

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Thursday, 27 August 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Brooke McKail, Manager, Policy and Research, and

Ms Deborah Fewster, Manager, Advocacy and Engagement, Victorian Council of Social Service.

The CHAIR: Welcome, everyone. I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future, and elders from other communities who may be joining us in some way today.

We welcome you, VCOSS, to the second series of 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. Members are attending remotely from home and from their electorate offices, so we ask that people note that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office, under the stay-at-home directions, 6 August, part 2, section (7)(i).

We also advise that 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 of 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. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome VCOSS and we ask you to make a brief opening statement of 5 minutes. We ask that for the Hansard record you state your name, position and the organisation represented. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you, Ms King.

Ms KING: Thank you very much. My name is Emma King. I am the CEO of the Victorian Council of Social Service, and I am appearing with Deborah Fewster and Brooke McKail from VCOSS as well. I would like to acknowledge that I am joining the committee today from the sovereign and unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

COVID-19 brutally exposed the cracks that for years have run deep in our society. Our social service safety net was confirmed as inadequate, and insecure work practices were revealed as not just cruel but dangerous. Long-known drivers of poverty and disadvantage found a new ally in the virus, forcing many people deeper into hardship, and those who already had less fared the worst. Since we appeared before this committee in May a lot has happened: cases have grown significantly, a tragedy has unfolded in aged care—one we must not let unfold in other settings—there has been a hard and a heavy-handed lockdown of public housing, and mental distress, isolation and family violence are increasing. To its credit, the government has stepped up in many ways; for example, giving people sleeping rough a pathway into a home, and investing in mental health services. And in the second wave, as in the first, community organisations have again risen to the challenge. They have provided support, assistance, advice and protection to our whole community, including those who are the most vulnerable. These organisations have also adapted themselves, operating in new and unique ways, often stepping up to serve their communities and our communities at very short notice.

Recently the Premier described this pandemic as an ultramarathon, and he is right. It must be noted that the community service sector, leaders and those working on the front line are feeling the strain. At this time of the pandemic organisations are doing everything they can to serve their communities. Staff are also tired and they are at risk of burning out. With more confirmed cases sending staff into isolation, it is getting harder to fill the roster. Frontline services cannot just stop; that would be unthinkable. So here is what is currently happening: people are working harder, they are working longer, and they are working themselves ragged—and this cannot go on indefinitely. Community service organisations are essential and community service workers are essential workers. If the community is to come through this pandemic, we need a strong and sustainable community sector with a workforce that is recognised for the essential work they do.

As I alluded to earlier, this pandemic is not affecting everyone equally, and we have seen many reports on that. To be blunt, if you are poor, working a precarious job or you did not get a great education, then you are more likely to get COVID. In addition, women and young people are being hit the hardest by growing unemployment. When we were last here we urged the committee to look to social housing as a win-win because it can solve homelessness and it can stimulate the economy. This is still a number one priority. But many of the jobs it will create are in male-dominated industries, thus exacerbating other problems that we have. So we think we should be combining building homes with building a stronger and a fairer society. This means investing more in things like community-based health care, social workers, youth workers, disability support workers—the list goes on. Because make no mistake: the real jobs of the future are in health care and they are in social assistance.

However, currently the funding for community services is inadequate and currently much of our workforce is casualised and insecure. But here is the good news, because the government can fix this. The community sector needs secure and long-term funding so it can offer attractive wages, conditions, hours and training to keep people in jobs and to serve our community. What has happened in aged care is a wake-up call. Insecure work and inadequate funding mean people working across multiple locations without necessarily having the right training and equipment. Investing in the community services industry is smart. It is an investment in the future for the wellbeing of all Victorians.

I want to leave you with two key ideas to bring all of this together. VCOSS believes Victoria should establish a wellbeing budget and a social recovery task force. This would help shape Victoria's recovery strategy beyond finding a vaccine and getting people back to work. It would identify ambitious and bold recovery goals, economic opportunities that will have ongoing social benefits that will benefit our whole Victorian community. Alongside a wellbeing budget that VCOSS has long advocated for, a social recovery task force can guide and advise government. It would be responsive to the needs of people of all backgrounds, genders and abilities, and would have representatives from across business and the community, government and non-government, including trusted community leaders. A wellbeing budget and a social recovery task force would provide vision and direction for Victoria, a vision for making Victoria fairer, stronger as we move through the pandemic and after the virus is defeated. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms King, and I will pass for the first questions to Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms King, for your presentation and thank you to you and your team for again appearing before this committee. If I could take you to the topic of economic inequality—as your presentation outlined and certainly from your evidence last time and from other witnesses that we have heard from as well, it is very clear that COVID does not affect everyone equally. I was wondering if you could speak to the effect of the pandemic on vulnerable and lower socio-economic communities.

Ms KING: Absolutely. Thank you very much for your question. Look, it is very clear, and we have seen more evidence again in the *Age* today actually in terms of an article talking about how the pandemic affects people unequally. Westjustice were quoted as part of that article in terms of saying, you know, it is very unequal, even in looking at the people who need to go to work throughout the pandemic, because they have got to make the choice between whether they keep themselves healthy and safe or whether they put food on the table. There are so many different components in the ways that I can answer this question in terms of the way that the pandemic has hit those who are poorest. I think we have often heard the analogy that in effect the pandemic was perhaps brought in by people who are better off and those who are the poorest are actually living with the outcomes. What we are seeing is it hitting particular groups far more so. We are looking at obviously women and young people being impacted most significantly. We are looking at people who are poorer who are often living in overcrowded housing conditions where they have got shared spaces et cetera that have made them more vulnerable to the reality of the virus and being able to keep safe.

We are looking at low-income people—and interestingly low-income people whose occupations were often not valued terribly highly before this pandemic. We know that they are the essential workers. Whether they are retail workers stacking shelves or whether they are people who are serving our community in aged care or disability, we know that actually they are at the greatest risk often of contracting the virus because they are continuing to go to work to serve our community. They are our essential workers, and they have not been recognised as such prior. What we have seen is the very real effects of COVID that are hitting the people who are often the poorest in our community the most through a variety of different ways. I am mindful that in my

answer I have given, if you like, a very overall kind of view because the reality is that there are so many layers to this that we could write a whole submission on this in and of itself. What the evidence clearly shows—there was an article in the *Guardian* yesterday and another article in the *Age* today—is it is indisputable that COVID-19 has hit vulnerable communities the hardest. It hits poor people the hardest and in the most dramatic ways. We see this with emergencies across the board, and it has been amplified with COVID as well.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. If we could just delve a little bit deeper into insecure work and that of casual workers and labour hire workers, I would just like to ask you for some further insight on how those workers have been, in particular, impacted during COVID-19, and also if you could potentially outline some industries that you think have come before you that have been particularly impacted.

Ms KING: Thank you. It is a really great question. If we ever needed a spotlight shone on the dangers of insecure work—so not only the dangers in terms of economically and people not being able to get enough hours for their needs, but now that is coupled with the very real risks to health. If we look at the issues when it comes to insecure work, including, as you say, labour hire firms and including the gig economy, we are seeing that amplified. We are seeing that across industries and we are seeing that hitting people in terms of not being able to attract work across tourism, hospitality and retail. But we are seeing it as well, and I will talk about the sector that I work with, in particular, in terms of looking at the community services industry, because we have seen a huge shift to a casualised workforce over recent years—so a huge shift away from part-time and full-time employment to casualised employment. If we were to shine a light on aged care, for example, what we are seeing there is insecure work, low wages, highly feminised occupations and an industry that has not been given the kudos that it deserves in caring for the most vulnerable and the people who need the most from us in the community. So not only have the people in our aged-care facilities suffered, and in many cases died, what has happened is that we have got a workforce that has been exposed as incredibly casualised, underfunded and often working in multiple workplaces because they need to do that in order to be able to make ends meet.

And I think it is really interesting that when we look across disability, when we look across aged care and many components of the community sector in general, what we are seeing are highly precarious jobs, inadequate wages, people not being able to get enough money each week in order to be able to make ends meet and people not knowing what their income is going to be from week to week in order to be able to budget. We are seeing this absolute crisis point through COVID because they are suddenly working between multiple workplaces—well, they are not suddenly, they were always doing it, but we have seen a spotlight being shone on that in perhaps a way that has not been known or understood before—and this is our opportunity to change that. Because I think as a society we cannot let that happen, and we also know that, in terms of my earlier comment, these are essential workers, they are critical to the social fabric of Victorians and actually they are critical to people's lives. So we have got to step up, we have got to fund people for the wages that they deserve, we have got to fund organisations properly and we have got to deliver for Victoria, and doing that means we have actually got to give people a fair go—we have got to pay them properly and give them a good job.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. During this round of hearings we have heard evidence from a witness who argued that the government's approach to driving down case numbers is causing more harm than the virus itself would if there were no measures taken and that human rights are being compromised by measures such as mandatory mask-wearing. As the peak body that represents vulnerable Victorians, I was just wondering if you had a view on that.

Ms KING: First and foremost, this is a seismic challenge, so let us not understate the fact that, yes, we hear the word 'unprecedented' being mentioned a lot and it is there. I think in this context it is more than fair to talk about 'unprecedented'. We know and in every single piece of advocacy that VCOSS has done we have recognised first and foremost that the government is taking the advice of the Chief Health Officer and working to save lives. That is what comes first. We have seen examples in America, where there have been hospitals in Central Park because there are tens of thousands of people dying and thousands of people dying every single day. So we know that we have got to mitigate our responses around: 'How do we first and foremost make sure that people don't die?'

In terms of things like mandatory mask wearing, I think that we know once the evidence came out—and we saw the Chief Health Officer's advice change around that because of research that came out that showed that that actually wearing masks saves lives, so we know that that is really important. We know that there are some tricky things to navigate around that. For example, for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, wearing masks

has been difficult, and what that community has spoken to me about and we have been able to talk with many ministers and bureaucrats about is to say they are not anti-mask-wearing. What they are saying is they want to find ways that they can continue to communicate with their communities when they go down to the pharmacy or the supermarket or they go into a hospital. We need to find ways that we can navigate that, because first and foremost we have got to keep people safe and we have got to keep them alive.

The other thing I would say is that I think there are some things that we can probably learn from, for example, looking at New Zealand, where they have looked at people who live alone and people who are highly vulnerable and having a kind of buddy system where they can potentially have someone come and visit them at home. Because we also know we are mitigating this risk in terms of health, and there is no question everyone is doing the best that they can, but we know the issues around isolation and vulnerability and mental health—they are profound. And I think there are some things to learn from what has worked in other jurisdictions such as New Zealand in having a kind of a buddy—that you are allowed to have one person that you can have contact with throughout a pandemic and throughout a lockdown stage because we know that issues around isolation and mental health are really significant as well. So, you know, it is a precarious balancing act, but first and foremost comes saving lives.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. If I could take you now to the issue of renting. Recently the government announced that it would extend the moratorium on evictions and rent increases to the end of this year. This stability is obviously crucial for tenants during the pandemic. Would you be able to talk a little bit about the experiences of renters during the pandemic and how this moratorium on evictions and increases to rent has assisted them?

Ms KING: Yes, absolutely. I will talk to this, and I will ask Deb Fewster, one of my colleagues who has worked very closely on this as well, to jump in for anything she has got to add. First of all, we absolutely recognise the moratorium on rental evictions and also the ability for people to be able to speak with their landlords and seek to find some form of a rent deduction et cetera to ensure that they can stay safe and stay at home. Remembering first and foremost the advice we are all given is, 'Stay safe. Stay at home', that is pretty hard if you do not have one or you cannot afford to pay your rent because you have lost your job or you are in precarious circumstances.

What we have seen here is government absolutely step up. We have seen government put a moratorium in place in terms of looking at rental evictions. That has been profound, to be candid, in terms of not having people evicted where they would have otherwise been. We were initially a little bit concerned about people who might reach a rent deal and then find themselves with a bucketload of debt at the end. What we are seeing, which I am really pleased to be able to report, in recent data is that there have actually been thousands of agreements reached where that is not the case. That is something we were keeping a very close eye on.

We have been really mindful around the fact that CAV has the ability to make a binding decision between a renter and a landlord in terms of making sure that it is a fair agreement all round. We were a bit concerned about that at the start. We have been really pleased to see a significant shift in that direction in terms of looking at the number of agreements that have been reached and also the number of agreements that have been reached that are about genuine rent deductions. My understanding is that is between 25 per cent and 27 per cent—that is kind of the general rule in terms of the deductions that have been reached. But Deb, I might just hand over to you given you have got in-depth knowledge of this particular program as well.

Ms FEWSTER: Thank you, Emma. It is Deb speaking. I think Emma has given a really good overview. Obviously there was a decision taken at national cabinet in terms of that eviction moratorium. In terms of the package then that the Victorian government designed, we do think it is kind of a best-in-class response if you look at the different elements: so the moratorium on evictions, the freeze on rent hikes, the access to rent relief grants and renters having the right to negotiate or request a rent reduction with their landlords, and if landlords will not come to the table on that, there are a couple of escalation points. There is access to informal mediation or resolution with Consumer Affairs Victoria; if that does not work, there is another escalation point, and that can go up as high as VCAT. So we think all the elements are in there.

One of the things that I think Consumer Affairs Victoria would be the first to say is that it is fantastic to see, I think there are, more than 26 000 registered rent reduction agreements lodged with Consumer Affairs Victoria now, so that is great. And as Emma said, it is running somewhere between 25 per cent up to as much as 28 per cent on average rent reductions. Those numbers, we would like to see them higher than they are, and we know

that government would like to see that as well—they want to see this policy deliver on its full promise. I think the really fantastic thing is that government has been really responsive to VCOSS, to our colleagues at Tenants Victoria and Financial Counselling Victoria. A number of organisations in the community sector have been empowered with some grants funding to do some really significant work in terms of amplifying that message to renters so that more renters can get access to the scheme. It is a combination of that communication to renters but also thinking about, ‘Who are the people that can actually help convey that message, support renters to realise or actualise their rights?’. So it is about actually empowering a range of different community services workforces with the information they need to deliver on this promise of the reform.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. For my last question I will just go to homelessness. Your presentation, Ms King, touched upon the From Homelessness to a Home program. I was wondering what your views are on how that accommodation has assisted those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic and the importance of ongoing housing for those Victorians.

Ms KING: Thank you. Can I just first of all acknowledge we look at so many of the devastating things out of this pandemic, and there are many, but one of the things that I think is really interesting is that we are looking at policy that we were perhaps told could never happen. If I look at issues such as people sleeping rough and women sleeping in cars and those sorts of things, it always seemed a bit overwhelming to be able to deal with, and one of the things that we have seen extraordinary government action on is actually making sure that, at a time that we are told to stay safe and stay at home, there is this priority on keeping people housed and working at pace to make sure that can happen. We have seen that initial response around moving people into hotels so that they have got an opportunity to be safe and to be off the streets.

What we are looking at now is a longer term strategy around that in terms of moving people into accommodation and also with the support services that people might need, knowing that it is really important, if you like, because people are perhaps moving from where they might have been over a period of time, to have the support services they need around them, be they social workers. I do not want to stigmatise people for being homeless, because not everyone needs a social worker, not everyone needs an alcohol and drug person et cetera, but we know that it is really important to have what we often call ‘wraparound services’ around people as well.

There have been so many announcements on this front, which I can only applaud. I do go back to saying that we have been advocating on this front for years—well before the time that I was at VCOSS—and we were probably always told when we came up to advocate around it, ‘You know what? You’re dreaming. Like, it’s never going to happen’. We have seen considerable investment in this space, and we have seen a really rapid turnaround in terms of looking at people being housed and now looking at longer term propositions.

I guess what I would say at the same time, because I would not want to miss the opportunity, is I come back to social housing and the need for us to invest strongly in social housing. I look at the fact that we have got about 100 000 people—this is before COVID—who are on waiting lists for public housing. This is our opportunity. When we look at economic stimulus—and we have got this incredible opportunity for economic stimulus and to put people into good homes—we have now got this incredible policy that has been developed, I think, at pace. My guess would be it has probably been something that each party has tried to do while they have been in government and has not succeeded. We have now seen this incredible shift, and I think we can now take this to the next level. Let us invest; invest really heavily in social housing and invest in good homes for people, because we know that every Victorian deserves it, and it is pretty hard to make anything happen if you do not have a house.

Mr MAAS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and I am sorry to cut you off there. The member’s time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr Danny O’Brien, MP.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and good morning all. Can I just ask, Ms King, do you have any data in terms of people and families who are actually needing additional assistance having lost their jobs or their livelihoods in Victoria? When I say ‘additional assistance’, whether that is food, money, housing, all of those sorts of things. Is there any data going around as yet on that?

Ms KING: Yes, look, the data that we do have—and I will invite my colleagues to jump in in case they have got something that I have missed—is that there is about 60 per cent of our services, so our member organisations that work at the front line and serve people in need are reporting that demand has increased since March. I think what we are seeing here is that many people who are seeking help have not previously needed support from community sector organisations because they have had work. They have fallen into unemployment and perhaps found themselves in a situation that they never felt that they would be in.

For example, I think one of our members estimates about one-third of their clients in June were not vulnerable before COVID-19. So we are seeing a really marked shift. One thing also I would name there is in terms of looking at some existing clients who need additional support. One of our members spoke about young people feeling more isolated and disconnected and requiring daily check-ins with support workers. What we do know is that we are coming to the end of the time actually in the increased payments in JobSeeker, so that full COVID-19 payment, and we are also going to see decreased payments in JobKeeper. We are anticipating that will have a significant shift and it will impact on the question you have asked. So the data we have got comes from our member organisations.

We know that 60 per cent of people are concerned about their financial wellbeing, including their ability to pay rent and bills and groceries—

Mr D O'BRIEN: That's across the board.

Ms KING: Yes, that is across the board. We know that nearly one-third of people have dipped into their savings. A lot have been using credit or buy-now, pay-later schemes in the last few months, which means generally they are on edge.

Obviously looking at the large number of people who have drawn down on their super, I think it is nothing short of horrifying. It probably shows that general trend that, again, we know about in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on women and young people in particular who we know have basically taken everything out of their super. We know with that money that they have spent it on kind of essential goods, like groceries and paying the bills. That is extremely concerning.

So with the lockdown as well, look, we know for many people they have not got their winter energy bill yet. I would expect to see some really significant demands for additional help as those winter energy bills come in, as people are at home and they are at home in dire situations and needing that immediate bill help as well. We do not have the exact data in terms of who is coming in and out, but I guess what we do have is the information from our community sector organisations, keeping in mind they were already very stretched. They are seeing new people coming through the door.

I think the Treasurer reported to this committee he is expecting to see in the vicinity of 350 000 Victorians become unemployed as a consequence of COVID-19. We know that is very real, and I guess we have seen it play out in ways as I have just mentioned in terms of people pulling all of their money out of their super. I am deeply concerned about JobKeeper and JobSeeker and what that is going to mean for so many people in our community. We know through the JobSeeker allowance and the COVID-19 supplement we heard people say that for the first time they were able to buy food, they were able to eat three meals a day, they were able to pay for their bills. Now, that is going to be taken away from them and then they are going to be in what is even a bigger call on community service organisations that were already stretched.

When it comes to JobKeeper, taking that amount of money away is going to be devastating for so many across our community, and that does not even pick up the fact that many people, such as international students and those on temporary visas, have had nothing—absolutely nothing. We see the devastating images of them lining up for food because they have just got no support at all. But I am not sure whether, Brooke or Deb, you wanted to add anything to that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is quite good. Can I perhaps move on? I understand there is no hard data, but even what you have given I think is useful and interesting. In light of that, I might just sort of go back to the line of question Mr Maas was just doing about the impacts. You said quite rightly we are all focused on trying to stop people dying, but what I guess I am wanting to ask you about is whether there has been any cost-benefit analysis of the action we have taken so far.

I think we all accept that we have had to lock down again to deal with COVID and the second wave. But if we get this one under control, the thought of having a third lockdown in two months, six months, 12 months, whatever it might be if there is no vaccine, those impacts that you have talked about will be even more devastating. Can you give any idea—is there an alternative to the way we have had to approach it now? Should we be looking after the vulnerable more, putting more effort into nursing homes, aged-care centres and our health system to prepare and letting the rest of us try and get on with our lives?

Ms KING: We have not undertaken a cost-benefit analysis. I think probably like many people we have been working with dealing with the situation that is before us, but also I would say that we have been working with organisations as well to capture, if you like, what we call from stories into evidence. We have been undertaking interviews with well over 50 organisations to ask, ‘What are the learnings in terms of what you have seen so far?’. Because no matter what everyone is working at this at pace. I do not question for a second that everyone is doing the best that they can. What we are trying to do is really that action analysis around what has worked badly, what has worked well and what do we want to see as we go forward. And we think that we need that kind of analysis to actually show how might we navigate through this pandemic because, as the Premier said, it is an ultramarathon and I think we have to be realistic about that.

Without question, I think some of the key learnings are—just to flag again before I throw to my colleagues—if we look at the organisations that step up first, we have got to look at the fact of who is well supported and who is valued and needed by their community. If we are to look at organisations like Community Health, for example, when we look at the public housing—

And can I say as well we know already that in terms of public housing, the scenario planning as a consequence of what happened at Flemington and North Melbourne, there have been considerable learnings from that and we are seeing different work in place in different public housing communities. We hear from our members who are on the ground that they can see the difference there. One of the key differences is using local community organisations. I think it talks about the investment that we need there.

I do talk strongly to Community Health. Again I will go to North Melbourne and Flemington and just say, look, in that instance we had Cohealth, who already were seeing more than half of the people who were living on the housing estate, and they are known and loved by their community and need to be at the forefront. We know we have got to invest in aged care. We know we have got to invest in disability services. All of the community services that have been underfunded and are valued by our communities are our key touchpoints that we have got to invest in very heavily. But I am mindful that both of my colleagues are doing work in this space; I am not sure if they want to jump in as well.

Mr D O’BRIEN: I am sorry, but I am mindful of time; I am going to run out shortly. I might just turn to the public housing estates and the issue there, and I am sure Mr Hibbins, if he is going next, will probably raise this too. What sort of involvement did you have with the government in terms of dealing with vulnerable people in those housing towers when they were literally locked up?

Ms KING: The involvement—you are asking particularly did we have with government per se?

Mr D O’BRIEN: Yes. Did the government seek your assistance? Did it seek your advice? Did it listen to the concerns that you had?

Ms KING: Our response was probably pretty immediate after it happened, and we were extremely concerned and we raised our concerns with government and with members of the bureaucracy immediately. I have to flag in this instance that I live in the local community as well and I am involved closely with the local neighbourhood house, so it is probably a bit closer to me if you like than it might be if it was placed further, elsewhere. What I can report on is the fact that we were talking to the bureaucracy multiple times during each day to report on different things that we were aware of at the estate and some of the things that were not working and were not working well, because we wanted them addressed.

Mr D O’BRIEN: I guess the question is—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr O’Brien, to cut you off there, but your time has just expired. Mr Sam Hibbins may also be pursuing some of these issues in any case. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms King, and your team for appearing before the inquiry. I actually wanted to touch on what you brought up earlier in terms of a buddy system, or I think it has been called a bubble in some areas. Is that something you think the government should be doing as we step down to the next stage of restrictions?

Ms KING: Yes is my short answer. Yes, I do.

Mr HIBBINS: Great.

Ms KING: We all know the issues around mental health and isolation, and again I think these are things that we learn along the way and I think it would be great.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, good to hear. I also wanted to touch on what you have raised in your presentation and your submission, and that is the community sector being a priority industry. Could you go into a bit more detail on just some of the sort of challenges that you are facing and some of the specifics of how you would like to see the government actually respond to that?

Ms KING: Yes. If I can acknowledge as well the community sector has worked incredibly well with the government during this time as well, and I think it has shone a real need on the key role that community plays when it comes to a time of emergency. Because often people who are impacted by the emergency—which is obviously all Victorians, but in particular vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians—have particular trust in their community sector organisations, and we have seen this play out in disasters, whether it be Hazelwood, bushfires et cetera, as we are seeing it play out during COVID-19 now.

There are a couple of key things I think that we are seeing, and that is that we have got a system that has been fundamentally underfunded forever really, and we are now seeing the strain on the system, and we know that really we are in many ways the first responders when it comes to an emergency. So when you look at the role of be it Community Health and those local, often grassroots organisations who are there to support their communities, it is critically important.

When we look at issues, for example, like indexation, we have seen community organisations that have been underfunded forever. So if we look at different indexation systems that would happen across business, across hospitals et cetera, fundamentally community sector organisations have been left behind. We need to be funded and funded well, because if we are, then what we are going to see is the impact of looking at a workforce that is well-paid, that actually has good full-time or part-time jobs. We want people to be attracted to come and work in this industry—and I am really mindful around the way that I speak about this, because it is the growing sector; it is where the jobs of the future are. They are people jobs. They are not going to be replaced by robots. They are actually great jobs. We need to talk about how we talk about them, but also for people that want to work there we have got to have good wages, we have got to have good conditions and they need to be valued by Victorians. I think what we are seeing now is they are being valued in a way they have never been valued before. We need to make sure that we are actually supporting them systemically and through funding.

Mr HIBBINS: You identified that women and young people have been hardest hit by the pandemic and that the community sector itself is largely a female-dominated industry, for lack of a better term.

Ms KING: Yes.

Mr HIBBINS: Do you see a connection there between addressing the gender issues that have been thrown up, or the economic impact, and then looking at the community sector as a growth industry and addressing that?

Ms KING: Absolutely. In short, yes. It is absolutely a feminised industry. It has been characterised by precarious employment, low wages et cetera. It is a no-brainer. When we look at all of the ABS data, it shows that this is the workforce of the future. It is a no-brainer to invest in it. Not only is it good for the community services sector; it is good for every Victorian. Every one of us is going to need assistance in aged care; one in eight people in our community has a disability. It is a no-brainer that that is where we are going to invest. And we want these jobs to be great jobs. We have got to reward and remunerate them appropriately.

Mr HIBBINS: Would you like to see some gender budgeting principles or some reporting done by government when they are actually doing their economic stimulus spending?

Ms KING: I would. I would love there to be a gender lens over the budget. We talk a lot about the wellbeing budget as well, because I think that is really important. You know, you can budget for the budget line items, and we are all used to going through the papers and looking at those input measures. Really, what does that mean if we are not delivering for the whole Victorian community? I think we do need that gender lens, because what we are seeing as a consequence of not having it is that women are paying the price. So I think that would be a great principle to take.

The CHAIR: Mr Hibbins, just a reminder of the terms of reference of this inquiry, and indeed this committee has another whole inquiry on that issue in any case.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, and I think you will find this is entirely relevant to the terms of reference—economic stimulus spending that the government is doing. You have identified emerging workforce shortages in your submission. How should they be best overcome?

Ms KING: In terms of looking at our emerging workforce shortages, there are a number of different issues that come into play there. One is being able to attract people to work in the community sector, because of often short-term contracts, lower wages, those sorts of things. The other thing actually that I will take the opportunity to point out now is one of the issues that we are finding at the moment when we are looking at the future workforce coming into this place. We have got some great programs in place; we are fortunate enough to be running a traineeship program that we are finding has incredible success in placing people in community sector organisations. But I would draw the committee's attention to issues around things like student placement, because one of the challenges that we have through COVID-19 and the risks that are existing in organisations at the moment is it is very hard to have students who are undertaking studies often remotely at the moment, as they cannot get placement obviously within community sector organisations.

So there will need to be some really good thinking about 'What does that mean as we travel through the rest of the pandemic and beyond?' and 'How do we create that workforce of the future?', because we have got free TAFE, we have got all of these fantastic opportunities for people that mean often people who were fundamentally blocked from studying because of the cost now have the chance to do so, but they are not able to get their workforce placements because of COVID-19. So we are going to have to think really carefully about: what does that mean around student placements if people are undertaking traineeships? We have a number of people who, for example, were not in work et cetera—this is prior to COVID-19—who were able to undertake a traineeship, and prior to COVID-19 we saw people get jobs who probably never thought they were going to have them. So there is a lot of work to be done actually, for an industry that is going to have rapid, rapid growth, about how we make sure we get student placements and how we make sure that we are able to think through that, because that is going to be one of our very big challenges as we take the next steps forward as well.

Mr HIBBINS: You have identified—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Your time has expired. Thank you very much to VCOSS for appearing before our committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice, and responses will be required within five working days of that request. The committee will now take a very short break before consideration of its next witnesses, but thank you to VCOSS for the work that you do and for your time today.

Witnesses withdrew.