

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Melbourne—Monday, 14 October 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

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Mr Meng Heang Tak

Mr Bill Tilley

WITNESSES

Dr Melika Yassin Sheikh-Eldin, International and Community Development Manager,
and

Ms Carissa Gilham, Research Officer, AMES Australia.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you for being here. I declare open the public hearing of the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. All mobile telephones should now be turned off or to silent. 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 things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

Today I welcome Dr Melika Yassin Sheikh-Eldin, International and Community Development Manager, and also Ms Carissa Gilham, Research Officer, from AMES Australia. Who will be presenting first?

Ms GILHAM: I will start. Hi, everybody.

The CHAIR: Please state your name before you begin.

Ms GILHAM: Sure. Carissa Gilham of 7 Hopetoun Street, Kensington. I am here on behalf of AMES Australia. My colleague Melika and I are both here on behalf of AMES in support of the Victorian Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement for CALD Communities. Thank you for inviting us to participate in this important Inquiry.

AMES's experience lies in working with migrants and refugees from CALD backgrounds and directly and indirectly with their families, including small children. Our submission therefore draws on our extensive experience working alongside CALD communities, including direct consultation with CALD parents around the terms of this Inquiry. Melika and I will now briefly present on the main points in our submission.

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: Thank you, Carissa. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to be here with you today to try to give AMES's perspective as far as childhood engagement is concerned. I will start with mainly the social issues. The first thing is building awareness. CALD children are under-represented in preschool programs. Also the concept of childcare services is culturally unfamiliar to some communities. There is no awareness of the value of children attending these programs for their development. The second point is building capacity for the sector and CALD communities. Preschool education helps CALD children and their parents to benefit from practising their English language. It exposes children and parents to networking with other parents from mainstream society. It also enhances the sector's ability to support CALD communities to adjust to norms and expectations in their new environment. The third point is diversity in the workforce. It is very important to have cultural diversity in the early childhood sector, both in the staff and in the children's group, to improve engagement. Also this improves CALD communities' trust and access to services, because many of our client groups came to Australia as refugees and many of them have been in refugee camps for a long time and therefore they need time to build trust and so on.

Ms GILHAM: I am going to discuss more of the economic or the industry factors that we covered in our submission. So AMES has a unique model of vocational cross-delivery, including the certificate III in early childhood education and care. This model focuses on learning English alongside the vocational skills, which is quite a unique model in that a lot of our clients in this program are from a CALD background and it helps CALD communities to access the early childhood sector. In terms of free child care and adult education, this is extremely important to access programs like the AMEP—the adult migrant English program—for newly arrived migrants and refugees. Our experience shows that there is a significant uptake of this service in the AMEP. However, there is a lack of access to subsidised child care in other forms of adult education that is tailored for newly arrived migrant communities.

Regarding CALD women, like the Australian-born population, there are high rates of unpaid child care being provided by women in CALD communities, and this is actually more than the Australian-born population. Compounding this is not having family support and having potentially low English and a smaller network. This can lead to issues of isolation for women from a CALD background who might miss out on these opportunities, and for mothers particularly who have experienced a traumatic premigration experience this could lead to issues of separation anxiety—leaving your children with someone that you do not know. There are several initiatives that are successfully addressing this issue, which we have covered in our response to the Inquiry.

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: In developing programs, AMES relies on consultation with communities to see what their priorities are, how they want it to be done and so on. We run different types of consultations. We run central consultations four times a year, and this is to bring communities from different backgrounds together to share their experience and learn from each other. We also engage our communities in ethnospecific consultations, so each ethnic group might have different views and so on, and we try to bring all ideas and so on together to see what can be better for everyone. Also there are regional consultations, because each region might have a different concept and therefore, you know, we have to get feedback from those communities. Also if it is a specific topic, then we engage focus groups where we can get ideas from that community before we plan for a program or before we implement a program.

The CHAIR: We might start the questions from our members. I might start with a question. You have spoken about the workforce and how important it is to attract culturally diverse people into the workforce. Do you find that that is a challenge—attracting and actually bringing in, especially from new and emerging migrants, people from that sector into the workplace?

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: I can say that we have developed an international program, which we presented at the United Nations. This is called the Community Guides program. We are lucky to be the first point of contact for most of the new arrivals. We provide settlement and therefore we meet them at the airport and for a year we try to help them with all settlement needs.

So we started a program called the Community Guides. This is to engage people from new and emerging communities first of all to provide a culturally and linguistically appropriate service for clients but at the same time also to create employment opportunities. There are two main questions. I am of refugee background myself, and I have been through that experience. The first two questions are whether someone has got an Australian experience, and the second point is if they have a reference here in Australia. People cannot get them unless they have the opportunity to work. So based on that, when AMES started the settlement program in 2005 we planned to engage people from new and emerging communities. So we established this program; of course it needs resources and finance.

First of all it has to be casual. The profile always changes, and we cannot keep people who are from one community to support another community, so always we have to make it casual; and we try to also help those communities to link them to employment opportunities. So the first thing is to provide them with appropriate training. There was no funding at the beginning, but AMES was challenged to say, ‘We always talk about capacity building, but capacity building is not a word, it is an action. Therefore it has to be supported’, and AMES had to invest at least at the beginning to make it work and try to provide some support.

The support was mainly in training. So always it is said, ‘Many of the new and emerging communities do not attend training even if we have training’, but we do not ask what are the reasons for not attending. The main reason for not attending is that they have other responsibilities, so wherever they get opportunities to get some income, maybe like working with someone and so on, they will take that opportunity and leave the training. But if we provide some support, then that—

Ms GILHAM: Yes. I will just add to that. I think a lot of our communities have learned that it is a growing sector, especially other care industries as well as aged care and child care; they are growing sectors, and there is going to be more and more work in this area. So I think they are naturally drawn to the industry in that way, because for many people their priority is getting a job.

Mr NEWBURY: I note that your first recommendation was to build awareness of the importance of early childhood education, and you suggested perhaps community information sessions. I was interested, if you

would not mind unpacking it a little bit: how significant do you think the current disconnect is on the importance of early childhood education and how significant therefore would it be if there were an enhanced awareness? As I said, you mentioned community information sessions. Do you mind also going a bit further into what ways there would be to better increase awareness?

Ms GILHAM: I might just firstly say I think there is a huge difference between some migrant and refugee communities. I think we need to make sure we do not put everyone in the same basket. There is a huge diversity amongst different cohorts in terms of knowledge of the benefits of early childhood education for children's development and school readiness and that sort of thing. But in terms of how we might run some information sessions, do you have some thoughts on that?

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: Yes. I think, as you mentioned, we have new arrivals of different standards, of different levels of education and so on. For example, we used to have some refugees from Africa, and not just from Africa but from very remote areas, and now we have, for example, clients from Iraq or from Syria who are very high standard. Therefore we have to plan to provide information according to the standard and the level, because if I just try to provide information in a very low level for people who are not educated, people might not get interested, because it does not give any meaning to those who are highly educated. Therefore we have to identify first of all the needs: how can we engage with that particular community? Then, as I mentioned, you know, having bilingual or multilingual workers is very important. First of all, I am from, as I said, a new and emerging community. It is just the way you present. It is very important—how can you address those communities, what will be the best way, and so on, and making them interested.

The other thing is also sometimes we ask people to come to somewhere, so we have to be able to go there wherever they are so it makes it easier for people too. So cross-cultural workers, not only because they speak the language or they are from the background, the most important thing is to focus on giving the appropriate training for those cultural workers, whether it is from the Australian culture and understanding of the system, as well as relating it to their culture to see what will be the best way to address them, and identifying the right venues, where they are and the right time for people to come, because sometimes you run a session at 10 o'clock where people will say they are not interested or they are not ready to come. So always when we run our consultations we have to make sure to see what is the appropriate time. What time is it for them, the venues, the language support and so on—so making it more interesting.

Mr TAK: In terms of connecting the new arrivals with their community, what would help them to connect to their own community?

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: I think we are lucky to have the community guides, who are from different communities, and they are the ones who meet the clients in the first place. They are the ones who provide the information session in their language. We bring someone who speaks English and another one who speaks the language. So here we have the link between the communities and ourselves. Those community guides are our links, so we always keep them informed, and we get more information and feedback from them about the needs of the community. Based on that, we run consultations so we can hear from them: not only through the community guides, but we want them to tell us exactly how it has to be.

Mr TAK: Do you think faith organisations, like temples, churches and mosques, are also a good place to start off?

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: Yes, these are good because when they come, first—as part of the service delivery—we link them to schools, we link them to the health system and all these things. As part of that we also link them to their communities as well as to the faith-based places. So we do that, but we do not interfere. We link them, but we do not interfere.

Ms GILHAM: I mean, often we find communities do not really need our help to connect with their communities because pre-arrival they are already speaking to families and friends from their community to hear, 'Where is the best place to live in Melbourne? Where is my community?'. It is not always our job to connect; sometimes they are connecting themselves.

The CHAIR: Just on a final question, what are some of the barriers and challenges that are facing families in relation to accessing early childhood programs and services?

Ms GILHAM: Cost.

The CHAIR: The cost?

Ms GILHAM: Number one barrier, probably.

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: And language as well.

Ms GILHAM: Language and cost, yes. We held a consultation, like I mentioned, around the terms of the Inquiry, and it was across the board: everyone said cost. People are doing really flexible things to accommodate this. Like one couple, the mother took up night shifts because they could not afford child care. So she worked during the night so her husband could be home with the child during the night. They would take it in turns, but then you have to think what kind of effect that has on the family relationship, but people are doing what they can. It is a shame it is acting as a bit of a deterrent in some ways.

The CHAIR: So the costs from the beginning, as in accessing maternal and childhood services all the way to playgroup, kinder, are we talking from—

Ms GILHAM: I think it is more kindergarten and child care.

The CHAIR: From kindergarten and child care?

Ms GILHAM: Yes. So when parents want to access the workforce they cannot justify the cost.

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: I think also with new and emerging communities they are always hesitant to ask for help, because they think they are putting a lot of pressure on. So parents groups will be something which is really good because they can exchange ideas, and also if there are some kinds of mentors or volunteers who can help, like, parents to get connected to the services, because sometimes they just do not know where to go. But if there is any kind of support in the services—if it is a new family, are there volunteers to help them? Is there someone who can be a mentor, you know? So whenever they are stuck somewhere or they want to know more ideas or something, they can ring that person. So that would clearly help and make a difference.

The CHAIR: There being no further questions, I thank you on behalf of the Committee for presenting today. It was a very good submission, and hopefully you can keep up to date with the progress of the Inquiry. Again I thank Dr Melika Yassin Sheikh-Eldin and of course Carissa Gilham for being here today.

Dr SHEIKH-ELDIN: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.