

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Shepparton—Wednesday, 20 November 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

WITNESS

Ms Pauline Wilson, Executive Officer, Yarrawonga Neighbourhood House.

The CHAIR: Hi, Pauline. Thanks for attending today. 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 would like to give us a 5-minute presentation, and then we will ask questions as we go. Thanks for being here.

Ms WILSON: Neighbourhood houses are confronted with disadvantaged jobseekers every day. DHS agency staff handle Centrelink issues in a non-judgemental and empathetic manner but they cannot solve the multiple problems that go along with being on unemployment benefits. Therefore on many occasions our clients are referred to our information and referral program, where our community programs worker will listen to their issues and spend sometimes hours trying to find services to refer these people to—services that we do not have in some of our rural areas.

These people are from all walks of life with sometimes multiple barriers to employment. They range from the 55-year-old man who has worked hard all his life and suddenly, through no fault of his own, finds himself unemployed and having to live on benefits that have not increased in real terms in decades. We owe him more than that. He might be the most resilient person in the world, but after 12 months in the punitive jobseeker system he will reach rock bottom and probably be suffering from some sort of mental trauma.

Then there is the person that comes into our organisation and asks for a will kit. He has given up; he is basically saying, 'I can't do this anymore'. It is heartbreaking. Then we go further down the scale and find the jobseeker who faces any number of devastating life events, such as mental ill health, family violence or generational unemployment and who barely has the capacity to get out of bed each morning, let alone look for work and avoid losing their payment in a system that, in my opinion, is broken.

We live in a wonderful country, but so many people are not getting the support and assistance that, as a compassionate society, we owe them. We need to do more. We need to remove the stigma and stop treating these people like they have done something wrong and like they do not deserve our support. I would invite the members of this Committee to come and visit our DHS agency or one of the many like it in small country towns in Victoria and talk to the people they meet there. They are ordinary people with extraordinary problems, and none of these problems are being helped by our current punitive jobseeker system.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Pauline. I have four neighbourhood houses in my electorate and they do a wonderful job.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: I have got three.

The CHAIR: I value their work as I value your work. You mentioned mental health. Do you think there are enough adequate support services to deal with some of the mental health challenges that we have in certain communities?

Ms WILSON: No. Our particular community, which is obviously the only one I can speak to, is in a triangle between Shepparton, Wangaratta and Albury. Basically, we are stuck in the middle in Yarrawonga. Services outreach from Shepparton and they outreach from Wangaratta but they do not get as far as Yarrawonga on many occasions. We have very few health services at all, particularly affordable ones that people on unemployment benefits can actually have access to. Our youth mental health—schools are reporting a crisis in mental health in schools and in young people as well, so it really is very difficult.

The CHAIR: Have you dealt with this firsthand at the neighbourhood house that you are at in terms of some of the challenges?

Ms WILSON: Definitely.

The CHAIR: Can you give, broadly speaking, an example of some of the challenges associated with dealing with people from the community?

Ms WILSON: You might be there and have a person come in obviously in mental distress. Our community programs worker will sit them down, talk to them and try and find services for them. But often that is just on the end of the phone; there is nothing you can do face-to-face for that person. We have had instances where we have had to wait for services to come to us. We are looking at closing time on a Friday afternoon and trying to get a service to help someone who has got to have some support over the weekend. That happens on a regular basis. We get so many people that just come in because there is nowhere else to go, and we try our best, but the services just are not there.

Ms RYAN: Pauline, thank you for being here. Could you speak a little bit to the role of your neighbourhood house, particularly as a Learn Local provider, and what that offers people? I suppose I have spoken to a lot of neighbourhood houses who have said to me that, particularly when it is disadvantaged jobseekers, it is a far less intimidating environment for them to start making that entry back into the workforce. Can you, I suppose, speak a little bit about what you do as a Learn Local and the role that that plays?

Ms WILSON: As a Learn Local we have additional funding for preaccredited training. The focus of that, however, is on vocational training. We have to use that for vocational training, which is all very well, but many of the people that are coming back to learning need a very, very soft entry. The people that I am talking about that struggle to even get out of bed in the morning are not going to come in and be able to concentrate on a vocational program. If we could get that funding softened a little bit, it would be a big help. It is about learner engagement. We have good success with one of our preaccredited programs in particular, and that is what we call our Prepare for Study program, which is delivered prior to someone enrolling in a certificate course. They might be doing a Certificate III in Individual Support or a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care. We are a registered training organisation as well as a Learn Local, so we combine the two. If someone comes in and is engaged and ready to do some training, then that is a really good program to put them into, and then they can see that after doing that program they are going to be going into an accredited course where they can realistically look at a job at the end of that.

The role of the Learn Local is very much that pre-entry into training. It has got to be where the student feels comfortable. We do have welcoming environments in our Learn Locals. It is not like going into a great big TAFE where you do not even know where you are going sometimes. That is very confronting for people who are disadvantaged. That is the benefit of our Learn Local environment.

Ms RYAN: You just alluded to, I think the phrase was, softening around funding. I know a couple of years ago there were a lot of neighbourhood houses that handed back their Learn Local because of changes around funding and regulation. Can you explain a little bit more about what you mean about that?

Ms WILSON: It has become too hard because of the criteria to deliver the training and the actual engagement of learners into that training, because we know that we are talking about disadvantaged learners and getting them in the door in the first place is a really difficult thing to do. We cannot get the enrolments, basically. I know a lot of people in the Upper Murray region have definitely just stopped delivering preaccredited training because it is has just got too hard.

Ms RYAN: So what needs to change?

Ms WILSON: I believe what needs to change is there needs to be part of the funding that is available to engage the learner in the first place. We do not have resources, in time, to go out and speak to businesses, speak to jobactive, speak to school boards—speak to all the people that we could speak to—in order to obtain enrolments and get learner engagement, so if we had a component of the funding to be able to do that with. Once upon a time for that sort of funding we used to be able to deliver any sort of social program, like basically a sewing program, but now we have to make that so it is an introduction to fashion design or something like that. We have to have that vocational aspect to it. Still, the program needs to be something that is more social connection as opposed to something that is vocational. Realistically if you look at a 20-hour program that is not going to prepare someone for work. It is a pathway. They might have to do five or six preaccredited programs before they are ready for any further step into an accredited training program or into employment, because some of them have had incredibly bad educational experiences in the past or there is family violence or there is generational unemployment—all sorts of situations where they are just not ready to work.

Ms RYAN: Do the per-hour subsidy rates work for you when you are dealing with a more disadvantaged cohort?

Ms WILSON: Yes. I think there is enough money there to do that, but it is that learner engagement in the first place and the need to be able to deliver something that we can engage people in to begin with. But, no, the subsidy rate is quite good at the moment.

Mr ROWSWELL: Pauline, do you think there is a place for local council—local government—to be doing more in this space, and if so, what do you think that looks like?

Ms WILSON: I think local government could promote what we do a little better, definitely. They tend to look outside for training rather than coming to us. We have quite a lot of expertise in digital training in a lot of different areas—customer-service training and that sort of thing—and yet local government will often go outside to get that training rather than looking at their own organisations.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: In terms of the cohorts that are accessing your preaccredited courses, are they mostly young people? What are the demographics that you are dealing with?

Ms WILSON: We deliver Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care, Certificate III in Individual Support and Certificate IV in Disability, so they are mostly women because they are community services—those caring roles are considered to be feminine. But they are from a wide range of age groups. In our early childhood they are much younger—so 18 to 30, perhaps. In the aged care and disability it is an older demographic. We do have a few blokes doing those courses. That can range up to people in their 50s and 60s who are either looking for a change in career or have simply tried everything else to get employment and have just not been able to.

The CHAIR: Just in terms of the digital barriers, how important is digital literacy for jobseekers? Are there some people who do not have a computer and therefore do not have an email and internet access? Are there people who are deprived of that? And how can the Government help with some of those inadequacies that prevent them from getting a job?

Ms WILSON: They definitely do. Every day we help people get an email address so that they can get a myGov account so that they can apply for jobs and do what they need to do and report for their income support, and unfortunately many people are still very resistant to digital literacy. They still say, ‘I don’t want to learn how to use a computer’, even though they understand that it is going to assist them with their DHS and with anything else they need to do—there is so much that is online these days, and they understand that. But what they tend to do is come in to us, and because we do not have the resources, instead of assisting a person to learn how to set up their myGov account—we do not have time—we do it for them. Basically we sit down at the computer and we do the typing for them. It would be great if we could support people one-on-one like that and say to them, ‘Sit down. This is how you go about doing this’. Many people still do not have computers. A lot of people still do not have email. But the resistance is still unfortunately there as well and that is the really difficult thing. I do not know how we fix that.

Ms CONNOLLY: We had a lovely lady come in earlier and talk about how, if she cannot access a computer, she will go to the library. So she will actually travel to get to the library to use the computer. Do you have many stories like that?

Ms WILSON: Yes. We offer public access; people can use our computers. But yes, once again they have to travel to come to us or to go to the library. And the library access, I think they have to make bookings as well. Generally with ours we have a computer available for anybody who needs one.

Ms RYAN: We also just heard earlier from a few different witnesses about the impact of public transport in regional areas and the difficulties that that presents particularly for younger jobseekers. Do you have any reflections particularly, I suppose, on Yarrawonga’s availability of public transport and how the Victorian Government can assist there to try and reduce those barriers?

Ms WILSON: Yes. Public transport in and out of town is pretty much non-existent. You could get a 6 o’clock-in-the-morning bus but you might not be able to get back until the next day. We did have a full bus

service between our towns going out to Bundalong and across to Mulwala. That was not utilised sufficiently, so it has been cut, but there is still a taxi service that can be used for that bus service basically. But yes, getting to Wangaratta or Shepparton or anywhere close by where you might have to go for a job interview is pretty impossible unless you have got a driver licence.

Ms RYAN: And if you succeed in actually getting that job?

Ms WILSON: Well, yes, that is right. Then you have got to get there every day.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Pauline, does the neighbourhood house have any existing relationships with employers in the area that are, I guess, proactive in seeking out employees from disadvantaged backgrounds or who are facing challenges to getting employment? Do you have any relationships?

Ms WILSON: Not really. The relationships we have are basically around training—so, providing training for those organisations, for their staff—but as far as relationships with businesses who are willing to employ disadvantaged people, I suppose if you look at the students who go through our early childhood and individual support, from our last aged-care course, the individual support course, we had eight students finish and eight of them had work before they finished. So that is through our relationship that we have with an aged-care provider who understands that we are delivering quality training and that our students are job-ready when they are finished and sometimes even before they are finished. So we do have those, and the same with the early childhood centres.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Okay. And do you think expanding on those relationships or having a third party be a kind of broker between those two established relationships like that, whether that be State Government or local council, would be of benefit to you?

Ms WILSON: Yes, it would be, actually, because sometimes that can be difficult. In particular we are struggling to find places for our disability students, so yes, we are trying to develop relationships with the special schools and disability providers. And the disability providers now are many, so to develop all those relationships is quite tedious and time-consuming.

The CHAIR: Pauline, you mentioned before about services being too focused on outcomes or vocational outcomes. So how do you think the State Government should measure its success, if not by that?

Ms WILSON: I think we probably need to tell more stories about the benefits of social connection. It is not about quantitative data really, it is more about qualitative. We should be telling the stories of what the social connection programs deliver to help people get back into society basically. We have had so many stories about people who are lacking in confidence because they have had mental health issues. We have got people who have other disabilities who have come in very, very low in self-confidence and really did not want to do anything with their lives, and they have engaged with our social connection programs and have just blossomed. So those are the things. I think we need to be telling those stories more so that Government can measure the success of other outcomes other than vocational.

The CHAIR: In terms of a holistic approach, how can the Victorian Government assist neighbourhood houses to provide more holistic support for individual jobseekers?

Ms WILSON: I have mentioned the three gaps—or maybe not the three gaps, but the social connection. It is all about funding—about resources—really, unfortunately. We have the neighbourhood house coordination program, which is fantastic, but really that only provides for the wages of the coordinator and not for the program, so the programs have to run on their own steam. As I mentioned, learner engagement is another gap in our service that we need somehow to fill, and then also support for learners at risk of disengagement. The Reconnect program, for example, the Victorian Department of Education and Training program, does not allow for someone that is already engaged in an accredited course to be assisted. Even though they are at risk of disengaging and will be right back where they started because something catastrophic has happened to them, that program is not suitable for them. They are not eligible for that program. I think it is just around Government looking at programs and seeing how minor changes in many cases could be made to assist with what we are trying to do.

Another one just recently is the Skills First funding for accredited training. We get an eligibility exemption for some of our students so they do not have to be upskilling, but that has just recently been dropped from 20% to 10%. That was such a good innovation, that ability to enrol someone who 20 years ago had done a hairdressing Certificate III and then, because they could not get work in that particular area, wanted to do an aged-care course, where we know there is a huge possibility of them getting work. They have to pay fee-for-service for that. But with these eligibility exemptions we were able to give a number of our students that exemption, and therefore they were funded. It is a pity that has been cut by half this year.

Ms ADDISON: Pauline, I always love to end on a positive note. You talk in your report about someone experiencing a catastrophic life event and having a lot of difficulty in terms of being able to get a job. Have you got an example or a story you could tell us about someone who has gone through your neighbourhood house and has had a good outcome?

Ms WILSON: There are so many of them. We have had many people who have come to us who have had all sorts of issues, all sorts of barriers, and they come and get a job. Also people with English as a second language—I am thinking of one particular lady who ran up to me in the street and gave me a big hug because, ‘I’ve got a job, Pauline, I’ve got a job’. It is wonderful. That is the good part of the job.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you for being here today.

Ms WILSON: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.