

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Shepparton —Thursday, 24 October 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

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Ms Michaela Settle

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Mr Bill Tilley

WITNESSES

Mr David Tennant, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Amy Jones, Practice Manager, Child and Family Services, FamilyCare.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. All phones should be turned to silent at this stage. I welcome David Tenant, the CEO of FamilyCare, and also Amy Jones, the Practice Manager for Child and Family Services at FamilyCare. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected against any action for what you say today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, to my right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and any handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the Committee of up to 10 minutes, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Welcome.

Mr TENNANT: Thank you both for the opportunity to present to the Committee but also for coming to Shepparton. The reality is that it is increasingly difficult for organisations like ours to engage with policy and review processes, so you coming to our community does not just make it more accessible for us, it is a tangible recognition that the place matters and that sometimes the way that people experience disadvantage or challenge is different in different places. So it is terrific that you make that contribution to our community.

I will say just a couple of introductory things about FamilyCare in Shepparton and then pass to my colleague Amy Jones, who will talk about a couple of specific service issues. About FamilyCare: we are the main provider of child and family services across the Goulburn Valley, so Wallan and Beveridge down south up to Cobram in the north. We host Child First across the region, and behind that there is a full suite of service options. Of particular interest to this Inquiry, we provide a parent-child day-stay service to parents and carers with children under 12 months of age. So if there are particular issues in those very first early days of a child's life and it needs some follow-up assistance, ideally with a residential option—which we do not have in the Goulburn Valley—we are able to provide some assistance here. This does not mean that everything has to look toward Melbourne, because frequently if we are making those referrals people cannot or do not make it for whatever reason. That service operates in a variety of locations, and currently five days a fortnight. We have got a number of other services, including targeted disability and carer supports and community development activities, and around 140 staff and 70 volunteers in a mix of roles.

You would be aware, no doubt, that there are a range of cultures represented across our region, and probably the broadest mix is here in Shepparton. Historically Shepparton provided a landing point for European migrants who contributed to the region's agricultural and food production capacity and diversity, particularly post war. More recently Shepparton has welcomed many more cultures, and it is one of the most significant humanitarian resettlement communities in Australia outside of a metropolitan area. I think that is one of the things that makes us most proud as service providers because with all of the conversation about how difficult that is, this community seems to have made that work, by and large, and it is a universally positive experience for people.

There are, however, a variety of structural challenges that exist here in Shepparton, as they do in other places, but because of the concentration of certain demographics and needs, the structural challenges can be felt more acutely here than in other places. One of those that I would draw particular attention to is the insufficiency of benefits and supports provided to refugee arrivals, especially those who come to Shepparton as secondary rather than primary migrants, and those can sometimes result in acute material disadvantage. Added to histories of trauma, it can produce an extra layer of struggle for those families and challenge for them to access the local service system. We believe there are links between these structural drivers of disadvantage and Shepparton's comparatively poor AEDC data, and the results are unsurprisingly worse for culturally and linguistically diverse families. I would be happy to answer some questions about those if you have more interest, but I will perhaps hand over to Amy.

Ms JONES: Thanks, David. FamilyCare's main intake platform is Child FIRST and obviously is available to all members of the community, with a common interest being the care of children. Child FIRST integrates with a range of different service options, both internal to our agency at FamilyCare and across a number of our service partners that tend to focus on families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage. The main service that FamilyCare provides that is primarily designed to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse community members is our refugee minor program, which provides support to unaccompanied humanitarian arrivals. The ages of children in this program range from around six to 17 years of age. Families from a CALD background with younger children often use a range of our other programs, including integrated family services and the day stay service that David was just talking about.

Obviously because we work in communities with significant numbers of people from CALD backgrounds we have developed and continue to maintain links with specialist organisations and providers. We ensure that our staff receive regular training and professional development to enhance their cultural awareness and competencies, which is very important to us. There are a number of community activities that are held in our local community throughout the year that celebrate our diverse community that aim to make families from cultural backgrounds feel safe, respected and heard when they seek FamilyCare support through our programs.

Broadly speaking, the demographic make-up of our service users reflects our community. Over the last two financial years 6.5 per cent of our child and family services intake with children aged in that zero-to-eight range was drawn from a non-English-speaking background. Our own preparations for today and those of our colleagues attest to a community that is proud of its diversity. There are challenges, however, for CALD families with young children, and some of these challenges relate to differences in societal norms and expectations. For example, the freedoms afforded to women are different in Australia than in some source countries and this can cause confusion and even tension. Practical challenges like access to material resources, transport, affordable child care and the like can inhibit that help-seeking behaviour. Language barriers can be overcome with interpreters, but sometimes in our smaller communities finding adequate independent interpreters can prove challenging and we often have to rely on older children or friends and family to assist in those communications. Sometimes that can create unintended misunderstandings.

David has mentioned the challenges associated with our social security system, and generally benefit incomes are subject to criticism for being too low. For our CALD community members, especially refugees or asylum seekers, exclusions or limitations can create extreme poverty, leaving people with young children reliant on charity to survive. Most are genuinely appreciative of what they do receive. They find bureaucracy hard to understand and navigate, so an incorrect answer to a poorly understood question can also have dire consequences. I will just leave my comments there, and we are happy to answer any questions.

Ms COUZENS: The unaccompanied children—what services are you providing for those children, particularly where they are coming from trauma?

Ms JONES: Part of, I guess, what we can provide is around linkages and connections. We obviously work with those minors from Shepparton, and we have also been working in the Wodonga area as well, so connections with others, making sure they are linked in, that transition to schooling, family members and a whole range of other supports, obviously, that young people require.

Mr TENNANT: It is also a bit like when a baby arrives in a household—as exciting and happy as the occasion is, it does turn the household upside down. Even if there are already children in the family, another child changes the mix. The families who are hosts to these arrivals might share common cultural backgrounds. They might even come from almost an identical regional area and religious background, and ideally they have been matched in this way. But there are still all of those tensions when you change the family mix. So the important work that our refugee minor workers do is not just supporting the young person and providing them with the connections but also—how does that family dynamic change? How do you keep them functioning as a family group so that they are all healthy and well? If any of them are out of sync in that process, it can cause trouble, particularly for the traumatised young person.

Ms COUZENS: Do you have any specific programs for kids who have experienced that trauma?

Ms JONES: FamilyCare does not have specific therapeutic programs.

Ms COUZENS: So you refer out on those issues?

Ms JONES: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: So what do you see as some of the key barriers or gaps that families from multicultural communities are facing in terms of accessing services, getting to playgroup and getting their little ones to kindergarten? Can you elaborate on what you see as being some of the gaps and barriers that need to be addressed?

Mr TENNANT: Perhaps if I go first, and Amy can fill in the bits I get wrong. The critical bits are differences between systems. I did not say it in my introduction, but I think it is critical to acknowledge that Shepparton is one of only a handful of welfare reform trial sites around Australia. The way that social security and the range of Commonwealth supports feel here is different to other places in Victoria. We are the only community in the state that has income management as well. That also has flow-on consequences for our new arrival communities. If, for example, they have additional layers of conditionality upon them that require them to participate in having plans for what they will engage with or risk losing access to their modest benefits, that creates an additional challenge. For people who have come from countries where the trust in government is low and have experience of being mistreated and sometimes worse by bureaucracies in their source country, the fact that Government here is telling them to do things or there will be a penalty associated with it terrifies them. I do not have data on it because there is not data collected on it—people are not investing in researching these things—but some people choose to disengage with those systems and would rather not receive a benefit if it means that they are required to do those things.

But then there are all the other layers: if you are required to participate in a particular activity, does the activity have child care available with it? If it does not, that makes it infinitely harder for people with young children to go along and to participate. We have funded child care around those types of activities because it was not going to be accessible for people otherwise. We have sometimes applied State-based resources that are available to us for brokerage to make things happen where Commonwealth rules would otherwise have a penalty involved for people. It is incredibly difficult. It would be better from my perspective as a major service provider here if those layers of government felt a bit more joined up and if we were better at acknowledging where they are not working well rather than having policy conversations that are more like marketing.

Ms COUZENS: Can you just explain what you mean by marketing?

Mr TENNANT: Well, often when we talk about those welfare trial programs—and one that is often quoted is ParentsNext—we focus on positive stories. There are positive stories, and it is good to do that; it is good to talk about where things have worked for people. Equally there are some horror stories about how ParentsNext has resulted in unintended bad outcomes, where people have suffered suspensions and they only find out about it after it has occurred when they try and get food from the supermarket on a Friday afternoon and they might well be cut off for the weekend. These things are real. We probably see them faster in a smaller community. They do cause shame for people. Our challenge is to be sufficiently joined up as a local system that we can mobilise quickly to cover that sort of stuff. It is increasingly hard.

Ms COUZENS: So would you see additional resources as being a key to solving some of those problems? I mean, is it about resources? Is it about government policy at whatever level that might be, whether it is Federal or State? Obviously this is a State parliamentary Committee so we can only deal with the State, but I think what you are saying is that the Federal and State policy areas are not matching up or are causing problems. Is that it?

Mr TENNANT: It is. Again, excuse me if this sounds blunt, but I would describe the Victorian—

Ms COUZENS: Say what you need to say.

Mr TENNANT: The Victorian system feels to me to be focused on support and encouragement and trying to recognise and meet people's needs. It does not always get it right. It does not always have the right resource at the right place at the right time, but that is the principle that underpins it. At the moment the Commonwealth system seems to be mostly focused on rules, compliance monitoring and penalty if you do not follow the rules. Those two systems are by and large incompatible, and yet we pretend that they work well together. They do not.

The CHAIR: I will just ask a question in relation to your experience with CALD parents of children with disability seeking and receiving appropriate support for their children, and in particular, what are the sort of areas that could be improved and what has the impact been with the NDIS scheme?

Mr TENNANT: In relation to CALD families, if it is okay with the Committee, I might take a specific part of that question on notice. At a general level we are great supporters of the concepts behind the NDIS, recognising that this ought to be a rights-based system with a social insurance model underpinning it. All of those things are incredibly positive. So too is the message that we will all go the distance in making sure that it is rolled out properly and evenly across the country. There are significant teething problems in making that happen. Some of the rules between the State system and the Commonwealth system, exiting one and entering the other, are different. An area that we have seen, peculiarly because of the make-up of our clients, has been in the diagnoses and what will qualify you to access support for autism under the Victorian system and the Commonwealth system. Broadly speaking, the criteria in Victoria was slightly more accommodating than the criteria that applied for the Commonwealth, and so we now find people who are caught between those two systems, where previously there might have been an expectation that they would be able to access block funded services but they cannot get a diagnosis sufficient to qualify for NDIS supports. We are doing what we can to bridge that gap, but ultimately it needs the gaps to be better recognised and understood.

At the worst end of that scenario we have families considering whether or not they need to relinquish the care of their children into the State system. That is an absolute tragedy. We think it is fantastic that the Victorian Government is recognising that we need to do something with that. And there is some funding that is happening right now to enable us to work with families to try and keep children in families. We have encouraged thinking that says these problems are not problems for those families. They have not suddenly become bad parents or bad families. It is just that systems at their highest level are pretty brutal. They talk about criteria, and if you do not fit them then you are nowhere. And we need to do better than that.

Ms COUZENS: I am interested to get your take on how much having people from CALD communities working in the sector—whether it be kindergartens, schools or the community sector—is encouraged by your organisation and whether you see it playing a significant role in delivering better services over time. I think it what everybody does is great—great services—but we can always do better. Do you think people being employed from the variety of communities, the multicultural communities, would add benefit to that? I suppose that is what I am asking.

Mr TENNANT: That is a really easy question to answer. And ‘Yes’ is the answer.

Ms COUZENS: I suppose the next bit is: how do you envisage that happening? Because we know it is still not right.

Mr TENNANT: In our organisation—I hope my board will forgive me for saying—this is a subject that has been key as we are preparing our new strategic plan. We do have a number of people from diverse backgrounds employed at FamilyCare. Broadly speaking, if you did it as a total number, it is roughly representative of the community, but we believe we have to do more and better, and so we will be really actively trying to build pathways that make it easier and faster for people from those backgrounds to access employment in the sector.

That is not just for us. We have a group of organisations called Shepparton Community Share, four independent Shepparton-based not-for-profits, and we are doing what we can to create employment opportunities. And where we cannot do it on our own we are looking at inventive ways we can share employment so that if we cannot on our own create a full-time role, perhaps we can by having a bit here, a bit there and a bit somewhere else.

In terms of what those communities themselves need and want, we recently had the Telstra digital inclusion index launched in Shepparton. Telstra chose Shepparton as one of its two national deep-dive research projects. And the focus was: how do people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities here experience access to the digital environment? It was really exciting for us to have that focus on our town. It told us that those people are really, really comfortable in the digital environment. So some of that myth around the difficulties of encouraging people to make use of online tools—it is actually not. They are really comfortable in an online environment. But proportionally they pay much more of their income to get access to that, and they

also have some deep and persistent problems in understanding formal interactions. The challenge is for us on the formal side of the system—non-government, but particularly for government—to be doing things online that are actually fit for purpose for the receiver and not only for the person conveying the information. So we cannot be writing stuff that goes online that suits our needs without considering the needs of the people who are trying to access it.

The CHAIR: And just on a final point, the key barriers for culturally diverse families and young children, in your view, that prevent them from accessing information, programs and services—sum it up.

Mr TENNANT: Gee, that is a hard one to do in a very short answer, but if I had to pick the one issue that creates the most challenge at the moment, it is a conversation at a broad public level, but particularly a national political level, that says difference is something to be fearful of and to avoid and to not be naturally trusting of. This community is the pin-up for how you can make a new arrival feel comfortable, both for the people who are arriving and for the people who already live here. We have done that largely without tension, and yet if you listen to most of the rhetoric and conversation about particularly our newer refugee arrivals, these are people that we should be deeply distrustful of and scared that they will create a community that is less safe. It is not like that. We need desperately to stop having the conversation in that way, because it does impact the way that people engage with us. They feel like somehow we are judging them, and that is not our intention and we do not want to be represented in that way.

The CHAIR: I totally agree. That is a good way to sum it up. Thank you very much for your work and your presentation today. Your submission will be part of our deliberations, and in the new year the Committee will be handing down some strong recommendations to Government. We will keep you posted on the progress, but we will have information available on the Committee's web page. But I do again thank you on behalf of the Committee for taking the time to submit your contribution. It has been very valuable.

Committee adjourned.