

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Bendigo—Tuesday, 22 October 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 Kate McInnes, Executive Officer, and

Ms Bu Gay Pah Thei, Community Development Worker, Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services.

The CHAIR: Thank you for being here to give us a presentation on this very important Inquiry that we are conducting. Can I just say at this point in time 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. 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. If you can give your presentation, then we will proceed to ask questions after that. Thank you for being here. Just mention your name, if you can.

Ms McINNES: My name is Kate McInnes. I am the Executive Officer at Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services.

Ms PAH THEI: My name is Bu Gay Pah Thei. I am one of the community development workers at the multicultural service and one of the Karen community members here.

Ms McINNES: Our organisation is Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services, so we cover that Loddon Campaspe region. We are an ethnic communities council and the peak body for multicultural organisations in this region. Most of our work is done in the City of Greater Bendigo. That is because it has got the highest culturally diverse demographics for that region; it is still relatively low in comparison to metro areas. We are a not-for-profit, and our work sits across community programs and then our arts and events programs, which are whole-of-community focused. In terms of employment we have a Jobs Victoria-funded employment program. Prior to that it was philanthropically funded for a year, and then it was happily able to move into that JVEN space. I am going to hand over to Bu to talk a little bit about our employment program.

Ms PAH THEI: I work with the settlement program and employment program funded by Jobs Victoria. The main groups that I would be working with are the Hazara community, the Karen community and the South Sudanese community. I want to talk about the barriers for these communities. We help them a lot during their recruitment and inductions in the workplace and during work. The three things that we give them are bilingual support, bicultural support and all the paperwork that needs to be done in the workplace. We give them all the support, because I think it is very important for them to receive bilingual support instead of having an interpreter, because interpreters do a different job from bilingual support and some interpreters do not receive cultural competency training in their work. You can use an interpreter who may speak Karen or may speak Dinka or Dari. The interpreter's job is to interpret what exactly is said. But, for example, if you have people that come from a refugee background, they will not know what these terms mean. For example, 'near miss'—how can you interpret that? You say near miss, but the person who has not been in Australia will not understand what near miss means when we have a communication between the employer and the worker.

What stops most people from going to work is that they do not have enough support for driving lessons. As a multicultural service we are not-for-profit and we do not have enough funding for this to support this community into a workplace. But thankfully with the JVEN program we have the ability to support them into the workforce.

Ms McINNES: We have been running our Jobs Victoria program since October 2016. That is when JVEN started, so we have just come up to three years with the program. In that time we have worked with 148 jobseekers, and of those we have placed 78 into employment, where they have managed to stay in that employment for at least six months—so around 50% of people. Of those, we have only been able to claim 37 as paid outcomes, and we have met all our outcomes now. So we are in a position where we still have jobseekers coming to us looking for jobs and we still have employers calling us, but we just do not have the human resources to continue that work. That contract finishes in June next year, so for that period we do not have funding to continue that work.

We have found our model has been highly successful. I think looking at the regional context and being clear about the model for a regional context has been very important. In the City of Greater Bendigo it has really been only in the last 10 years that we have seen migrant and refugee communities settle. Bu was actually a member of the first Karen family to settle here in Bendigo 12 years ago, and everyone else in the Karen community has come since then. It is very new for workplaces, and a lot of our work has been focused on

workplaces. Yes, we work with jobseekers, but also with workplaces about their cultural competency and their level of comfort in employing someone from a refugee background.

Just talking about barriers, I will just pick up on Bu's point as well around driver's licences. We find that for a regional context for low-skilled or entry-level work it is an absolute must that people have driver's licences and preferably their own car as well, because employers just do not see it as reliable. In many cases it is absolutely just not possible to get to a workplace on public transport because of their location and because of the public transport system. We might leave it there and leave it open to questions.

Ms ADDISON: Just on that, do you get any support from the TAC for driving lessons? I know there is a program.

Ms McINNES: They have programs for under-21s. There is no funded program at a federal or a state level at this stage for over-21s, and we see that as a real need.

Ms PAH THEI: Yes, and most of the people that resettle in Bendigo are older than 21. For the older generation, when Centrelink puts them into the workforce they need to be looking for a job, but there is not enough money for them to get a driver's licence.

Ms ADDISON: It is very expensive, yes.

Ms PAH THEI: The job provider also requires them to look for the job, but if you do not have a car and you do not have money to pay for your own driver's licence, how can you find a job, you know?

Ms ADDISON: Is the test also quite hard because not only do you have to know the road rules but it is in your second language?

Ms PAH THEI: Yes. It is very hard. We have one volunteer at our office that helps the South Sudanese young people to get their driver's licence because they do not have enough English skills to review all the road rules. They were pretty young. Imagine for the older generation. For my mum and dad it was very hard to get a driver's licence.

The CHAIR: Some of the migrant groups that come here, most of them are obviously hardworking people that just want to get into a job and earn some money. They are quickly snapped up by a lot of employer groups for various reasons. But do you think as a Government we identify the skills that they bring with them appropriately? A lot of them I know go into their own small business, for example, to service their own communities, whether it be convenience stores or other shops that they open in small business, and they are very successful at it. Some of them end up being farmers, for example, contributing to the agricultural industry. Do you think as a Government—both State and Federal—we identify the skill sets so that we can place them accordingly into those jobs?

Ms PAH THEI: Not really. In speaking to the former Karen community, they migrated to Australia. They never went to school. They do not have this education work around their business. So what they do is go straight to processed food. If the Government gives them funding so they could learn how to get this skill, they probably will in the future, but this time around there are other things that will be happening at the moment.

Ms McINNES: I think also at the moment the three major refugee communities in Bendigo are the Karen, the Hazara and the South Sudanese, and they all come from predominantly rural areas and have very low levels of education pre-arrival. They have a lot of skills that are not recognised or we do not transfer.

The CHAIR: That is why I mentioned agricultural.

Ms McINNES: Yes, absolutely. There are skills, but they are not transferable. But then again also at the moment the biggest refugee cohort coming to Australia is the Syrian cohort, and they are highly skilled, and the skills recognition processes and the recruitment processes that prioritise having experience in Australia and having an Australian reference on your résumé really disadvantage people unnecessarily. We are just starting a very small pilot program that is DPC funded looking at how we can make some better pathways around that so

that people can get into work in their professions and Australia is benefiting from those professional backgrounds, which at the moment are often wasted.

The CHAIR: So the qualification recognition is another issue. For example, we are lacking doctors, and there are people that have qualifications in their own countries as doctors but they are finding it difficult to transition here. Do you think that is an issue?

Ms McINNES: Yes. Across health sectors—with doctors but also allied health—we have skills shortages here in the City of Greater Bendigo but also across the state. People are coming with those qualifications, but in terms of the process and the time it takes needing to have someone supervise you while you get your hours, all of that, those processes are huge barriers. And then also engineering is the one we are seeing coming out of Syria. There are a lot of qualified engineers, but again that process is very difficult.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Given that a lot of the migrants are coming from agricultural backgrounds or those types of activities, in what way could the Victorian Government help employers offer them more opportunities for work experience or placement?

Ms McINNES: I think one of the reasons why our program has been successful is because it has built that local trust with employers, and once you get that reputation that you are only putting forward candidates who can do the job and that you are there to provide pre-employment support when the wheels might come off and there are miscommunications or difficulties there, then we do find people come back to us. I think the Jobs Victoria model has by and large been very successful, and I hope it will be continued, but I think that local support is what we find employers value, and then they will be likely to re-employ people from that same background.

Ms CONNOLLY: What about that ongoing support? Do you think there is, post placement, a need for that ongoing support, both for the employer but also the employees?

Ms PAH THEI: Yes, because I find with Civilmart—one of the concrete companies in Bendigo—they hired four of our JVEN clients but they still need ongoing support because of the training safety modules that come up every year and they need to train their staff. The staff do not have enough English, so they have to call me up every six months to retrain about safety rules and new modules that they ordered. It is ongoing support, but now the funding is finished that means we do this out of our volunteer time.

Ms ADDISON: It sounds like you are doing some really good work here in this region. How can the Victorian Government increase awareness of unconscious bias amongst employers and encourage more employers to be open-minded and open their arms to refugees and migrants? Any suggestions?

Ms PAH THEI: I think maybe the employer might need to receive cultural competency training. We should sit down with employers to let them know about the refugee people; you know, that they are very good at what they are doing and they are employable and they are very reliable people. They are not just people that come here and want to take people's jobs. They want to make a better life and they want to start a new life. They want to build a family in Australia, to be very successful and to have a future for their kids to be very successful in Australia. Like for myself, my parents were hoping that one day I would grow up to be a wonderful woman, work in the community, help the community to grow.

Ms ADDISON: And look at what has happened.

Ms PAH THEI: Yes.

Ms McINNES: I would say unconscious bias is an issue. We also see issues of discrimination in the workplace. I would not say it is common, because mostly it is employers coming to us and self-selecting. But in terms of their other employees, we have had issues with discrimination and bullying of employees from refugee backgrounds. It is something we are working with employers to address. We provide fee-for-service cross-cultural competency training. We find some employers will take those up, others will not take up anything that has a cost associated with it.

I would say with larger employers I would love to see more blind recruitment as per the State Government's model. We do a lot of work with smaller businesses as well where that kind of thing is not going to be really very useful for them or very easy to implement. But I think that with the larger employers I would like to see more of that.

We see the labour hire system as a big barrier as well. It is great that that is now becoming regulated, but it is a real barrier for people with low levels of English because the level of English required to get through a recruitment process with what is predominantly a Melbourne-based recruitment company is much higher than the level of English required when you are sitting down with staff who are actually in the business that you are going to be working with.

The CHAIR: So if you had a top priority for Government in terms of assisting with what you are trying to do with the migrant communities and placing them in sustainable jobs, what would that be? What would you ask of State Government?

Ms McINNES: I think number one is for the Jobs Victoria program to continue, predominantly as it is. I think the model with the expectation on the service provider being 26 weeks is a good one. So at the moment you are not paid unless it is a 26-week outcome. I think that is a reasonable amount of time. We find that once people are in work for six months they will tend to continue. We do still provide post-employment support after six months, but I think in general that model works well.

I think the lack of funded support for driver's licences, and for people to get their driver's licence, is probably the biggest barrier we are seeing in our region other than that.

Ms ADDISON: Good to know.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: We have had some people comment that the 26-week mark could be extended out. What is your view on that?

Ms McINNES: I think it could be. It would not affect our program much because people who stay in for 26 weeks are staying in longer than that.

The CHAIR: Have you got some data on that?

Ms McINNES: Yes.

The CHAIR: We would love to see that data, if you can provide that data.

Ms McINNES: Yes.

The CHAIR: Because that is something that we have been grappling with, whether 26 weeks was enough or whether it needed a further program to watch because, let us face it, there are certain programs that have incentives attached to them but once they do the obligation bit they just let them cut loose. We just want to know. If you have got some good data on that, we would love to see it.

Ms McINNES: Yes, we can definitely provide that.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: There has also been a suggestion that employers get paid at various intervals throughout that 26-week mark rather than right at the end. Do you have a view on whether that would be a better model?

Ms McINNES: We were given a percentage of funding up-front, and I assume everyone was, so that helped us to manage our books, because the staff time is the cost of the program. That would not really affect our program. I would say, in terms of the 26 weeks, we are at a point now where even if we were offered more—if the contract finishes in June, that means you need everyone to be in work by December to get your 26-week outcome, so if the outcomes are extended, that does logistically create some issues there in terms of: is there a disincentive to place people into work between January and June because you are not going to get an outcome for it? So there are those kinds of logistics around it, but I think if you are seeing providers who are providing support for six months and then washing their hands of things, I would encourage it to be a longer outcome

because we provide that support anyway and it is just part of our model. And it does not make sense, because you need to build the trust with employers. If you break that trust and are not providing good support, they do not come back to you, so then you lose them as an employer.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. It was a great contribution. We appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.