

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into services for people with autism spectrum disorder

Geelong — 19 September 2016

Members

Ms Maree Edwards — Chair

Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

Ms Chris Couzens

Mr Paul Edbrooke

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Emma Kealy

Staff

Executive officer: Dr Greg Gardiner

Witness

Mr Gordon Portway.

The CHAIR — The committee would like to call Gordon Portway.

Mr PORTWAY — Thank you. My situation is I am the grandfather of an autistic granddaughter. As you are well aware — and I am not repeating things, but basically — it is a stressful situation and it is difficult with education.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask, Gordon: do you care for your granddaughter?

Mr PORTWAY — I do.

The CHAIR — Are you her carer?

Mr PORTWAY — No, I am not the carer, but I do care for her, and my wife is often — almost every day — around there. There are just some practical things I would like to say. First of all, in my own basic maths I have worked out that something like 50 to 120 children are diagnosed in Greater Geelong every year with ASD. That is probably an underestimate; I would say it is greater than that. I am not sure whether you would agree or disagree with me. So I think there is some sort of need for an autistic school — a school which deals specifically with an intake which is basically autistic children. I do not even know whether there is one; I do not think there is one.

The CHAIR — No, there is not.

Mr PORTWAY — I think there is a need for a support drop-in centre, staffed by trained professionals, where children and families can actually get some help and support and some ideas.

The CHAIR — An autism resource centre?

Mr PORTWAY — A support centre, drop-in centre, yes; somewhere somebody can go and actually find out information, dialogue with other parents of autistic children and also relieve some of the stress. In other words, they could spend 2 or 3 hours there. It is very stressful at home. It is a stressful situation; it is 24 hours.

The CHAIR — How old is your granddaughter, can I ask?

Mr PORTWAY — Five. She has not gone to school yet.

The CHAIR — When was she diagnosed?

Mr PORTWAY — About two years ago.

Ms COUZENS — So at three?

Mr PORTWAY — Three. She had normal milestones up until about 18 months to 2 years and all of a sudden just regressed.

The CHAIR — Has she had any behavioural therapy, intensive intervention therapy?

Mr PORTWAY — Yes. That is the reason why I am saying it, because it is basically important that these sorts of facilities are provided early for the kids. My daughter and her husband have limited opportunity to go to something autistic friendly out of school hours. There needs to be something out of school hours — there is nothing — because really they are trapped at home. Like today — and you are going to laugh at me — the roof fell in, literally. The plaster came down, and she will not go back in the place; she thinks it is a different place. She will not go in our place because it is our place. So what do we do? We have just had a screaming child. That is why I am not very well geared up for this. So I reckon some sort of area where they could actually go, where they could actually spend some time in a nice relaxing area, is a must.

She was attending an early learning kindergarten program at Greenville Kindergarten in Grovedale, but someone zapped the funding. When I say ‘someone’, we know the government did. I understand it is being reinstated — you may well be aware of that — but it is not good. They are waiting. Every year these teachers are waiting. They do a fantastic job. She has been there two years, and she has really improved with their help. But if you are going to let them sort of hang on the end of the thing every year just for funding, it is not fair. So kindergarten needs are important.

I am concerned also about adults. What happens to adults? When these kids get to adult age — and I am talking about a range of abilities here: you have got the Asperger's on one end and you have got the ones on the other end that are not able to cope as well with society. I am concerned about the adults. As they grow up what are we actually doing to help them integrate, because I believe their talent is there? She is quite intelligent, I know she is intelligent.

The CHAIR — Is she verbal? Is she able to communicate?

Mr PORTWAY — She is verbal. She is just becoming — in the last six months she has been getting more and more verbal. But already she knew where to go — 'Go and get me the' such and such, and she would know exactly what to get. That is all I have to say: basically practical things. I think someone could have been saying this about 25 years ago; I am sorry.

The CHAIR — Does she get the 15 hours kindergarten?

Mr PORTWAY — Yes.

The CHAIR — The full 15?

Mr PORTWAY — Yes.

The CHAIR — Good. Do you think she will be attending school next year?

Mr PORTWAY — She is going to Barwon Valley, I think it is.

The CHAIR — Is that a mainstream?

Ms COUZENS — That is a special school.

Mr PORTWAY — No, it is a special school.

The CHAIR — Okay. And she has already been assessed?

Mr PORTWAY — They are not able to assess the person. From what I could see of the actual — I am a teacher myself — IQ test, it is extremely hard to assess a person's ability when they are in this condition, particularly when they are not as verbal as they should be.

The CHAIR — No, I think we have heard a lot about that. Thank you very much, Gordon.

Mr PORTWAY — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.