

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 Felicia Dean, Chief Executive Officer, Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative.

The CHAIR: Thank you for being here, Felicia. Can I firstly acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. You are protected by parliamentary privilege. Hansard is recording everything we say on this Committee. Of course, you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you say some of those things outside, you may not be afforded that privilege. You will get a transcript of the proof version of what you say here, and of course you can confirm that everything that was said is in that transcript. If you want to give a 5-minute presentation, then we will ask questions of you, if you like.

Ms DEAN: Can I first say—because I am wearing a few different hats here—*gulpa guka anaya Yorta Yorta woka*. And yes, you know my name. I do that because I am the Interim CEO, but I have actually just been appointed, so I am the CEO of Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative. What I said in Yorta Yorta—because I am a Yorta Yorta woman—is ‘Welcome, friends, here to the Connection on Yorta Yorta country’. I have also done that because this is my business. I wear a few different hats in the Aboriginal community. I purchased this business about four years ago. Aboriginal employment is really important. All my staff here are Aboriginal, and I have about 12. At Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative we have 218 staff, with more than 60% of those being Aboriginal staff.

I was not really quite sure how today was going to go, so—

The CHAIR: Do you want us to just ask questions as we go?

Ms DEAN: Yes, that would be good.

Ms CONNOLLY: I will kick off. Felicia, could you talk a little bit about some of the key barriers faced by Aboriginal jobseekers in this area and the barriers they are facing to secure sustainable employment in the Greater Shep region.

Ms DEAN: Yes, okay. I think there are a number of barriers to Aboriginal employment and they include education barriers and education attainment, the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal community members—we do have a high incidence of drug and alcohol abuse—and transportation, as many young Aboriginal people in particular do not have their licence. I think one of the other most significant barriers is business or organisational cultural awareness. Often some places are not culturally safe places for people if they have not had any cultural awareness training. And family and community support can often also impact on Aboriginal employment.

Ms CONNOLLY: We heard recently from some lovely young people of Aboriginal background that talked to us about the difficulty of getting their Ps and getting those hours up, particularly for young people that might have left home at an early stage and their parents are unable to do those driving lessons or drive around with them. It was sort of suggested to us also around a culturally safe space or trying to get the hours up with a driver, if it was not their parents. Do think there is a kind of need for a program like that in this community with Aboriginal young people?

Ms DEAN: Yes, there certainly is. I actually thought about setting that up myself. There are couple of programs like Ganbina, which is an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation here that works with a particular group of young people. There are children who come from strong family supports, and they are able to access a driving program. But there is plenty of data around to say that there are a lot of children in the Goulburn Valley who are in out-of-home care. In particular, it is those young people, and they generally also have the highest unemployment as they get older. There is definitely a need for an Aboriginal driving school perhaps or establishing a volunteer Aboriginal driving school that would support these young people. There are probably some good organisations that could support something like that, perhaps even places like the Rumbalara Football Netball Club, who have a number of programs that support young people, where they feel culturally safe being able to go to.

From a private sort of business side, we did look at establishing an Aboriginal driving business, but it was very hard to get people who were interested in going down to Melbourne to undertake the driving instructor program. I think, like a lot of things, that is a big step for someone to do. It is a big responsibility to take young people around, but it certainly would benefit people.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask, if I may, just about you? You are obviously a successful person. You are a leader in the community. You are a mentor to many. What is your journey? How did you get to your position, and how can we help others to do the same?

Ms DEAN: My story is a long story, but anyway, we will cut it really short. I was at Rumbalara many years ago. I am fortunate and very lucky to come from a very supportive family, a very large family. Education was drummed into us from a very early age. It was very important. I went through university and did all that. I changed my career a few times, but what really got me interested in private business was for the last four years being involved in the national Empowered Communities model that they have been running. There are eight sites across Australia. The Goulburn Valley is one of them. The Empowered Communities model looks at if you are seeking and working towards parity in the Aboriginal community—and parity across the board for everything, whether it is economic development, health, justice, all of that—you have got to get involved in that sort of stuff.

I used to coach a little netball group, and this was at the Rumbalara Football Netball Club. The big company Wesfarmers were in town. They had an Aboriginal employment program. They are companies like Coles, all the ones that come under Wesfarmers—Coles, Kmart, Bunnings, all of that. They have got an Aboriginal employment strategy. We linked in with them through the Kaiela Institute and Rumbalara Football Netball Club and got them to sign up to employing young people. I had these little girls who I was coaching in netball, and they would sit on the sidelines and they would see the older ones come out and play netball. Two of the girls were working at Target. I do not want to take too long, but it is a really nice story and it is what got me going.

The CHAIR: Yes, please tell us.

Ms DEAN: These two girls were working at Target, so they had their own money. On the day that they were playing netball, they came out to play and they were all dressed up like teenagers do, you know, when they play sport—girls. They had full make-up.

Ms ADDISON: Of course they did.

Ms DEAN: Their hair was beautiful. They had foils in their hair and they had new runners on. So I had these little under-11 girls, and they were watching them and they said, ‘When I grow up, I want to be like Chonoa’. And they said, ‘She works at Target’. Chonoa had a job, so she had her own money. So there was this aspiration there, and it really got me going. And I thought, ‘Well, what can I do to help that?’. This was probably eight years ago. What makes me feel really proud is some of those girls now work for me. And I thought, ‘Well, when I was that age, I never thought that I could get a job at Target or any of the shops’, and I thought, ‘How can I change that?’. I wanted to have a go at doing my own business, and I thought, ‘Well, if they come in here and work for me, we can teach them early learning skills, job confidence, turning up to work on time—those sorts of things’. They do not stay with me forever—they can go on—but they have got a basis for where they can work. We can write a reference for them, which is another barrier. If you do not have a reference, you do not have experience, you cannot get a job somewhere. And that is what has happened.

I have had four trainees in the three or four years that we have been here. A number of my girls have had gap years, so they worked their gap year and they are now at university. One is doing her vet training over in Albury-Wodonga, and the other one is down in Melbourne. It was really good because I know those girls are now in those towns and they are able to get part-time employment because of the opportunity they had here. They are funding themselves while they are at university. Perhaps they would not have had that opportunity. Perhaps they would not have gone on. These are girls who have come through ASHE, which is the Academy of Sport, Health and Education, which is a partnership between the University of Melbourne and Rumbalara Football Netball Club. ASHE was established as a centre where young people, Aboriginal people, who perhaps had been disengaged from mainstream schools, would then attend this place and they would get reengaged again. That is what started me off, and that is what keeps me going, because I always think life has been good for me. I have worked at the executive level, so I have earned very good wages, and I feel it is my way of giving back to the community.

Ms ADDISON: Great story. How can sustainable employment address broader social issues for Aborigines living in the Goulburn Valley, particularly issues of children in out-of-home care? How much will a job, and a sustainable job, address those broader issues that are facing your community?

Ms DEAN: Well, when you first look at unemployment—and it is for everyone, whether you are Aboriginal or not—there is a higher incidence of mental health and wellbeing issues and all those sorts of things. When someone is employed and working, generally speaking their health and wellbeing is much better. A really good example that I have seen: I have been involved with Rumbalara Football Netball Club for over 20 years, and when we first started 80% of the players, whether they were footballers or netballers, were unemployed; 20 years on, I would say now there is only 10% that are probably unemployed—they are all employed. But what we have also seen is an increase in home ownership. We have seen an increase in the number of people who are well—whose families are strong—which is really, really good. I could confidently say those people that are engaged in employment and having an active lifestyle are families that would not have any children that predominantly are not in out-of-home care. So those children that we see in out-of-home care are coming from families that perhaps are not in that space at all.

Ms ADDISON: I am a passionate advocate of sport, as is the former Minister for Sport. I certainly believe strongly that if we can get people engaged in sport, their lives can certainly turn around. But maybe that is something we need to be looking at in a committee. It is not just about investing in job engagement; it is about taking a step further back to say, ‘If we can give people leadership opportunities where you have got to turn up on time for coaching, turn up on time for training and you have got to turn up on game day ready to play’, a lot of those requirements are exactly the same requirements you need to get your first job.

Ms DEAN: Yes. I could not speak more highly of Rumbalara Football Netball Club and that whole model, because it works across the community. It is a holistic model, so it is supporting families who are there. People are not there as individuals; they come with their whole family, so there is a whole heap of support structures around them. There are some really good success stories out there.

The CHAIR: Following up from that, pre-employment support—job readiness—is something we have spoken about a fair few times. You are an employer now yourself. What do you think we need to do as a government to provide that support?

Ms DEAN: I think there is a lot of work to be done around getting people job ready, so attending interviews, writing résumés, those sorts of things. You know, what it is like—work experience. There are still many Aboriginal children who do not participate in work experience programs. At school, when the schools have the work experience programs, most Aboriginal kids perhaps will have a week off. They do not participate in them, so they are not experiencing some of that sort of stuff. But even if they are not in school, for those that are connected to job networks, perhaps there could be some compulsory work experience for them, which starts to get them thinking, starts to get them ready in practice for what is involved in being employed—and assisting them with their driver’s licence and those sorts of things. At Rumbalara, we are doing a skills audit at the moment. We have a lot of staff who are competent in their knowledge around how they can support their community, but perhaps they do not always have the skills.

One of the most important skills to have in Aboriginal organisations is this knowledge and awareness of how the community works, so Aboriginality is very important. Sometimes, when you are looking for someone for a job—it is not a qualification; do you know what I mean? So when you are doing job interviews and you are marking someone off against the criteria, there is no emphasis on Aboriginality and perhaps there should be. It is essential. Many of the job networks and that that are around now will have an Aboriginal support person in there to help them engage with Aboriginal people.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Felicia, thank you for your contribution so far. We know from experience, and yours is a great case in point, that when we have Aboriginal-owned and controlled businesses they tend to employ more Aboriginal people. What can we do to encourage more of that entrepreneurship, more of that starting up of businesses, which then has that flow-on effect in this area? Do you know of any supports that are available to Aboriginal people who are looking to go down that path of starting their own business? And what could there be?

Ms DEAN: There are a number of statewide organisations, like Kinaway, which can help with business ideas and can help someone, but at the end of the day it is around the funding and money that you need to set a business up. I do not think there is any funding around that might help a small business initially set up, like on a loan, without going to a bank. Perhaps some support around that would be really good.

About five years ago we had a leadership program here called the Algabonyah Aboriginal leadership program, and I co-facilitated that with Professor Marcia Langton from the University of Melbourne.

Ms ADDISON: She is amazing.

Ms DEAN: Yes. We had about 14 participants there. Of those 14 participants, seven of them identified that they would like to set up their own business, and they had a whole heap of ideas. But they were just very scared because most of these participants were, I would say, coming from middle management backgrounds already. They were sitting around their late 30s or 40s, so they were not younger people. But it was more around they were just scared really, and they wanted to see somebody else do it. I guess using other Aboriginal businesses that are around now as perhaps role models for them would be certainly a good support system as well.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: From the work that I have done in the women's portfolio, I know there are initiatives aimed around, say, migrant and refugee women who want to start up their own business, and there are programs that are in place that allow them to come with their idea, have a business mentor, develop that idea and then ultimately even pitch it to investors. Have you seen anything like that in your experience? Would something like that benefit your community?

Ms DEAN: Yes, I think so. It is that following up, it is that mentor, because I think there are a lot of people around who have got ideas. As I said, I probably know more than a dozen of them, even just here in the Goulburn Valley, who have got business ideas, but it is getting a team around them or a network around them to support them to do it because I cannot do it all on my own. There is another young Aboriginal woman—her name is Jackie Walker—in town. She has got a cafe called Jetjas, and she has done extremely well as well. But between the two of us, running our own businesses, we have been pretty busy anyway.

The CHAIR: Just following on from those questions, being the former minister for tourism I know what an asset it would be for the State to actually highlight our Aboriginal culture and tourism opportunities. Certainly it is a two-way street: the Government would benefit from extra visitors coming from other states and other nations, and it would also help out the local Aboriginal community. Do you think the partnership may be enhanced in terms of the tourism opportunities that exist?

Ms DEAN: Yes, I think it can. The City of Greater Shepparton, and in particular their CEO, Peter Harriott, have done a fair bit of work in this space in trying to develop it. So they have The Flats tour, which is just over here. It is not very far away. There have been some initial plans and discussions about that becoming a bigger part of bringing visitors to Shepparton to showcase that. They have done significant work with Kaiela Arts, which is the local Aboriginal art gallery. This is SAM, so it is the council and Kaiela Arts. That has now been incorporated into the new SAM, but currently Kaiela Arts sits over on High Street, and that will certainly be a tourist attraction for Shepparton.

I think that the City of Greater Shepparton, the council, with their commitment and the work that they have done with the Aboriginal community, and there are a number of groups that they have been working with, are doing some very good work in that space, creating tourism. They have got some wonderful artwork that they have been promoting which honours Aboriginal elders from this area that have played significant roles in Aboriginal rights and in highlighting all that.

The CHAIR: Because I would imagine this place in itself would be an attraction for tourism.

Ms DEAN: Yes, I would like to think so. Yes, it is. And often there will be groups that will come here, and they will do a tour and then they will come and visit the centre. We have got some small Aboriginal artefacts that can be sold and that sort of stuff.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms DEAN: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.