

# **TRANSCRIPT**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Ballarat—Wednesday, 23 October 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

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Jan Simmons, Team Leader, Work and Learning Advisors,

Mr Ray Creelman,

Ms Angie Rowe,

Mr Milad Nacher, and

Ms Marie Sutherland, Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre.



**The CHAIR:** Thank you for being here today for this very important Inquiry. 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. Having said that, it is a very relaxed Committee, so do not stress.

**Mr NACHER:** We are not. We are in Ballarat.

**The CHAIR:** That is true. We invite you to just speak about some of the programs you have and then we will ask questions accordingly if that is okay.

**Ms SIMMONS:** Cool. That is fine. So you would like me to start?

**The CHAIR:** Sure.

**Ms SIMMONS:** I am Jan Simmons and I am the Team Leader of the Work and Learning Centre Program. I am also an adviser so I have case load of about 70 clients at any given time and I have a team of five to look after as well. I have spent a lot of years in neighbourhood houses so there is not much I could not tell you about neighbourhood houses around Australia and overseas.

The Work and Learning Centre Program is part of the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre. The Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre is located—interestingly—in the hub building inside Phoenix Secondary College, so we have a big family around us of school and then we have the community coming in to the program in the hub. Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre offers a diverse range of programs and entry points for jobseekers. They may come to do a learning program or to one of the community lunches and then discover the Work and Learning Centre. It gives them the opportunity to sneak in or come in in a blaze of glory.

The Work and Learning Centre Program is a small program with big outcomes. We would have about 300 clients coming on a case load at any given time. We have achieved 54 work outcomes since July, so given the small team that we are we have had some pretty good outcomes. We have a team where one team member focuses on youth, another focuses on non-English speaking backgrounds and then the other two of us take up whoever is left really. We work in a one-to-one fashion and in groups, and we also run some workshops. We additionally have set up the social enterprise because we became well aware that a lot of the traditional workplace areas just did not seem to fit our people. That gave them an opportunity to learn skills and demonstrate skills without being in a classroom. It has been very successful. I have worked with a lot of social enterprises in my life and I truly believe it is the way of the future for people who are unemployed.

Being part of the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre, we are intrinsically linked to the community development and education elements of that centre so that gives us the opportunity to link our clients into programs. I have brought along some of our program areas. If we are doing things like IT classes or the social enterprise activities, then people can link into those.

I have brought along some fabulous people from our program. It is always much better to hear from the real people, I think. We have got Angie here, who has got an amazing story to tell you. We are very proud of Angie.

**Ms ROWE:** Thank you. I am proud of myself too.

**Ms SIMMONS:** And this is Ray; and this is Milad, who likes a bit of a chat; and this is Marie.

**The CHAIR:** Nice to meet you all.

**Ms SIMMONS:** So you would like to hear from them, right?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that would be great.

**Ms SIMMONS:** So do you want to start with Angie?

**Ms ROWE:** So I have come from basically a poor background. My mother was an alcoholic growing up. She did not really teach me much about life in general or anything. All I knew was how to party and whatnot, so that was basically my life right through my teens and my 20s. Then I moved to Ballarat and got my licence and got hooked up with Ballarat Neighbourhood House. That is how I got my licence and did—what, a year?—of cooking courses, and now I work for Peter Ford Catering in Ballarat.

**The CHAIR:** Awesome.

**Ms ADDISON:** Peter Ford is an amazing, extraordinary caterer.

**Ms SIMMONS:** And she has visual proof.

**Ms ROWE:** I do.

**Ms SIMMONS:** She wants to show you.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. We would love to see it.

**Ms ROWE:** I told him about this meeting and he said to take a photo to prove it.

**Ms ADDISON:** What a lovely photo. There is Peter, who is a Ballarat icon.

**Ms ROWE:** Yes, he is really well known in Ballarat for weddings, business meetings, everything.

**Ms ADDISON:** We had a big soccer dinner on Friday night at Civic Hall. That was amazing too.

**Ms ROWE:** He does up to like 5,000 people, he caters for sometimes. It is a lot of work but I enjoy it. I love it.

**The CHAIR:** What is your favourite food that you like cooking?

**Ms ROWE:** At the moment I have not got a favourite food. I just love experimenting with new food and trying new things at the moment. That is my favourite thing to do.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** So how long have you been there for?

**Ms ROWE:** Peter Ford? About four weeks, five weeks.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Fantastic.

**Ms ROWE:** And they love me. It is awesome.

**The CHAIR:** That is great.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** That is very good. Well done.

**Ms ROWE:** And that is all. I did a lot of it myself, but if I did not have the help from the Neighbourhood House, I would not be where I am today. It is a big impact on my life and my kids' life—everything.

**The CHAIR:** Congratulations.

**Ms ROWE:** Thank you.

**Ms SIMMONS:** And I think she has sort of overcome setbacks so—

**Ms ROWE:** And confidence-wise, too, I would not have been able to do this year ago—sit in front of a panel of people and talk. No way. So that has helped a lot too.

**Ms SIMMONS:** And then she went for an apprenticeship and did not get it and she thought she would implode, but she clawed her way back out of it and there was Peter, waiting. So that was fantastic.

**Ms ROWE:** And that was due to Troop Employment as well. They hooked us up.

**The CHAIR:** Ray, do you want to go next?

**Mr CREELMAN:** I have been long-term unemployed for the last three or four years. I have had a few catastrophes in the middle there. I am in the middle of doing stuff; I have been doing courses and stuff to help get myself a job. Jan has been really good there because she has been like a big sister helping me through stuff.

The catastrophes I have had were personal family issues. My father got sick and died—throat cancer after a short battle.

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to hear that.

**Mr CREELMAN:** Also I got my jaw broken too. That was just a small, little setback, but Jan has always been here. She has been good helping me. Recently I had a job interview down at Coles and she helped me step-by-step with everything, with interviews and stuff. She has always been here and I go and see her once a week. She is somebody different and she always thinks outside the box—because you go to some of these employment places and they just do not have many strings in their bow. They only know one thing and some of them have got no idea, but she is there and you know you can say things and say, ‘Did you see that?’, or you can call something out. She has always been there, so I have enjoyed seeing her a lot.

**The CHAIR:** Well, thank you for being here. Thank you for sharing your very private life with us here, too. Thank you.

**Mr NACHER:** My name is Milad. My background is from Lebanon and I have been here in Ballarat now nearly two years. I have been with the Ballarat Neighbourhood House because I do not know how to read English properly. I do not know how to write English. I started to apply for work. It is very hard for me to do it. The Neighbourhood House has been helping me to do all those things, and I got a job. I did a course for cooking. They backed me up in every way. Whenever I have needed paperwork to fill out, I have gone there and they have helped me to do it step by step. I have had a job for nearly eight months now.

**The CHAIR:** Congratulations.

**Mr NACHER:** It is a fantastic place there to be in—how much we can get help to build up more knowledge in computers. They can give a lot of people more.

**The CHAIR:** So how did you find Neighbourhood House? Who told you? Was it referred to you?

**Mr NACHER:** It was friends of mine sent me there. They told me to go to Neighbourhood House. That is the closest to the house where I am living. They told me, ‘Go there. It’s all of them there. You can try and get help from there’, because I have got paperwork I have to fill out and I cannot do it completely. When I went there, the lady there—her name is Lisa—is an amazing lady. Jan was there on one day that Lisa was not there. I did not have appointment; I did not have anything. I said to her, ‘Please, I want to fill that. Can I do it?’. And she looked at me like, ‘Okay. Come in’. Then we went in.

**Ms SIMMONS:** You got lucky.

**Mr NACHER:** I knew it that day.

**The CHAIR:** When did you migrate here?

**Mr NACHER:** About 15 years ago.

**The CHAIR:** What part of the world?

**Mr NACHER:** Lebanon.

**The CHAIR:** From Lebanon, Nacher, okay.

**Mr NACHER:** Yes. That is what happened.

**The CHAIR:** We were talking about Lebanese food.

**Ms SIMMONS:** So were we. He said, ‘Ballarat needs a Lebanese restaurant’.

**Mr NACHER:** I said to them, ‘If you can find me a place that is cheap to rent, I can open one’.

**Ms ADDISON:** Milad, what work are you doing at the moment?

**Mr NACHER:** At the moment I am doing work with McCallum in the laundry, but it is not going to be forever. I have to buy something for myself, and that is what I will discuss with you later.

**Ms ADDISON:** Very good. Also, with the McCallum laundry the State Government gave some money for solar panels on the top of the roof. McCallum offer disability services as well as social enterprises. They are based in Wendouree, which I am very proud of. But it is a fantastic service that does excellent work.

**Mr NACHER:** And they accepted me there. Honestly, I do not know how. I presented myself and Lisa was again was a reference for me—from the Neighbourhood House. They accepted me. Then I went in, and I did not know how to read all the signs properly. They started going slow with me, and then I got in.

**The CHAIR:** Congratulations.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** I have got a very different story from the others. I have worked all my life, mainly in the corporate sector. I recently moved to Ballarat. Given my age, being a senior, I was looking for part-time work. It is a bit harder as you get older. I came across the lovely Jan at the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre. I did a course there, and I am now employed by the Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre, so I am very lucky.

**Ms SIMMONS:** We like to employ our own.

**The CHAIR:** Great stories—really, really good. You have covered almost every part of what we are looking into, which is exactly what we want. In terms of an outcome for us, ideally what we would like to see is that we can help the cohort of people that are really finding it difficult to find jobs, whether it is young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether it is migrants or whether it is people that have worked and want to come back into the workforce. This is what it is all about. We really appreciate the fact that you have provided this presentation today.

**Mr NACHER:** We have to go back to Ballarat Neighbourhood Centre, and then you can get a job.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** They can.

**The CHAIR:** Can we ask some questions? Is that all right?

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** Sure, yes.

**Ms ADDISON:** Jan—or I will open it up to the group—I love this in your book, computers for the terrified. How important is digital literacy in your jobseeker training?

**Ms SIMMONS:** It is critical, and I think the thing is that you never know. I am always surprised at how many people do not know how to use technology. And so what we did—as I said, we employ our own. But we had a young guy who had a science degree, and he was not getting any work, so I said, ‘Why don’t you come in and help the people who need to know about stuff’. So he knows how to use not just computers but phones and anything to do with technology. We go, ‘Go and see Dylan’. So we have got him on tap sort of every week for people. Today he is actually over with the elderly in their village, and he is helping them learn the IT skills.

But it is pretty important for people because it is the only way you go for jobs these days. Even in aged care or any of those industries a lot of their work is done using IT, so you do not have a choice anymore. I have a lot of people who say, ‘I don’t want to do it this way’, and I say, ‘None of us has a choice; this is how it’s going to be’.

I think the biggest problem I find with digital learning is that a lot of learning happens online, and 90% of my clients would rather have it face to face. Even if it was a blended learning option—we do not get enough of that in Ballarat. They seem to just go for that option, ‘Oh, well, we’ll just do it online’. There is no support for people, really, if you do not have any confidence in using technology. So, yes, it is really important, and I think we need to put more resourcing in behind that support.

When I was on a travelling scholarship in Scotland, right out in the wilds of Shetland, I went to visit a group that was all learning online, but they were all doing different things. They came into the centre once a week and they were supported by a person who was obviously quite talented because they could work across five or six dimensions. But that, I thought, was at least recognising that people need a bit of personal support when they are doing online learning.

**Ms ADDISON:** And from the rest of the panel, is that your experience—that you really do need to have—

**Mr NACHER:** If it is face to face it is a lot better.

**Ms ADDISON:** Face to face, but even more so when you are applying for jobs or trying to—

**Ms ROWE:** Yes, I was having trouble with that.

**Ms ADDISON:** even interact with Centrelink, you have to be online. Is digital—

**Mr NACHER:** We need something. Someone has to be instructed in it first, and then we can go in; I believe that. The same happened to me, because I do not know how to read English completely, and then Lisa started going with me a little bit slowly, and then when I filled the application, again she went slowly, slowly, about it and I got better.

**Ms ADDISON:** Can I congratulate you on your English skills. I am a former teacher, and I think you have excellent English skills, so congratulations.

**Mr NACHER:** Yes, talk is fantastic. That is my bigger problem, because I can talk very good, but coming to fill out an application I am zero. I am stuck everywhere.

**Ms ROWE:** That is the thing with it, too, because you have got to present it in a certain way. Normal people like me would just type it all up and sent it in. They are not even going to look at it because you have got to present it a certain way. So, yes, I had trouble with that. Kirsten at the Neighbourhood Centre helped me put it all together and send it off—

**Ms ADDISON:** Like addressing key selection criteria.

**Ms SIMMONS:** Yes, and it is also the attachments and stuff, so they have expectations of the work history and your skills. So it is the whole layer over that.

**Ms ROWE:** If you have got a certificate, you have got to send it with the email. That was my problem. I did not know how to do that.

**Ms SIMMONS:** How do you attach it.

**Mr CREELMAN:** I applied for a job at the start of the year. They suggested [inaudible] leaving your name there. You click on a box and then you have got to upload a letter and all these sorts of things. I get my little brother to help me, or I come down to see Jan to see if she will help me with it.

**Ms ROWE:** Yes, it gets confusing.

**Mr CREELMAN:** Do you know what I mean? Some of them you can do it just with a normal email, but some of them you just—

**Ms SIMMONS:** And the other thing is the MyGov stuff, which drives everyone nearly—and we were finding that more and more clients were coming and asking, ‘Can you help me with this MyGov stuff?’. So we

have actually got a staff member who has been unemployed and she knew it. And then somebody said, 'Oh, but isn't that what the jobactives are supposed to do?', and I said, 'Well, clearly they don't have the time or else we wouldn't be seeing so many people'.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** I just want to say thank you for sharing. It is amazing to listen to your stories. Do you think, as you go along in your employment journey, you will be reaching out to Jan and Jan will provide that ongoing support—and the importance of that?

**Ms ROWE:** I still contact my job provider, Kirsten, and talk on a week-to-week basis kind of thing for my confidence and stuff as well. It just helps me keep that level head, I guess, about work. If I have got any questions or I am too scared to ask the boss, I will present it to her: 'How do I say it?', or stuff like that.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Have you ever had that type of support in any type of employment you have ever been in in your life before?

**Ms ROWE:** This is the first time I have ever been employed. I have never had this kind of support, ever. I was from Ararat originally, and there is just nothing down there. When I moved here doors just opened up completely everywhere. As soon as I started meeting the right people, which was the Neighbourhood House, it was amazing.

**Ms SIMMONS:** And we always threaten them with the fact that we are with them for life.

**Ms ROWE:** It makes me feel good.

**Ms SIMMONS:** It is a great move for getting a job.

**Ms ROWE:** If I fail at something, they are still going to be there. They are not going to just wipe me off because I failed or—you know.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** And has it been good for you to have a familiar face like Jan?

**Ms ROWE:** Definitely, yes.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Some of the other job agencies, do you find that—

**Ms ROWE:** They swap and change a lot, and it is hard. Therapy and that—I know it has got nothing to do with this—but I try and do therapy, and they swap and change a lot. I have stopped doing it at the moment because it is just too hard to keep explaining your story all the time—to get to where you are and then you have got to go right back to the start again. It is hard.

**Mr NACHER:** Can I give it to you, a small thing? The other job agency is very lazy. They take the money from the Government but do not want to give anything for other people. You go there, put your name in for support: 'We're working here for you'. But when you go in and sign your name: 'Go find the work'. Okay, I'll find the work, but I cannot get it. You have to help me. 'That's all we can do; find a job and then we'll help you'. That is what I was saying to you before. For three years I have been dealing with a couple of different agencies. Honestly, when I went to the Ballarat Neighbourhood House I got through straightaway. Why? Because, I got all I needed.

**Ms ROWE:** I will say, though, with the job agencies, there are only a few workers, and they have got that many people they have to work with that they lose track of you and they forget what is going on and what is happening. I think that is why they never get anywhere with a lot of people, because they have got too many people that they have to do stuff for, and they just forget a lot. I think there needs to be some more workers as well.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** On that, Jan, it is clear that you do a mountain of work.

**Ms SIMMONS:** Yes.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Short of cloning you—



**Ms SIMMONS:** They should be so lucky.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** All those in favour?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** What can the State Government do for you and for the Neighbourhood Centre to make your job easier so that you can help more people?

**Ms SIMMONS:** The obvious is resourcing, and I think there is certainly that. We do work with the jobactives. I have a terrific relationship with a couple of the JAs, and we really get each other. They will refer people to me, but they will be looking at the whole person. They will be looking at someone and saying, 'This person needs to build their confidence', and I know they have got it then. It is not just about writing a résumé for someone. It is about that support.

So what I think we need to do is there is some education that needs to take place for people who are jobseekers, because jobseekers have this whole person that needs support. It is not just a résumé or a cover letter; it is so much more than that, and that is the critical part. Jobseekers will be successful once they have built those skills and that support comes for them. And we say it takes time. Unfortunately I know governments do not always have time, but it does take time. I have taught literacy. It takes time. Unless we change the ground rules, I do not think your jobactives have got a hope at all of trying to succeed. So I think programs like ours, where we are not hemmed in by punitive laws, work better because we can operate in a more flexible and fluid fashion. Does that answer your question?

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Yes, it does. It does go to the kind of model that you see as successful.

**Mr NACHER:** And especially again, when you are going to teach a person to learn English, Jan said before, you cannot go on the same program as the person who was born in Australia but he does not know how to read English; you know what I mean? You have to go really a step lower. You can get the language properly and then put them on track. That is a big problem for us, people like me. We cannot get it completely. I have communicated with a lot of people, again from Afghanistan, from Lebanon, from Pakistan, the Afghani—same problem, all of them the same problem. From Syria we have 20,000 now this year. Not any one of them, maybe, talk English properly, only because they do not have the basics. You know what I mean? This is going straightaway to above the basic, and you are going to start talking? You cannot. You need to start up on some: one, two, three or four—it is not straightaway four, five, six, seven. That is the program. We have to drop it down a little bit, the same as we did at the Neighbourhood Centre there. It is fantastic.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, good point. Can I ask, Marie or Jan, what can we do to encourage more employers to take on older employees? How can we overcome that?

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** It is a good one for you, Jan. I do not know.

**Ms SIMMONS:** I am an older worker myself.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** That is why I was happy to meet with Jan.

**Ms SIMMONS:** And I think that in many cases it helps that I am. I am in an age category where people think you should be retired, and I am going, 'Really?'. So I think what we have to demonstrate is what these people bring to the workplace. Quite often when I am helping people prepare for interviews I talk about the fact that they bring maturity, reliability, all the things—understanding the world of work. So we promote the skill set that you get by having an older worker in the workplace.

**The CHAIR:** Reliability and all of those other assets that you would have.

**Ms SIMMONS:** Yes, all of that. My husband moved up from where he was working down in the country and came up here, and the guy that he is working for at Ballarat Toyota said, 'I know you. Would you like to come and work for us?'. Now, he is in his 70s. So you can do it if you can showcase the skills.

I think what we want to be able to do is showcase these people. I get more complaints about young people than I do, ever, about the older clients that they are trying to place. They do not want to have any—'Jan, don't send

me any young people. They're so unreliable. They never turn up. They don't understand work. They only want to do precious jobs'. So I have more trouble trying to convince them that young people are worth employing than I do older people, who bring some fabulous skills to the workplace. So I think it is about how we promote that in their cover letters and résumés and we sell that to people. I am finding that people in their 60s are getting jobs fine. It is very encouraging, actually.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Marie, what would you say were the barriers for you getting employment?

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** I had worked most of my life. I had not worked for the last three years, and I think you lose a bit of confidence. And given that I am 62 now I thought, 'People will look at me and say, "You're too old'. But I felt I still had a lot to offer.

**The CHAIR:** Far too young.

**Ms SIMMONS:** Yes, perfect.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** Coming and meeting with Jan in such a relaxed and comfortable Neighbourhood Centre, everyone was just beautiful and welcoming. I instantly felt—and Jan gave me the confidence too. I do have these skills, but I had lost some confidence, I felt.

**Ms SIMMONS:** There has actually been some research done on this. I am sure you are quite up to speed, as I am about it, but apparently within two months of not having a job people's confidence diminishes by half. It is an amazing amount of confidence loss. Even people who are highly skilled can lose their confidence in that time. So that is why having things like social enterprises and things that people can link into to keep themselves confident and tuned up is a really important part of the way we need to go.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** Also, can I just add depression and anxiety come into it as well.

**Mr NACHER:** I think so—sorry, if you can take a little bit, applying for this job is not on a network, I believe all the people can get a job. I believe that. Why? Because the person who will be looking for these jobs are 19,16 or something like that—you know what I mean? They say, 'That's okay, we'll get the 19, 18, 17'. You know what I mean? I have been refused two times from two companies because of that.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** Do you put your age on?

**Mr NACHER:** Of course, you have to.

**Ms SIMMONS:** No, you do not.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** No, you do not, you never put your age.

**Ms SIMMONS:** Come and talk to me about that.

**Ms SUTHERLAND:** Never put your age.

**Mr NACHER:** I applied for Coles and I applied for Bunnings. I talked to them directly—'I'm available anytime'. They look at me like that, and they go to my resumé and see my date of birth there, 'Okay, no, sorry, you don't have the job'. Every time I get the same messages coming back to my email that they need someone else to work there, and I say, 'What's going on? I applied for that job'. It is because of my age at the end the day, I found out.

**The CHAIR:** It is unfortunate, isn't it?

**Mr NACHER:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for coming in today. It was very valuable; thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**