

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 Jess Wilson, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Cassandra Strakosch, Head of Communications and Engagement, Good Things
Foundation.

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 and pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

I welcome here today Jess Wilson, CEO, and also Cassandra Strakosch, Head of Communications and Engagement, of the Good Things Foundation.

I also would like to introduce my colleagues participating today: Christine Couzens, Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, Member for Buninyong; Neil Angus, Member for Forest Hill; and Meng Heang Tak, Member for Clarinda. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans.

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Can I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking, again just to minimise any interference. Also, if you have any technical difficulties, please disconnect and contact committee staff using the contacts that you have been provided.

I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the members. Thank you, Jess.

Visual presentation.

Ms WILSON: Thank you very much, Natalie, and thanks so much for having us. I am coming to you today from Dharug Gadigal country, so just wanted to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land which I am coming from.

I am going to do a short presentation and Cass is going to join in on that. The Good Things Foundation is really pleased to be here today, so thank you very much for inviting us to present to you today. We are a social change organisation focused on improving people's lives through digital technology. Our vision is a world where everyone benefits from digital. We want people to be digitally capable and confident and safe so that they can be happier and healthier and better off, because it is so essential for everybody to have those essential digital skills to do everything that we do in our world today.

But I wanted to start today with just a comment by Mr Lan. Mr Lan has participated in a number of the different programs that we run through a community partner called Indochinese Elderly Refugees Association Victoria. Mr Lan came to Australia at 64. He says here he was feeling very lonely and isolated, but by going to the Indochinese Elderly Refugees Association he has not only been able to connect with other people in his community but he is learning the skills that are helping him to connect with the broader community in Australia. So I wanted to position Mr Lan in the conversation that we are having today.

This slide is quite a complex one, but it is one that we had to develop because of COVID and, if anything, COVID has taught us in the last two years how essential digital technology and the ability to be able to use it is to being able to participate in our community. Now, this is a flowchart that we created just for people to be able to get their digital vaccination certificate. We have had hundreds of calls to our help line, people wanting to know how to be able to do this. On the left-hand side we have got just those essential skills. So you need to be able to know how to browse the web. You need to be able to fill in an online form, to have basic internet safety knowledge, to understand what a password is. You need to have an email address. All of those are essential

skills you need to have just to be able to get that digital certificate, and that is before you go on the right-hand side, which is all the information you need to know to be able to access government services.

Now, as we know, many governments, including the Victorian Government, are really pushing to be able to have a digital-first focus, but it is also essential to make sure that people are able to access those digital services. So the awareness of MyGov, the ability to use that system, which we know is quite complex—all of those pieces together you need to be able to do to be able to get one thing that is going to help you participate in the community. And that is before you even link it to the Service Victoria app, which I know you have been able to do in Victoria today. So this is kind of showing you exactly why it is essential for everyone to be able to have those digital skills they need.

I am just going to hand over to Cass to talk a bit about the research and the evidence that we have got behind the work that we do.

Ms STRAKOSCH: Good morning, everyone. On screen now is our 'Digital Nation Australia' resource, and it helps to paint the picture of the digital inclusion landscape in Australia. You will see right down the middle is the digital divide, and I wanted to highlight the three bridges that help people to cross it. So there is access and affordability—that is the means to have an appropriate internet-connected device and that you can pay for it affordably—and then we also have ability. So ability is the skills and confidence to use the internet and that technology safely once you have access to it.

And if we look specifically at older migrants and refugees, frequently they are at higher risk of being digitally excluded. So research that came out late last year showed that one in four Australians is digitally excluded, and we know about 11% are highly excluded. And some people are more at risk of digital exclusion than others. So 80% of seniors have said it is really difficult to keep up with the rapid pace of tech changes, and I am sure that is something we can all relate to as technology changes around us so quickly.

We did some work with Settlement Council of Australia, and they consulted settlement agencies who said that low digital skills and access were critical barriers to accessing support services for new migrants and refugees during the pandemic. So we know that as people get older that they are more likely to be excluded, and when people are new migrants or refugees or have English as a second language there are additional factors that come into place to their digital exclusion, or risk of.

And we also know that digital inclusion actually supports social inclusion. So it is really important for being able to do everyday things—being able to connect with grandchildren, being able to read the news and find reliable information online—but also accessing all of those support services in the community that surround us and that are just online these days. The Be Connected program actually helps illustrate the importance of digital inclusion supporting social inclusion. It is our flagship program. Federally funded, we work in partnership with DSS and the eSafety Commissioner to run the Be Connected program through our network of 3,500 community organisations nationwide. It has so far reached a million people, and it is really through our partnership approach that we have managed to reach that many people. It is that network of funded community organisations embedded in community—people they trust, people the community know, who are there to lend a helping hand. It skills digital mentors for the people in the organisation—by digital mentor, that could be a tutor, a teacher, a coach, a mentor; it does not have to be a tech expert, it has to be someone who is happy to be a helping hand to support someone to learn—and provides quality online content so that we know what we are teaching people is reliable. A recent social impact evaluation on that program showed that it increased digital skills, confidence using the internet and online safety. But it also saw people being more socially connected and less isolated as a result of participating in the program. It actually created a \$4 social return on investment for every \$1 that was invested in it.

Ms WILSON: As Cass said, I think, we have a networked approach at Good Things Foundation. We have been doing this kind of approach to support digital inclusion both here for 4½ years and in the UK for 10 years because we are passionate about the difference that community organisations can make in their communities. Just to highlight that, in Victoria we have over 1,000 community partners, and 677 of those work with people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We have got quite a lot of those in regional and rural areas as well, and we know that if we can build their capacity and give them the resources and support that they need to be able to deliver programs in their community, then they are the best ones to be able to reach the people that we most need to reach.

Cass talked a little bit about digital mentors, and I think this is the key role. What the social impact evaluation of Be Connected showed was that those people that are like you, peer-to-peer mentors, actually make a significant difference to being able to build digital skills in people's communities. We just wanted to highlight that this is coming from one of our conferences that we ran last year—the real importance of those digital mentors in being able to deliver community digital inclusion programs. They are not tech experts, but they are passionate and they are about supporting people in their community.

I suppose the key thing as well for us is we have been talking about digital ability and skills for a long time, but COVID showed us how essential it is to be able to have the right digital technology and the data to be able to access that technology. When people were isolated, when they were in their homes on their own, if they did not have access to technology or could not afford the data, they were significantly more isolated. We did do a loan program through our Be Connected grants program, but still in a survey we did last year 74% of our community partners said that people still needed devices and data in their community. So it is still a concern for the majority of our partners. I think what this shows is that although Be Connected is a broad program, we do have community partners that are supporting culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We do know that there is a need for a more focused program that does build on the more generic program but has that additional funding and support to be able to tailor to refugees and migrants. There really is not a national program or a state program that just focuses on this target group, and we know how important it is. So certainly it is important for us to do that.

Just a quick mention about our Health My Way program, which is digital health literacy. We want people to have not just the essential digital skills they need but also, building on that, how they then build on their skills to be able to connect and improve their health care. We have been delivering a program, Health My Way, through the Australian Digital Health Agency, building people's digital health skills, their ability to access health apps and to be able to manage their health, to be able to access telehealth and to be able to get the right kind of and reliable health information and how essential that has been over the last two years. We delivered an expanding digital health series, which was bringing together a range of practitioners, policymakers, researchers, people on the ground who have been delivering digital health literally to talk about what is important in being able to deliver digital health across the country. Really the key things that came out of that were the essential need for people to have that health literacy—consumers as well as healthcare providers, so that combination of those two things—and also again affordable technology and access to data is really, really important.

Cass, do you want to talk a bit about our campaigns?

Ms STRAKOSCH: Yes. We have run a number of [inaudible] now because we know that people may not know about the support already available to them and we motivate people who are a bit unsure and find that that will inspire them to take the next step online. So [inaudible] even with the pandemic there were thousands of community events held around Australia [inaudible] because 95% of attendees who went to these very fun, kind of [inaudible] events—it might have been something like learning how to watch a YouTube tutorial to make something [inaudible]. Ninety-five per cent of people who went to events wanted to learn more about what you could do online [inaudible]. So it is these kinds of awareness-raising campaigns and really getting out in the community and letting people know what is possible with tech [inaudible] people to ask for help. We know that campaigns and marketing channels need to include offline means too for people who are at risk of—

Ms WILSON: Cass, I am sorry; I think you might be breaking up a bit.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is breaking up.

Ms WILSON: Sorry about that. Cass, I might keep going while we try and fix that.

Get Online Week is a key point to be able to tell people that there is support available.

I suppose these are just the recommendations from our submission to you: we need to make sure that everyone in Victoria has access to affordable internet devices; we need to codesign digital-first government support services with refugees and migrant people from refugee and migrant backgrounds; and it is really important to expand on the programs that are already existing, so not to create new ones but to expand on those programs like Be Connected that can support access to support services and build people's confidence and skills.

Just to finish off with another story, this is Mama Fe, who is a digital mentor now in the Australian-Filipino Community Services organisation. She started off as a learner actually—she did not have that confidence herself—but she really wanted to be able to inspire others, so once she had learned that first piece of how to use technology she wanted to be able to support others to not be scared and to get online. Again I just wanted to centre her voice in our conversation today. That is the end of our presentation, so I will stop sharing. I know you will have some other questions for us.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jess and Cassandra. I will move to the first question from Chris.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you, and thanks, Jess and Cassandra, for that great presentation. We really appreciate your time today. In your submission and on the screen, as we have just seen, you have made a series of recommendations. I suppose I wanted to unpack that a bit and ask how you think we can meet those challenges to deliver the key points of your recommendations in a practical way and what role the state and local government plays in that as well.

Ms WILSON: For sure. The first key thing for us is about making sure that there is access to affordable technology. We know that state governments put out a significant amount of funding over the COVID pandemic to allow students and other people to access technology during that time. So I think it is about building on the knowledge and experience that we had during COVID and making sure that those opportunities continue to exist for people beyond the emergency responses that we had to do because of COVID—so just ensuring that people have that.

Now, there are different ways of doing this. I do not think it is just a government responsibility. I think it is government responsibility, a technology responsibility—technology companies have the opportunity to participate in this. Actually in the UK we have been developing a program called the data poverty bank, which is a bit like a food bank but for data. So it is where we have got a number of different technology companies donating data that we can then distribute through the community partners. It is a combination I think of government taking responsibility for both making sure that you have new things that are coming out that are focused on digital first and making sure that people have the skills and confidence to be able to use them as well. So, number one, the digital first government systems do need to be able to be co-designed with people that are going to use them, so they need to be as simple as possible, and we know that sometimes that is not always the case. They need to be in different languages as well, so we need to make sure that they are accessible in different languages or at least in easy-read options—there are videos for instruction, those kinds of things—that make them easier for people to access.

And I suppose for me the last piece is around building on programs like Be Connected. So Be Connected is focused on older Australians, anyone over 50. Apparently that is older; I am not sure that I feel confident about that, but anyway. It is fantastic because it means we can support people who are still in the workforce, and we know not everybody has the digital skills they need, even if they are in the workforce today. But it is essential for us to kind of build on that and go, ‘Well, we have some resources in other languages, but we know that there are more languages that we need to build on’. So that opportunity to actually have a specific focus on refugees and migrants is a real opportunity for the Victorian Government to say, ‘This is something we could make a real difference on’.

Ms COUZENS: You talked about the partnerships that you have already built up, which is fantastic. How do we build on that capacity? Do you see, for example, neighbourhood houses and different community organisations playing a role in that?

Ms WILSON: Yes. And look, our network is a broad network of a range of different service providers, and it is deliberately so. So it has neighbourhood centres and community houses as part of the network. It also has, as you saw, the Indochinese Elderly Refugees Association, who probably had not delivered digital literacy programs before but actually saw a need in their community. We have disability organisations; we have Aboriginal health organisations in the network. So it is a really broad network deliberately because we know that people learn best in a place that they feel comfortable in. So if there is somewhere they are already going to get support or to have that social connection and if we can build that program into that space, then they are more likely to learn and feel confident and be able to take that to the next level. So I think absolutely community houses, libraries—all of those organisations—are really important, and some have been delivering digital literacy programs for quite some time, but it is about where are those other spaces people are going to

access support that we can build these digital literacy programs into to make sure that people have that confidence.

Ms COUZENS: And as a regional member, as Michaela is, in regional and rural areas obviously there are issues in terms of connectivity. Do you see the recommendations from this report also recommending, I suppose, solutions to some of these connectivity problems for regional and rural Australia?

Ms WILSON: Look, connectivity is probably not our specialty. We are focused on digital skills and capabilities. So I know there are a lot of other people that are much more experienced in the connectivity space than we are. What I would say, though, is it is essential to have connectivity before you can have the skills, and as I said earlier, it is a combination of government support and technology companies working together alongside the community to make sure that we have the opportunity for people to have that access. Now, I know that there are different ways of doing this. Some libraries have free wi-fi for people to be able to use that you can use during work hours and operation hours but also outside. So there are different models that enable people to access that, but actually if we wanted to make sure that everybody had access, we would need to make sure that there was free wi-fi for everyone, and that is a significant challenge for our community. So I would say that connectivity is essential, and it is a combined effort between governments, technology companies and community partners that is actually going to solve that. But unless we have that, then people are going to be excluded.

Ms STRAKOSCH: And I can just add to that—and hopefully you can hear me again as my audio has been fixed. We have recently provided a submission on the Regional Telecommunications Review which explores this kind of connection between connectivity and skills in a little bit more detail, so we are happy to send you a link to that following this. But I think one of the things that the pandemic has taught us is how you do remote delivery. We know that not everyone can come to a community organisation to get that in-person support all the time, particularly in regional Australia. We actually, through this pandemic, have worked with our network on how do you support people remotely who do not know how to turn on their phone let alone join a Zoom call, and we have developed some support resources around that. So I think we know a lot more about providing digital skills support in regional and rural Australia than we did two years ago. I think there is that next step that is possible in regional Australia to support them a little bit more, and actually we have more regional-based network partners in Victoria than metro.

Ms COUZENS: You very much focus on affordability and accessibility, and we have touched on that a bit already. If people do not have a device, how do we then get them connected?

Ms WILSON: Our key thing is that we need to make sure that everybody has a device and so there are different ways of doing that. Again, we delivered a grants program to our community partners where they could purchase devices using some funding that we gave them and then loan those out to people in their communities for a period of time. Now that was really essential. That was one of our initial COVID responses because we knew there was no way people would be able to, number one, continue to learn digital skills, but number two, stay connected with people unless they had a device. And we have seen some fantastic stories of people actually being able to stay connected and learn how to use Zoom on Zoom because of the incredible participation of our digital mentors, who spent hours on the phone with people before they actually got them onto Zoom, so those devices are essential.

I think there are different ways of doing that. If we could get donated devices from people to give out to community partners that need them and to community members that need them, that is going to be an essential step really. You will see a significant amount of research and data saying that the majority of Australians now have some sort of device. That is what the statistics are saying. But if you have one family member with one mobile phone and you have six or seven people living in the house, then that is not enough to make sure that people are digitally included. I would say that a lot of people have a device, but whether they can actually afford to pay the bill for it or afford to use the data to do the things that they need to—using a Zoom call uses a lot of data, so for us to be able to participate today or to be able to do a digital telehealth appointment costs a lot for people in data. Actually it is not just the device, it absolutely has to be about the data as well and so it is that combination that is really essential.

There are different options. There is having cheaper NBN options, and I know there is some work happening around that, but it is also about making sure that people know what is available in terms of cheap data options for them as well longer term.

Ms COUZENS: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. Any other members? Michaela, and then I will move to Neil.

Ms SETTLE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Jess and Cassandra, for your wonderful presentation. I might, if I can, just make one quick comment. In Ballarat, where I am from, there was a wonderful program that Dementia Alliance ran during COVID and it was about finding iPads for dementia patients and it was that connection piece. It was not so much for them to be able to use them, but how do you explain to a dementia patient that no-one is coming to visit them? So I just give a shout out to Dementia Alliance in Ballarat. They were on it. What I wanted to ask you about, you talk about building on existing programs. I guess what I am interested to know is do you think that working with the CALD community is just a matter of interpretation or is there another layer of that that we have to work through, be that a sort of cultural reluctance to use them. So if we are going to build on those programs like Be Connected, what sort of work are we going to need to do specifically for the CALD community? And on that, in what way do you currently work with the CALD community to make sure that you are tailoring to their needs?

Ms WILSON: To answer your first question, I suppose that what we have seen through our community partners is that need to have bilingual mentors. It is really important to have people from the community that speak the same language and understand the cultural needs being able to deliver the programs in the way that they see fit. I think what is really fantastic about the Be Connected program is that we do not ask people to say, 'Okay, you have to do this course, and then you go through these six weeks, and then you end here'. It is actually really flexible, so our community partners can make a decision about what is most important for the people that are in front of them to help them learn. So for the CALD community, I would say it is really about having those bilingual mentors that understand what they need to do, understand the language and can work in that way across both English and the language that they are working in to be able to explain quite complex concepts, I suppose. The internet is quite strange. It is a completely new language as well if you have not connected with it before, and so I think it is about how you interpret that. I do think, though, there is a need to have the knowledge, the opportunities and the resources in more languages. I think that is definitely something that is essential to be able to ensure that we have got resources and online learning content in other languages. That will help, so I think that is definitely something that is really important.

But it is also about funding those community programs. We deliver the grants program for Be Connected, and we have the Health My Way as well. We know about investing in community partners to be able to have the time and the resources to be able to deliver programs. Our funding is quite small—it is between \$2,500 and \$50,000 across the grants program—and so I think adding a little bit of capacity to those community partners who are working in a bilingual way and have to have that added complexity of working with people who need to learn English along the way as well as learning the digital skills is really very essential. So I think that additional funding, or an additional program focused on those communities, is really important.

Ms STRAKOSCH: And I think when designing the programs, we are big advocates for a codesigned approach—so getting the people who are going to be the beneficiaries, I guess you could call them, in the room, the people who are going to run the programs, and really getting their firsthand perspective in the room with us to work out what is the best model, how do we reach people. It might be really nuanced. And we by no means think that sitting here in Sydney we know what is going to work in every single community in Australia—that is not our approach at all. So that is why we actually take the time to set it up well, understand needs, design with them and then learn and iterate as we go, and then we can have these flexible approaches. We know that even after you do that process people will deliver it in different ways that will work for their particular community and organisation.

Ms WILSON: Can I just add one last thing to that?

The CHAIR: Sure.

Ms WILSON: I think it is the combination of having a localised approach alongside that consistent online learning, and for us what we do is build capacity in those community organisations. They do not have enough

time or effort to be able to look at exactly what they need to do, and so that opportunity to have that coordinating and supportive body that is able to help people deliver this and bring them together so they can learn from each other is also really, really important from our perspective.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will move on to Neil.

Mr ANGUS: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Jess and Cassandra, for your evidence today and for your written submission as well—most informative indeed. I was just wondering: are you running any courses in relation to digital scams, online security issues and that sort of thing?

Ms WILSON: Yes, absolutely. So working in partnership with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, online safety is definitely one of the key focuses that we have. All of our programs include something about safety, because we know that people who have not been online and are starting out their online journey are actually more likely to be the victims of scams, because they are not sure what to look out for. So the first thing that we talk to people about, apart from encouraging them to be online—so I think there is that balance between talking about scams and supporting people to know what to look for, but at the same time not scaring people, because a lot of the reason why people are not online is that they are scared. They hear all about the scams. They do not want to lose their money. And so it is that balance really between saying there are a whole lot of benefits and a whole lot of reasons why it is a great idea to be online, but just like if you are learning to drive a car, you need to learn how to drive a car safely and so there are things that you need to be able to learn so that you can actively be safe online. So definitely one of the key areas of focus for all of our digital literacy programs is to make sure that they are talking about safety as well.

Mr ANGUS: Thank you. You mentioned before your mentors. Are they all volunteers?

Ms WILSON: Quite a lot of them are volunteers, I would say. They are either volunteers in the community, so they might be people that have been part of the community, as you saw from Mama Fe at the end—she was a learner to start with and then saw how important it was and how much she got out of it and said, 'I'm going to give back to my community and step into that'. So there are definitely a significant number of volunteers that participate and deliver these programs. But I would also say it is community support workers and people that work in the libraries, librarians, who are supporting people to deliver these programs. So often it is on top of the work that they are doing more broadly and becomes part of the way that they see to engage people in the community. It is just so important. People are coming to them all the time asking for help. We know that the libraries have been the place where people go and say, 'I don't know how to do this. Can you help me?', and so it is really important that we are building their capacity and their ability to support people in their communities.

Mr ANGUS: Great. Thanks, Jess. And just one final question from me: in terms of your own funding, is it a mixture of grants from federal and state? Can you just flesh that out a bit for me, please?

Ms WILSON: Yes, so we have a combination. We have not had any state funding from Victoria yet, but we do have a range of federal government funders and we have funding from corporate partners as well, so from NBN and from NAB and from a range of other programs to support people.

The CHAIR: Any further questions, committee? No? Well, that concludes this part, and I just want to take the opportunity on behalf of the committee to thank you both, Jess and Cassandra, for your valuable contribution today and of course your submission. The committee appreciates very much the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence and to be with us today, broadcasting live, and thank you for all the work that you do and all the very best in your endeavours, your organisation. The next steps will be the committee will prepare some strong recommendations and table a report to Parliament, hopefully before June of this year, and the secretariat will keep you informed of that progress. But again, thank you very much for taking the time to be with us today.

Ms WILSON: Thank you for having us. It has been great to be with you. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.