

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Melbourne—Monday, 28 October 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

Mr Bill Tilley

WITNESSES

Dr Greg Gow, Program Leader, Education and Early Years, and

Ms Kathy Cooney, Communities of Practice Team Leader, Education and Early Years,
Foundation House.

The CHAIR: Good morning. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today. I now 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 at this point should be turned to silent. I welcome Dr Greg Gow, Program Leader, Education and Early Years, and Kathy Cooney, the Communities of Practice Team Leader, Education and Early Years, Foundation House.

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. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard—to my right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's web page as soon as possible.

I now invite you to proceed to a brief opening statement to the Committee of 5 to 10 minutes, which will then be followed by questions from the Committee. Welcome.

Dr GOW: Thank you very much, and thank you for this opportunity. As has been described, we are from the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, otherwise known as Foundation House, and particularly the Education and Early Years program, which we will explain to you a little bit more about as we discuss.

In terms of just perhaps giving you a little bit of background around Foundation House, we came into existence in 1987 and had our 30-year anniversary two years ago. Our particular focus is really about promoting the health, wellbeing and human rights of people of refugee backgrounds, and we are a statewide service. So we work right across metropolitan Melbourne, but we also follow settlement trends and patterns across regional and rural Victoria, and we partner with regional and rural services and schools and early years services as well.

In terms of Foundation House, what really informs our work is what we call direct services. So we have counsellor advocate teams that work directly with children and young people and families, but we also have shall we call it a sector development program or capacity-building program, where we work across the early years sector, and we also work intensively across the schools sector as well. So in many respects our approach is integrated, which is about working directly with children and families, and also working with systems and services.

The logic behind that really is in terms of our overall goal of seeing inclusive services that are aware of the challenges and experiences that people of refugee backgrounds have survived and how we can actually go about enabling services right across these services to put in place policies, processes and practices that create that inclusion in an ongoing way. We like to use the phrase 'a trauma recovery environment' in this aspect. People who have survived persecution and human rights violations or are of refugee backgrounds in many respects have had prolonged exposure to persecution and human rights violations. The impact that that has in terms of their capacity to transition into mainstream services is that there are barriers that are presented. One of our key messages with early years services and with schools is that they are the ideal place to support trauma recovery. Closely tied with that is the research that shows how important early intervention is in regard to positive settlement outcomes for people of refugee backgrounds. So that is really our rationale for our program of education and early years, where we actually consider that in education and early years—early years, foundational school—that transition in that zero to eight is really critical. In many respects it is what sets up young people for life. That is why we really have a multipronged approach to intervention, shall we say, with early years. Kathy will talk in more detail about our programs.

In terms of refugee backgrounds, we use an inclusive definition of ‘refugee’, which means obviously you have got new arrivals who have come under Australia’s humanitarian program, and we do work intensively with new arrivals, but we also have people who may have refugee-like experiences but did not come to Australia on a humanitarian visa. Also there are children and young people who were born in Australia whose parents or carers are of refugee backgrounds. One of the key things that we observe is the intergenerational impact of refugee experiences. Often that is aligned with experiences that parents or carers are dealing with in their own recovery, and in being able to actually support their children through early years and education there can be challenges. So that is a bit of a snapshot. I might hand over to you, Kathy, to talk in a bit more detail about our early years work.

Ms COONEY: Our work in early years has a couple of different prongs to it. First of all we have a lot of professional learning opportunities for people in this space: educators, maternal and child health nurses, community hub people—anyone working in early years. We do consultancy as well. Part of what we are doing there is exploring the barriers and the facilitators to inclusion in early years services in all of the universal early years services. We also do collaborative place-based projects establishing dialogue between newly arrived communities and the early years sectors. So that actually is how we get a lot of our information about resource development and the specific barriers for each new community. In particular, we did one in Brimbank with the Chin community. There were a lot of learnings that came out of that, and we documented that. One of the kindergartens, Sunshine kinder, was awarded an early years prize five years later for continuing to maintain the beautiful gains that they had made. We also have done one with the Assyrian-Chaldean community in Hume. That was in 2018–2019. We have just wound up one in the City of Whittlesea, which was in partnership with Enhanced Maternal Child Health and Whittlesea Community Connections. That was with Arabic-speaking women from a few different backgrounds, but all of refugee backgrounds and having been in Australia on an average of two years. So that is a long-term piece of work, at least 12 months, meeting regularly with that group and then bringing in the services that they would like to dialogue with and give advice to about inclusion.

The other really important piece of work we do is Community of Practices and, again, place-based locations, where we are working with about 10 different early years services; so that could be family day care, private kinders, local government kinders, long day care services, maternal and child health. That is again an 18-month project working with a whole-of-agency approach, looking at family-centred practice. A lot of resources come out of that work. It is intensively place-based, and we are currently working in Melton at the moment in that.

So that gives us a lot of information, I suppose, across the sector regarding refugee and asylum-seeking background families, which is really good. The collaborative place-based community practices—we have always done them in partnership with Best Start, which we feel has exactly the same goals as we have in our early years program. That has been a really fruitful partnership with the evidence base and cycles of improvement. That is how we feel we can raise some of the issues around the sector.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your presentation, and thank you for all the work that you do. I have got firsthand knowledge of the work that you do in Brimbank. I will start off with the questions. We were out in regional Victoria last week, and we heard there is a real challenge when it comes to communication—and I note your submission touched on communication—and also the access to interpreters, keeping up with the pressures of newly arrived refugees and how to communicate and provide those interpreting services. Can you, I suppose, add some of the experiences that you have had or your foundation has had?

Ms COONEY: Interpreters—I suppose primarily you would like staff to be well trained and to maintain their training in using interpreters. It is a body of knowledge where people need support in learning how to do that. One of the issues is that the department of education provide interpreters for their funded projects. But in long day care there will not be access to interpreters unless especially the private companies provide that. So that can be a real barrier. There just is not funding or incentive, perhaps, to use interpreters. We have lots of anecdotal stories about where things go terribly wrong because they are not using interpreters. They are using family members and sometimes even using bicultural educators, who are not interpreters, for very complex conversation. So we would be spending a lot of time supporting services to understand how they might use interpreters and the actual skills of doing it. I think you have found a really important point that it is not right through the sector.

The CHAIR: And also, just to add onto that, in your submission you talk about government and local government producing information on early years services. You have spoken about refugee backgrounds, and you have talked about the fact that it needs to be monitored for how well it has actually reached the audience. Could you, I suppose, add to that? When you talk about ‘monitor’, how do you envisage that to actually be enforced?

Ms COONEY: I do think that is our expertise, but we have seen many times where it has not been successful. With the Whittlesea community advisory group, they were very keen on having language-interpreted materials to read. The MCH app developer came to one of their meetings and he brought all the beautiful MCH flyers that are in Arabic. They are all in 10 community languages. They are not always the right community languages for the newly arrived groups, but of the group that were there that day—there were 10 there that day—none of them had ever seen the flyers before. There are a whole lot of barriers, I have been hearing, to getting those resources to families in their appointments. It was only a small anecdotal group, but none of them had seen them. They loved them. They all took photos of them and asked how to get them and disseminate them through the community. There were 30 children amongst them, as parents. Not all of them were up-to-date with their key age and stage visits with their maternal and child health, but they had been visiting and they had not been able to get this material. So it is how you monitor it.

The other thing we noticed in that group was that we went through a couple of websites, and as a group they found it quite humorous the translation of some of the materials, because it just did not make sense and they were trying to explain it to us. That was with Google translator as the basis. There are some words like ‘council’, they said that there is not an Arabic word that is equivalent for local government council. There of course is not an Arabic equivalent for maternal and child health. So you cannot just translate it in that way.

I am trying to exactly remember the quote, but it was the value that ‘If you interpret material, if you put a sign up in Arabic or if you have fliers in Arabic, then we know you really want us to come to your service and we feel respected’. And even if you use an interpreter, there is something about going to that extra effort to have good materials. Then they actually added, ‘And if you employ someone who speaks our language, then you really do want us to come’. It was quite an interesting view of it and worth the effort.

Dr GOW: I might just sort of build on what Kathy shared. I mean, central to our approach is partnership and building partnerships with communities. As Kathy has been highlighting there, creating pathways for people from refugee background to eventually find employment in early years services as well is critical. They provide an important bridge to the community. That whole area of building the capacity of early years services to develop those partnerships is critical.

The CHAIR: The Committee has heard about, and of course we know, the benefits of having a multicultural and bilingual task force that reflects the community. It is always one that gives confidence to newly arrived migrants and also to established community groups as well. Can I just ask: with your foundation what are some of the steps that you have taken to promote a workforce that is reflective of diversity?

Dr GOW: Our own workforce?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Dr GOW: Well, I mean, that is a work in progress. Often people from refugee backgrounds do enter into very specialised roles, you know, the bicultural roles. I think that is the challenge: where you have got people working, for example, as multicultural education aides, bicultural workers or family liaison workers, how you can create ways for them to actually transition into mainstream roles in an organisation. I think, for example, just speaking about the education and early years program, we do have one staff member who recently—well, within a number of years—arrived from Syria, and you really have to be aware of what is going on in your organisation in terms of creating inclusion around assumptions and modes of operating, shall we say, that are dominant in our society and being a bit more flexible around that. But I think we have got a lot of room for improvement in diversifying our workforce.

Ms COONEY: I think one of the problems is that with employment pathways you get to a stage where unless you are getting lots of support it is going to be very hard. We do have two of our counsellor-advocates

who started as bicultural workers and have been supported to study and are now working as counsellor-advocates. But it is quite a big issue, isn't it, creating those pathways so that people do not get stuck at the—

The CHAIR: We have heard about mentoring and providing support programs on the ground level through local councils and organisations, but if you could give any level of government advice on how to tackle this extreme challenge at the moment, and encouraging a much more diverse reflective workforce, what would it be?

Ms COONEY: I am thinking perhaps more micro than what you want to think, but I see so many good early years settings where they gently encourage the parents with no English to stay. They teach them how you can read to all the children in your own language even if the book is in English, and really modelling and facilitating that and providing an extremely welcoming environment. Sunshine Kindergarten had a parent in that situation. She was a volunteer first, then that was where she did her placements when she started doing her certificates in child care and then she got employment there. Now she has moved on to another role. But it is that very careful, supportive work. Early years educators just have that understanding that they work with the whole family, and it is very much a family-centred practice, so with a very small input of education around what is refugee and asylum seeking background and how it impacts, I think they become very good advocates on that level of supporting people into that space and others.

Ms SETTLE: I am a regional MP, so I tend to look at things through that view. I was interested that a lot of the programs obviously you are talking about are placed based. When you get to somewhere like Ballarat, where there are not very strong and distinct communities, I guess the question is: where do you see very targeted services versus the mainstream service? Really in somewhere like Ballarat it will need to work through what is a very mainstream service because there are not the strong communities that you might have in some of these other areas.

Dr GOW: So with the specialist services around refugee background groups that are settling in say, for example, Ballarat, what we do is we partner with—I am not sure of the name of the organisation in Ballarat—a community-based organisation there and support them to be able to develop that specialist practice, as it were. Obviously in a regional-rural area you cannot really open up a distinct specialist service, so we basically build the capacity of a mainstream service. The way that we do that is we have a rural-regional coordinator that visits services and works with them. Also, particularly in regard to schools, we work with schools in regional-rural areas as well.

Ms SETTLE: So you work directly with the schools or through the local organisations?

Dr GOW: We will work with the schools as well and build their capacity to engage with families, and we do the same with early years services in regional-rural. For example, in Ballarat we have been working quite a lot with Catholic Education in Ballarat. We have a number of schools that we have delivered professional learning to as well. So I think with regional-rural work, the numbers are actually obviously smaller. One of our key messages, by the way, is it is not always about the numbers, because you never really know what is going to happen with settlement trends and patterns. If you look at regional-rural Victoria—for example, Hamilton-Colac—we are actually seeing significant numbers of people in secondary settlement, where people are basically leaving Melbourne and moving there. So it may well be that Ballarat could have significant rises in numbers in the next few years. We do not know. That is why our message is it is really important to build the capacity of early years services and schools to respond.

That is what we see in, for example, Bendigo. If you just go back five years, we actually did a refugee education support program class to eight schools in Bendigo maybe four years ago. We are doing a new one, starting next year, for another four years. That is simply because the numbers have risen so dramatically. We worked with Kangaroo Flat Primary School, and they had two students. This was probably about four years ago. Now they have got over 60 of refugee backgrounds. So we really think with rural-regional work it is about building the capacity of mainstream services and schools and early years services.

Mr TAK: Thank you. I am the Member for Clarinda. That is in the south-east part of the City of Greater Dandenong—Kingston, Monash and a bit of Glen Eira. I came to Australia in 1996 as part of the humanitarian program, but my parents both are survivors of the Killing Fields. Before I go on I would just like to say how

wonderful the Foundation House is and how grateful I am for the assistance it gave to refugee and migrant background people in the south-east at the time. That was 20 years ago, but it was very important when I came here.

Dr GOW: Thank you.

Mr TAK: With my short time working as an interpreter, and the Chair has already touched a bit on that, would you think the translated documents—On the Fly and all of that—would assist or rather interpreting interaction is better?

Ms COONEY: I think it is just a process to interpret materials well. It is not about just sending it to the service and getting the words interpreted; it needs to be checked with communities that it is relevant.

We have also got a large number of communities and individuals in communities who are not literate in their first language. So the advice from certainly the Whittlesea community advisers was to use a whole variety of means. There is a very large WhatsApp group that is run through one of the bicultural workers in that area. The Facebook groups suggested putting up billboards in language. They are saying that if there was a billboard in Arabic they would stop and take notice of it, because there is nothing like that being done. So, yes, a flyer would be good if it was carefully interpreted and checked and then kept up to date, but you need all of the other means as well, I think.

It is not hard to check it, because when you ask people and they have never seen this material or they tell you that they cannot understand what you are trying to say there, you can get really good feedback that the materials are not good enough. Certainly to keep up with the newly arrived communities and have the materials ready takes a bit of an investment, I think.

Mr TAK: That is right. And in terms of the benefit of early childhood, do you think the CALD communities are aware of the benefit, or there are things that are a burden on the parents from taking their kids to attend early childhood?

Ms COONEY: I think unless people understand what early childhood is, it is very hard with all of the stresses you have got—with settlement, with your own recovery from trauma, with limited finances. As a parent, unless you really understand the value of early years, it is very hard to get your child there every day.

One of the models that we use is that kinder teachers in particular are really available to talk to parents, and whatever your question is they will explain it beautifully. But often families who have had a refugee background do not feel confident to go up to an expert, which is how they perceive the kinder teacher, and ask, ‘Why are the children just playing? Why aren’t you teaching them the alphabet?’, those sorts of questions. So it really probably needs bicultural workers helping them understand the value of it and then the long-term value of it. Once communities get it, I think they become incredibly good advocates and make sure children do attend.

But one of our biggest problems is that we cannot find out data around how many children are attending. Anecdotally, whenever I meet a prep teacher in my work I say, ‘How many of the children do you think went to kindergarten?’. I get answers that about 50 per cent of refugee background children have been to kindergarten, which means that with the long-term benefits of kinder it is a terrible thing that children are missing out. We do know of some areas that have got interventions to ensure that all children have been to kinder before they come to prep, but again, you have got to put resources into it. In our work with Best Start we do not have the data to say that a small number of refugee background children are not attending all of the early years services. We do not have the data, so then we cannot say that we have done this intervention or that intervention and we have increased the attendance or the participation. So then it is very hard for an organisation like, say, Best Start in the local area to make that a target audience, because we do not have the data.

Mr TAK: That’s right.

Dr GOW: Could I just add onto that? One of our main areas that we are wanting to work on is integrating early years in schools. Obviously there are community hubs that are functioning in different locations at

schools, and I think if early years services are able to be co-located on schools sites, that actually says a lot to parent-carers about the role and the significance of those services. I am just mentioning that.

Mr TAK: Just a final question. Greater Dandenong is a refugee welcome zone, but from my own experience, and I just want to hear from you, I have heard through my friend who works in a bank that now there are more Karen or Burmese refugees that have moved on into the regions—Traralgon, Morwell and Moe. I think that has burdened some in terms of education because it used to be just one place in Dandenong and now it has spread. Is that the experience?

Dr GOW: Yes, particularly with people from the Myanmar-Burma region they have secondary settlement often occurring. We are seeing a lot of settlement in the Yarra Ranges and Maroondah local government areas of people from that part of the world. Also up in Bendigo is a settlement hub, and there was the enterprise that happened in a rural town near Bendigo with the poultry industry where a lot of people relocated for that as well.

I think that is what we see with refugee background communities. Often people who are from rural or regional backgrounds in their home countries may likely want to actually secondary-settle elsewhere in Victoria out of a city. The Chin and Karen are examples of that, where they have tended to want to actually try their luck in a rural or regional setting. In many respects actually what happens is you get a sort of chain migration that occurs where relatives and others will follow them. At least from Foundation House's perspective we think that that is a positive thing. People are obviously arriving in Melbourne where housing is quite expensive and often people feel quite isolated, and some people are well suited to regional or rural settings. That is our sort of view on that.

Ms COONEY: But like you said before, it has implications for our services. We have good schools and early years services, and if we can make sure they are very welcoming and able to include people, that is a really good intervention that we would love to see.

The CHAIR: Just a final two questions: in relation to data collection you just spoke about the deficiencies and some of the challenges. What can the Victorian Government do to improve this situation?

Ms COONEY: Probably asking—collecting the data. When people enrol in kinder, sometimes that data is collected and sometimes it is not, in central registration. We do not think the data is being collected for maternal and child health. And then how is it reported back? So it would be quite complicated to collect it, and there are other people that can talk about the way that is being done in health. It is not our area of expertise. But it would take some resources, I imagine, to do that. The next step would be to make that information available so that we could use it for planning across the state.

It is going to be very difficult, especially a little bit tricky with the secondary settlement. Especially once people have been here four or five years you have to ask about country of birth, languages spoken, but that is not enough to be able to really identify. We know the impact of the refugee experience is intergenerational, so with families, even if they have been here 10 years, we would like to know when working with their children that there is a refugee background there. That would be very helpful to know.

The CHAIR: Foundation House recommends early years service staff should receive appropriate training about trauma-informed care. Can you explain to the committee what trauma-informed care might look like in a childcare setting?

Ms COONEY: There is some work that has been done in childcare settings in terms of increasing staff capacity to identify trauma and to work in trauma-informed ways. It is possibly not in a systematised way. For us, we would work with organisations and train around the signs and symptoms that you might be expecting. We very much focus on the whole family. It is not just what you would be observing in this child; you would also be looking at how you support parents who come from that background. So it is about education and it is about talking about case studies, just increasing the understanding and really putting a layer on top of the family-centred practice that early years is so capable of doing. It is just adding to that, I think.

Dr GOW: I think really one of our main messages is that when you work with children of refugee backgrounds then you need to expect that you are going to see trauma reactions and disclosures. Trauma reaction can be triggered by any variety of everyday things, or seemingly everyday things for us. For example, we have seen with the children that have come from the conflict in Syria the time frame from their fleeing Syria

and their time in Lebanon, for example, to then settlement here is quite brief. So we have a lot of reports of children being highly agitated, and fear and anxiety, really, are the dominant manifestations around trauma reactions. So a lot of our work is about enabling the early years staff to actually confidently feel that they can respond in a way that supports recovery with children and young people. So when we talk about being trauma informed, it is really about understanding and being able to actually respond in a way that enables that child to settle and to continue to learn. It is not just about the individual early years worker, it is also about the setting and how we create safety and control so that a child can actually feel—and a parent-carer—that they are safe, physically safe. Central to that too is building connections and belonging. There is a whole range of strategies that early years services can do that can make a huge difference around responding to traumatised children. So that is really what we do with our work. We enable an early years service to do an audit, to basically say, ‘Look, what are we currently doing that’s supporting children of refugee backgrounds that’s working well, and how can we actually build on that?’. They do an audit and then they develop an action plan, and we work with them to put that in place across the whole service. While we are doing that we will also deliver professional learning with the staff as well. So it is not just about individual staff, it is also about the setting, and that is why we use the phrase ‘trauma recovery environment’. That is a big part of our professional learning that we do.

The CHAIR: Thank you. On behalf of the Committee can I thank you for your presentation and taking the time out today to inform the Committee. I would like to also thank Foundation House for all the work that you do. Your submission will now take part in the final deliberations of the Committee. Next year the Committee will table some strong recommendations to Government, and I am sure your submission will take part in that. To keep updated you can follow us on the website. I am sure we will keep you informed on the progress.

Dr GOW: Thank you very much.

Ms COONEY: May I add one thing?

The CHAIR: Sure.

Ms COONEY: We would really dearly love to see the criteria for early start kinder expanded to increase newly arrived children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds. That would mean children would have three-year-old and four-year-old kinder. It is so welcoming that three-year-old kinder is going to be rolled out, but if you look at the areas where it is being rolled out, it will not be where our mostly refugee and asylum-seeking families are settling. That would make such a difference if that was extended. Thank you for letting me add that.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.