

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users

Shepparton—Wednesday 13 September 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Nacole Standfield, President, and

Wayne Reither, Committee member, Shepparton Search and Rescue.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website.

Thank you so much for your time and for coming today. I will do a quick introduction of who we are, and then I might hand to you. You can make an opening statement or talk a little bit about your organisation, and then we will ask some questions. Thank you.

Nacole STANDFIELD: No worries.

The CHAIR: I am Alison. I am the Member for Bellarine.

Kim O'KEEFFE: I know your faces very well. I am Kim. Welcome.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

Jess WILSON: Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

The CHAIR: We might hand to you to introduce yourselves.

Nacole STANDFIELD: Nacole Standfield, President of Shepparton Search and Rescue.

Wayne REITHER: Wayne Reither, Committee Member and PR.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Can you talk a little bit about your organisation and what you do?

Nacole STANDFIELD: Yes, sure. Shepparton Search and Rescue has been around serving the local community for 50 years. It was put together by a group of community-minded people that saw a need for our service in the community, and they banded together alongside Ambulance Victoria and Victoria Police to basically build us and help us grow to what we are today.

The CHAIR: Great. So what kind of activities would you engage in?

Nacole STANDFIELD: We engage in broad activities, very similar to the SES. We attend road crash rescues, storm and flood response, land search, crime scene preservation, rail industry accidents—all those sorts of things.

The CHAIR: Wow, yes, okay. Thank you.

Jess WILSON: And are you all volunteer-based?

Nacole STANDFIELD: Yes, so a fully volunteer-based organisation.

Jess WILSON: When there is an emergency, you put a call out and people leave work or whatever it might be to come and assist?

Nacole STANDFIELD: All our members carry pagers on them. They will be at work, at home or whatever they are doing, and they will respond to that call 24/7.

Jess WILSON: Fantastic. Sorry to interrupt.

The CHAIR: Great. No, no, all good. That is good to understand what it is. We might have some questions. Kim, do you want to start?

Kim O'KEEFFE: Yes. Thank you so much for coming. We really appreciate it. We have had a really fantastic day of hearing from locals, which is what this is all about, and particularly regional issues, which is so important to us—to see some change. My question—and we have got a few here, but one of the main questions—is: what do you see as the main causes of road accidents that your squad gets called out to?

Nacole STANDFIELD: I think for us we obviously get called to quite a lot. I have got some statistics over some previous years compared to this year, but there is not one thing in particular. There are a range of things: fatigue, lack of concentration because people are looking at their mobile phones, not wearing seatbelts, not stopping at stop signs and give-way signs, driving too fast in weather conditions. But the road conditions from the floods also have an impact on that as well.

Kim O'KEEFFE: That makes sense, and I am sure there are some common threads but nothing specific that is targeted.

Nacole STANDFIELD: No, not one thing in particular.

Kim O'KEEFFE: You have alluded to the roads. I am sure you would see lots of incidents and even not fatalities at times but just serious incidents, and I think they are the stats that get a little bit left behind. Would you say that has increased since COVID, or more so since the floods and roads?

Nacole STANDFIELD: It has been really difficult. We have been really busy since the floods. I would say definitely since the floods we have seen an increase in calls this year alone for ourselves, but not in particular to the condition of the roads. I think they have a contributing factor. As a road user myself, a lot of the signs placed upon the roads to warn you that there is a traffic hazard are right on top of that traffic hazard, not giving enough time for people to adjust their speed or whatever to slow down to those conditions. I think there is that to take into account as well—the signage just is not there, and especially at night-time. If that sign is right on that damaged road, there is not enough time to see it.

Kim O'KEEFFE: So are you able to get that message out? How are you getting that out to VicRoads and your local councils? Are you able to pass on that information within your organisation?

Nacole STANDFIELD: We have been having a lot of contact with TAC. We have a TAC rep that we deal with, so I have had quite a few meetings with her in conversations about what messaging may be looked at for this area. Obviously TAC covers the whole state, so they are looking at it in a statewide branch about what they can do. We are constantly having conversations with them.

Kim O'KEEFFE: The regional perspective is quite different, isn't it?

Nacole STANDFIELD: It is.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. John.

John MULLAHY: From your experiences turning up to incidents and things like that, I am just wondering what road safety challenges vulnerable road users in Regional Victoria face, and what is needed to address these challenges?

Nacole STANDFIELD: I think for vulnerable road users there has obviously been a big expansion: you have got pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. But on that as well, there is an increase in special needs in Shepparton. The specialist school is growing bigger and bigger, so they too became your vulnerable road users in this town. I think lack of education is a big aspect and big part of that. I think during COVID people got complacent with less traffic on the road. People leaned more to riding their bike or going for a walk, so they got complacent with less traffic. Now that there is more traffic, with the school run and the work run in the morning and the afternoon, they are not quite used to that heavy traffic load that there now is on our roads.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Jess.

Jess WILSON: Sure. Thank you so much for appearing and thank you for what you do. I mean, community-run organisations are not easy things to manage on a day-to-day basis, and it sounds like you are always on call, so thank you for what you do. Just thinking about, I suppose, road infrastructure, you spoke about the fact that signs are there, but they are too late because you are upon the issue on the road. More broadly when it comes to road infrastructure or traffic treatment, what do you think the State Government could invest in to actually improve the condition of our roads, both here and in a city centre, but also more on the regional and rural roads?

Nacole STANDFIELD: I think in the regional and rural roads that road structure is not growing with the population. It is staying as it was when there were less people in the area. I think that is a big contributing factor. Roads are not being widened to allow the extra traffic on the roads, so often people are verging off to allow another car to pass, but they are not slowing down. They do not have the experience on that road, so they get into some gravel and it will flick them off the road. I think roads are not growing and being built to cope with the population we have today.

Kim O'KEEFFE: That is not the first time we have heard that either, by the way.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you for appearing and thank you for all the work you do. In an ideal world we probably would not need Search and Rescue if everyone was following the rules and whatnot, but unfortunately we do. So in that regard, thank you for the important work you do, because you genuinely feel the brunt of those road safety issues. I guess in that respect I want to just ask around transport infrastructure and the State of the roads and conditions. I am sort of interested as well around calming measures, like what are the calming measures? You referred to signage and the distance of signage, which Jess also pointed out, but what else can be done in terms of other measures, mitigation measures and treatments on the roads that can just help improve the behaviour of drivers, improve awareness and improve safety for motorists and all other vulnerable users as well?

Nacole STANDFIELD: I think education is very key, and I think education needs to start with our younger generations. Shepparton is lucky that it has the Cool Heads program, which is run by Victoria Police and supported by the local places here in Shepp. We often speak at Cool Heads—but not every regional town gets that, not every city town gets that. I think that where it is lacking is that we are not educating our young people of today on the risks associated with driving a car. They get raised to think that having a licence is a privilege that you get once you turn 18, or your learners when you turn 16, without understanding the consequences of driver behaviour. Cool Heads allows that, because they get to hear from people who have firsthand experience on what it is like to either attend an incident or from someone who has been involved or directly impacted by a road accident.

Anthony CIANFLONE: And you are part of those programs being delivered face to face with students?

Nacole STANDFIELD: Yes, we deliver a lot of educational programs here in Shepp, so if a school contacts us. Cool Heads is a big one, and with Cool Heads there are often people directed by the court to attend those sessions where they must collect a certificate at the end to state that they have attended. They have people from MCIU attend, Victoria Police, AV, a judge will come in, we will come in, they have had nurses from the GV hospital come in, so people can get an idea of basically the ripple effect a road crash can have on a country town or into the health system, and the mental impacts it can have on people who have witnessed it, been involved in it or have been directly affected by it.

The CHAIR: Or your member volunteers that go to it?

Nacole STANDFIELD: Yes, and it happens. We have seen a few members be impacted by the mental strain of a road accident. We do have access to peer support and a clinical team through SES and through our MOU with them, so we are very lucky that we do have that support. But if someone comes across a crash, they are not used to it—they have not see it before, they do not know where to go to.

The CHAIR: Or are trained to deal with it.

Nacole STANDFIELD: Or trained. They do not know where to go and get help, who they can talk to, what they can talk about. So the ripple effect is big. It does not just impact those that are initially on the scene, it ripples right out into the community.

Anthony CIANFLONE: We had Luci, Fabian and Katy, I think it was, from—

Kim O'KEEFFE: Greater Shepparton Secondary College.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Greater Shepparton Secondary, thank you, just earlier, and that was some of the evidence that they provided as well around the impact that those sessions had in terms of the message cutting through. So is there a particular part of that message that you think particularly resonates with the young people as part of those sessions? Is it the shock part of it?

Nacole STANDFIELD: I think in those Cool Heads sessions it is not like your TAC ads. It is not so graphic. MCIU show their photos, so they will show you what a car looks like after it has hit a tree at 120 or 130 kilometres an hour, but they also go into what consequences would happen if you were the driver of that car. There is Robyn—I am not sure of her last name—she is a counsellor for those impacted. She too was impacted when her son was involved in a crash—he is now a paraplegic—and she often talks about the costs associated with taking care of a loved one who has been impacted through road trauma. So it is all these things. It does add a shock value when you see fines, years in jail, costs associated and pictures, and you hear from nurses and the impacts it has on the health system. So I think all these things, when you tie it into one program, give people a better and bigger understanding of how it actually affects everybody.

Jess WILSON: One of the things we heard from the students was: how do you get this widely known that these programs are available, and how do you make sure as many young people can attend them, or at least that information, that shock, is put in front of them? They talked about the need to play on the platforms that they are all on, and TikTok was one of the ones that they nominated. How do you think we as a government can potentially do that better? Obviously there is the TAC. It uses the more traditional mediums of TV advertising and print advertising. But given social media is the target for younger people, is there something that could be done with local groups to help support that? Obviously we said this morning the students probably need to drive some of that themselves, because they know what content actually has an impact. Do you have any thoughts around how we could change the way we deliver those messages?

Wayne REITHER: I think that with schools, especially with young drivers coming up, when they get their P-plate or whatever they could actually go and see something like that as part of their drivers licence, just to show them the impact of what actually happens, because a lot of those young drivers do not realise what it is like to see somebody injured with their leg or arm off or something like that and such things, and the outcome is going to affect their life for the rest of their term. If they have seen that, they might get it into their head a little bit psychologically that they have got to be a bit more careful. So if there was an education program on that in line with their licence, as part of the licence, it might be a bit of an education for them.

Jess WILSON: And we have heard that around re-registration as well. When you have to re-register or renew your licence, you have to watch a couple of videos or whatever it might be, and if you do, you get a discount or whatever it might be. Do you think that is something that could help through the course?

Nacole STANDFIELD: I think so. I think there is a difference between watching a video and sitting in a room and having someone stand in front of you and deliver the information. Now, Cool Heads could be run in every town or every city around Victoria by just being involved. I know Cool Heads is branching out into Wallan, Wangaratta and all those places, and it is just some Victoria Police members coming down, seeing how it is run here and taking it back to their towns. So that is something that can even be looked into, but also even taking these programs into the school system rather than just having the two nights a year that it can currently run due to funding—that funding getting increased for those programs—because I think that there is a lack of funding for programs like Cool Heads to be run within schools and other places.

Kim O'KEEFFE: We had Cool Heads in here this morning as well, and—sorry, just jumping in very quickly—the Greater Shepparton Secondary College students did not know about the Cool Heads program—

Nacole STANDFIELD: Yes.

Kim O'KEEFFE: which was really alarming for us, because, well, we think it is well known.

Nacole STANDFIELD: And with Cool Heads as well—and it was just in the middle of the year—a lot of the footy and netball clubs will bring in their teams to come in to the big session in the middle of the year, but

that dropped off this year and we do not know why. Whereas I think if the messaging was getting out into the schools or back to the parents—and parents are more than welcome to bring their children along. We encourage it highly. We advertise Cool Heads on our Facebook page. We have been a massive sponsor of Cool Heads from the beginning. So we try and get that messaging out there to get those people there, and I know Cool Heads this year was completely booked out. So there are definitely a lot of people getting it, but I think we need more than the two sessions a year.

Wayne REITHER: We also on our Facebook page do up road safety messages, especially around Easter and Christmas, and we try and make them as graphic as we can to show the impact. Sometimes it works, and everything goes—the keyword—nice and quiet. But then at this time of the year it is very hard to do up something like that because you have got the road conditions and everything else like that that is part of the factor. It is just very hard to get the message out there. So there are just a lot of factors about messaging at the moment.

The CHAIR: You talked about the statistics that you have seen and you have got, and you were a bit unsure whether there was a correlation or what COVID has done to impact that. Can you just unpack that and tell us a bit about that—what you are seeing?

Nacole STANDFIELD: Yes. In 2020, so at the start of COVID, we only received 39 calls for the year. So that is very quiet for us, I will say. In that were seven fatalities and 14 live casualty extrications. So that was a very quiet year. We did not see much happen. Obviously less people were on the road. In 2021 we went back up to 67 calls, five fatalities and 46 live casualty extrications. So again, we were still in the midst of COVID and yet our calls for the year had jumped up. Our fatalities sort of stayed around about the same. In 2022 we got 60 calls for the year, five fatalities and 14 live extrications, so again it did not really change too much from the year before that. Then when we look at this year, so to this date today, we have had 61 calls, 12 fatalities and 21 live extractions, and that is so far now. And that is just where we attend; that is not including the other SES units around us, outside of our area.

Wayne REITHER: Like Cobram.

Nacole STANDFIELD: That is just in the area that we attend to.

The CHAIR: What is your expert advice on why that is happening? You must have a sense of what you think is happening.

Nacole STANDFIELD: In that is a lot of people are complacent. We have seen a lot of people not wearing seatbelts, not stopping at give way signs, speeding, not stopping at stop signs, driving when they are tired, just not paying attention and not slowing down for road conditions. It was a very foggy winter. That comes into play as well. You cannot see the roads. There is not one particular thing that is causing this. I think people are just complacent. That is probably the biggest thing. They are not thinking before they sit in that driver's seat.

The CHAIR: Distraction as well? Is there any evidence about them being distracted on phones or devices?

Nacole STANDFIELD: Distraction is probably a really hard one for us to gauge if that has been in play. We always say it probably could have been in play, but we are not 100% sure.

The CHAIR: I have one more question about how behaviours have changed. Obviously complacency has changed. Do you think that there is a COVID hangover, I suppose, about behaviours we did through COVID and them continuing? Do you think that is something?

Nacole STANDFIELD: Yes, definitely. I think a lot of the complacency comes down to there is less traffic on the road or the fact that they may not have driven a lot during COVID. It is like muscle memory. It is not always there. You sometimes forget. So I think those things do come into play with it.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for your time. If we have sparked a conversation with you about something and you need to add further information or provide those statistics or something in writing to us, we are more than happy to receive any further information.

Nacole STANDFIELD: These statistics I have definitely given to TAC because they do not necessarily always get individual areas. But yes, definitely. No worries.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Thanks so much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.