

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday 22 August 2023

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Bernadette Nugent, Chief Executive Officer, and

Christine Harrison, Manager, Education Programs, Amber Community.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings 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 silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside the 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 hearings will be published on the Committee's website. Can I please just remind Members to mute their microphone when not speaking, just to minimise that interference.

Thank you very much, Chris and Bernadette, for your time today and your submission. What we thought we might do is let you do an opening statement or talk to your submission a little bit more, and then we will head to questions. Hopefully we will get through all the Committee members to ask you questions.

What I might quickly do though is just a quick introduction. I am Alison, Member for Bellarine and the Chair. We have got Deputy Chair, Kim O'Keeffe, Member for Shepparton; Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan; Dylan Wight is the Member for Tarneit; Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale; John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley; and Jess Wilson is the Member for Kew. I will refer to them when they are asking the questions. But I will hand over to you. Thank you.

Bernadette NUGENT: Good morning, everyone, and thank you so much for inviting us here to speak to you today. My name is Bernadette Nugent, and I am the CEO of Amber Community, and accompanying me today is Chris Harrison, who is our Manager of Education Programs. At Amber Community we provide free support, information and counselling to anyone in Victoria who has been impacted by road trauma. In addition to our counselling and support, an integral part of our organisation lies in our comprehensive education programs. These programs play a pivotal role in raising awareness about critical road safety information and promoting an understanding of the devastating and often life-changing impact that road trauma has on individuals and families. A vital component of our programs is our lived-experience speakers, who volunteer with us and who bravely and generously share their stories in a variety of settings, including our key education programs, media, community groups and pretty much whatever opportunity that we can provide for them and on their behalf.

As a community-focused organisation, we emphasise the significance of engaging in grassroots conversations. We are committed to connecting with individuals from all walks of life and across diverse cohorts of road users. By actively listening to firsthand experiences and insights, we endeavour to cultivate a collective understanding of the challenges that different road users face. We believe in the power of community-driven change. We encourage candid conversations and facilitate deeper understanding of road safety concerns. These conversations can drive transformative shifts, garner widespread community buy-in and influence meaningful change. A lot of our submission was really based around community engagement and the need to bring the community with us in all things related to road safety, including changes to legislation, understanding the impacts of road trauma and the constant campaign around road safety issues.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Thanks for that. Chris, did you want to add anything, or are you happy for us to go into questions?

Christine HARRISON: I am happy for questions. I think Bern summed that up very well. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. Okay, well, I might hand over, firstly, to Dylan, the Member for Tarneit.

Dylan WIGHT: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Bernadette and Chris, for the really detailed submission. One of the common themes that we have found during this Inquiry is road users' changed behaviour since 2020, or since COVID, to be frank, and we have heard a lot of reasons for that—health issues, increased drug and alcohol use. Also texting and driving—all mobile phone use—has significantly increased in that time. And in response to that, though there has been one change from the Government with the new fixed cameras designed to detect distracted driving, what are the other most effective ways that really are changing people's behaviour on the roads to protect vulnerable road users?

Bernadette NUGENT: Thanks, Dylan. From our experience, as I mentioned earlier, a huge part of our organisation and what we do is our education programs, and one of the things that we have found over the years—and these have been running for many years—is that the key component to all of our work in relation to road safety is really around the volunteer speakers sharing their personal story. What we find, as we have written in our submission, is it really takes the statistics to a whole different level where people are really looking at, ‘This could happen to me.’ So a lot of the work that we do in our space is really challenging that community complacency around, ‘It can’t happen to me. It won’t happen to me,’ and I guess very distorted views about what kinds of drivers are involved in serious or fatal collisions. We challenge that a lot through our personal speakers basically telling them within the folds of their story that this in fact can happen to you and it can be your family and everyone needs to take responsibility. Chris, is there anything I have missed there?

Christine HARRISON: I think there are a lot of people out there that are still in that blaming: ‘It’s everybody else’s problem, it’s not mine. I’m not doing the wrong thing, it’s everybody else that is,’ and I think it is about challenging those beliefs. There is still a very strong belief around it being revenue raising with every new repercussion that happens, from the fines from the cameras and from everything. There is still this belief that it is about revenue rather than about safety, and it is bringing it back to being able to see it from an empathic view, as Bern said, from being able to hear those real stories of where it has happened to someone and being able to see that from an empathic way. But yes, there is still a lot of blaming: ‘It’s everybody else.’

Dylan WIGHT: Sorry, Chair, just one second. Bernadette, essentially what you are saying there is: educational campaigns through, I would assume, lots of different formats as we have to use now and really creating a personal narrative from vulnerable roads users that have experienced this in the past.

Bernadette NUGENT: Absolutely. That is exactly right, and part of what we try and do is get out across as many different sectors of the community as we can. We are working with workplaces and organisations to keep their staff safe. We are working with community groups, local councils and sporting clubs. So we are really looking at a wide breadth of people, not just narrowing it down to who we assume might be the cohorts that are most responsible, for example, for road injuries and road deaths.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Deputy Chair, I will head to you.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Thank you. Hi, Chris and Bernadette—really great to have you with us, and thank you for the great work you are doing. You have answered some of my question, which is about how people find out about you, because it is such incredibly important work. So it was really great to hear how you are reaching out to the different networks. One of the key messages I would like to ask about is the Victorian Government. What could we focus on when delivering road safety campaigns to protect the vulnerable road users? How do we get that out to community, and what is the best way to do that?

Christine HARRISON: How to get it out—I think to begin with, when we are looking at some of the campaigns or strategies or interventions, it is really about involving the people that these interventions are actually being delivered to and for, because the more that we can involve people, the more likely those interventions are going to be developed in a way that is going to meet their needs. They are going to understand; they are going to feel like they are being involved in the decision-making. It is bringing them along on the journey. That, I believe, is one of the biggest things that is missing in a lot of our campaigns and interventions. We think that we understand what people need. We have got evidence. We have got a lot of the stories. But we are not actually some of those people, and I think to involve them is going to be an important part of getting that message out.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Jess, I will head to you next.

Jess WILSON: Thank you very much. Thank you for appearing today. As Kim said, it will be great to hear how we can get your rollout more broadly into the community. I know that we sort of talked about the post-COVID impacts on road usage and on vulnerable road users, and obviously you pointed to mental health as a big part of that. Where do you think the Victorian Government could go in terms of helping to manage the attitudes and behaviours? We have talked a lot over the last couple of weeks about that behavioural aspect and how we change behaviour, which is a very long process in terms of trying to address some of these issues. I am keen to get your thoughts about raising awareness and what the Victorian Government could do.

Christine HARRISON: You are so right there, Jess, in that if we are looking at cultural change or a shift in people's thinking, it takes like 25, 30 years for that cultural change. So whatever we do, it needs to be consistent. It needs to be ongoing and those consistent messages. I guess even thinking back to when the seatbelt laws came in, back in my time, there were consistent messages on a really ongoing basis. I would not even think to not put it on now, and I certainly brought my children up to put their seatbelts on. I mean, even that seems to have gone now. So those consistent, ongoing messages I think are really important to shift the cultural thinking or beliefs that we come into road safety with.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Chris. Anthony, I might head to you, if that is okay.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you. Yes. Picking up on the question that Jess just asked, your submission talks about a reported increase in the amount of people driving and commuting with increased anxiety and depression and that there needs to be a greater understanding of how mental health can impact on an individual's ability to manage day-to-day tasks, including driving. It also talks about the role of poor concentration and increased internal focus among road users and what that means for people taking risks on the road and while commuting. So I guess my question is really around: what can the Victorian Government do or what can this Inquiry focus on that is about addressing those types of behaviours and raising awareness amongst drivers and commuters of the role mental health plays in terms of improving the safety or decreasing the safety of vulnerable road users across our network?

Christine HARRISON: Thanks, Anthony. One thing that we were already doing before COVID was starting to talk to people around how we take ourselves into our driving experience. So whatever is going on in our mind and in our health and wellbeing is certainly going into that experience. It is a pretty big thing to be fully focused in your driving experience. Since COVID we know that people's mental health and wellbeing affected many people in varying ways, with that increase in alcohol, mental ill health, anxiety and depression. We are seeing all of that, and if that is going into that driving experience, then it is certainly having an impact on the focus and the distraction that we are bringing into that experience. So I think when we look at working through that, one, it is being aware of it. If people are aware that they are taking that into—you know, they have got problems at home, financial issues. We are starting to see a lot of that in people that are coming through some of our programs; they are talking about these things. They are just heightened. I think some of the things that we need to think about are, one, making sure people are aware of that and how it might impact their driving experience, and the other is starting to look at some of our health and wellbeing and mindfulness practices—just to sit in the car and maybe have a couple of deep breaths before we go in. To me it is about awareness, because unless we have that awareness then we cannot put some of those solutions into place. Bernadette, I see you are back.

Bernadette NUGENT: My sincere apologies, Chair. Unfortunately, we never have internet issues at the office and it just dumped me straight out, so my sincere apologies. I hear that you were talking about perhaps how mental health impacted. One of the things that we found here over the total period of COVID and the lockdowns was—and I do not know if you said this, Chris, so my apologies if it has already been said—a significant increase in the number of people who chose to take up counselling following a road incident and people who had already been clients with us increased the number of counselling sessions. So mental health was playing a significant part and, as Chris has probably alluded to, the fact that people's general ability to cope was compromised and challenged during COVID and that our normal support systems were diminished. Certainly there is a lot of evidence to suggest that there was a significant rise across the board with people seeking psychological support during that time. A lot of the work that Chris and I and the organisation do with workplaces around keeping their workers safe when they drive as part of their job is looking at the way mental health impacts our driving and our ability, as Chris said, to stay mindful. One of the examples that we often use is: how often have you driven from point A to point B and thought, 'I don't even remember going through that intersection'? It is a really good indication. I think we can all raise our hands and say we have done it. I have. But when your mental health is impaired, that sort of mindlessness and distraction from driving is going to increase, and that is what we found.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Thank you. I am just mindful of time, so I am going to let Wayne ask the last question. I appreciate your time.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you, Chair. We have had a number of submissions obviously on this topic, and one has been around driver behaviour through COVID. People actually found that drivers took more risks

through COVID. So I suppose my question is: what are the ongoing effects of COVID-19 that continue to shape road users' behaviour? Have you found that, or what are your thoughts on that?

Bernadette NUGENT: Thanks, Wayne. I think that, as previous speakers said, there is no kind of sound evidence yet in data indicating what the long-term impacts are going to be. But what we are witnessing and what we are hearing from our clients is that drivers and road users—and I will say road users across the broad variety of people who use our roads, including vulnerable road users—appear to be less concerned about their own driving behaviour and the road hierarchy about who should have priority on the road seems to be really challenged at the moment and every group is kind of vying for that spot. Certainly across the board the behaviour does not seem to have really improved much since COVID. If you go back to COVID, with certainly more open roads, less road traffic and the increase in people—I do not think I ever saw as many people walking and cycling as I did during COVID—there should be a shared road mentality, but there is not, particularly against vulnerable road users.

Christine HARRISON: And I think we have really seen—you know, there appears to be a lack of patience out there. There is a lot more aggression that seems to be happening amongst all users, not just the drivers. We have some programs where we work with people who have offended on the roads, and we are certainly seeing and hearing a lot of those stories from people that are coming through that there is a lot of aggression and lack of patience. That is resulting in people not providing distance between vehicles or rushing through a pedestrian crossing when they do not see it, or through the lights. And if you just look around you, we are seeing a lot of that behaviour still playing out in our roads. There are a lot of bigger vehicles. I have seen some research on that and I have certainly been looking and thinking, 'Yes, that's right, there are a lot of bigger vehicles out there.' So yes, there have been some changes, but as Bernadette and others that I have seen with some of that research say, we really do not have a lot of data yet. That is something else I think is really—we have not got a lot of consistent data out there, working on what is going on. I mean, we talk about deaths, but what about serious injuries? That does not get talked about still, even though at a government level we have said we need to start to look at what is going on. We are still talking about deaths on the roads as opposed to serious injury—they would probably tell an even different story.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you very much, Chris and Bernadette. We really appreciate your time today and the submission and the work that you do, and thank you for answering our questions today. I am sorry we have to cut it there. We could have asked a whole lot more questions, but we appreciate it. If there is anything further you would like to add, please feel free to write back to the Committee as well, if you think we have missed something today.

Witnesses withdrew.