

FINAL TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds

Ballarat—Thursday, 31 March 2022

MEMBERS

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Mr Brad Battin—Deputy Chair

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Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESS

Ms Lisa Dinning, Workforce Development Adviser, Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are meeting today, and I pay my respects to their Elders both past and present and any other Aboriginal Elders of other communities who may be here today.

I welcome Lisa Dinning, Work and Learning Centre Adviser for the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre.

My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. My colleague here is Meng Heang Tak MP, the Member for Clarinda.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, so what you say here is protected by that privilege, but if you say these things outside, even on social media, that privilege may not cover you.

Evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, so after the public hearing you will receive a transcript for you to check, and then that transcript will be made public and published on the Committee's website.

I now invite you to make an opening statement, which will be followed by questions. Thank you, Lisa.

Ms DINNING: Thank you. My name is Lisa Dinning. I am a Work and Learning Centre Adviser and teacher, or tutor, at Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre. First of all, I would like to tell you a little bit about my role there and what I do and then talk a little bit about what the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre does generally, especially in relation to the migrant and refugee community in Ballarat.

My role at the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre is officially called 'Workforce Development Adviser'. I am on a team of four people, and my role specifically is to help people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. The other people on the team deal with jobseekers who are from other backgrounds or youth. What we generally do as part of the Work and Learning Centre team is assist jobseekers with: creating résumés and cover letters; doing online job applications; interview skills; and even paperwork like getting police checks, working with children checks, NDIS screening and superannuation—and the list goes on, especially with me, because I have to help people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, so often they do not know much about how things operate or what they need to do to prepare for work. We also assist with placing people in pre-accredited and accredited training.

Another important part of my job is to liaise with my network partners within Ballarat, so I belong to some committees in Ballarat, including the Ballarat Regional Settlement Advocacy Committee—specifically the subcommittee for employment action. Other members of that committee include the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council, the Intercultural Employment Pathways program from the City of Ballarat, Ballarat Group Training, Ballarat Community Health, Victoria Police, jobactive, Fed Uni et cetera. Through this group we organise things such as industry networking nights, where we invite jobseekers to come and network with employers and also people who are already working. So those are some of the things we do.

I also network with Centre for Multicultural Youth, and we also have a local advisory panel that we host quarterly at the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre. Also sometimes I liaise directly with employers. They often contact us directly looking for employees, especially at the moment, with a bit of a job surge and an employee shortage. I also have a special relationship with the A Pot of Courage social enterprise and also Djerriwarrh, which runs the AMEP language classes in Ballarat.

The other part of my role is that I am a teacher or tutor and I teach pre-accredited classes at the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre in English as another language and also IELTS, the international English language testing system—preparing for that. We also have a baking and language class that we run there, which I no longer teach but used to. It was fun. We decided to run these classes—we have been running the English classes for quite a few years. The IELTS classes have only been running for a couple of years—we just saw a bit of a gap in the market in Ballarat. People were asking for help with it, and so we decided to fill that gap. The Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre runs pre-accredited classes, as I mentioned. We have classes like the English classes. We also have sewing, knitting, gardening, literacy and numeracy, and cooking, which we do through our social enterprise—our kitchen.

There are basically three main components that we run at the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre, and one is the classes, the pre-accredited training. Another one would be community engagement—we have a community engagement team—and the other one would be the social enterprise, which is a kitchen, catering, social enterprise. We find that these three elements complement each other, because through the social enterprise we run cooking classes, which are very popular with our migrant and refugee clients. The social enterprise also runs community lunches, which again are well attended by migrant and refugee people from the community. We also do events like Harmony Week, which we ran just a couple of weeks ago. We had over 200 people attend that, so it was very successful. We also do International Women's Day and other programs, and they are all organised by our community engagement team.

The social enterprise provides a valuable pathway for migrants and refugees. It provides kitchen experience, which they can put on a résumé. It allows them to learn employability skills. It allows them to learn what it is like to work in Australia, which is very valuable. A lot of my clients when they come to me often do not have any experience working in Australia. They might not even have anything that we can put on a résumé, so the first place that I send them is to our social enterprise. Even if they are not interested in working in a kitchen, it still provides those employability skills, so it has been extremely valuable. As a continuing pathway I have made a connection with A Pot of Courage cafe, which is a social enterprise cafe that is run out of Barkly Square, which is where BRMC, BGT, Djerriwarrh and quite a few of those organisations are based. They employ people there, so they will actually pay people to work there. And so that has been a really valuable pathway especially for some of my female clients. A lot of our people also volunteer for community lunches and other events.

Some of the issues that I have, especially with engaging older migrants and refugees in our programs, would be things relating to—and I heard the previous speaker talking about how they do not access social media—digital literacy. It definitely is a huge one, because often migrants and refugees may not even be literate in their own language, let alone English, let alone digital literacy. So there is a whole range of problems there. Some people have low English skills, which can be a barrier. And just reaching out to them—they can feel very isolated, and finding a way to reach out to them is quite difficult. That is why I think an important part of my job is to network with other organisations, because I often refer people or am referred to by other organisations and network partners. That is a really big part of what I do, so one of the challenges would be making people aware of our programs. Once people join our programs they tend to love it. They become volunteers, they do more and more courses and they may go on to accredited training. It is a massive pathway, but it is getting those people—making them aware of what we do is the big challenge.

English classes of course are a challenge. The English classes that we run, each of them is only 2½ hours a week. They really need a lot more than that, so that is an issue as well. There are other issues as well. We have had some of our clients disclose family violence to us. We had one case of an older lady who was experiencing family violence. She came to us. She did not know where else to go, but she had been to us before, so she felt comfortable coming to us and disclosing. We had to find someone who could translate for her, because she did not have any English, and then with the help of that friend that was translating for her, we were able to refer her on to other services. So things like that can happen, because we are in a regional town, and although Ballarat is quite multicultural and we do have quite a few social groups and networks of different cultural groups that get together and have events, there are still going to be some cultural groups which are not well represented in Ballarat, and I think that can be quite isolating for people as well. In terms of food and that sort of thing, we are not that multicultural, not compared to Melbourne, so a lot of my clients will go to Melbourne to get certain foods and things like that that they need. There is still that sort of issue as well. I think that is about it.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Lisa. That was an in-depth submission. I will move on to questions. I will start with one. You spoke about the importance of neighbourhood centres and your centre. How can the Victorian Government support neighbourhood centres for them to become better culturally, providing better culturally inclusive programs or services? What can the Victorian Government do?

Ms DINNING: It comes down to funding, I suppose. Some more funding for programs which are specifically for multicultural groups and for the multicultural cohort would be helpful. For example, we have a community garden which is probably pretty under-utilised at the moment. We have some volunteers working in there, and we also have one or two classes that work with it. But what I would really love to see is—I have seen some places in Melbourne where they have really developed their community garden with their multicultural cohort and got them involved in growing, you know, the foods that they have to go to Melbourne for—to

Footscray Market or whatever. They could be growing them here, possibly, in a community garden, and that would be a good way to connect. So funding for those sorts of programs and more community engagement and maybe more classes as well. Those would be the areas where I think you would need to look at.

The CHAIR: Heang, do you have any questions?

Mr TAK: Yes. I just want to follow on with the Chair's question. Is there anything else that you think the state government could assist your team of four to further strengthen?

Ms DINNING: I think digital literacy is a big issue as well. It has probably come up quite a few times with you already with different people.

The CHAIR: It has.

Ms DINNING: I think the thing with digital literacy classes, because we do run digital literacy classes, we do have funding for that and we do run them—you know, how to use the internet. During the lockdowns we had to teach people how to do Zoom meetings and things like that. But I think when you approach it with people who have English as another language, it is different. You need to have someone really who has that sort of skill in teaching English but teaching them those skills as well, because often I have sat in on classes where people are trying to teach something to people who may have English as another language, and they speak too quickly, they use colloquial language, they use slang. They do not check understanding, because they may have been in a situation where they have only been teaching native speakers. It just does not get through. So I think some digital literacy programs that are especially for people and with a teacher who is qualified in teaching English, yes.

Mr TAK: I will come back to growing vegetables and all of that. Do you have a community garden?

Ms DINNING: We do have a community garden.

Mr TAK: I think that is a very good place where people can—

Ms DINNING: Yes, I would really love to see that. I think there is a lot of potential there for providing a base for people to connect, really. So that would definitely be an area where if we had some more funding we could maybe look at doing that. And also I would love to, if I had a blank chequebook, get someone on our community engagement team who was specifically for migrants and refugees, just focusing on that—but, you know, that is my fantasy.

Mr TAK: Yes.

Ms DINNING: Yes. Just to engage, because my job is very much employment based. I do have some who are older, like Milad who is 57, so he is getting towards the end of his working life now, and I have other clients who are of that age as well. But a lot of my clients are still quite work focused. They just want to work or train or do both, whereas with some of the people that I have, they have got parents who have come over or whatever and they are quite isolated—having some programs where they could get involved.

Mr TAK: Yes. I mean, that is absolutely correct, because we heard from other speakers before in terms of the working age. The objective is to get a job, so English or digital skills are maybe secondary.

Ms DINNING: Yes, that is right. People are only interested if they have to, if they need it for something. It is the same with most classes really: they are not interested unless it is something that is going to lead them to employment, which is fair enough. The purpose of pre-accredited training is to lead into employment or accredited training. But definitely if you are talking about the older migrant cohort, then yes, that is a different situation altogether.

Mr TAK: All right. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Heang. I think that concludes our questions. We thank you very much for your valuable contribution, in taking the time—I am sure you are very busy—to be here with us and provide that valuable submission and your evidence today. In the coming months the Committee will deliberate on all the evidence that we have received, and then we will prepare a report to be tabled in the Victorian Parliament with

some strong recommendations of what we see, for the Victorian Government. If you want to stay up to date, you can do so via the website or our secretariat. Today has been really valuable—for us to be here in Ballarat. We have had a range of submissions and evidence. Thank you for all the work that you are doing in your space.

Ms DINNING: No worries. It is a pleasure. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Excellent. All the very best.

Committee adjourned.