

# FINAL TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds

Melbourne—Monday, 31 January 2022

#### MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr Brad Battin—Deputy Chair

Mr Neil Angus

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

#### WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Ms Maria Tsopanis, Senior Manager, Community Development and Social Participation,

Mr Conor Butler, Research Officer, and

Mr Ali Sakkour, Industry and Client Manager, AMES Australia.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

I now welcome Maria Tsopanis, who is the Senior Manager, Community Development and Social Participation, and also I believe Conor Butler, Research Officer for AMES Australia, is participating today.

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues who are participating: Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; we have Neil Angus, the Member for Forest Hill; and Meng Heang Tak, the Member for Clarinda.

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Can I also remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to again minimise interference. If you have difficulties at any stage, please disconnect and contact committee staff using the contacts that were provided.

I now invite you to provide a brief opening statement to the committee, which will be then followed by some questions from the members. Thank you very much. Thanks, Maria.

**Ms TSOPANIS:** Thank you, Natalie. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge that I am standing on the lands of the Wurundjeri of the Kulin nations and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge that I have another colleague, Ali Sakkour, who is also in the room today.

AMES Australia has been providing settlement services to migrants and refugees in Victoria for over 70 years, and really our core objective is to build people's social and economic participation as a way of increasing their successful settlement journey. We do this through a variety of programs, including employment, education, initial, on-arrival, settlement services and social participation.

For this inquiry we are really speaking to the experience that we have understood through our client's journey, from arrival to established in their settlement journey. We are not a provider of health or aged-care services and so really base our work around the social and economic participation activities that we undertake.

If I go into those, one of the major issues for migrants and refugees generally but also exacerbated for older Victorians of migrant and refugee backgrounds is around language, literacy and increasingly digital skills as a gateway to their participation in terms of a lot of the vulnerabilities, inequalities and disadvantage that older people face. These are certainly amplified when language and literacy are very low, and this is particularly evident when you are trying to navigate services and engage with the broader community. When your social capital is limited—lack of networks—then it really fosters social isolation in many ways and lack of engagement, and therefore for older Victorians this can become, as I said, amplified.

My colleague Ali—I see you have got your hand up, Ali, so I will just finish the statement and then perhaps go to you. Participation in employment—there are biases that already exist for older jobseekers, and of course this is certainly again amplified when older migrants and refugees arrive in Australia with literal language and literacy and digital skills and perhaps a lack of work experience. I think also issues include the fact that entry-level jobs per se have really been reduced over the years with the decline in manufacturing and the move towards a digital economy—there is a lack of security. Often previous waves of migrants and refugees would utilise their employment in entry-level jobs as a way of increasing their economic and social participation, but for many of the newer arrivals this is becoming more and more limited.

There is also the intersectionality of issues for older Victorians of migrant and refugee background, particularly around disability and health. Issues around disability are often not clearly identified within a lot of our migrant communities. Often, unless it is a fully diagnosed condition that is visible, disability can be something that further precludes those individuals from participating. Often, as a protective measure, families tend to perhaps not hide but try to protect their family member with a disability from interacting with the broader social community. That increases their vulnerabilities and also their isolation and withdrawal from the community.

In terms of COVID, over the past two years really COVID and social isolation and the restrictions that we have been placed under have really heightened the isolation that a lot of older members of migrant and refugee communities face. Particularly with the move to everything going online, the lack of technical ability or digital literacy skills is one factor, but access to devices is another, as well as access to reliable internet. What has also happened during COVID is that there has become more of a reliance on one or two family members rather than a range of different family members, just because of the nature of restrictions and the fact that if those individuals were in the home setting, they were limited in the number of family members with primary caring responsibilities, often restricted to one or two family members. That is great, but it does reduce their social contact, which is really important for health and wellbeing. It also limits their source of information and where they get their trusted information from. I think that was really heightened through COVID over the last two years.

Translated materials are helpful but not always timely, not always written in a way that communicates the message properly, and also not all people are literate in their own language. We also find that with some of the smaller language groups things are not translated into their language.

As I said, COVID has impacted on health in terms of physical and mental deterioration. I have certainly seen this within my own family structure, where my ageing mother has deteriorated physically and mentally because of the social isolation and lack of interaction with other people and social connection with her peer group, which is really, really fundamental.

In conclusion, we have suggested perhaps the idea of a consultative committee for diverse older people which could help inform the commissioner, and perhaps looking at more funded opportunities for older Victorians to engage socially. They do exist, but perhaps they need to be more widespread and reach out to some of those smaller community groups, and in language as well, because we know that older members of migrant communities tend to revert to their first language as they get older. And finally, for government to be mindful that as services move online they are not further excluding older people of CALD background. I think I will leave it at that. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Maria. Before I go to the members for questions, did Conor or Ali have anything further that they would like to add to the evidence?

**Mr SAKKOUR:** Thank you for giving us this opportunity to express our satisfaction with servicing refugee backgrounds. It is more satisfying than just doing servicing. I do work with a huge community of refugee backgrounds from all different ages. I am from an employment background, and I have found that to allow the opportunity for the refugee's background to settle or to immerse themselves in society it is very important to start earning. Starting to earn gives them independence and releases other connections tying them to family members and gives them peace of mind to just immerse themselves in society and be more productive. AMES Australia has been assisting refugees from the airport on their journey through to settlement, education and upskilling them, putting them into pre-employment training, putting them into jobs and explaining on this journey we give them more stability in their lives.

We are here to answer any questions. We have been achieving a lot of—I do not want to use the term 'outcomes'—achievements. When I meet jobseekers in the street and they come and say, 'Hello. Thank you, Ali', it is very satisfying. I will give you just a little example, a quick one. I brought my child to the swimming pool with his mates—he is in year 7—and one of his mates said, 'Is this your dad, Ali?', and he said, 'Yes. How do you know him?'. He said, 'He found a job for my mum'. So that is the sense of satisfaction I am talking about.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Ali, and thank you very much for your submission today as part of AMES, Maria and Conor, and for taking the time to present to the committee. I will now invite committee

members to ask some questions of you. I will begin with Chris and then move to Heang. I think Neil has got his hand up too. Thank you, Chris. We will begin with you.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Maria, Conor and Ali, for your contribution today. We do greatly appreciate it and the time that you have given. Being a regional member of Parliament I am interested in your take on the difference between metro Melbourne and the regions. You talked about some of the access issues around language, digital skills, disadvantage and social isolation, for example. How do you think we can address those issues, particularly at a regional level?

**The CHAIR:** Who wants to take that question?

**Ms TSOPANIS:** Did you want to go, Conor? I can always add.

**Mr BUTLER:** I can kick off just briefly I suppose. AMES has been fairly involved in regional settlement work for refugees, mainly relocating for work, so we have a pretty well formed sense of what is a successful kind of resettlement and what has not worked in the past. Typically what does not seem to work is resettling communities, particularly a primary resettlement from overseas, directly into regional Victoria or Australia without much consideration of whether the services match up, whether the communities match up and how prepared people are to welcome new communities, and also housing I think is a really big one too. When you overlay an older age group onto that issue I think it is something that would have to be really coordinated and is probably about finding the right regional locations that can support a growing population of migrants and refugees but also those that can accommodate multiple generations of that, because that is what leads to sustainability as well. You find a lot of people who relocate to the regions for a short period of time, mainly for work, often can be socially isolated in those areas. But where there are multiple generations—younger people and older people—we find that that sort of leads to a more prolonged period of settlement like you see in places like Nhill with the Karen-Burmese population, who have been there more than a decade now, I think. Maria, I do not know—

**Ms TSOPANIS:** Yes, just going on from what Conor says, we have been working in that field of regional resettlement, and what we do find is that the services available on the ground there and the community itself and how welcoming they are are really critical. But, as Conor said, we look at a family resettlement model where you take the whole family up, so as a consequence you need to be able to engage and ensure that there are services for all the generations—so if it is young people, what schools are available, what is the education pathway that they have and what employment opportunities are there for them for casual engagement while at school but also post tertiary. For, as we call them, the primary participants, it is about the job opportunities that are available for them. Perhaps customarily it has been the male member of the family, but in a recent settlement program we did we were surprised by secondary outcomes of the wives that were getting work, because they had not had an opportunity in the cities to actually explore job opportunities or it was too difficult. And in the regional setting, through local networks and word of mouth, they were able to get work as well. There are a lot of factors involved that really make for successful regional settlement. I do not know if we have answered your question or if we have gone off on a tangent there.

**Ms COUZENS:** No, that is fine. In terms of this inquiry, how do you think the state government should be dealing with the challenges that we have talked about—and with others obviously—to address some of these issues? Have you got specific things that you think need to be put in place across the state to address these things?

**Ms TSOPANIS:** We did think that there should be really quite structured social participation opportunities that could be implemented widely across the state. And it could be, if you are in your regional areas, either through the local neighbourhood house or through the local service club or something like that to also allow for that cross-cultural opportunity as well as allowing people to meet within their own community and in language. But if it is in a setting that is perhaps set within the community, then they will have those interactions either deliberate or not. So that is one thing.

I think the other thing we suggested—and Conor or Ali please jump in—was around some kind of consultative committee that you could bring together to actually test ideas on and to look at perhaps the changing needs of older Victorians as we go along and move forward into a new world post COVID.

**Ms COUZENS:** And with that consultative committee, are you referring to it as a state rather than a regional—

**Ms TSOPANIS:** We probably have not given it too much thought, but we were thinking initially as a statewide body, with representatives of course from the regions and different representatives—gender, disability and so on.

**Ms COUZENS:** And would you see the multicultural organisations being part of that or establishing that consultative mechanism, or do you think it needs to be something different?

**Ms TSOPANIS:** The multicultural organisations could establish something like that, but I think if it is held out of a committee of government it probably adds to the value and you are more likely to get ongoing participation. I think sometimes, and this is my opinion, communities are over-consulted by multicultural groups like ourselves so may just see it as another consultative forum. Whereas if it is perhaps under the aegis of state government it would have a higher regard. That is my thought. Conor or Ali, any other thoughts?

**Mr SAKKOUR:** As I have an employment background, we have on our systems something called relocation assistance, so when we have an employment opportunity in regional areas we try to introduce it to our jobseekers for them to take the opportunity of moving to the regional areas. As most of the refugees tend to come from big cities, they think it is demoting to go to the regional areas or live in the regional areas. If you look at the demography in the greater Melbourne area, they are all community bases so any new arrivals tend to go and join these communities. But before they arrive or even when they arrive, if the government introduces the regional areas as being equal to greater Melbourne, this will switch their minds. They need to understand the regional areas in Australia. Not everything is concentrated in the city or in the community. Offering more employment opportunities in the regional areas and facilities for the second generation to develop themselves or to live in these regional areas will be a great initiative.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Chris. We will move over to Heang, thank you.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Chair. I think my question has already been mainly answered, but I would just like to say either to Maria or to Ali that I remember vividly accompanying my mum to her evening language class—you know, the 510 hours—as a new arrival 25 years ago. That is still a vivid memory. But my question goes to how does AMES Australia sort of engage with older people from culturally diverse communities and provide culturally relevant services, which also include partnerships with other providers?

**Mr SAKKOUR:** Can I take on this, Maria?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ali.

**Mr SAKKOUR:** There are two sections I would like to answer, with no offence to the system we are running at the moment, or the government is running. First, the 510 hours is intended to be a classroom-style delivery, and unfortunately it is not working. Being honest, they go every day to the school just to learn the basics—basic, basic. I understand they need to be introduced somehow to the language; maybe a few months or the first six months just to learn the English structure. Then they should be introduced to reality English, daily life usage English. This will be more productive, more preparing the candidates to immerse in the society later on. Because it seems that there is a wall; everybody is hiding behind it. We have so many arguments with the educational institute teachers. Why are we taking this candidate after 12 months or two years with them and putting them into pre-employment courses, introducing them to the workforce, to workplace culture? We had a long argument with that.

But I have a few examples of achieving after these 510 hours, where I have put these candidates into pre-employment training for two weeks, concentrating on the daily life—on the payslips, on the OH&S and all of that. There are so many. I did receive one call once from a jobseeker. I said, ‘Who is this?’. The way she spoke after I put her into work, I could not believe the language she was speaking. It was very amazing. I jumped with happiness, because after two years doing these 510 hours she could not answer more than a, ‘How are you? How old are you?’. That was it. Yes, that was one of them. Forgive me if I forget the second one.

**Ms TSOPANIS:** Perhaps I will—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, just one moment. Heang just had a further supplementary. Heang, go ahead.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ali, for your insight. In terms of employment, knowing that the primary, as you said, or the secondary—the wife—would have experience from overseas, either professional experience or trade experience from overseas, the thing is would you agree if I were to say sometimes it is very difficult to get Australian experience to step into that employment? Are there any other things that you see could make it a pathway or more welcoming so that employment could be fast-tracked?

**Mr SAKKOUR:** In 2017, 2018 and 2019, before COVID struck us, I used to look into the profiles of the newly referred jobseekers to us, regardless of their age and regardless of the time they were in the country, and put them into pre-employment training, one related to the vacancies we had. I do discuss with the employers about the cohort I have and what I am doing, so there is a negotiation between me and the employers. So I do prepare the jobseekers specifically for these vacancies we have. Of course it is a bulk employer recruitment. They are ongoing vacancies, so I can use them all.

The second thing I do is introduce them, of course using a bilingual trainer just to overcome the language barriers. I am talking mostly about the Arabic or middle Asian cohort. I am from the same area as well, so I do understand their way of thinking, their mentality. Looking to employment, their impression is if you are over 50 you are lost. That is it. No more employment for you. Nobody will hire you. So we did work on all of these aspects, assisting other RTOs and AMES as well to qualify the staff, using bilingual trainers speaking the same language. Most of the time when I have a great challenge in collaborating with some employers I do intend to target employers of the same background. In the northern suburbs we have an area called Campbellfield, which is dominated by same-background employers who speak the same language. I will give you an example: some of them do not speak the same language but they have so many employees from the same background. Mentioning one of the employers, Concept Caravans, they bring somebody from the same background to conduct the interview just to offer the opportunity of employment to those with a refugee background. So there is initiative from us and initiative from the employers working with jobseekers to meet one target, which is to get them into employment.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ali. I will go to the final question from Neil.

**Mr ANGUS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Maria, Conor and Ali, for your contributions this afternoon as well as your written submission. My question is to you, Maria: how many of your clients would be considered older Victorians?

**Ms TSOPANIS:** I could not tell you off the top of my head, but we do work with all members of the families in the settlement area, so that takes in obviously the immediate family but it takes in members over 50 and over 60. As well within our employment we do service people at the older end of their working life, which takes you up to 64. In the area I work in, social participation, we work with people right up into their older age and we usually do this through what we call our cultural activities or celebrations—so through things like celebrating Refugee Week; planned activities; raising awareness around breast screening and bowel screening, so working with the Cancer Council, particularly targeting the older members of those communities; and also our disability awareness programs, really again trying to work with that older group. Unfortunately I am unable to give you a precise number. I am not sure whether Conor could tell you, but it would be several thousand, I imagine, given that we work with about 15 000 people a year. Is that right, Conor?

**Mr BUTLER:** I think so. Settlement specifically—in a normal year there would be about 4000 arrivals to Victoria and AMES is the largest settlement provider, so the bulk of those see AMES at some point. There is the full spectrum of age groups in that area. Another key cohort that we work with, particularly in the east, is in our English language classes—there are a lot of people, particularly of Chinese and Vietnamese background, who would be over 60 who we see every day.

**Ms TSOPANIS:** Yes, and just adding to that, we offer those people a lot of bilingual classes, and generally at the weekends, because particularly the older Chinese and the older Vietnamese have grandparenting responsibilities. So we find that the only time they are available is actually at the weekend. They tend to like it as part of a social interaction as well as learning English. What we try to do is also include some basic digital

literacy in there as well, exposing them and helping them to set up MyGov accounts so that they get a picture of the way the Australian social system works and the service system works. It is quite fundamental.

**Mr ANGUS:** Great. Thank you. Thanks, Maria. You mentioned your own example of your family as a result of the COVID isolation. I concur with you. I think that is a very significant and serious consequence of the last couple of years for our broader community but certainly for our multicultural and migrant communities. Within your sphere have you seen any sort of outworkings of that that you can identify at this stage, or is it too early to see any consequences there?

**Ms TSOPANIS:** Well, certainly I have seen physical decline, not only in my own family members but in other people. My mother is in her 90s, she is 92, certainly an older Victorian, who was driving a vehicle at the beginning of the first lockdown in March of 2020 and by the end of it is no longer capable of driving a vehicle because of the physical deterioration and lack of strength in her shoulders and so on. And when I speak to others—we speak not only with family circles but also with client groups—there seems to be that anecdotal evidence saying that people are also noticing that as well.

What is happening is that for those older people who are not in aged care but are at home, we kind of think they are doing it better, but actually they have also been quite locked down, so that takes away a lot of the everyday activity that they would be used to. Even just cooking a meal for family and inviting family, that really requires a lot of physical strength for someone in their 90s. And also that social interaction—you know, you were really restricted in who you could see, particularly during the lockdowns. So as I said, that kind of limits them. And this is something that some of the communities were identifying when they were trying to get messaging out to communities about COVID and COVID restrictions—there seemed to be more gatekeepers to the older people because you would only have that one voice into the household. I think those are some of the things we have seen.

**Mr ANGUS:** Great. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Maria. Thank you, Neil. I think that concludes the questions from the members. Can I take this opportunity on behalf of the committee to thank Maria, Conor and Ali for presenting here today and also for their submission to the committee. We truly do appreciate you taking the time to present to the committee.

The next steps will be, once the committee concludes this inquiry, we will table a strong report hopefully to government with some recommendations in relation to this inquiry, hopefully before June. And if you would like to keep up to date with the progress of this inquiry, you may do so via the website. Thank you so much for being here today and taking the time to present to us.

**Ms TSOPANIS:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**Mr BUTLER:** Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**