

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 December 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Name withheld (a), and

Name withheld (b).

WITNESSES

Name withheld (a), and

Name withheld (b)

The CHAIR: Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respect to their elders, past and present, and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today. I now declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. I welcome [name withheld] here today. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans and the Chair of this committee. To my left is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong; and Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda.

All evidence taken today by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, so here you can say anything you want. That is what it means. But of course if you say this outside you may not be protected by privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the committee's website unless they are marked confidential.

Also today we have Reiko Hipple, who is here with us—no, she is in the next room. But I want you to know—

Name withheld (a): I have met her.

The CHAIR: Excellent. She is here today to support us and also support you in relation to any support that you may need. If you need to take a break during this hearing, or even outside, once we have concluded today, if you do need to have some support we are more than happy to provide that.

The Committee is very interested in hearing about your experience, and I thank you for sharing your experience with us, most importantly to really advise us if there have been any services that you have accessed and what outcomes you would like to see in this inquiry.

I now invite you, [name withheld], to make a brief opening statement. We are in your hands. Please feel comfortable. I know this is very difficult, and I truly do appreciate you being with us today. Thank you, [name withheld].

Name withheld (a): My name is [name withheld], which you already know. In 1971 I was 19 years old and I found out I was pregnant. My boyfriend did not want anything to do with it. I was alone, powerless and scared. My family, church and society left me with no other choice but to place my daughter up for adoption. It was forced because there was no alternative. I was met with judgement by those around me. When I returned home my daughter was never spoken about again. The guilt and the shame I experienced became a part of me and have never gone away.

I cannot remember much from this time. Memories that are inaccessible have left me nearly 50 years later still wondering what ever happened. I was so angry when I went looking for my hospital records that they had been destroyed, because this could enlighten me a little bit about the time in hospital.

These experiences had long-term impacts on my life. For nearly 50 years I was impacted by my physical health, my mental health, my relationships with my other children and my self-worth. People would say—this is after I found my daughter—that, 'You've found her. It's okay. You're okay'. But they do not understand. It was still a baby, even when I found [name withheld]. She lives in the country, and [name withheld (b)] would take me up there. There was one time—I used to say to [name withheld (b)], 'It's just the baby, but she is different to the baby', and I had to apologise for the baby being taken.

I came here today to speak to you to highlight the impact of forced adoption and to tell my story to help my healing but also in the hope of helping other people in the broader community understand how much these policies and decisions by institutions have left so much trauma in their wake and how the support offered by institutions has not been adequate, available or appropriate. I believe that the most significant requirement is a fully funded, integrated mental health support program that is available to all, including mothers, adoptees,

siblings of mothers of adoptees and children of adoptees who are not fully aware of body-based trauma counselling. This, together with talk-based therapy, could be considered or should be considered. I also believe that the *Without Consent* exhibition, which I went to—my whole family went—should be maintained and readily available for the general public so as to ensure that issues of the past are not repeated in the future by institutions again. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, [name withheld], for sharing your experience.

Name withheld (a): That is okay.

The CHAIR: I know it is extremely difficult, but we are immensely in gratitude for you to be here today. Just at this point I will introduce my colleague David—

Mr SOUTHWICK: My apologies for being late.

Name withheld (a): Yes. Hi, David.

The CHAIR: David Southwick, MP, the Member for Caulfield has joined us, for the record. I will pass to Christine for questions. Thank you.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, [name withheld]. We know how difficult it is, and challenging for you, to come and share your experiences today, so we are really grateful for that. You know, we see the written submissions but having that personal contact with you is really valuable for us too, so thank you so much for that. You talked about what you would like to see as an outcome. Do you think it is important that counsellors have specific training in the forced adoption area?

Name withheld (a): Yes, psychologists, psychiatrists—the whole works. Absolutely.

Ms COUZENS: Okay.

Name withheld (a): Yes, because they can—well, not understand; they never understand, but it is helpful, I think, for them to know roughly what we went through, a little bit. Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Okay.

Name withheld (a): I mean, I first—I was very lucky. My GP, when I was really crook, sent me to a psychiatrist, because he would have been about the same age then. I think it must have been a friend. And if it had not been for him—because he would be old; well, he was older than me; he is retired now—and also a psychologist that I found by myself, I do not know what I would have been doing, okay? Because they were really good, but they had had a lot to do with either people like myself or the people that sort of worked in the homes as well, because they were feeling not really good about themselves—not at that moment—as well. So that really helped a lot. They sort of understood. Since then, I am still seeing psychologists and counsellors now—but not in that way, no. So they got me through a lot, really, but it is still ongoing and ongoing.

Ms COUZENS: And are you involved in any support groups?

Name withheld (a): I had a bit to do with VANISH, but I never—I was talking to [name withheld (b)] before. There is nothing out there to tell you. I mean, I grew up in a country town but I did live here, eventually, and there is nothing—there is nothing there. I mean, okay, ARMS is out there, but it was by fluke that I actually saw—this is even after I found my daughter—a job for VANISH; you either were, sorry, a birth mother or an adoptee, and I went along and spoke to them and got the job. I was also working somewhere else and my boss, who knew about the whole thing, said, ‘Look, just go along and see how you go’, and all this sort of stuff. That is when I met the people there, and that was really good, but I did not stay there at all, because I think it would have been too overwhelming for me. So I did know about them, yes.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. So do you think there is a role for those support groups?

Name withheld (a): Oh, absolutely. There is a role for them, yes. And it will be a lot like that. I understand with counsellors that it is not—what did I say? You cannot go through Medicare, or you cannot get—

Name withheld (b): The gaps.

Name withheld (a): The gaps—because it is not cheap going to psychiatrists and psychologists. I do not think I could—I would hate to think what we have paid, all over the years. But yes, probably they need to be a bit more qualified, if the other people are going to get some money back, because a lot of people cannot afford it. Okay, I have been lucky with where I am. A lot of people cannot afford to go there, in the situations they have been in. So yes, it is very well needed. Yes.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, [name withheld]. I appreciate it.

Name withheld (a): No worries. That is okay.

The CHAIR: Well, again I take this opportunity to thank you on behalf of the Committee for your contribution today and your submission as well. The Committee appreciates the time and effort taken by you to be here today. As I said previously, we acknowledge that it is difficult for you to share your experiences, but you have done so with us, and we really do appreciate it. Please be assured, and I truly do say this on behalf of the Committee, that your evidence will help us all be informed—we have heard you today—in understanding the relevant issues to be able to make very strong recommendations to the Victorian Government. We are hoping to table this report by 1 July next year, and we will endeavour to keep you updated on the progress. But, most importantly, if something comes to mind after today, please feel free to reach out to any one of us, including our Committee Manager, Yuki. That is, we are here.

Name withheld (a): She is lovely.

The CHAIR: Absolutely; she certainly is. Thank you again, [name withheld], for being here today.

Name withheld (a): Thank you.

The CHAIR: And also to your daughter for providing support, thank you so much.

Name withheld (b): Thank you.

Name withheld (a): She has been all the way through for every adoption apology everywhere.

The CHAIR: Oh, lovely. That is so special. Thank you so much. We wish you all the very best.

Witnesses withdrew.