutions are not unique to our region, but they can be shaped and adapted to suit local people and local needs. An obvious solution is housing—increased, affordable, appropriate and safe housing, preferably public or community housing. And we need to increase sustainable, long-term housing options as the most effective solution to homelessness, and we all know this. So we put a bit of a slightly cheeky suggestion in the submission, but one which, you know, may have legs and that is one way to achieve the scale required may be

to set aside a proportion of all stamp duty on housing collected by the state government to fund the needed expansion of public housing. This links the profits of the private market to funding housing for those who are excluded from that market, and will provide a large, long-term funding stream for public housing. This would not be an increased tax, just a more equitable use of the tax already being collected on housing.

We talk about prevention and early intervention solutions as well, what we call, if you have been around the homelessness trap as well, turning off the tap of people entering into homelessness by diverting them quickly and effectively away from homelessness. We have several programs that do that really, really well.

Also I mentioned in our submission that we would recommend that Victoria introduces a duty to assist law, similar to that in Wales, which could be a key tool for homelessness prevention and early intervention. And it would apply to all government and community services, preventing people from other service systems entering into homelessness and would ensure that responsibility for responding to homelessness is shared across the government and the community rather than just homelessness services, who are overwhelmed. It could prevent evictions from public housing into homelessness, prevent people from being discharged from hospitals into homelessness and avoid people getting passed around between different sectors, particularly those with complex needs. And we have done a submission to the mental health royal commission as well on that.

The third solution focuses on ending chronic homelessness, and there has been much written around this. The longer people stay homeless, the more complex their issues become. So expanding programs which are effective at ending chronic homelessness using a Housing First model—Housing First with wraparound long-term supports. To work, these are permanent models; they are not time limited. We provide the housing for people as long as they need it and the support for as long as they need it. And we know it works, but we just do not have enough of it in Victoria at the moment.

Our fourth lot of solutions focuses around tailored supports to respond to specific needs of cohorts, so that would be children, young people. We do not have any youth foyers, for example, in our region. We need tailored responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, responses for LGBTIQ people and increasing the responsiveness of the NDIS for our target group as well.

Overall solutions must build on the knowledge and evidence of what works to end homelessness. In my role I get so many ideas—you probably do too—lots of crazy ideas thrown at me from day to day about what the community thinks to end homelessness. But we have the research; we know what will actually work and what will be effective in the long term, not just short-term bandaid fixes. We need to expand the programs that work well and ensure that funding allocation reflects the actual demand for assistance. We need the programs in every local area where they are needed, not just when we have money available we give it here or we give it there. It is critical that we also address poverty and inequality concurrently with implementing these solutions to ensure that these solutions are sustainable into the future, and that leads back to some of the federal issues, which we will be making a submission to the federal parliamentary inquiry on as well.

I am just going to touch a little bit on coronavirus and then take questions. Our capacity to respond to homelessness in the pandemic has highlighted some of the flaws in our system and also some of the strengths. There have been some great initiatives, I think you would agree: rent freezes, JobKeeper, income support supplements, moving rough sleepers into motels and hotels. Also, we have noticed increasing community compassion about homelessness as so many of us face uncertainty and stress in this time. Our sector has worked with the government to put in place a range of responses to the potential spread of coronavirus amongst our client group, which to date has been largely averted, thankfully. But it has been my fear all along that the second wave of the pandemic in Victoria will be among the poor, the people who cannot not work, those who live in overcrowded housing with 12 or 15 people in a three-bedroom house, those who are getting kicked off a friend's couch or floor where they have been sleeping and those who live in a rooming house with one bathroom amongst nine people.

Despite financial capacity to accommodate all rough sleepers in hotels and motels at this time, there are still people in our region sleeping rough. They might not have been able to access that accommodation because we do not have support programs to help them get to the services and stay in those hotels in every part of our region. In some areas services have been unable to purchase accommodation. Hotels do not want our clients; they would rather stay empty than take our clients. So we have had a few variations across our region in the

success of that. We know that in some council areas—for example, Mornington Peninsula shire still has about 20 people sleeping on the foreshore, and I myself have seen new people sleeping in my local park in this time.

We keep coming back to the main problem, I think, which is highlighted at this time. It is a lack of those real sustainable housing options for people. So we are holding them in the hotels, but what happens next? I guess at the time we are considering economic stimulus more housing for people on the lowest incomes would be a great start. There is also the fear in our sector that the economic fallout of the pandemic is yet to really hit and that when the supplements and rent freezes stop there could be a tidal wave of unemployed people becoming homeless and coming to our services for help. There is so much unknown and it is a lot of stress for everyone. As one of our consumers said in our survey:

Homelessness needs to be taken seriously, anyone can be homeless.

I think that is particularly relevant at this time. People experiencing homelessness need homes. We all need security and safety, and privacy too, particularly now. We all need a home, so I think we can end homelessness and we can do it together. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Ruth. That was a great overview of what was a really good, detailed submission. We will all have a short time to ask you questions and I will go around the room—or the screen, as it is here. Certainly just thinking about COVID, putting aside some of the people that have not been able to be housed—and certainly that is not unique to the south; we are certainly experiencing it where some people have not been able to access it—but with the ones that have, could that be a game changer? And have you been able to, in this time, start to put those wraparound services to the people who effectively have been housed? Are you seeing the services being rolled out to them now?

Ms GORDON: Yes, that is starting to work. We are all developing collaborative models that the government has asked us to do to support people in those hotels. But I must say, apart from the funding for the actual cost of the hotel accommodation, we have been asked to do most of this within existing resources. So this is the challenge. That is the challenge at the moment, that it is intense work. A lot of the people have high and complex needs, and we still have other people. It is also a bit of that thing about the queue jumping. These people are at the top of the queue, which is important, but then we have had people who have been waiting for a long time, so there are some interesting ethical issues around. These are things that we are facing every day in our work, and our workers are trying to juggle that. But yes, there is an effort to bring support to those people in the hotels and to hold them. We would love [Zoom dropout] and have more funding for support to really work with them to keep them safe until we find proper housing outcomes. We do not want them to leave those hotels and go back to the street. The government does not want that either. We are hearing that loud and clear, but we are not hearing what next is.

The CHAIR: It seems like there is an opportunity that you can stabilise someone's living circumstances, that that can enable you to start working on those other complex needs. But, yes, as you say, the money has got to come.

Ms GORDON: And it is not like you are living in a hotel. It is not a home, it is a temporary thing, and the stress of those people in the hotels not knowing what is coming next and if they are going to be there in the next two weeks.

The CHAIR: Sorry, just quickly on that: have you got any serviced apartments in your area that have also been used for accommodation?

Ms GORDON: I believe some of them are serviced apartments—hotels, motels, serviced apartments.

The CHAIR: Yes. At least that provides personal cooking services—

Ms GORDON: Yes, and that would be ideal, but not everybody is in that situation. I think it is mainly hotels and motels.

Dr KIEU: Thank you, Ruth, for your submission. I have just two parts, two questions. One is about COVID, and the hotel accommodation has been helpful but it is still uncertain. To some people it has been a life-changing experience, even though it is a temporary measure. I am just wondering, what are the main

reasons that some of the hotels, as you mentioned, do not want to take on homeless people? And is there anything we can do about that? That is my first question.

Ms GORDON: That is a really good question. Thank you. I think at the beginning—I cannot remember if I am right or wrong—I had a feeling that the government was going to bulk purchase hotel accommodation like they did for returning travellers and health workers, and that would have bypassed our agencies having to negotiate directly with individual hotels. They do not want to take our client group because of stigma and discrimination and because without the support—

You know, we have got some pretty complex people and without support—ideally you would have these people in something like the Elizabeth Street Common Ground where there is 24-hour staffing and support on site for people. So the hotels might have security guards on site or a receptionist, but they do not have the support that people need, and without that support the hotel owners will be worried about what might happen to their property.

Dr KIEU: And particularly with the increase in the infections, particularly in the south-east, Casey and Cardinia, that might be a further issue to deal with.

I will just move on to the next question before we are back in the time of the others. Being a coordinator of the homelessness network, do you see—is there good collaboration and not too much overlapping between different organisations providing these services, in your experience?

Ms GORDON: Yes; a very good question too. So we do have good collaboration, and that has really come to the fore at this time as we collaboratively change our focus to supporting people in hotels. We have to work together, and as I said, there has not been additional resourcing, it has been through working together that we are able to do this. The way the system is pretty much set up is that we have our entry points. It is spaced out. There is not overlapping of the services, there is not duplication. There are more gaps than anything, than duplication or overlapping. There will be gaps, for example, because as you can see from my submission we have had growth in the outer suburbs in homelessness and the services are not there to meet that demand. Say, Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula seem to have less services than other areas. They do not have any crisis accommodation for any groups, so there are, I would say, more gaps rather than overlapping.

Ms LOVELL: Hi, Ruth. How are you? Ruth, obviously we have put a lot of money into crisis response because we will always need crisis response, but a lot could be saved if we actually went into more early intervention. You talked about innovation, and we did a lot of innovation, as you said, when I was minister. Has any of that innovation been stepped up in your area? Because obviously if we do intervene earlier, we actually do save money later on. So have any of the innovation projects been stepped up or those that are successful brought into your area? I know in my home town STAR Housing has been absolutely amazing for keeping people out of the homelessness sector.

Ms GORDON: Yes; a really good question, Wendy. Look, I did work on one of the projects at HomeConnect, the VincentCare project, at one stage and did some evaluation of that in my previous role. They are fantastic programs. The only one that I think we have in our region is the Detour youth coaching model through Melbourne City Mission. The problem is, like I said, they are really good programs, we know they work, they have been well evaluated, well documented, but then they just stick in those areas. So if we had Detour across the region or if we had HomeConnect—they are needed not everywhere but they are needed in lots of places rather than just in the places where they happen to get funded at that time. This is what I am talking about—that we do have the evidence of programs that work and that do deter people from the service system as those two programs do. But we have got Detour down in Frankston, and that is it, that I am aware of, from that round of projects and innovation.

Ms LOVELL: And that is a shame, because the reason behind that was to identify good projects and then to roll them out statewide, not to keep re-funding them in their little pilot areas. So it is a shame that they have not been taken up. Also, you mentioned the youth foyer. How do you think a youth foyer would change things for you in the southern metropolitan area?

Ms GORDON: Well, I think we could probably do with more than one. I think they have looked at it maybe down in Frankston, Mornington Peninsula. There is a project—I think they are putting in a late submission to your inquiry—it is called the Youth2 alliance, which is an alliance of youth services. There are no youth

refuges, no youth crisis accommodation, and there are no youth foyers in Frankston or the Mornington Peninsula, so part of that is to get both of those aspects down there. And I think there is Chisholm, there is a TAFE down there, who are keen as well. So I think things may be aligning; we just need a bit more of a move on. So it is a good prevention model, it is a good early intervention model. It seems to not work so well with young people already entrenched in homelessness, but to get them back on track or get them on track for the future it is a really good program.

Ms LOVELL: It is certainly an area that we were considering for one of two additional foyers. It was actually the first area we looked at before we put the first one out at Mount Waverley, but we were just having a little bit of difficulty with the education providers in that area understanding that Education First model at the time. Once everyone saw that up and operating at Holmesglen and at Broadmeadows and also in Shepparton, everyone was putting their hands up for them. But to get people to understand that Education First model at first was a little bit difficult, otherwise Frankston would have had one a long time ago.

Ms GORDON: Perhaps, Wendy, it's always better if you can go and visit one and see how it works.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, it is so much easier, isn't it? Yes. But some people just got—

The CHAIR: Wendy, we have only got a few minutes left.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, fine.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you, Ruth, for your time today and for your submission, and thanks for the fantastic work that you and so many people like you do in this difficult sector—homelessness and housing issues. I have a two-part question. Our Labor government did fantastic work as soon as the coronavirus crisis broke out in housing and for people who were homeless or facing those issues, but what I heard from you is that you are looking for some solutions which are long-term solutions. So if you had, say, three strategic priorities in mind for the government to do something to address these issues in January, now due to the coronavirus crisis how do you think those priorities have changed, to add the complexity of the pandemic? So that is the first part of the question. The second one is: you also mentioned that there are certain communities or certain cohorts who face the issue of homelessness or the housing issue, it could be women and children, LGBTI or other. How do you think that people from CALD communities or ethnic backgrounds face this issue, if you have a little bit more information about that?

Ms GORDON: On the first question about how priorities have changed, I think that when I went back to have a look at my submission, as I said, it has really just highlighted the need. It has not changed the priorities; it has just made them much more urgent, because we are holding these people in hotels and we need housing. We need it now. We do not need it in five years time or whatever. We need it now. So it has just made it that much more urgent, obvious. It is the same with the prevention and early intervention, like I said. The potential for more people to come into our system because of coronavirus—if they lose their job, whatever it is—has just become more urgent and a bit more scary as well. And I think the needs of those people with the more complex needs who need that Housing First approach also have become more obvious and highlighted. So it has really just highlighted the need for those solutions. I do not think it has changed them. It has just made them more urgent. We need it yesterday, really.

So the second question about CALD communities is really good. The issues that I have talked about about overcrowding in our region—we think there is a cultural element. We do not have any evidence. We are only looking at the evidence from the census. It does not drill down into CALD groups. But I would love to see more research into, you know, 'Who are those 6000 people? What are their needs? How do we assist them? How do we help them get better housing? How do we help them stop coming into our services when things break down?'. Because they will break down. Having that many people, the households will break down eventually at some point or have other ramifications for children trying to learn in those overcrowded households.

We guess there is a cultural element, but we do not have the evidence. Like I said, I would love to see more research around that, particularly in my region. The other areas which have the overcrowding, in the census, I think were Brimbank and Hume—not to the level that we have it, but they are areas with high CALD communities, and it potentially links to the increase in the coronavirus in these areas as well.

Ms VAGHELA: Yes, so it will be very important for us to know about those once we have the evidence from the research done because, that way, whatever projects we have, we are making sure that we are taking them into account as well, because their cultural needs might be slightly different to the broader community.

Mr BARTON: Ruth, I just have a couple of notes that I have got here. You talked about stamp duty, about funding for more social housing and things like that. What are other options that you can see? We accept that we have got to build more affordable and social housing. How do we do that? What is your path? Expand on the stamp duty thoughts. And what other areas do you think we could do to stimulate the market to get more affordable housing out there?

Ms GORDON: Yes, it is a good question. I think I see myself more as a homelessness expert than a housing expert. I think there are many AHURI research papers on how this can be done, and I think the fact that we have had a bit of a missed boat federally around economic stimulus, it is the perfect opportunity. We had economic stimulus in the GFC into our sector, which seemed to have worked really well. And I am talking about the scale, so that is why I am looking at things like stamp duty. The other big pot of money is super funds, so getting them on board to make it easier for them to invest in social housing. We do not want short-term investment; we need long-term commitment to this. So that would be another area to look at. I know the federal government have got the NHFIC and other things, but that is not my particular area of expertise. That is my 2 cents worth.

Mr BARTON: No, that is all right. But you certainly have a view of where we can start thinking about if we should throw stamp duty out. You are not the first person to suggest that, and it is not something we should dismiss out of hand. We should possibly have a little think about that.

Ms GORDON: We need big money. This has been going on too long, and you can see when you look at the rates of social housing in Victoria and investment compared to other states that we are falling way behind. We lead in the homelessness sector, we lead in homelessness responses, but what is the point if we do not lead in housing?

Mr BARTON: That is right.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thanks, Ruth, and thanks for your time today. Thanks for all the information and for the fantastic work that you do. I was interested in the numbers of people that are actually in hotel accommodation. You may not have that at hand at the moment, but are you able to provide any more information about that?

Ms GORDON: The only information I can provide—and, look, it is changing every day—the last count we had in our region, so just in the south, was just a bit under 500 people. We know that Launch Housing—that is one of our members—are holding the largest group of people, and the last I heard they were holding about 1000 people. I believe you spoke to Bevan a couple of weeks ago. Things are changing all the time, but they are holding about 1000 people. That is including people in our region, so that 500, a lot of them would be in that Launch Housing figure—that is not additional. So I am not sure what the total number is across the state, but the state government will have a good overview of that.

Mr TARLAMIS: And do you know what the average length of stay in hotel accommodation is for people?

Ms GORDON: No, I could not say. It has been varying. Some people have left the accommodation—we do not necessarily know where they have gone—and we are still finding new people turning up. So as I said, it is changing day to day, week to week. It is fluid. But the government is collecting data on this. I believe you have spoken to them. So you could ask them to keep you informed of that. That would probably be the best way to do it.

Ms PATTEN: Thank you very much, Ruth. That was perfectly timed, but it was a really good submission, and I think you have left us with lots of ideas for solutions. Obviously, as you were saying, we already know that there are innovations out there, we already know there are programs out there that work, and it is now how we can build them up. Whether that is youth foyers or programs like Detour or HomeConnect, how we can not only prevent people from entering into homelessness but also look at some of the solutions and innovations that are already there and already working for us. Thank you so much for coming in. As I mentioned, you will receive a transcript of this hearing and of this conversation. Please have a look at it. Feel free to correct

anything. Then ultimately, that will go up on our website and the really valuable information you have provided to us will form part of the report and any recommendations that we make.

Ms GORDON: If you do need any more information, particularly southern MPs, if you want to get in touch with me, I am always happy to chat further.

Dr KIEU: Thank you, Ruth. Appreciate your work.

The CHAIR: Fantastic, Ruth. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.