

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 September 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESSES

Ms Jenny Smith, Chief Executive Officer, and

Mr Damien Patterson, Policy and Advocacy Officer, Council to Homeless Persons.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. 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 go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is also being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearings is only permitted in accordance with the Legislative Assembly standing order 234. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

I think you are making a 5-minute opening statement, and then we will proceed with questions after that. Thanks for being here today.

Ms SMITH: Thank you very much, honourable Chair, and thanks to all of you as members of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee for the opportunity to meet with you today. You will know that I am Jenny Smith, the CEO of Victoria's homelessness peak body, the Council to Homeless Persons, and I am very pleased to have with me here my colleague Damien Patterson, who is our policy officer.

You will be aware that tonight 24,000 Victorians will be homeless. You are probably also aware that over the course of the year 116,000 different Victorians will come to our homelessness services looking for assistance, and we will of course turn many of them away. The growing homelessness in our state and in our country is the consequence of a housing system that is not working for people on low and middle incomes, and rents have been increasing faster than incomes have been increasing. As a state, we are unfortunately at the bottom of the national league table for our proportion of social housing, and our proportion of social housing just keeps getting lower, despite the best efforts of all concerned.

So today as we sit here we have got a shortfall of around 100,000 social housing properties in Victoria. So that means more and more people simply cannot find a place to live that they can afford, and those who are most vulnerable to missing out in the rental market are those who are on very low incomes and who also present to private real estate agents with other challenges in their lives, whether that be the impact of racism or the outcome of family violence or having a disability or a psychiatric disability. So the homelessness that we tend to see most in our services is the homelessness that has happened to people with very little social capital, and the experience of homelessness tends to erode the social capital that they do have and also erode their self-esteem.

We know that homelessness is very damaging to people's mental health. Of people experiencing homelessness, 15% report that they had a diagnosed mental health condition prior to experiencing homelessness, but another 16% report that same condition or set of conditions after having experienced homelessness. It does not take much for us to understand that once people have a safe and secure home recovery can commence.

Meaningful employment and the income that comes with it is important to all of us in one way or another. It certainly improves people's access to housing, and it certainly commences or assists recovery from the traumas that have been associated with homelessness. As Peter Mares said recently in his book *No Place like Home*, health, education and housing are like three legs of a stool—take one away and the whole thing falls down. So what that means is that when people are homeless our investments in other things like education and health care are far less likely to produce the social outcomes and social return that we are looking to invest in.

We do know very clearly the type of support that is needed to assist vulnerable people into employment. That has largely been demonstrated by our mental services here and internationally. A range of approaches that can be called individual placement and support approaches have been empirically demonstrated to be effective. The eight key ingredients—the eight principles in those sorts of approaches—I will just list briefly. Everyone who wants to work is eligible. Employment services are integrated with other important services, like mental health and housing services. We are talking about competitive employment as a goal, not a range of temporary piecework voluntary alternatives. Every client gets personalised counselling about the impact of that work on their benefits situation so that those impacts can be understood and planned for. Rapid job search starts as soon as someone expresses an interest in gaining work. There are employment specialists who establish relationships

with employers. Those specialists are there to provide ongoing support as it is needed—titrated up and down. And clients are assisted to get jobs that are of some interest to them, that reflect their preferences.

The evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of these types of approaches is with people who are housed. Of our own homelessness services, the youth foyers, are probably the best example of that, where there is a deal between young people and the provider in relation to undertaking employment and other supports, but housing is part of that deal; people do get housing.

So from our point of view to improve sustainable employment outcomes for highly disadvantaged jobseekers we put forward four key principles. One is that a safe and stable home is really a prerequisite; that many highly disadvantaged people need support in renewing their self-confidence before embarking on employment; that the coercive and compulsorily employment-based programs that do fail with this group will continue to fail with this group if they are punishing and punitive rather than supportive; because highly disadvantaged individuals often are multiply challenged and are going to need employment support programs that understand and are equipped to meet those multiple challenges and are able to titrate that support up and down over time.

Twenty six per cent of the adults who present to our homelessness services in a year tell us they are employed. In the last figures available to us that was about 9,500. I think what is remarkable is that at the end of the period of homelessness support 12% more reported that they were employed. Now given how hard-won those employment outcomes are I do think that that is encouraging. That is happening in the absence, except for the examples that you have heard about, of a targeted support approach for our sector or for the housing sector, or the social housing sector. We do need support that is targeted at people who are emerging from homelessness. We need support that can engage our homelessness services—our homelessness support services, our case managers—as people, not when they first come in to our service system homeless, but as they are either in transitional stable accommodation or can see that stable home not far away, that is the time to be engaging with them and supporting them towards employment. We need that support to follow them into the housing, whether that be the social housing or into the private market. Because if we can create a 12% uplift in employment outcomes without that targeted support, what could we do with it?

As a final point I would draw your attention to the point in our submission where we point out that 10% of people attending our homelessness services in the last year did not have any income at all. Most of these people are people who have been unable in the context of the turmoil that comes with being homeless to have met their Centrelink mutual obligation around jobseeking. I think that we have to understand that this is what happens when people with complexity in their lives are required to engage with programs that are not equipped to understand them and are not equipped to respond to their challenging needs and then they lose their eligibility for government supports, and this will just continue while we continue to approach that challenge in this way.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I would like to start with the first question if I can. As a member that has a large proportion of social and public housing in my electorate, and I have recently opened six units for rough sleepers with a health professional on site, it is unfortunate that we need these sorts of housing but we do. A large proportion of people that live within that postcode are unemployed, so there is a trend in relation to public social housing and the employment rates of those areas that have a high proportion of these. That is changing. The perception is changing, whether it is discrimination by postcode or whether it is discrimination by the lack of opportunity, for example, with some of those people that live within those postcodes. Discrimination in its various forms does exist. How do you think that affects the ability of people to find meaningful employment or any employment whatsoever?

Ms SMITH: I think what we are seeing with the public housing stock that we have is that the level of complexity of people who are accessing that public housing is going up all the time. Because we have not increased the stock, because it has gone down in real terms in proportion to the population generally, the bar is so high in terms of challenges that you have in your life to be able to access public housing now. Compared to when North Geelong was developed, it was for workers in manufacturing and it was a recognition by government that government should support low-cost housing for manufacturing. Now it is housing for the most disadvantaged in our community, and that transition has taken place over 30 years. There was probably always a little bit of a stigma in relation to public housing but it is incredible now, and I think that relates to the fact that we have concentrated disadvantage in a way that is not good for anybody. So that is why we are strident in our call for a national effort in relation to social housing but also for our state, through the sins of us

all over 30 or 40 years, to recognise that there are different ways of counting it, but much less than 3% of our housing stock being social housing is not good for us as a community. Even the national average of around 5% is not good for us as a community. We have got to stop hoping that this problem will go away and start addressing that.

So within that, I do think we have the opportunity to look at the resources that we do have to provide additional support to people who want to work but cannot by virtue of not having a place to live or because of where they live and the view that they are not necessarily going to be as good a bet as someone else in employment; to have that extra support to engage with employers; to understand the person and what they are going to respond well to and what they are not going to; to deal with some of the inevitable hiccups that happen while settling into employment perhaps after a significant period without employment—it is in everybody's interest.

Ms ADDISON: I was wondering: from your experience, what role does discrimination play in the ability of people experiencing homelessness to find and retain work? Like, there are some fundamental forms you have to fill in when you start a job, and generally the first one is 'What's your address?'. How do people who are homeless overcome this?

Ms SMITH: Well, I might start and then Damien might want to say a few things about this. Look, I think the discrimination that people experiencing homelessness face first and foremost is at the door of the private real estate agent.

Ms ADDISON: That was my next question.

Ms SMITH: And it is not that they are not good people; it is just that the number of people looking for housing in that most affordable, low-cost band is too many. And they have plenty of people to choose from. They have got students with parental guarantees. They have got people who clearly are not a single woman having escaped family violence, with a whole lot of things on her mind or someone clearly struggling with a mental illness, perfectly able to live very happily and as great neighbours in our community but not going to compete at that hard end of the real estate market.

We have recently been talking with the people we know with relatively recent experiences of homelessness, and what they really said as a chorus is, 'When we become newly homeless the last thing on our mind is work, if we haven't got work'. Because the effort that goes into just surviving each day, the effort that goes into trying to get out of this cycle of nowhere to live, or a temporary arrangement—'Damien's going to kick me off his couch if I'm still there next week'—that is all encompassing. If you are a mum with kids, trying to get them to stay connected with school or kinder and not lose that social interaction can take all day if the temporary accommodation is a long way from where you are.

So work, if you have lost it, is a long way down the pecking order. I think where we have got some potential to think about it more creatively is how we can encourage employers to understand family violence more, for example, and the family violence leave discussion is heightening awareness of that because it is about not losing that job, I think, at the point of homelessness—maintaining the economic benefit of that as well as the whole social benefit of that. Because once you have lost it, it is a long road back. Is that what they told you?

Mr PATTERSON: Yes. I guess I would just add that a part of sustainable employment, of course, is not just finding a job but keeping a job. For all the difficulty that people experiencing homelessness face while finding a job, keeping a job is extremely difficult during a time of such crisis, where you might have a bunch of appointments that you need to attend, as Jenny said, and you might be having difficulty finding the next short-term place where you are going to sleep that evening. And so, yes, the issue is not always just, 'What can we do in recruitment?' but also 'What can we do in ensuring that people who are experiencing homelessness can keep the jobs that they are able to attain?'.

The CHAIR: Any further questions?

Ms CONNOLLY: So you think there is a real need about flexibility of work? So employers understanding the issues but also being able to be flexible in those working hours, say, to attend appointments to—

Ms SMITH: I think family violence is the one that is perhaps easiest to think about, where someone has clearly got things going on at home and is clearly wobbling. How do you be a flexible and supportive employer to get that person through the time? I think it is a different challenge, say, for somebody who has been out of work because of the consequences of their mental illness over time. And the supported environment that is needed to actually get them to successfully engage with work, which they want to do—and they are keen to give it a go—but also to be around, to titrate up and down, once the work placement has been achieved, as things might wobble over a much longer period over that time. I think that is the type of structure that we have not quite got to yet.

Mr ROWSWELL: Jenny, good to see you again.

Ms SMITH: It is lovely to see you.

Mr ROWSWELL: I spoke in the Parliament just a couple of weeks back on this particular topic, and it was a great privilege to do so actually. It gave me the opportunity to research it a bit more and I guess speak from the heart in many respects. Just so we are clear: your view is a safe and stable home is the best opportunity that a currently homeless person has to sustainable employment in the medium to long term?

Ms SMITH: Unfortunately I think statistically it is a prerequisite, and the people with that experience support that. But I do think there is an opportunity, as people get close to that and start to achieve that, to look at the employment dimension.

Mr ROWSWELL: And in your view the only way to fix that is to bring more public housing stock into the market?

Ms SMITH: Yes, and I think we have got that shortfall that I mentioned, but we have also got to work out how to do that as we go and as we grow. I understand Melbourne will be the most populous city in the country in not too long a time. Well, if we keep doing what we are doing now it is going to be horrendous.

Mr ROWSWELL: As I asked the previous witness, is there a best practice example around Australia or around the world that you could point to that manages this in an appropriate way, that cares for the person and respects them?

Ms SMITH: I think we have got a good start with JVEN and I think we would like to see that looked at, particularly in relation to this cohort. It is well delivered by the services that you have heard from in our sector but it does not have a profile for your average case manager in our sector. They would not know about them particularly unless they are in a program where that is happening, so I think we have an opportunity.

I think with the work that has been done in the mental illness space both here in Australia and internationally we have got a great set of evidence for the types of services that would work. I think having a look at what we have got and how it might be beefed up to make sure it meets those criteria and also how it might be taken to scale so that homelessness and housing services are maximising people's supported access into employment—so any competitive employment—but with enough support to get them there and keep them there is what we need to do.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Jenny, clearly it is incredibly difficult to find work when you are homeless. You have talked about perhaps the opportunity is greater when they are getting to that point of getting people to have stable housing. What role do you see social housing providers doing in providing complementary wraparound services to those individuals, and as an addendum, what role do you see State Government having in that process to assist them to then assist their clients?

Ms SMITH: I think we do not really have ongoing support services in our social housing. Our homelessness services are at the front door and turning away a lot of people every day unfortunately. We have a limited resource in terms of time-limited case management while people are in transitional care. We are just creating a small number of demonstration projects about ongoing support.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: And co-locating as well?

Ms SMITH: Yes. So I think we have got the opportunity to say, ‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be able to join up social housing with employment services in a way that maximised people’s opportunity for that?’. I was at the National Housing Conference last week and there were services from around the country—some social housing services, some employment services—that were using a range of time-limited funding to demonstrate how to bridge that gap. But it is really about not hoping it is going to happen magically. It is about having the skilled resource that understands both and that can join them together as well as engage with employers on behalf of someone who needs that bridging and that support.

The CHAIR: So the Housing First program, you have indicated that it is a good program. What sort of resources would we need as a Victorian Government to trial one, and can you provide any examples of Housing First programs that have been delivered in the nation?

Ms SMITH: Yes. I think you have just got some of our first ones, in a way, in your electorate. Common Ground, which is in Elizabeth Street, is a Housing First program. It is one that is in a big building, and there is a mix of social housing and a little bit of affordable housing, particularly for families, at the back. The Housing First model basically says, ‘It doesn’t matter how complex you are as a person, actually we’re not going to get very far with you by making you jump through a whole lot of transitional hoops to get somewhere to live. We’re going to actually do a lot better if we can house you and then support you to live successfully in the community’. The evidence is all for that approach, for that Housing First approach. There is not any evidence supporting transitional approaches.

We have started to do that with some pilot funding in Victoria, not in a big building but in terms of scattered-site housing within public housing.

The CHAIR: Mixing the demographics of—

Ms SMITH: Yes, with mobile teams. What we are really struggling with as a community in Victoria is to get timely access to that social housing for people as they come out of rough sleeping with those complexities—to be able to get them into the housing to match the support. We have got very fine examples of how to do the support, both in our mental health service system and now in our homelessness system. We need to take that support to scale around the state, but we have got to identify a supply of social housing that can meet those people at the time the support comes. We are doing a little bit of it. We have not got where we need to as yet. But I think that is a good analogy for what we are talking about in the employment space. We need that support to be there in the pre-employment phase. We need it at the front end when people get into a job, but we need the opportunity for that ongoing support to titrate up and down as it might be needed over time. I might be in a job and I might not need support for nine months, but when I do I really do, and people have got to know me and come back in and help me resolve whatever situations emerge and help me keep that job.

The CHAIR: Anything further that you would like to add?

Mr PATTERSON: I think we are okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Ms SMITH: Thanks for your interest.

Witnesses withdrew.