

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's Reports no. 99: Follow up of Regulating Gambling and Liquor (2019) and no. 213: Reducing the Harm Caused by Gambling (2021)

Melbourne – Tuesday 25 July 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O'Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Ms Bear Lin, Counsellor and Project Manager, Federation of Chinese Associations; and

Ms Ngoc Chung, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Anh Bui, Counselling Team Leader, and

Ms Thao Ha, Gambling Prevention Project Officer, Australian Vietnamese Women's Association.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting, and we pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging and any that may be joining us on the live stream today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this follow-up inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's reports on regulation of gambling and liquor and the reduction of gambling harm in Victoria.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I would like to give a very warm welcome to Bear Lin from the Federation of Chinese Associations. We have Ngoc Chung from the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association, as well as Anh Bui and Thao Ha. I am very sorry if I have pronounced your names incorrectly; please feel free to correct me. You are very welcome here today. I am going to invite the Federation of Chinese Associations to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes please, followed by the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association, and then committee members will have some questions and we will have a bit of a conversation. Over to you.

Bear LIN: Okay, thank you. Honourable members of Parliament, distinguished guests and my dear fellows, I am the project manager of healthy life service under the Federation of Chinese Associations Victoria, and we are actually one of the national gambling help programs which have been funded by the VRGF since 2016. It is my great honour to be invited here and to present to you on the gambling problems in the Chinese community. We would also like to speak about some of our observations on online gambling for the past six years.

We have actually worked with more than 2300 frustrated individual gamblers and heartbroken families over the past seven years and supported them to quit and reduce gambling issues, the effect on their families, conflict and mental wellness and to overcome lots of difficult times in their lives. The problem I want to address is that the Chinese population is highly targeted as one of the main customer groups in the gambling industry. They prey on Chinese migrants with lots of culturally friendly advertising and making the gamblers feel warmly welcome in the venues when they are actually facing very difficult moments in their work experience, study or with living here.

We have observed that lots of our clients go to the gambling industry chasing luck or money digging and lots of them want to seek an emotional escape from the hardship in their lives and homesickness. But all of them are not seeing how gambling makes them drip out their life funds and expels the love of their loved ones, which causes extra hardship on their relationships and their financial situation. Studies have also found that the percentage of problem gamblers is actually double the one we get from reports on mainstream problem gamblers. In the Chinese community we understand that this number is far undervalued and under-reported.

Since we lack a culture of counselling services, gambling is actually a very hidden secret of individuals and families in the Chinese culture. When they are experiencing gambling harms they will not officially seek help. They will try to settle it by themselves and it is not until all the tragedy occurs that they will seek help. At that moment more holistic care and treatment plans need to be involved and discussed. Let me give you some data on how what we have gone over the past seven years.

About 85 per cent of cases compacted with mental health and domestic violence issues, about 5 per cent of cases were involved with one to multiple suicide attempts and about 8 per cent of cases were linked to sex transactions, money laundering, fraud, kidnap and other crimes. When we peel off all those kinds of hybrid stories, we can see that gambling is one of the main triggers to all the harms. It harms family relationships and trust, and these harms can cross generations. The harms can bring a lot of long-term trauma to the gamblers and their family and friends, and we can see a lot of public resources are involved. Gambling harms are an extremely big threat to our public health system.

Let me share a bit about the online gambling issues that we have run through over the past couple of years. We have noticed that online gambling and gambling-like games are far welcomed among teenage and mid-aged Chinese people in Victoria, and we can see large losses reported in our cases. Compared to the purchase and protection mechanisms, the whole development of the gambling and digital gaming industry runs faster than our laws can move. In lots of our cases we can see that teens are using their parents' credit cards and then setting up maybe fake IDs or using lots of fake accounts and then starting to gamble, and they have actually lost quite big figures. Then in some of our cases we can see that parents need to lease out their property here to recover the debt. That is what we worry about. On the other hand we have also found that the online gaming operators they access are not operating in Australia, which means that lots of websites they now access are overseas. Then the set-up and all the access requirements lack rules.

What we want to address for this second point is that we have also noticed that the gambling-like games are less discussed and the harms are underestimated in the whole industry. The biggest difficulty reported by our frontline workers is that we can see that the gaming companies again are all run overseas. Then we can see the loot box system is working and is always harming the young people, training them with a strong mindset of chasing luck and gambling behaviour. In some of our cases we can see that if the teens have played loot box games before, they become more easily addicted to online betting, especially the sports ones, and we can see that they are exposed to a higher risk of getting more addicted, which means that they will tend to become problem gamblers very easily. That is what we worry about, so when we consider the gambling harm that loot boxes can bring to teens and the difficulties for the parents to monitor this, especially for CALD parents who have very low English proficiency – with all of the paperwork they rely on their teens to take care of it. I think it may be time to reconsider whether there are some protections or work that we can do for these groups.

Finally, I want to discuss some of our current protection systems. I understand that our current protection systems are working, such as self-exclusion programs with lots of service providers; YourPlay, provided by the department of justice; and the 100 Day Challenge, provided by the VRGF. They are very great tools and a great thing to reduce the gambling harms in our community because all those kinds of protection tools are self-help resources, and that is very useful for a large group of people. When they experience gambling harms, then they can seek primary support. But unfortunately, when we access all those kinds of tools, we cannot see the co-support page, which means that a lot of resources might not be translated into co-language that our customers can use in a rush. So they are very, very frustrated when they want to seek help but they cannot access our current protection tools.

I also appreciated that the mandatory spending limits and time restrictions in Crown Casino have been announced and have taken effect. For broader consideration, it is important for the panel to discuss and maybe explore the measures and enhance customer protection in other offsite gambling venues like TABs, because we have not seen that similar programs have been announced in TABs and in other regional pokie service providers. I guess it is like exploring – we can experience more measures to enhance protection on online gambling and, as I mentioned before, the gambling-like games industry. We suggest building more on all those kinds of our existing resources and making them useful and friendly to our co-group. I guess that is the end of my presentation. I will hand it on to my fellows.

The CHAIR: On to you, Ms Chung – or Ms Bui.

Ngoc CHUNG: I will just thank you for having the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association here. Anh Bui will be doing mainly the presentation and Thao here as well. So just a little bit about us – we do have 343 employees across metro Victoria. We do have gambling prevention initiatives as well as gambling counselling services. We probably all have personal instances where we have been directly affected by our community being affected by gambling or personal experiences where we have seen family members lose their

livelihoods and their homes because of this, so we certainly have a lot of input into this conversation. Thanks, Anh Bui.

Visual presentation.

Anh BUI: Thanks, Nicky. Today I would like to talk about tackling stigma in our Vietnamese community. So this is roughly what we will be talking about today, which is close to what the committee has been asking for information on. Just moving on a little bit, the impact of gambling harms, including online gambling, which is no different than gambling, on the Victorian Vietnamese community has been significant. The five main types of gambling harms that impact gamblers and non-gamblers, according to Browne et al, 2016, are not limited to financial harm as the most severe indicator for gamblers and non-gamblers. Other harms from gambling and online gambling that affect the Victorian Vietnamese community are health, especially the emotional and psychological aspects; relationships; and work and study harm.

There are various pathways and points of contact between people experiencing gambling harm and the justice system. The most obvious is a linear pathway when a person who develops gambling problems commits a crime such as thievery and/or drug trafficking to repay the accumulated financial debt, according to Campbell et al, 2017. Since the year 2000 the number of incarcerated Vietnamese women in Victoria has increased by 481 per cent. One of the pathways into the drug trade is to resolve debts incurred through casino gambling, as Vietnamese women attend casinos to escape family stress, relationship breakdown and cultural gaps between them and their children.

The risks of gambling harm mainly come from a high level of shame associated with gambling behaviours, according to Browne et al, 2016, which make clients more likely to practise personal resistance strategies and to turn to their family for assistance and not seek external help. Maintaining control is important to Vietnamese people. Revelations of excessive gambling could be associated with loss of face. For families of gamblers, they may shy away from seeking external assistance, as an admission of a problem with the family reflects on the family as a whole. Furthermore, among the Victorian Vietnamese community, many Vietnamese people have little experience or knowledge of the counselling process, which also hinders the seeking help behaviour.

We have been networking via VRGF's meetings, which is Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, such as the prevention partners forums, multicultural community of practice and multicultural Gambler's Help network meetings. We have also received resources via VRGF's professional development centre and Gambler's Help training and events. AVWA were introduced and linked between agencies.

VRGF has supported us in clinical practice, with Gambler's Help program guidelines, cognitive and motivational interviewing for gambling counselling and brief psychodynamic therapy for gambling. Internally in AVWA we are a close-knit community and have strong relationships with Vietnamese-speaking services, including psychologists, financial counselling, employment support, prisoners support et cetera. All of the above were to ensure our clients received effective referrals between funded organisations and a holistic approach.

In terms of peer support, since December 2020 we have been running an online social support group which is co-facilitated by the Footscray Narcotics Anonymous facilitator. The group ran fortnightly via Zoom throughout 2021 and continues to occur in 2023. The participants are encouraged to take turns chairing the group to increase their sense of empowerment in their recovery journey.

After attending our counselling sessions and social support group, clients disclosed that they felt less stressed being supported by non-judgemental professionals. Clients also reported gaining greater control over their gambling behaviour, significantly reducing their gambling urges and developing coping strategies to prevent future relapse. Clients also attempted to improve their relationships with family members who were affected by their gambling habits.

Other types of peer support can be included from the Activator of Changes project, which is also called AOC. AOC participants were empowered to contact support services and were referred to various services that they reported they were using or planning to use soon. Since the participants are all women, this project has shown increased knowledge about the risks of gambling, how to get help and how gambling is harming them or others that they care about.

In terms of culturally appropriate outcome measures and evaluation models, we are aiming to provide culturally appropriate measures and evaluation models. VRGF engaged Lirata Consulting to lead the evaluations of our two gambling prevention projects – Invest in You Too and Activator of Changes. These two projects aim to prevent incarceration and other harm in the Vietnamese community, especially of women. The evaluation process was customised to engage Vietnamese women and consulted with AVWA staff, which required cultural knowledge to approach participants. To ensure their engagement in the evaluation process, AVWA was able to provide culturally appropriate approaches based on participants' needs and building trust among the community.

Evaluation activities with project participants were mostly conducted in Vietnamese and translated by Lirata's Vietnamese-speaking associate. Our immediate outcomes are increasing access to education programs, social support and activities for Vietnamese women. We see medium outcomes for Vietnamese women from our treatment services – increasing knowledge of their rights and systems within Australia, increasing community participation and social connections and increasing confidence to engage with broader community supports. And last but not least, the long-term outcomes are crucial for Vietnamese women in preventing gambling harm for those who have limited to no language in English.

In the last two years AVWA had both gambling counselling and gambling prevention projects at the same time. Gambling counselling provides culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate counselling services to gambling-affected Vietnamese who have problems using the mainstream services Gambler's Help provides due to their limited cultural awareness or lack of English language proficiency. However, AVWA's gambling counselling services mostly reach out to gamblers with severe gambling harms, especially relating to correctional services, while AVWA's gambling prevention projects, including Invest in You Too and Activator of Changes, help communities and groups to understand the barriers to participation for Vietnamese women and effectively refer participants to relevant services for support. To ensure cultural appropriation, AVWA made a short film with Three Sides of the Coin from lived experience as a tool to increase engagement with priority groups. Participants from both projects felt that the trusted sources from the projects were helpful in many aspects, including preventing gambling harm. We believe that having both projects in gambling counselling and gambling prevention will enhance the effectiveness of regulations and reduce gambling harm in Victoria.

Lastly, based on the evaluation outcomes, which will be available shortly, once we finalise that and we can happily send that to the committee – for both projects, Activators of Change and Invest in You Too, participants highly agree on increasing the following aspects: knowledge of Australian laws and systems, understanding their rights, social connections, knowledge about gambling help available, knowledge about the risks of gambling, knowledge about employment or education, confidence to contact support services and understanding of money and finances. These projects started in 2021, and by the end of the financial year 2022–23 they have had a strong impact on the Victorian Vietnamese community, especially with the increased knowledge of gambling harm and its consequences among the Victorian Vietnamese community. In conclusion, AVWA strongly believes in the future outcomes and the potential of both gambling counselling and gambling prevention projects for the Victorian Vietnamese community. That is the end of our presentation. Thank you for your attention.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Ms Bui. I am going to hand to Mr Galea for the first round of questions.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, all, for joining us this morning. I really appreciated those presentations as well. There are a few different topics I would like to go through. If I can start with a relatively broad question, though, for both groups, and that is in harm reduction: do you think that over the past several years the harm from gambling in your communities has worsened or improved?

Bear LIN: I think it has improved, because as I said before, I can see a lot of protection mechanisms have been placed online, and then I can see a lot of our co-fellows have been developing wonderful programs in promoting all those kinds of concepts. But I think compared to the investment in advertising from the gambling industry, we are just very small drops in a big ocean, as I can see. I think we are improving, we are doing a lot of work, but maybe not enough compared to the other giants.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

Anh BUI: From my point of view, I think that we did manage to accommodate those who were affected by gambling, especially those severely and strongly impacted and especially, like I said before, related to correctional services. Those are people who have gambling harms that are at an unmanageable level. So that is what we have been doing: we have been reaching out more to those who are in crisis. However, I think that we can definitely reach out to those who are at risk or at moderate or even low and medium risk of gambling harms.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And, Ms Bui, I was absolutely astonished by the statistic of a 481 per cent increase in incarceration rates for Vietnamese women since 2000. How much of that can you attribute to gambling?

Anh BUI: I could not give out the percentage precisely, but I think that it was roughly the majority of that. There is a very linear pathway to repaying the debt, but it also involves loan sharks or other incidents as well, like violence or sometimes drug trafficking or sometimes even more than that, like money laundering. I think that the majority from the Vietnamese community in prison are coming from gambling, either directly or indirectly.

Michael GALEA: Yes, thank you. I am quite interested too in the projects that both groups have done, often with the support and assistance of the VRGF, and I appreciate the offer to provide that evaluation once that is finalised. Just quickly, when will that be finalised?

Anh BUI: We are still waiting for the announcement from the VRGF, but we are definitely happy to share that as soon as possible.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I appreciate that. Could I ask again to both groups: what are some of the key lessons you have learned from those projects? What have been the successes, and what have been the things that could have been done better?

Thao HA: I am doing gambling prevention, so the lesson I learned is that especially women out there do not have enough information. They do not know where to get information from, and they are not encouraged to seek help, especially from the organisations that speak English. While we have been doing the Activators of Change we have found out that we have got a group of people that are willing to share the information that they get from us – from the trusted sources, like you said – and to spread out information to the community. So from that I think we can spread out the information to the wider community to reduce the harm from gambling and to empower women to get help when they need it.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

Ngoc CHUNG: I might just add to that as well. The Activators of Change model that you were talking about is an amazing model. It takes six volunteers who then create groups of up to 20, and then they are the leaders in sharing information and facilitating those conversations. It was really disappointing to understand, from my perspective, that the initial funding was only for two years, which would have concluded at this time. We were just really lucky that the contact that you have had at VRGF has sought additional funding for us to just extend for one more year. It is a really critical program for social connection and for a trusted organisation like AVWA to enter the community to provide information to people who would not normally be able to access that information.

Thao HA: In addition to that, 80 per cent of our Activators of Change participants did not know about our organisation before. They are very new to our community and to our society, so they are very isolated.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And just on that quickly, do you think that approaching this from a public health perspective – I think you actually mentioned this in your submission, Ms Lin, too – will benefit and provide more support, if we approach it from that perspective?

Bear LIN: I think with the support we are trying to navigate the clients through our current health system. I can see there are still some barriers, and I guess that is related to the language barriers, as we always highlight. The second thing is that I think the Chinese community experience a similar experience with all the CALD groups – it is a lack of the culture and not understanding all the systems running here. A lot of them came here – for example, some of our clients are international students, and we suppose that they can speak good English,

or at least that they can understand English context. But when we are running the focus groups with them and working with the student unions in some of the universities, then we can find out that they still only have access to very limited knowledge about what to do if they are facing, for example, gambling harms. They will feel that it is shameful to share their life experience, and then that is why we are seeing that it is pretty difficult to work with people who are low risk or medium risk, because people can only access the FCA or the AVWA. It is not until their case is extremely severe that we need to do a lot of work and expend a lot of effort in helping them to work through all of those kinds of harms. That is what I can learn from the cases we do in the counselling service and the prevention programs. So nowadays we quickly swap our minds; we set up a lot of case-sharing channels, we pack up the storybooks and then publish online on our WeChat channel to try to explain all of those lived experiences to a broader audience. We understand that lots of people love to access social media. But it is still very arguable, when they have access to all of those kinds of materials, how deep the knowledge they develop is and how effectively they can seek for help. But all the things we are still working on are things we actually have, like changing a bit of minds and developing a lot of networking at the national level. We started to work with lots of hospitals and other mental health organisations to exchange ideas to see how we can work with the CALD clients and how we can settle their cases more appropriately under what we can do.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Ms Lin. I know there is a real recurring theme about shame and the social effects of gambling – that members of both Vietnamese and Chinese communities, from these submissions, do feel that extra level of social pressure. Can you elaborate on what that can come through as, what that looks like, and how that makes it an additional pressure that Chinese and Vietnamese Australians who are experiencing gambling harm have to deal with?

Ngoc CHUNG: I might just make a quick comment before I pass on to you. We also do family violence, alcohol and other drug and prisoner support and counselling, and with these types of concerns it is a lot about early intervention so that we can normalise help-seeking behaviour. There is just not an understanding necessarily that these behaviours that are being undertaken or things that are being felt are heading towards a crisis point, and we really need to have supports in place to provide that information and social connection for people to really start looking for help sooner rather than later.

Thao HA: Exactly right.

Anh BUI: I think too that there are shame associations that we have in the Vietnamese community, especially in Victoria, because we are a very close-knit community and we are taking care of each other. However, it also has a really huge stigma about having problem gamblers in a family as a whole, and people tend to not seek help because of that. They do not want to see in the family that there are some problem gamblers or there is someone having problems with correctional services, which would be shameful to the whole family. That is why, because of the whole connectedness that we are having, it also hinders the external seeking of help. I think that enhances what Ngoc was saying about normalising and tackling the stigma and encouraging seeking behavioural help, and I think that definitely tackles too the shame that you mentioned.

Bear LIN: I would add one thing. When I have worked with a lot of Chinese clients, their first concern is about gossip in the community and the rumours. They are very afraid that if they are telling their story or seeing counsellors like us, their story will be known. That is another very difficult part for at least our Chinese community to work with: dealing with the privacy issues and letting them understand all the stories will be kept in the box, not shared with each other. I guess that is why people feel it is very hard to seek help at the very early stage.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Again, a similarity in both your submissions was that you noted the increase in online gambling of recent years. We have heard from broad perspectives in the last couple of days how the harm is still greatest from poker machines but the harm from online gambling is increasing. Is that something that you would say is the case in the Vietnamese and Chinese communities as well?

Bear LIN: Yes, in some of our cases, especially during the lockdowns, we surprisingly saw a lot of online gambling cases surge. Then some of the cases we can see are a bit horrible, because we always assume for middle-aged women that it is very hard to learn digital technology and try to access all that kind of information. But unfortunately it is very easy to access the online casino or other entertainment resources, and then we can see that they learn how to create pockets and learn how to do the card games online. Then they start to gamble. We can see a lot of cases reported to our desks. Their experience is about \$10,000 to \$300,000 lost. It is nearly

all their savings in their family. Now they are still in that very extreme financial situation. And when they report it to us we also notice that the frequency of online gambling is very quick. We have done research before: we can see it is nearly doubly faster than the offline pokie machine, which means that when we click on the pokie machine it usually will quit down for 10 seconds or 20 seconds, and then you start another round. But if you do it online, that will be like 5 seconds, which means that in one hour you can lose double if you keep that frequency going. And I cannot see any regulations about the regulation of the online pokie machines.

We also notice that even though our clients sign up to self-exclusion orders with the online pokie machine service provider, they will then use maybe another family member's ID and use their credit card. They easily set up another account, and then they can start to gamble. And then there will be no way for them to stop, and that is very horrible, as we can see.

We also notice that when they are on the apps, usually firstly they will ask their family and friends to borrow money to continue their gambling, and once they fail to do it they will start approaching the loan sharks. And then the shark loans will offer them different deals in taking care of the debts. In one of our cases, very heartbreaking, one gambler borrowed about A\$1 million from the loan shark at the casino, and then a few days later on the loan shark came to his property, knocked on the door and threatened that if he failed to pay that debt, his sisters, his girlfriend and his mother would be moved to the sex work industry to pay off the bills for him. All those kinds of heartbreaking stories were reported to us, and they sought for our opinion not until that very moment. So those are some cases I can share to help you understand more about the situation.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Apologies for jumping in. I am relatively short on time. You mentioned marketing as well, Ms Lin, and I think it was raised by AVWA as well. I am curious to know, whether it is poker machine venues or particularly online marketing – online gambling for sports betting or other online casinos – what sort of marketing takes place to the community? Is it in language? Is it targeted? Is there any sort of specific marketing, whether direct advertising or otherwise, that the committee should be aware of that is taking place?

Anh BUI: From my perspective from working with the Vietnamese Victorian community, I think that it is not just about marketing in their language, but it is more about the accessibility. A lot of my clients have reported that they are finding the apps really accessible. They do not need to understand the language, or they do not need to understand the rules or regulations about how the apps work, and they can easily access them. The second thing is that the very first one they have done is with digital money – so it was not real money, but it was just digital, to make them get hooked on it. A lot of my clients have reported that it was so dangerous to them, and it gave them the feeling of urges for gambling, especially people who in the past had gambling harms – so that is where they realised that it was like an alert. Then afterwards people can decide: they can continue doing real money or they can be doing it with digital money. In some cases that I have seen when they decided to go to the real money – to their credit card or to their accounts – they lost a few thousand up to \$10,000 despite how much they had won with the digital money. So that is where the harm is – not just in the marketing but in how easily accessed it is from the apps.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And if I can just ask for maybe a one-sentence answer from each of you. The federal parliamentary committee recently recommended a blanket ban on all gambling advertising in Australia. Would your groups support such a move?

Anh BUI: Absolutely.

Bear LIN: Absolutely, because we can see a lot of advertising too popping in a lot of sports. That is where there is a lot. And even though we are gamblers counsellors and usually we would be on our smartphones typing in the keyword 'gambling' or 'casino' or those kinds of keywords, once we have it typed in and when we visit other websites we can see there are a lot of them pushing it and promoting to you the online gambling apps. So it is like it is a very horrible loop, like even though you do not want to gamble, the internet will push you and exploit all those kinds of apps. And some of the apps are very friendly; they even, like, print in Vietnamese or Chinese that is extremely friendly, using the culture and very friendly colours, giving them some kind of hope. That is what I can see, especially on some on the YouTube channel.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. 'Predatory' is a very good word to describe that. Ms Sandell.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Just two questions from me. The first one is: you have talked a little bit about this, but are you finding trends over the last little while in your community where people are experiencing harm more online, or is it still casino and poker machines? Are you seeing any trends one way or the other?

Thao HA: I might tell you a story. One of my activator of changes participants tells us that there were some people who knew she was lonely and had no friends. So one lady approached her, made friends with her and offered a trip to the casino for entertainment, and she promised her – my client – to teach her how to win at casinos. But luckily the girl that I talked to said she is so scared of blending with that lady, so that is why she is not addicted to casinos. But there are some people like that in our community who get to our very vulnerable people and push them into the casinos for gambling. They are still there.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you.

Bear LIN: In our case, no. It used to be more cases from offline gambling, but nowadays we can see online gambling cases; if you weigh it up, about one-third of our cases are coming from the online gambling, so that is why we are a bit worried about this change.

Ellen SANDELL: So it is still mostly casino and poker machines, but online is growing faster?

Bear LIN: Yes, at this moment. Because maybe the ways for them to access help are still a little bit different. So I imagine, before the online self-help, the system was not quite friendly to the core group, so just maybe they could not access those materials. We do not know because we still need to see how the data is coming out and then see what happens, but now there are still the pokies and the casino, yes.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. And more casino rather than clubs, like pubs and clubs?

Anh BUI: Mostly casino because of the cultural aspect; they find that really warm and welcoming.

Thao HA: You do not have to speak English as well.

Ellen SANDELL: You do not have to speak English – yes, that is a really interesting point. You talked about the difficulty in people accessing support – the shame, the difficulty with language to even get support. But once people do reach out for support, do you find that then there is enough support there for them or culturally appropriate support in language once people do ask for help?

Ngoc CHUNG: I will make a comment on that. With the counselling services that we provide, the general consensus is that using an interpreter is very prohibitive. We have advertised previously for alcohol and other drug counsellors and similar, and it has taken us a long time to get a bilingual, bicultural person. There are just not enough out there at all.

Anh BUI: I definitely agree on that, because we have difficulties in finding culturally appropriate services within the Vietnamese community besides the nurse. We try to manage to gather as much networking as we can, but sometimes there is not enough.

Bear LIN: Yes, I think the same at this moment. We can see that the ways why Chinese people sometimes fail to access the support network – I think it is still back to the cultural awareness. Counselling is not an accepted treatment to the addiction. When we mention counselling to our community, then we find that they might experience some psychiatric issues like, ‘Do you feel like I’m getting crazy and I need to see a counsellor?’ I think that stigma is still down there, although we have worked for so many years in trying to break down the stigma. But I think it still takes time to break down that stigma first, and then to encourage CALD cultures with our counselling concept, those kinds of groups can accept those kinds of services, which could be changing their life. Once our clients accept our first-language counselling service, they will give us very good feedback, and they feel like they are getting fully supported and they feel more confident to deal with their even life-threatening situations. We can see, even though they relapse maybe six months later, then they know how to contact us again, and they sit down and they open up another case and do another counselling session. That is good.

Ellen SANDELL: Do you feel like the barrier is people accessing your service rather than – once people are in the door, so to speak, you feel like it is quite effective?

Bear LIN: Again, I can see both, because some of the clients are living in the regional areas where first-language counsellors are extremely limited. And what they can do is use the mainstream counselling service with the interpreting service, and then, as we can see, it is very hard.

Ngoc CHUNG: I will give you an example. We are introducing an employee assistance program at our work, and we are using a national provider – a huge employer. We have asked them to provide services in Vietnamese, and they have got two psychologists in the whole of Australia: one in Sydney and one in Melbourne. That is not enough, really, for us.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Sandell. We will go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Is there no-one – sorry, I thought there might have been someone from the Liberal Party here. Recently it was announced some changes to electronic gaming machines, particularly around spin rates, mandatory closures across the industry – bar the casino – and also precommitment and carded play. Do you have particular views on whether this is a series of positive steps, or what is your opinion on these?

Bear LIN: That is a very important move, and we are actually extremely appreciative of all those great works having been done. I guess that is like breaking the Australian history that we will have all those kinds of regulations. But what we are worried about is maybe all those kinds of rules announced and limits in the Crown Casino area; Crown is actually – after, for example, gambling at 12 o'clock and then the casino is closed, they still can travel to the TAB or another venue and continue to gamble. And, I mean, the limit of money they use on gambling is not counted, which means that the limits in Crown Casino at which they need to leave – when they go to the TAB, there is no limit: they can still gamble. So that is what we worry about a bit.

Mathew HILAKARI: So interconnected limits across different gambling being used and types is what you are suggesting.

Bear LIN: Yes, because we consult YourPlay. I guess that position is undertaken by YourPlay, but YourPlay does not have a course venue system at the moment. So I think the next steps will be discussing if that is available, that the course venue money limits won can be taken into account.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you.

Anh BUI: I just want to add to that. We have similar aspects to that. We really appreciate and we understand about the rules and regulations to prevent gambling harm. However, from my perspective, from my point of view from the self-exclusion at Crown Casino, a lot of people who actually exclude themselves from Crown Casino continue to get back if they do not seek out the appropriate help. So no matter what the rules and regulations are, people with gambling problems are still going back to their pattern of behaviour if they are not getting any guidance or any external help for that. I just wanted to add that.

Mathew HILAKARI: Certainly. I am interested in how you advertise and let people know about the services that you have. How do you make sure that is communicated well across the community? A few moments ago it was mentioned that sometimes people's first experience with your organisation is when they are engaged around harmful gambling. How do you get the word out that you are available and there?

Anh BUI: I think it is a little bit different between gambling counselling and gambling prevention. So for gambling counselling basically it was word of mouth, and we have really good connections, especially to the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, which is a women's prison. We have a lot of clients from there that need direct help with a Vietnamese-speaking counsellor. Besides that, recently we have reached out with marketing, in the social media from the AVWA that we have, and we do provide it, similarly, in a newspaper and also newsletters, making sure that the other services know about us so we can work inter-agency. But I think gambling prevention is a little bit different.

Thao HA: Yes, gambling prevention is a little bit different. When we are doing groups – first of all we did not start out with doing gambling prevention. We just provided information about the law, about Australian systems, about the services available, about their rights. So by that information we wanted to empower them, and gradually we introduced the gambling harms so that people could know more about their rights and know

more about the laws. They spread out information through the community. In this way we advertise, we speak up.

Ngoc CHUNG: We hold a lot of events. Say, for instance, we will have playgroup events through the year, for mid-autumn festival or Lunar New Year et cetera, and we will have our own stalls set up. So it is very indirect. The families that are attending are aware of the services that we are providing.

Bear LIN: For FCA we definitely do a very similar advertising mode, since we are a community service centre which has serviced Victoria for over 40 years. The Federation of Chinese Associations is a bit interesting since the members are not individuals. We are all social leaders. The Chinese social leaders are association members under FCA. The FCA usually runs a lot of community leaders' meetings and then tries to empower and then to normalise all those kinds of issues with the local community leaders. The local community leaders can bring back those messages to their individual groups. They will be very diverse. They can be seniors groups, women's groups, youth groups or the business groups. We spread out all those kinds of messages in that way. I will give you an example. For example, we have a regional member which is located in Ballarat, which is run by Charles Zhang. He will run regular groups for the local Chinese in Ballarat, promoting our service down there. Once a family is experiencing gambling harms, they will contact Charles and Charles will contact me. So the whole advertising and internal network works like that down there. We find that is a very sufficient way to support the Chinese community – in the internal network.

Mathew HILAKARI: I guess I have got literally 1 minute left, but if there was one thing that the Victorian government could do to support you or to prevent gambling harm, what is that one thing that we could be doing? I know that is really hard to encapsulate, but we have got 1 minute.

Anh BUI: I think that it was having gambling counselling and gambling preventions together, because I think that one of those could not do well without the other. So that is what we found in the last two years. That is our suggestion and that is our finding.

Bear LIN: Yes, agree. To cut off the time.

Mathew HILAKARI: One between everyone – that is great.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately, we have come to the end of our session. There are plenty more questions I think that members may have or would have liked to have asked today, but if it is okay with you, then perhaps if there are things that committee members really want to put into writing, it would be great if we could write to you and you could provide us with some further information.

Anh BUI: Yes, surely.

Thao HA: Sure.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much for sharing your expertise and your knowledge. Most importantly, on behalf of the committee, I want to say a very big thankyou for the work that you do in your communities. I know that there are representatives here, including me, who see you do incredible work and put on many hats to do many different things with your communities, but the work that you are doing in relation to gambling prevention and harm and support is absolutely extraordinary. So on behalf of the committee and the Parliament I do want to say a very heartfelt thankyou.

The committee will follow up on any additional questions or any questions taken notice and, just so you know, responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to now take a short break for lunch and recommence the hearing at 1 pm. I declare the hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.