

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Geelong—Wednesday, 20 November 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

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WITNESSES

Ms Kathryn Howe, Executive Manager Practice Development and Family Connections,
and

Ms Yvonne McAuliffe, Coordinator Early Years, The Bethany Group.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. Welcome. I declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. All mobile phones should be now turned to silent. I welcome here today Kathryn Howe, the Executive Manager Practice Development and Family Connections, and Yvonne McAuliffe, Coordinator Early Years, The Bethany Group. Thank you for being here. 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, these comments may not be protected by this 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 possible. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to provide a brief 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be then followed by questions.

Ms HOWE: Thanks, Natalie, for this, and thank you for the opportunity to come and present to this Inquiry. We feel very privileged to do that. In starting our presentation we would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on the land of the Wathaurong people and acknowledge their elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge the elders and members of the diverse communities that we are focusing on today and their contribution to our learnings and community life.

We have got a presentation; I will try and keep it to the 10 minutes for you. Just a brief understanding about Bethany: Bethany has been operating in Geelong, and now we operate in the Geelong, Barwon and the south-western areas of Victoria. We have been operating since 1868, and we are a broad and, we think we are, dynamic organisation that is actually here to respond to the changing needs of our community. We want to ensure that our workers are actually looking at new ways to support children, families and individuals to be the best they can, develop secure relationships and participate in the community. Today we are going to focus on a particular program within our family services program, but we also just want to acknowledge that we work broadly across a range of programs, including family violence, family services, housing, counselling, problem gambling and the like. Really our approach is to respond to those communities.

In early 2019 we launched our diversity statement—which is there for you to note—across the organisation to support an inclusive approach for all people to engage and participate. As I said, in thinking about this and thinking about early years and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, we want to focus on a particular program that we have developed within our universal and family services program arena, and that is called Connect Up, and also we have obviously just picked on what we are doing in relation to those diverse communities. We operate this Connect Up program across six sites. They are placed within schools and kindergartens and community hubs, and we have selected those sites in response to need and requests from those schools and kinders, and we work in partnership with all of those, and particularly we work in partnership with parents. This is a program that we have grown ourselves, and it has grown from a number of services that we have had located initially in schools some eight or more years ago. We have had funding from State Government, funding from the Commonwealth and funding from philanthropic groups.

We have taken the opportunity in the last 18 months to bring all of that together and develop a new framework and put it all into one, consolidating those program responses and also putting a specific worker into each location so that we are building relationships and building opportunities to engage with that community and engage with those professionals and hopefully do our part in being able to bring that system together and meet some of those needs. Bethany integrated with the kindergarten services several years ago, so it is an opportunity for us to also build upon that platform of the kindergarten service system. The redesigning of the program was really about putting it into one framework, as I said, and it fits within the Road Map for Reform, which is under the Department of Health and Human Services, and that pathway response around early help. We also just want to say we hope to receive our final copy of the evaluation that Deakin University has undertaken for us, which is really focused on the stakeholders' view about our success under the new framework.

So what it offers, as I was saying, is it is a place-based and parent-led service response focusing on early engagement and early intervention. We look to introduce flexible community development approaches to enhance that parent and child participation within that universal platform. We designed it to be tailored to the needs of individuals, not to go in and say, 'Here's a program and we run it like that'. It is actually about responding to what might be happening within that. I understand this morning you went to the Wexford campus. You would have seen hopefully the playgroup, I understand, and one of our staff members was in there running the playgroup. She is located in that centre and is working with the schools, working with the hub, working with Community Hubs Australia and those linkages with other services, such as the kindergarten. That is about meeting the needs of those families that come into that location. Then what we might run in East Geelong will be tailored to what those families in the East Geelong area need—and the other five sites. We are not adopting a one-size-fits-all; it is tailored. Our focus is very much about building a relationship and building trust with those families—us being regularly there, reliably there. Then those families can come and access us and use us, also creating opportunities for them. It is about being familiar and being there—being present. We also have a strong focus on partnerships with other family services and all those universal providers. It is about increasing community engagement and participation, and it is about trying to cut down social isolation and the under-resourcing we regularly see that these families have.

In the pack, the model that we have really is designed to improve educational health and wellbeing outcomes for children who are residing in those areas that we are targeting at the moment. We have three key platforms, which are the kindergarten platform, the primary school platform and then any other community settings, which would include potentially community and family hubs and the like. So it is really where people gather and where they feel comfortable to be. The other part about it is that it has very much been for us to be providing opportunities for families to become familiar with and comfortable in these locations because this is where we see that families, particularly in the early years, get what they need and what their children need.

I have listed a number of components that sit within these programs; again, it is selective on what is needed. Playgroups are actually a very strong platform for us to be engaging, and that is often something that families become comfortable to come to. It is a good engagement strategy for us. Then those families may well identify that they are needing other supports. We work both on a group basis but also on an individual basis for those families. I have listed the program outcomes in there. I do not know if you need me to read all this, because you have that—you have the transcript—but you will see that they are in line with what the funding requirements are.

So I have just reiterated the program components. There is brief family support work, so that is where we will do individual work, often around a casework focus. There is parenting engagement; parenting groups; supported playgroups; secondary consultation, which is for professionals who might identify some needs for children; transitional support; and then referrals and linkages. We would just brainstorm with our staff and ask some of the families about the feedback that we have had. The 11 groups we are predominantly working with at the moment are listed there. It is a fairly broad group of community members that have come from diverse backgrounds. As I said, it is about having a dedicated worker. It is about opportunity to build a trusting relationship and confidence in seeking support. That is one of our underpinning principles.

We see that Connect Up is part of the system, and it is working within the system and within the communities. It is very much about collaboration. We do not think we can do it all ourselves. We strive to offer a culturally safe and welcoming environment and program activities, because then it is about being able to introduce what we think is useful and what people are asking for. An example of working collaboratively with professionals is that with Community Hubs Australia and with our playgroups what we have done is we have been able to coordinate what we were offering. So playgroups will run and the parents will be there, and then following that they will move straight into an ESL language group. Also there are cooking classes and the like. We actually look at working together, about how we can collaborate and provide a welcoming and safe place for people to come. In that, we see that this is about us then being able to bring in services that they need—so that concept of progressive universalism, which I have stumbled over. It might be about being able to support the NDIA to become engaged with these families, to make it a safe place for them to do it and to help the families to navigate the system. Of course families find our systems confusing, so therefore our job is about having to navigate and assist in that and often to be able to bring people into something like the playgroup and to provide

some additional individual support from that. I do not know if I made that clear – I am conscious of the time for you.

There is a lot of focus on trying to navigate the system—like the kindergarten-to-school transitions—and our assistance in being able to do that. We also see that this approach has really been useful in breaking down the barriers and some of that conscious and unconscious bias that operates, and that families within the community are getting to understand each other better and to feel more strongly about other cultures they are interested in and mainly the commonalities as well.

The literature and practice demonstrate that playgroups, as I said, are the soft-entry service responses. We see that it is also a very good place to give the opportunity for developmental learning for the children and to support the transitional needs of those children. It is also a great place to be able to assist parents and children with learning languages. So songs, story time and that sort of stuff, and using books from other cultures as well as using the English books or the songs. All of that sort of helps. Again it is in a safe place and families are comfortable because they are focused on their child and what they are doing.

It is also about us recognising that parents are supporting each other through building strong peer support with a focus on the child. It is also about us being able to creatively use interpreters and make sure that language is as accessible as we can make it. Fathers are encouraged to attend and to access information linkages. We often find that for these fathers and for men that they are actually after the information and once they get the information that it might break down some of the stigma of them thinking that their child is different or the like. It also helps them to navigate the system so they have greater control of what they are doing.

A very important part of this is about how we can actually provide practical support and an immediate response recognising what those families are needing at the time. So whether that is about household items or counselling or the like, we can provide that through our brokerage. Some of the systems improvements that we have recognised and we see that we are a part of continuing to do: we recognise that the school readiness funding that has been released is a really important component in how we can be adapting our program in this and being able to continue to support individual children's or group's needs. As I was saying, the continued cross-organisational collaboration: it is working with local government, it is working with other agencies, it is working with the schools, et cetera.

The ready access to trained interpreters can be a challenge. It is also about our staff being able to understand how to use interpreters and that we have the right interpreters to be engaging with the families and that those families trust using another interpreter. The issue with large organisations and being able to get information in their own language so that people can understand about large organisations, whether that is about schools or Centrelink or the like, so that they can actually read that, understand that and grow to trust those, because, as we know, people may not have had that experience in their own country prior to coming to Australia.

Using community elders to provide information and assist in facilitating access to isolated families we see as really important. Establishing and maintaining community facilities offering culturally safe spaces, ideally within universal settings, we highly value. We highly value that the schools and kindergartens and the like provide that space for us to come in. Being able to continue to shift some of our resourcing to some of that early intervention, that is a tension, but something we highly value, and building and finding ways to link families with those larger systems so that they can actually have greater independent trust in health systems, Centrelink and so forth.

In this presentation Section —and I might leave it for you; you can tell me how you want me to do this—we have actually put two case examples, but also this example which is about where in Children's Week as part of a community activity that we undertook we facilitated 90 families to be able to go and participate in the Barwon Valley Activity Centre. Those families told us they found it invaluable. Being able to see what is out there and being part of a much bigger community broke down some of that isolation.

Ms McAULIFFE: They also all sat down and had a picnic lunch afterwards, so it was a real community-building thing.

Ms COUZENS: I think we saw that photo this morning, didn't we?

Ms McAULIFFE: Oh, did you? Well, it was Community Hubs Australia, us and Ardoch.

Ms HOWE: So there are two case studies there and there is also some feedback from parents and universal stakeholders. I will leave that for your information.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your presentation. Are there any questions?

Ms SETTLE: There was just one. I was interested in your systems improvement and the suggestion around supporting community elders to provide information and assist in facilitating access for isolated families. I am just really interested in how you see that. How would that happen? How would the State facilitate that, and how would it operate?

Ms HOWE: Well, the State being a partner in this, I think this actually comes down to a very local response. Part of it is knowing who those people are, so it is using the systems, it is using our connections with other organisations such as Diversitat, but also talking. It is about us talking with local people about saying, ‘Who might be some people of influence?’.

We also at Bethany all have times when community elders will come in and talk to us, and talk to us about what might be some dos and don'ts and culturally relevant matters that our staff need to be aware of, but that is also about us then staying connected with those people. Particularly if there are things like if they know somebody that they think would get value from being involved, they might actually help facilitate that access but also it might be about them just coming in and being a part of the group at the time. I am thinking mainly from a group perspective, but them being there and being present, so it is actually about someone who might help continue that understanding about what was there. It is also about them being, that family being, connected with their own community outside what we are offering.

So that is what I mean, it is part of a system and a part of the response. We as an organisation do not have all of those, we do not have people employed with us who come from all of those communities, so how is it that we are engaging with those communities? How are we respecting elders and what they might be doing and what they might offer in our learnings as well?

Ms SETTLE: That probably leads on to the question around workforces. Have you got strategies about bringing in bilingual workers within Bethany?

Ms HOWE: Yes, sure. We will always work to ensure that we are having a diverse workforce, and I think in Geelong we can get more and more diverse cultures within our workforce as well. When I came to Geelong some years ago—15 years ago—they probably did not have that level of representation that it has today, and so we have a number of people but we do not have people from all of those communities.

Ms SETTLE: When we were at the school this morning there were two wonderful women who were just starting to volunteer, so I guess I am asking: is there a set pathway from volunteer to then trying to develop those skills?

Ms McAULIFFE: Yes. And I think that they are things that occur in some way or organically because they are identified as maybe the person who has been here the longest that is from the same cultural group. They might take on that informal support person with English and supporting and interpreting and then they are identified as the person that you might call, and certainly that is happening. Community Hubs Australia has been there 12 months, so we have been in those spaces 12 months from then, and you can see the collaboration that has occurred and the numbers of families from the number of communities that are coming in, so that is something certainly into the future that we would be looking at supporting and maybe looking at career pathways. In our parent groups there is the opportunity for the parents to tell us what it is that they are seeking and on occasions they have asked around some careers information and careers. So it is our role to be providing that for them and to be supporting them in that, and to be acknowledging those champions within the cultural groups and supporting them to achieve those outcomes.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both very much for coming along today. We really appreciate your time and your presentation. That is fantastic, so thank you. Just staying on the workforce area, are you encouraging

people in the CALD community, for example, to look at the free TAFE courses that are on offer in Geelong to get them through that employment pathway?

Ms HOWE: Yes, absolutely. It is our job to do that because the people might actually get some benefits, especially when their child is young, but then what happens when the child turns eight? We are looking at reintroducing a program that we developed, which was called Bridging the Gap—we will find a new name for it in the next phase—but that was very much about doing more of a case-management support and working alongside employment providers, employment training groups about being able to help again people navigate and be able to get linked in and get supported through that process of training. We did that several years ago through some independent money that we achieved and we saw some great results in that. It is like a number of pilots that we evaluated and felt were good. We then moved that into the JVEN strategy that has been working at Whittington.

We said that we need to be considering about expanding that again or looking at a similar strategy, but in our individual work in here, this is about being able to support individuals to think about what they want to do, what their aspirations are, what they might be able to take on initially, look at what experience they have had before and how that might fit in, link them in with Northern Futures and what is happening at the Gordon and a number of training opportunities. Part of it also I think is some of the work that we do and some of the outcomes I have seen in this that have happened. An example is people actually feeling confident that they have got something to offer. They might have worked through some of the early individual work. I have seen parents whose kids are transitioning to kindergarten. They have taken up the opportunity to say, ‘Oh, okay. If my child’s going to be here, I think I need to be part of this community’ and saying they will be part of the Parent Advisory Group, which is fantastic, because then they are actually picking up new skills and then it is about being able to assist incrementally—it does not have to go that slow; it can go where the parent is—with that confidence. I see giving them their say and their control about what they want to do—that is our job, to be helping facilitate that, not putting people through a corral of, ‘This is what you should do next’.

Ms COUZENS: In terms of playgroups, you talked about some of playgroups that you operate. Do you see that there are benefits to having multicultural playgroups as opposed to mainstream or—

Ms McAULIFFE: The playgroups that we offer are open to all. We actually find it really helpful to have all community groups, whether they be Anglo-Australian or multicultural. In that, it is really lovely to walk into a playgroup and see a group of mums around an activity with their children who come from all different cultures—that sharing that happens. The focus is the child and the child’s learning, so they are learning a lot from each other, they are learning about each other—that integration, that unconscious bias. We have got examples of mums saying, ‘I used to call them the “Eskimo people”’. Now I know her name and I talk to her about her children’. This is important. An Anglo mum came in with her baby that was only a couple of weeks old, and other mums are talking about, ‘Oh, in my culture we don’t leave the house for so long’. So there was that sharing and that learning from each other of different cultural practices, so from that we get that understanding and that acceptance of each other.

Ms HOWE: I think it is also like if parents are asking for that, that is something that we would certainly look at.

Ms COUZENS: I am not saying one way or the other. I am just asking the question.

Ms HOWE: Yes, and it is also not about having someone who is so isolated. You would like to encourage a number of people from a particular community who are there and are a part of that. Often one person might actually then bring along someone else. I am not sure how many people were there today, but in one of our playgroups we have got 32 families who go along. Our job is then to make sure that that remains a safe space and that we are resourcing that and not actually saying, ‘You can’t come’. It is dynamic, and it is not one size fits all.

Ms COUZENS: Are there any innovative ideas that Bethany have come up to address CALD child services, or anything you can think of to add?

Ms HOWE: I think a lot of it has been about the innovation of trying to look at an engagement and being able to encourage young people to participate more fully, not just in a playgroup but other engagement. I do not know that they are particularly innovative, but it is about using skills that people have, whether about cooking class or food classes, and that leads into healthy eating and all of that. But that is a way in which people come together and come together comfortably. Our emphasis is about that engagement and using engagement strategies that are there

Ms McAULIFFE: And strategically thinking about it. One of the playgroups starts at 9.30, so all the mums go to the school assembly and then come across to playgroup. So it is about thinking about how can we support these parents to feel okay about becoming engaged in other aspects of the school community. So they are going together as a group, they know each other from one setting, they feel okay about going in. And in doing that they are learning about lots of other aspects of that community, so they are actually integrating and becoming involved within, and they start to learn that they got something to offer.

Ms HOWE: I think the challenge for this often is around adapting other systems. We adapt and adapt with other systems, like a school, because this is not core work for a school. The schools will say, 'We're about learning and development'. This is about being able to find common language and common approaches, and things that complement being in that setting. That includes looking at the kindergartens that we go into. Our kindergartens often do not have a lot of space for this, so how do we actually use it? I think our innovation has probably come about from challenging some of those systems and helping find ways through that system to work. It is also about us advocating around the community hubs and the like. We do not see that these should operate out of our buildings. They have to operate out of community buildings. I think also our challenge is the level of flexibility that we ask our staff to actually respond to. That is why we have to keep making sure we are not biting off too much in this. We have come from a program where we had three disparate services. Being able to bring that together, make some sense of that within a framework, learning from what we did in the past—that I think has been our innovation to date. The evaluation that is coming out: when we looked at the literature review as part of the evaluation that Deakin did, there is not a lot of research that is around about the three parties, the partnership we have got, like schools, parents and organisations such as us. So in fact we see we are actually contributing to that learning and research.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your presentation. The next steps will be that the Committee will deliberate on all the submissions and next year we will be handing a report with strong recommendations to Government. If you would like to keep up-to-date, you may do so by following the Committee's web page. Thank you very much for taking the time.

Ms HOWE: And if you are interested in our evaluation, when it comes through I will be happy to forward that to you.

The CHAIR: Yes, sure—to our secretariat. That would be lovely, thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.