

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Thursday, 14 May 2020

Members

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Ms Ingrid Stitt

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WITNESS

Mr Joe Toohey, Co-Convenor, Arts Industry Council (Victoria).

The CHAIR: We welcome the Arts Industry Council of Victoria. Mr Toohey, thank you for joining us. Welcome to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian Government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. All mobile telephones should be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. We ask that photographers and camerapersons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the secretariat.

We invite you to make a brief opening statement of 5 minutes. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and then this will be followed by questions from the Committee relative to the representation at the table. Thank you for joining us.

Mr TOOHEY: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the Committee for this invitation to speak today on the lands of the Kulin nation, to whom I extend my deep respect and acknowledgement. My name is Joe Toohey. I am here today as a member of the Arts Industry Council of Victoria. The Arts Industry Council is made up of various arts peak bodies in our state from across different art forms and focus areas. We often work together on challenges that are too big for any of us on our own, and it is hard to think of a bigger challenge at the moment than that presented by COVID-19. We know that the arts can have a profound impact on areas including health, education and of course creativity, but today the main focus that I am going to concentrate on is some of the economic characteristics and impact of the sector, worth \$31 billion to the Victorian economy.

Firstly, what we know about the current impact of COVID-19—when important social distancing measures were enacted to protect the community, those included restrictions on gatherings. As a result months of work evaporated for us and organisations as events were postponed or cancelled and galleries and venues closed. The full scale of this is now becoming evident. Between 14 March and 18 April employee jobs in the arts and recreation services sectors decreased by 27 per cent, second only to accommodation and food services in the same period. Only 47 per cent of arts and recreation businesses said they were currently trading according to that same ABS data. Over \$340 million of lost income has been recorded by the end of April nationally, and industry bodies predicted a three-month shutdown would lead to \$540 million in lost ticket revenue.

At the risk of stating the obvious, one of the reasons the impact is so significant for our sector is that we rely on providing live experiences to audiences to generate our income. Even Government-funded organisations in Victoria rely on earned income sources like ticket sales for half of their revenue. Without audiences we lose that income, and without income we lose jobs. The challenge is going to remain beyond the time when restrictions are lifted. Fifty-eight per cent of audience members will wait at least a month until after restrictions are lifted before returning to events, citing health concerns.

Ours is already a financially precarious sector. Income for most arts and cultural organisations sits only 2 per cent above expenditure. When you are operating on a margin of 2 per cent, it is difficult to build a buffer, and that makes our sector vulnerable to even small economic shocks. Additionally, different parts of our sector are highly co-dependent on one another. Our artists and organisations rely on each other as well as venues, technicians, designers, caterers—we are all interdependent. Eighty-one per cent of artists work as freelance or self-employed, and upwards of 60 per cent of employment amongst our arts and culture organisations comes from casual workers. A full-time independent artist might work on 14 different projects every year to earn a living wage with multiple organisations, which is equivalent to commencing a new project every three and a half weeks. I say this because it emphasises that our connections are not just between employer and employee but also between individuals, audiences and other institutions.

All of these factors combine to create the need for a creative industry sector-specific response package to complement some of the economy-wide measures, and to this end we welcomed the targeted announcements made by the Victorian Government to directly support our creative industries, totalling some \$49 million to date. These immediate relief-focused responses have been critical for supporting small to large organisations and individuals in Victoria and included some specific responses for regional artists, First Peoples and deaf and disabled creatives. We also welcomed the willingness of the Government to announce further measures when gaps have been identified—for example, when State-owned institutions like the NGV were excluded from other programs, further support was announced this week. That approach is important through the next stage as we know that some gaps will continue to reveal themselves as we go.

We know, for example, that local government-run galleries and venues do not currently qualify for any of the State and Federal Government relief packages, but these spaces and their specialist staff are going to be critical for our wider recovery and rebuilding effort. We have some road ahead of us as a sector, with modelling suggesting we will not return to normal levels of activity until the final quarter of 2021. We welcome the opportunity to work through the next phase of that recovery with all levels of government. And just finally, to any artists and organisations who might be listening to the Committee hearings: thank you for the role that you are playing in our community resilience and recovery effort.

Ms STITT: Hello. Good afternoon, Mr Toohey, and thank you very much for appearing before the Committee today. Obviously there has been quite a bit of commentary in the media about the impact of the pandemic on the creative sector, and you have certainly painted a very stark picture in your introductory remarks about some of the real challenges that your sector is confronting. As the peak body for the creative industries in Victoria, can you give us a bit of a sense of the kinds of issues and feedback that you are getting from your members at the moment?

Mr TOOHEY: Yes. In addition to some of those high-level stats that I provided in the introduction, an example of the experience of an artist and how they are experiencing some of the challenges at the moment is an artist who was born in India and currently lives in Melbourne, who has what I would have thought, before the shutdowns and the COVID-19 impacts started taking effect, was a pretty resilient business model. They had a couple of different streams of income. They were a performer, and they made income from performing at gigs. They ran classes—so they worked with students and schools to run workshops. They also sold and repaired Indian musical instruments, which was their speciality. And from time to time they organised bigger events with big headline artists.

Now, all four streams of what was previously a fairly resilient financial model are either completely gone or will be severely impacted in the coming months. So they are not going to be able to perform. They are really restricted on what kinds of workshops and education activities they can run. In terms of the musical instrument repair and sales, that has been impacted because people are not coming to the classes. But also this particular artist has a speciality in Indian musical instruments and has noted a couple of challenges in accessing spare parts from India, which has also got its own lockdown restrictions in place. And then in terms of organising big events, it is highly unlikely that they are going to be able to secure a large Indian headliner any time soon in Australia, with international travel restrictions in place. So just the kinds of co-dependent flow-on impacts there in terms of what is happening with some of the artists and members that we work with are, I think, pretty well illustrated by that example.

Ms STITT: And I would imagine that is quite a common feature of the types of employment models or income models that are in the creative industries. Why do you think the sector appears to be so disproportionately affected compared to some of the other industries? I mean, clearly the whole economy is impacted at the moment, but what are some of the unique features of your sector?

Mr TOOHEY: Yes. Look, some of the comments that I made in my introductory remarks probably reveal what are, I guess, the three key characteristics of the sector that make it particularly vulnerable. One is, as I said, that reliance on live performance, which has gone for most of the arts and creative industries. The second is those incredibly tight financial margins that the sector works on as a matter of course. The other is the interdependent and co-dependent nature of the sector—so we only, even in good times, need one part of that sector to be particularly suffering for that to have a flow-on impact.

We know that with programs that are supporting employment—for example, like JobKeeper, which helps employees stay connected to their employer—for our arts and culture industries, even for an organisation that does employ people, that is about 43 per cent of their total expenditure. So there is still 57 per cent missing, I guess. And that 57 per cent is often spent on other organisations and artists and people within the sector, so you see how it starts to kind of flow on and multiply. That has been, I guess, one of the most alarming and rapid escalations of the challenges that we have faced in our sector.

Ms STITT: Obviously there has been some really uplifting work being done by some of our artists in Victoria during the pandemic. Would you like to talk a little bit to the Committee about the kinds of things that the arts community are getting together to do during the pandemic?

Mr TOOHEY: Yes. Look, I think a lot of the presentation to date and a lot of our calls for support have been reflecting the need for the sector itself to be supported, but I think it is also important to remember the roles that artists and organisations can play in supporting the wider community as well. The arts can help us forget and will also be critical to helping us remember. So in the times that we have needed to have a bit of recovery and mental health space all on our own, retreating to a book or watching TV or listening to music has been really important. One of my favourite examples was from the Potato Shed in Drysdale, which is a small venue not too far out of Geelong that typically runs performing arts and music events. They have a birdbath out the back, and immediately after the shut down they set up a live video feed of the birdbath in the backyard of the Potato Shed. And it was a bit of a lottery as to when birds would actually appear to spot in the live video feed, but I found having that, even the sounds of Drysdale in the background, was incredibly soothing whilst I was working at different points. And occasionally musicians and artists would pop their heads in as well.

On the flip side, it will be artists that are documenting what is happening right now and when we look back on it in multiple years it will be the photos, the stories, the pieces of theatre and the music that were written about this period that help us remember what it was like to live through that period. The Ballarat International Foto Biennale is curating a project called *Mass Isolation Australia*, where people are sharing photos of their experiences of living in isolation, and they are curating the best of those and sharing them as part of an international project.

So they are a couple of quite, I guess, opposite extremes of the helping us to forget and the helping us remember by a couple of arts organisations in regional Victoria. And I should say in my ongoing role I am the Executive Director of Regional Arts Victoria. So there is going to be a slight regional focus to a couple of those examples that I have witnessed.

Ms STITT: So in that sense do you see that kind of thing extending into the recovery phase?

Mr TOOHEY: Yes. I mean, in terms of the priorities for recovery, the Arts Wellbeing Collective, which is run by the Arts Centre Melbourne, has noted that they had a 60 per cent increase in calls to their mental health wellbeing line in the last month. So part of the recovery effort is actually going to be about protecting people's mental health.

At Regional Arts Victoria again both I and our organisation have unfortunately had quite a bit of experience in working in communities impacted by drought and bushfires and recovering from disaster, and we know from that experience that we are in a period now where some people will go to ground and disappear for a little while. Others will be running on adrenaline through this next little period, and that crash might come a bit later. So in terms of the priorities for recovery, within the sector obviously it is about focusing on those and making sure that they are able to survive it both financially but also with their mental health intact.

I think also we want to acknowledge that there are some communities, as there were before the shutdown, that are more vulnerable than others. There are some, for example, that quick response funding programs might come and pass them by before they realise that the opportunity was there, because they are not quite as connected to different paths of information as they might need to be, for those programs to be extended, as I said, through a period that is going to stretch another six to 18 months ahead of us at least.

Ms STITT: Just turning now to some of the support packages that have been put together, the Victorian Government response I think is around \$49 million in terms of funding for the sector. How has that been received by your members, and how does that compare to other jurisdictions including the Commonwealth?

Mr TOOHEY: Well. It has been received well. In terms of other jurisdictions in the Commonwealth I think Queensland is the next highest at \$10.5 million in terms of an industry-specific package, so it is by some margin, of the states, the largest level of support that is being provided directly to the creative industries. As I said, the focus is very much immediate and emergency support, and that is understood and has been accepted, and the road ahead is still a slightly bumpy one but I think that the first steps have been pretty good. As with all of the economy-wide programs that have been announced, there are gaps that we know and there are others that will reveal themselves a bit more over time, because we are all kind of working in a fairly new space. But I think to date the reception has been incredibly positive on the whole.

Ms STITT: And given your regional knowledge and focus, can you comment on the benefits for regional communities in particular having had that support announced?

Mr TOOHEY: One of the things I mentioned in the introduction was that there is a dedicated stream within Sustaining Creative Workers, which is a quick-response funding program. There is a dedicated stream within that program for regional Victoria. It has been my experience that our regional artist communities have a lower success rate or lower capacity to secure those funds in an open funding program, and there are also First Peoples and artists-with-a-disability streams in there as well for the same reason. So having that stream dedicated to regional Victoria will ensure that some of that support is reached there. Regional Arts Victoria is also involved in assessing the applications that are coming through that regional stream, and the things that are coming through are what you might expect. It is a mix of devastation in terms of what is being recorded and the impact that has been had, but also a bit of optimism about what might be possible next and how they might be taking advantage of this opportunity through that funding program. So for example, authors who have had festival appearances that they rely on to sell their books at cancelled looking at how they might be a bit more active in the online distribution space as far as their books are concerned, musicians who were about to do album launches that have lost those as well thinking about how they can be a bit more active in the online space, and then others who are using the downtime to further their professional development and extend their practice a little bit more so that when they come out of this period they have a wider set of skills to apply to the sector.

Ms STITT: And just thinking in the context of so many people in the community across the state doing it really tough, why do you think it is so important to support individual artists and creatives to create new work and to come up with projects? Give us a bit of understanding from your perspective about that.

Mr TOOHEY: So again, thinking back to work that we have done at Regional Arts Victoria in the creative recovery space, one of the things that we found most successful after events like the Black Saturday fires in 2009, for example, was small projects that encourage people to come together. That is going to be particularly challenging over this next little period and we all know that, but the role of the arts in creating events for people to reconnect with their community, I think particularly locally, is going to be really important. I think the role of the arts, as some of the examples I mentioned before, occasionally when we did some of those projects after Black Saturday—it was just a workshop and the participants were saying, ‘It’s just nice to be doing something with my hands and not thinking about recovering from the fires for a little while’. I suspect that what we are about to face as far as the COVID-19 longer term recovery response is going to be largely the same, and the benefits that we will be able to contribute for the wider community from within that sector from individual artists will be much the same—that ability to remove oneself for a while, but also the ability to bring those communities back together in person as restrictions begin to be lifted.

Ms STITT: Yes, and with thinking about the recovery phase and the recent package that was announced for live music, can you see that kind of package with live music playing a key role in the recovery phase as well? Particularly in regional communities I am thinking that will be pretty important.

Mr TOOHEY: Yes. Live music and comedy, I would say, are two particularly mobile art forms. They are good in smaller communities in particular because they might not have the larger infrastructure to support other bits of work. So music is something that can go into the local pub, to the local hall, even on the back of a flatbed truck without the same set-up that some of the other art forms require in terms of performing arts centres and galleries. So yes, for sure, I think music is going to play a critical role in some of those community events.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you for appearing today. I have had some representations from some artists who lease studios around my area in the Prahran electorate that I guess are facing some similar issues that other people with commercial leases face in terms of having to negotiate with landlords sometimes and them sometimes coming to the party. Is that an issue that you are hearing from your members or artists?

Mr TOOHEY: Yes. It depends. There are different art forms that might work from home, for example, where that is probably not a huge issue in some parts of the sector. But I think that is probably a challenge that predates the current crisis. I think the lumpiness of income for a lot of artists means that regular payments through things like rent and utility bills and those things can be tricky from time to time.

I think there is probably in a lot of those instances—and this is probably an observation that is not just true for the arts—a bit of a power imbalance as well, where perhaps it is a take-it-or-leave-it approach. I know that there are artists, as I said, predating the COVID-19 restrictions, for whom, even in shared spaces that have been bought by a new owner, the rent has been increased significantly, and that has meant that often we see in a lot of our neighbourhoods the artists who have made it a neighbourhood to enjoy and to live in can no longer afford to live in it. So, yes, there are a couple of those anecdotally that I have heard. But I would just add, as I say, that it is probably a challenge that is both pre and post COVID as well.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. I am interested in post COVID, and particularly around some of the revival of our communities. In particular, in communities when artists move in or develop studios, suddenly that actually instigates a revival of certain areas. Do you see it as a role for artists within the economic revival of certain areas that have been hit by the COVID crisis?

Mr TOOHEY: Absolutely, and we know that even in terms of domestic tourism, because international tourism I imagine is going to be a tricky one for a little while longer. But in a recent report released by the Australia Council, arts tourists or people who come to visit arts and experience arts experiences stay longer and spend more money. So in terms of the role of the artists in reviving those communities, yes. Obviously there is a very local cultural pride and engagement piece there that is critically important, but the economic impact of that is also profound.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, just taking on note the issue around landlords and rents and whatnot could potentially be a barrier to that.

Mr TOOHEY: Yes, for sure, and that is going to be the challenge for some music venues as well in terms of negotiating with their landlords when they are not able to meet those costs anymore—not just artists who are renting those spaces to create work but the venues who are renting those spaces to present it as well. I think both sides of that spectrum will need that support.

Just talking about the recovery phase, a lot of those music venues that we are talking about will need support. One of the reasons that the recovery will be so long for some of them is that the break-even point for them opening their doors is not going to be 10 people or 25; they are going to need to get significant patrons through the door to make it a break-even—even worth opening the doors in the first place. So it is a bit of a road ahead, I think, for a lot of those organisations and sectors, particularly from the music sector, some of the things that we have heard.

Mr HIBBINS: You mentioned before some artists going into, I guess, hibernation during this time, but obviously we want to make sure that Melbourne and Victoria continue as the cultural capital of Australia. Are you concerned that some people or some talented artists might be lost to art altogether?

Mr TOOHEY: Yes. One of the concerns that has been raised by one of our members is that they recently launched a program which was about supporting producers—so the people who can actually help the artists get into venues and into spaces and with marketing and all of that—and the producer had all of the program that they had lined up with those particular artists, and a lot of those artists are not answering phone calls or emails at the moment. They have gone to ground, gone off the map. So there is a danger that they are lost to the sector for all of those reasons. As I have mentioned a few times, that has flow-on effects because of the co-dependence that we have on all those different parts of the sector. We need them when we come out of this as much as we needed them before.

Mr HIBBINS: And just in the short term, in terms of the future, in terms of the long term and what the arts is going to need to recover, do you see a real role for overall increased support from the State Government in terms of their creative budgets?

Mr TOOHEY: It is, as I said before, a financially precarious sector already; it was not coming off a golden run into this patch. So the need for ongoing focused strategic support in partnership with a lot of our creative industries is going to be critical as part of the recovery. There are funding parts of that that are about amounts, but there are also questions of flexibility and the way that that can be directed, and that is a conversation I think we should be having right now.

Mr RIORDAN: Some of my colleagues on this Committee will be surprised to know of my connections with regional arts, having been a voluntary director of an exhibition for a good 10 years. So I am acutely aware of the small business nature of so many artists, particularly in the visual arts but also the performing arts. As you pointed out in your presentation, many of these people need big volumes of people, whether it is art exhibitions, art festivals, weekends. It is a long time before they can get back. Now, they have all just missed Easter. They are missing anything that might be happening—you know, the Creswick book fair and all these other sorts of things that happen. Then of course as we move into the spring and early summer period there is not a lot of prospect of big crowds and groups getting together. So what support, apart from JobSeeker, have many of these people been able to access

Mr TOOHEY: The program that has been announced by the Victorian Government in the last weeks is still in its first couple of weeks, so it is early days for that. But those organisations which have lost—particularly those very small microbusinesses and volunteer-run organisations that you were talking about—are eligible to receive those quick response programs of between \$5000 and \$10 000 through this stream that has been opened. As you can imagine, it was an extraordinarily high response extraordinarily quickly, approaching 1000 applications, I think, across all four streams, which is—

Mr RIORDAN: So that is for organisations.

Mr TOOHEY: And individuals.

Mr RIORDAN: And individuals. Right, okay.

Mr TOOHEY: Yes, that is right. So they are able to access those programs. I think the need for those programs is not going to diminish any time soon.

Mr RIORDAN: Another industry that is big in regional Victoria also is of course the festivals. We had the Falls Festival. I cannot think of the rest because I am not a festival goer; I tend to be a festival supplier rather than goer. But there were about six of the main—

Ms RICHARDS: What kind of goods?

Mr D O'BRIEN: What sort of supplier?

Mr RIORDAN: No, no. If you must know, I was Kenny—I did the toilets, all right? That industry got hit particularly hard. The bushfire season saw, I think, about six well-known ones in the state cancelled. My concern is for the Kennys of this world—the industry behind the industry, if you like. I have heard anecdotally that there are lots of people in that industry who have pretty much missed the whole year. What sort of holdback will that have in trying to get the industry back up and going if you cannot access the toilets or the fencing or all the food vans and all those other businesses that those big festivals really need to work?

Mr TOOHEY: Enormous, and the time lines are quite long for a lot of these as well. So just to give an example from Regional Arts Victoria's work, we had a touring program that was to hit the road in regional Victoria from March this year that we began planning in 2018. That has all been rescheduled to 2021, which is great, but that also has flow-on impacts on what we can support in 2021.

I think one of the other challenges with those festivals closing down—and I mentioned some of the galleries and performing arts centres shutting down as well—is that if we are not able to contact them or work with them now, it is not a switch that we can kind of flick straight away for all of the reasons that you have articulated. It requires for a range of logistical reasons meticulous planning. I know that this has probably come up a number

of times, but the uncertainty is as difficult as anything else at the moment because we can plan for the festival to come back all we like, but that is a little bit beyond our control at the moment. So how you plan for something that might not happen is going to be the next little challenge for us.

Mr RIORDAN: And I am sure you were pleased to see the Falls Festival announce an all-Australian line-up. They are at least trying to get back on the horse, so that is good to see. But I guess even with that, until we get closer, they will not even know how many tickets they can sell.

Mr TOOHEY: Correct, yes. That is a positive benefit as well. And I will be really interested—again, thinking about not just regional but some of our metro spaces—in the opportunity perhaps to look at hyper-local programming, having people from within your own community be the stars of the show as well as all of the bigger festivals, as you mentioned, that are going to have the cream of the crop as far as our domestic Australian acts and artists are concerned.

Mr RIORDAN: Another plug for my region: I was pleased on the weekend the Red Door theatre company, which is a small owner-operated theatre company in Colac, managed to pull together over the last three weeks a Saturday evening musical extravaganza. They got sponsored by local businesses and they put artists up and went from 6 until sort of 11 o'clock at night and people could phone in and interact. The money raised went to the hospital to help buy some new equipment, but the sponsors helped the sound technicians and other people get some income, because they have all been hand to mouth. Has there been much of that and is there more the Government could do to help that sort of online innovation happen? It was all streamed through Facebook, which was great. I think for a town of 10 000 people there were 16 000 individual logons on the night, so it was pretty good.

Mr TOOHEY: Amazing. Yes, that is fantastic. We are seeing through some of those early quick-response grant programs people looking to move their work online in response to some of these challenges. I would note that online is not going to be the solution for everything, not just because of different art forms but also because the access to online programs varies. As I am sure you all know, there are some black spots in parts of regional Victoria but there are also some members of the community who are for a variety of reasons—economic or comfort levels—not able to access some of those programs. We know the volunteer-run museum sector, for example, is one that through the process over a number of years of trying to digitise collections and things like that a number of them have required a bit of additional support to get through that process.

So definitely both with Government support and without there have been some really interesting responses to what can be delivered online, and we are still, I guess, weighing up which ones of those are successful and which ones have not been as much. I am also as interested in seeing spaces like community radio, for example, become places of local artistic expression and performance over the analog airwaves, shall we say.

Mr RIORDAN: And with a minute or so to go, are there many taxes, charges, fees, registrations or other costs that the arts community are forced or have to pay by right that we may need to look at waiving in the short term to help with cash flow and to get people back on their feet?

Mr TOOHEY: I think it is probably in the venue space that some of those challenges are going to be the most pressing. I know that there have already been offers of things like payroll tax relief and all of those kinds of programs for a number of businesses. I think for venues that are closing down that might still be required to manage things like liquor licensing regulations and those kinds of things, any support that can be directed to help those organisations also reopen and be ready in terms of the health requirements that they might need to have in place as well and the costs that might come with that I think would be welcomed by that part of the sector.

Mr RIORDAN: For our big-ticket arts things—the big theatres in town here that have the big productions and the international productions—what effect will that have if we are perhaps looking at 12 to 18 months without that international dynamic coming into the Melbourne arts scene? Are there negative consequences of that?

Mr TOOHEY: Certainly. Notwithstanding the opportunity for more domestic artists to take those stages, there is still the question, as always, of audience. Those things succeed because people go to them, and there is an experience that we have with any performance, which is between an artist and an audience member coming together to share something, and an international flavour of that, I think, is going to be critical. So in terms of

those consequences, as I say, there are potential positives for the domestic, but we have to keep an eye on making sure those audiences are still getting the experiences that they are chasing as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Toohey, for your evidence today, and thank you for appearing before us. The Committee will follow up any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five days. We thank you very much for your time today, and thank you for the work that you are doing in supporting your industry through this difficult time.

Witness withdrew.