

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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WITNESSES

Professor Shelley Mallett, Director, Research and Policy Centre, and

Ms Emma Cull, Senior Manager, Service Development and Strategy, Youth, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

The CHAIR: Hello, Emma. Hello, Shelley. Thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate your time. We received your submissions. This is being broadcast; this is being recorded.

We are really looking forward to hearing from you, Emma, and from you, Shelley. We have just got a little bit of housekeeping to provide for you. As I mentioned, this is being broadcast and it is also being recorded. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by our *Constitution Act* but also by the standing orders of the Legislative Council. This means that any comments you make or any information you provide during this hearing is protected by law; however, if you were to repeat comments outside, you may not have the same protection. Also I note that any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament. Hansard will be keeping an accurate record of this, and they will provide you with a transcript of today's session. I would encourage you to have a look at that and make sure that we have not made a mistake or misrepresented you in any way. Again welcome and thank you so much for being here. If you would like to make some opening remarks, then we will open it up to the committee's discussion.

Prof. MALLETT: Thank you very much, Fiona, and to the rest of the committee, and to Wendy, who I know well. It is lovely to be here, and I appreciate the opportunity for Emma and me to appear before you on behalf of the Brotherhood of St Laurence. I apologise in advance if my internet connection gets unstable. It seems to have been doing that today. If it does, I will hand you over to Emma. We thought that we might start this 10 minutes in three blocks. I will give just a brief introduction followed by some words from Emma and then some words from me.

When we were invited to appear before the committee, it was suggested to us that perhaps the area we might want to focus on is the work in Tasmania that we have been doing, and so we have elected just to concentrate on that. Of course we could talk to the rest of the submission and ideas, but I think probably our best contribution to the committee might be to talk about that work and what we have been trying to do there.

I will do that in the latter half of the conversation, but I will just say first that the work in Tasmania began nearly 18 months ago with a review of their homelessness service system. The review was invited because the Brotherhood had been leading some work that actually Wendy had been deeply involved in originally when she was housing minister around the development of Education First Youth Foyers, and we developed a model based on what we call the capabilities approach and advantage thinking, which looked at realigning the effort around young people around building their opportunities, resources and networks to live lives that they really want to value and to connect them to education, employment and training to enable them to do that. On the basis of that development of the model we were invited by the Tasmanian government to look at their homelessness system altogether, but I think it is important to hear just a little bit from Emma about some of the work that we have done in Victoria which was the impetus for that invitation, and then I will come back to say a little bit about the work that we have been doing.

Ms CULL: Thank you. I guess the Education First Youth Foyers models were developed as a joint vision between government, the community service sector and really the education sector to drive reform of the homelessness sector. They are jointly delivered by TAFEs in Victoria, housing providers and youth support partners, and they really aim to break down the structural barriers that prevent young people from engaging in education, employment and mainstream opportunities. So rather than focusing on the provision of housing or emergency housing and crisis support as the focal point of the homelessness response, they look at that mainstream education as a response to homelessness. It is based on that premise that education is critical to developing future capacity. Stable accommodation has therefore provided the foundation to engagement in education and employment, rather than just as a solution to housing crisis.

So the three Education First Youth Foyers in Victoria are at Broadmeadows, Holmesglen and Shepparton. They are co-located with TAFE and have structured links to TAFE in delivery of a certificate I in developing independence to help young people plan their pathway through education, through the foyer into those

mainstream sort of sustainable independent livelihoods. In each foyer there are 40 young people who are 16 to 24 and are at risk of homelessness. They have their own sort of self-contained apartment that is modelled on student accommodation. I guess just that advantage thinking approach that Shelley just talked about, modelled on capabilities, is kind of one of the key things in changing the approach. So rather than focusing on people's deficits, on their barriers, on their problems, it really looks at, focuses on, young people's talents, potential and aspiration—and not just focusing on them but investing in opportunities.

So partnerships are a really key part of the model. They foster partnerships not only within the service system but beyond the service system, so mainstream education, employment and health providers, but also with businesses, employers, community groups, local government, philanthropists. So then foyers are really much more than what has happened in those four walls of the foyer. It is about connecting with people and the communities that they are situated in.

I guess just to talk a little bit more, and then I will hand back there to Shelley, about the kind of extension of the work of the foyers, really we see this model as a way of leading the edge of homelessness reform. We have really looked at sort of deepening and refining that model not just within the homelessness sector but in the other sectors that homelessness intersects with—so justice, out-of-home care, leaving care—and really looked at sort of how we can deliver things like the certificate I in developing independence to help really prepare young people for that sustainable livelihood that we have done through that housing model as well.

We have also developed a community of practice with all the providers of foyer, which is really about helping refine that model, sort of build knowledge, review and improve practice and identify systemic challenges as well as opportunities for innovation in how everyone responds to those things. We have also looked at adapting this model for leaving care, which was developed with the Department of Health and Human Services in the Better Futures model. While that one has not had a housing offer, it is really around providing all those other supports to help. So I guess that is just part of the genesis of the work, but I will hand back over to Shelley now.

Prof. MALLETT: As Emma was saying, when we began the work on foyer we had a big ambition, and the ambition was nothing less than total reform of the homelessness service system, because we thought about the homelessness system that wherever you looked across Australia, despite incredibly good work, we still had a big problem and a worsening problem in terms of homelessness. The challenge was: with limited resources, funding resources, how is it that we could maximise the effort to get better outcomes for people, whether they are children, whether they are older people, whether they are working-age adults or young people themselves? We felt that nothing less than a mindset shift was required to effect that change and that homelessness service delivery was so often managing the problem and often managing the problem on behalf of other service sectors—Emma mentioned a few, but we could add mental health, the drug and alcohol sector et cetera. We needed to effect a mindset change so that the homelessness service system became much more community facing and leveraging both the formal and informal supports that can be found from the community, whether that be from educators, business, local community groups, peers themselves. But we were not sufficiently or systematically doing that across the system as a whole.

The Tasmanian government embraced that vision, and they embraced it as part of thinking in the medium to longer term around more of a human service system reform such that the effort around dealing with people in need, including homeless but not excluding other groups, would be much more integrated but also so that it could leverage the role of the community itself in coming up with some of the solutions to homelessness reform. And so they began a process with us which began as really a co-design research process, where we reached out across the Tasmanian homelessness provider network as well as all of the related peaks and other relevant agencies and invited them to reflect on how the system was functioning, where were the barriers, where were the strengths and what would be some of the key things that were needed to enhance the reform effort. We brought together those providers in a co-design process to work out how could we collectively, and led by the government itself, reform the system as a whole; and how could those providers step up to the plate of leadership in that reform process, including stepping up to the plate potentially of recommissioning the services in the homelessness service system, to get more effective delivery but also better outcomes, most importantly, for homeless people.

Following the review in which all the recommendations were accepted by government, it was agreed that we would go through a process of actually working together in a collaborative co-design process again with the providers and with government to redesign the kind of system logic for the whole of the homelessness service

system and to realign the practice so that it is completely aligned around community-facing provision, where we are leveraging as much as possible the resources that are in some of the other service sector areas, but most importantly the resources that reside within the communities, families and other individuals themselves that can assist.

This is not really a substitute for a social housing response, which many people require, so we are not trying to wish away some of the issues around the lack of supply but merely to make the system itself as effective and high quality as possible so that homeless people will get a good outcome and be able to live a life that they wish, to value themselves and where they have a sustainable livelihood.

So where we are in the process in Tasmania currently is that we are doing the design. We are designing it around four kinds of principles. One is capabilities, the next are life course, the intervention continuum, and the last one is place. So we are designing a system with those system logics in place and then looking at four key cohorts, and they are: young people, children and families, single adults and older people. Where there is any specialisation, it really is a specialisation in terms of intensity of support rather than specialisation by population cohort—because what we see across the country is an increasing fracturing of the effort and duplication of the effort when we really overly focus on population cohort when often the areas of need are particularly common. They are typically income, they are access to housing, they are health and wellbeing, but they are also access to education, training and employment where you have young people and working-age adults.

So we are in the process of the design, and then we will also bring together the whole of the system—you know, co-design of the practice elements, but again framed around a capabilities approach that will make the providers actually more outwardly focused in their practice effort across all of the life course effort that they are doing within the homelessness system.

I will leave it there and then invite some questions from the panel.

The CHAIR: Shelley and Emma, that was quite remarkable given that you were explaining to us how you are completely rewriting and redoing the whole sector. To have explained that so succinctly in 10 minutes is very impressive. Thank you. I will not take long because I know a lot of the committee members will want to explore this a bit more.

I just have one quick question, I guess looking at this model of capability and community outward focus. We visited the foyer in Shepparton, and certainly not a day goes by when someone does not speak about what a great model that is and how, now that the model has been proven, everybody wants one—at least one. But just to clarify, you are suggesting that that kind of model would also work for older people, would work for people coming out with alcohol and drug issues—that it is that contract with the organisation and that moving of capabilities.

Prof. MALLETT: That is right. We see it as a practice approach that has got some structural elements to it, wherever you are, at whatever point in the life course—and the life-course approach is really critical. So if you are a child in a family, then there are particular things that a child and family need, a child of any family, and they are access to education principally. So any agency that is working in relation to children must have those external links. We are very clear too that the homelessness service system should not take up the role and function of the other areas. So if it is education, then they have accountability and responsibility to provide an education offer to those children, however insecure they might be in terms of their housing situation.

If you are an older person, then what you need is access to forms of social inclusion and an opportunity to contribute. You also need obviously access to care sometimes and possibly a health and wellbeing response, and there may be supports and forms of social connection, as I say. When you take a life-course approach which is pretty coherent and then you marry that with capabilities, what you are trying to do is empower people to make decisions on their own behalf, but you are aligning the empowerment with opportunities and resources and networks which are existing in the community to try and assist them. So you are leveraging what is there. That is not to say that sometimes we do not need additional resources, but it is not to say first, 'Give us additional resources in relation to that cohort'; it is first to say, 'What can we leverage? What can we maximise?', and we apply it across all of the life-course response.

Dr KIEU: Thank you for your presentation. It was very interesting about the concept and the implementation in progress of Education First, particularly the approach as a whole and the redesign of this

system from the ground up. That is very interesting. But I am also interested in that you also talked about the partnership in education as well, but now with the pandemic the future would be very much different from what we have been used to, particularly for employment, for example. Certain sectors will disappear. Certain sectors will be much more needed still, and the participation, particularly for younger people. I know that the progress is still in the design stage, but you must have some metrics built in to measure the success. And also how would you see that would be able to adapt to the new situation ahead, particularly in a very difficult time economically and also socially a difficult time?

Prof. MALLETT: Thank you very much for the question, Tien. We are also involved, actually, as it turns out, in relation to employment programs, using this model in relation to employment programs. We run a national youth employment body which brings together cross-sectoral actors, people involved in employment, and tries to look at a kind of local to national approach to employment, and of course in the context of that work we are very focused on what the impact of the pandemic is and how we can leverage the role of employers in community and education and skills providers in local communities to line up pathways for working-aged adults and young people. So that work is not stopping in relation to the pandemic. In fact it becomes absolutely more critical, and depending on where people are in the life course, for the young people what is going to become absolutely critical is an education, skills and training pathway for many of them because a lot of work is disappearing, particularly at the entry-level position.

But what we also know is that there still remains some employment opportunities in communities, so it is trying to align the effort around education and the existing work in those local communities, and we have developed some mechanisms for doing that work in communities, with a mechanism called a community investment committee. But these things broadly apply to working-age cohorts, so we think that that can happen while the pandemic is happening. Our community investment committees, which have local government, state government, federal government, local employers and providers themselves on them, are working during the pandemic and they are actively working in a few places across the country to line up the opportunities for people. We think that principle can work. It can work by using Zoom and other platforms to get together. We cannot do the face-to-face work.

But having said all of that, we are in a pandemic and we are facing really difficult times and the community-facing work is going to become even more important. I think that is something that has become evident in the pandemic—that people have turned to one another. So I think it presents an opportunity for us to do more of this sort of work rather than less, because I think people have become open to the possibility of it as a consequence of this massive disruption that we are facing in the community.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, ladies. In your submission you made a recommendation:

Establish a dedicated Affordable Housing Fund to deliver Victoria's affordable housing targets.

How do you see that is going to work?

Prof. MALLETT: Well, that is how we think we should do it, because we think the system reform will be really crucial, but without affordable housing it is going to be really difficult. We think that the commonwealth has a role in this actually and the state to the extent that it does, because it is absolutely essential as a consequence of the impact of the pandemic. Where the funding comes from, I am not sure, Rod, but we think it is really crucial.

Mr BARTON: Okay. I wanted you to say, 'Give me an answer'.

Prof. MALLETT: Well, no, just the suggestion in this case that we need a fund. Clearly there has been a lot of work around financing for affordable housing and in that financing work, work around social procurement in relation to large builds from developers. There has been work around how could we leverage the super funds, and I think that is an untapped resource, and many people have noted that. But we do think that both the commonwealth and state need to invest in a fund to address the crucial supply issues in relation to that. Whether that is a tax or some other measure, I am not certain.

Mr BARTON: Or a combination of both.

Prof. MALLETT: Or a combination of both, yes.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks, Shelley. You talked about something that we talked about a lot, which was the redesigning of the homelessness services. But also we heard earlier today from the Mornington Peninsula shire actually about the difficulties that they have with duplication of services and gaps in services, so a lot of the questions that I have asked many people during this inquiry are about support for recommissioning, which there seems to be quite strong support for. You might have actually given us the idea for our new overseas trip: seeing as how our trip to Scandinavia and America has been cancelled, we might be able to go to Tassie and look at your new model.

The CHAIR: I am not sure that we are welcome there even, Wendy.

Ms LOVELL: But, yes, I just wondered: obviously with the redesign of the service we would need to do recommissioning. Do you think that that is achievable in Victoria without a huge upheaval and outcry? [Zoom dropout] I think Shelley is frozen.

The CHAIR: Yes. Over to you, Emma. Shelley's face tells it all.

Ms CULL: I was wondering if she was stuck on that. Yes, I think we definitely do think that that is achievable in Victoria as well as in Tasmania. In Tasmania we have looked at recommissioning those without a whole lot of additional resources, and really it is a process of transition as well. It is about transitioning people from those existing services into this different way of working. So it is gradual, it is staged and it is not sort of throwing everything out and then starting again. It is really about how you slowly translate them into those different areas.

Ms LOVELL: Currently we have the 13-week episode of support for someone; that creates that revolving door. How would you redesign the period of support?

Ms CULL: Shelley, are you back with us there now?

Ms LOVELL: She is muted again.

Ms CULL: I just thought that she might have something particular. I am not really sure about redesigning the 13 weeks. I mean, I think really it is about that continuum of support and linking people into those other sectors as you go, so not just about that initial period but really about those ongoing connections that you are able to establish with people during that time. We look at it more as that holistic wraparound support that people are able to provide not just in the homelessness sector but how it can then link into the support that other services are providing—so whether that is within the justice system or the out-of-home care system—and how they can sort of converge to have a more coherent approach.

Ms LOVELL: Yes. That is good. A lot of the time in this inquiry I keep lamenting the fact that we did not get to finish the work that we started, that we were interrupted by a damn election—but anyway, maybe this inquiry will enable that work to go on.

The CHAIR: Certainly. Having you on the committee is helping that, Wendy.

Ms LOVELL: I am pushing my agenda.

The CHAIR: It is your experience and advice that we are welcoming. Kaushaliya?

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Emma and Shelley, for your time and your submission. Emma, the committee members here visited Shepparton, and we did go and see the youth foyer in Shepparton. It just really shows how the partnerships can work successfully. What I want to ask you is: it is challenging work to do anything in the homelessness and housing issues sector, but if we add the complexity of COVID-19, I just want to know from you what impact did it have on all of your stakeholders, including persons who are affected by homelessness, and how that has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Ms CULL: Yes. I think in terms of a lot of the stakeholders, as Shelley mentioned before, in some ways the COVID-19 pandemic has made a sharper focus around that partnership work, and particularly with foyers being really based in their communities and having partnerships within those communities it is really about how we work with each of those partners to help provide young people with opportunities. So even with a declining opportunity base, it is about saying what can we do now to remain connected to education and to

remain connected to employment, even if it is not in paid employment but through work experience and those sorts of things—obviously not during lockdown, and there was a period of lockdown for foyer students as well, so there was a time when they were not going out at all and, like the rest of us, doing a lot of things online both in terms of their studies as well as other things.

Ms VAGHELA: Has there been any change since the moratorium on residential tenancy evictions due to COVID-19?

Ms CULL: No, because with our foyer students we really manage that anyway with making sure that they are engaged in different things, and evictions—there just have not been any during this time. Really it is about keeping those young people engaged in doing lots of things. As a foyer community they have a lot of activities and engagement, so they have really managed to stay quite engaged during the pandemic, during that lockdown. I know there was a time when there were not new people coming in, so that was an issue—no-one left, but no-one came in as well—but I think that is slowly changing now as some of the restrictions ease. But we have them again this week, so it is hard to keep up with.

Ms VAGHELA: The youth foyer model is a great model, but if we just think, ‘What are the reasons why someone may move in and out of homelessness or be in a situation where they are facing housing issues?’, if we are able to identify and find solutions to that, then we may not even need all these models. Yes, it is a very successful model, but what are the reasons that people move in and out?

Ms CULL: I think particularly for young people we know that education is one of those key things—education as a means to future employment and the ability to maintain and sustain a future livelihood. So if you do not complete year 12 or you do not go on to further study, your chances of employment are much reduced, and there are a whole lot of studies to back that up. So for young people particularly it is about that pathway, and housing is the means of providing stability so that young people can engage and finish these things. But I think that is true of many different life stages.

But the other thing, we would argue, is social connections. Young people who are part of well-connected families have a whole lot of opportunities through their extended social networks to get work experience, to try something and fail, to start again, to be connected to a whole range of things that they might not ever have thought of or known of before. And really for foyers and that model, it is really about providing those social connections, expanding people’s social capital and connecting them in so that they are able to do those things themselves in the future. So it is not just about doing that at this time but also teaching them how you do that—teaching them to plan an ongoing engagement with education, teaching them how to use the mainstream health and education services in a community, because we know that people are going to need to continue to use those things throughout their lifetime. It is not sort of, ‘We’ll fix all your problems, and then you’re fine’. Everyone—all of us—will have different stages in our lives that we go through when we will need to re-engage with employment or education or make connections, whether that is with friendships, family groups or those sorts of things. So it is teaching young people those skills and how to make those ongoing connections. And we talk about that sort of connected independence. You want to build people’s independence, but you will always be connected to the communities in which you live. For young people who have experienced homelessness, they often have not had an experience of how to navigate that, so it is putting those supports in place that family-connected young people get through their family.

Dr KIEU: I understand that the education that you are talking about, Education First, is more of a foundation for the people who may not have had that education in school, or maybe the school education did not provide the particular skills—maybe more economic or maybe some other direction, so it is good to have the foundation to go on—but then in order to achieve the outcomes that we all want we have to have the participation and the willingness of the youth who we are targeting. In your experience—maybe you have not done that because you are still designing—is that something that we should take into account to motivate them and to encourage them to take part in that? Because no matter how much education or how much of a rosy-picture future we throw at them, if they do not have that willingness or that motivation, then that program may not be achieving what we wish it to. That is also only a comment.

Ms CULL: Yes, and advantage thinking, capabilities and a practice approach are about that. It is about that belief in young people and building aspiration, motivation and the unconditional quality of regard. So you invest in young people, and you say that they have the same opportunities as everyone else and that they can, if

they have the experiences, the connections and the networks, do the same. When they come in, they come to a level playing field, I guess, and providing them with those opportunities we are helping them make those connections. But I think it is really important, and I think that is why Shelley alluded at the start to that real mindset change. When we work with young people, often they introduce themselves by saying, 'I'm so-and-so. I have these issues. This is what's happened to me', instead of, 'I'm so-and-so. These are my interests and aspirations and what I can and want to do'. It is really about helping young people shift from, 'Here are all the problems that have happened in my life' to 'Here's the potential that I could have, and this is what I need to get there'. That is what we really focus that mindset and that practice change on so that young people really are being supported to aim high and are given the opportunities they need to get there.

The CHAIR: Shelley, welcome back. You are just on mute.

Prof. MALLETT: Sorry about that. I just got lost in a world of pain.

The CHAIR: I will quickly turn to Rod and Wendy just to see if they have got any final quick questions. Then, Shelley, given that we have missed you for a little while, if you have any final comments, we would welcome them.

Ms LOVELL: No questions, but just to follow on from Kaushaliya's question about kids leaving the foyer during the lockdown, we did actually have the young girl who we had dinner with, Janet Sadiq, move on to go to university. She ran into problems with getting her licence. She needed to get it but managed to get a special test done during lockdown. So she did very well.

The CHAIR: I am very pleased to hear that. Some of the other work that the Brotherhood does is hopefully capturing some of those people at risk a few steps back so that you will help to reduce even the need for some of the great work that foyers are doing. Thank you both so much for joining us this afternoon and just really for your insight. I must say, going back to look at what Tasmania is doing and just that real, complete rethink and complete reimagining of the sector is quite inspiring. I do not know if we will get quite that far, but it is an inspiration, so I am hoping that this committee will take the courage. Again thank you so much for coming. You will receive a transcript in the next little while. Please have a look at it. As I said, it will go up on the website. Your submissions and your contribution today will certainly play a role in the deliberations of this committee and go towards its final report. Thank you again.

Committee adjourned.