

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Bendigo—Wednesday, 23 October 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

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Ms Michaela Settle

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Mr Bill Tilley

WITNESSES

Ms Melissa Rockes, Project Manager, Communities for Children Bendigo; and

Ms Julia Feiss, Home-Start Worker/Supported Playgroup Facilitator, Baptcare.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. At this stage, phones should be turned to silent. I welcome Melissa Rockes, the project manager of Communities for Children Bendigo, and Julia Feiss of Baptcare is also here today. 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. 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. I now invite you to proceed with a brief, 5- to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Welcome.

Ms ROCKES: Thank you, and thanks for the opportunity to present today. I have provided everybody a handout. What I thought might be useful is to understand what Communities for Children is. Are you familiar with the Communities for Children program?

Ms COUZENS: No.

Ms ROCKES: Communities for Children is a Department of Social Services-funded program. There are 52 sites across Australia. We have had the program here in Bendigo since 2004 and over that period of time there has been a whole lot of changes to it, but the focus is about supporting families and children from nought to 12 years to access services so they can be the best they can be.

In Bendigo in 2014 the program was reimagined, and what came out of that revisiting of what can we really do here to make the biggest impact to families of our community was to bring together our community partners who deliver projects to work in a collaborative way, not that that had not been done previously, but to be very intentional with that and to draw on theories relating to a collective model impact or collective impact approach, so that there was this real sense that we were working to one plan.

That plan was to look at: addressing family violence, addressing language and literacy in the early years, a focus on vocational and educational pathways for parents, and building parenting skills and confidence. Those four things were chosen because we know that if we can address those things, outcomes for children and families will be wonderful. So as a collective we agreed that this was what we were going to work towards, and we have a very large theory of change and plan around that.

So today I am here representing our seven project partners. I have listed them here. We have a number of direct service delivery programs, and Julia is a part of one of those. So we have the Parent-Child Mother Goose program that runs here in Bendigo. We have a supported playgroups model, a particular model of supporting the facilitators of supported playgroups, which Jules is a part of. And we also have a program called Off to an Early Start, which is about supporting families to enrol in and access child care and kindergarten services and is a very flexible program looking at addressing the barriers for individual families in attending and getting to those early-years services.

As well as those direct services, we have four projects that have more of a community development lens. We have a language and literacy worker based at Bendigo Health; we have a culturally safe early years access worker based at Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative; and we have a project that is called Voice of the Family, which sits with Noah's Ark, and that is a project about listening to the experiences of families accessing early years services and taking those learnings to influence our community and the way the system is working for those families. The last one is family violence. We have a project with the Centre for Non-Violence around early years family violence. So that is who we are. Jules was not planning necessarily to present today, but I think she will be able to value-add to the information that I have got to say.

When we were contacted by Ray and asked to present here I said, 'I think that sounds wonderful, but I want to be able to talk to and hear from our project workers who are on the ground'. So today I am sharing messages from all of those projects. I guess, when I listened to what they were communicating to me, there were a number of themes. The biggest one, I think from what you said earlier, is in relation to interpreters. Then we have got a bit of content around translated material. But something that I really wanted to capture was around professional knowledge, competence and confidence in engaging with CALD families, and some successes in this space from within our own programs. It was wonderful to actually be able to sit here and listen to people who are having a lived experience. Certainly our feedback is from a professional's perspective, but I want to reiterate that those voices of the lived experience are probably more profound and important.

So what did we actually come up with? What we came up with was that in order to have quality engagement with CALD families we need to be able to communicate well with them. That requires competent, accessible interpreters, and that is a bit of an issue. We have got issues around the skills and knowledge of interpreters and this is particularly prevalent when we are talking about women's and children's needs. Many of our interpreters here in Bendigo are male and that can be really difficult for some families, but it is also around how things are being translated for families as well. One of the workers fed back to me the impact of language and the impact that can have on outcomes. She was talking about a family violence situation and the literal interpretation was 'The telephone cord found its way around her neck'—whereas that is strangulation. That makes a really big difference to how court orders are written—that is in a legal sense—but it also has an impact around health as well, so it is really significant.

The other thing is that because we have a small CALD community here in Bendigo, interpreters are often known and that can become a really sensitive and difficult issue to manage as well. Some services opt to use a telephone system, but again, in small communities even names are known, and so there is often the need to not use a name in those interviews and that can be a barrier to fostering relationships—not only are you needing to use a telephone interpreter, you are also not using that person's name.

One of the other implications of using interpreters is the amount of time that takes. For services, if you are allocated 45 minutes to do an intake with a family and you are having to have everything translated through an interpreter, we are talking about 3 to 4 hours for an intake session. As Julia pointed out to me earlier, that is for one formal intake moment. When we are working with families there are so many ad hoc contacts that we often have back and forth and interpreters are not available for that, so it means the quality of service provision is diminished.

I had varied feedback in relation to cost. Some workers said that they were able to access free interpreting. Others said that there was a cost and that that could at times be prohibitive. The other thing that I think is really significant is that children are often used to translate and interpret for their parents, and that is not appropriate. From, informally at the end of kinder, 'Tell mum blah, blah, blah', to a more formal setting with a health professional, it is really a difficult one to play. If there is not someone there and you think the child might understand, then you have got to do that, but I do not think anybody wants that to be the method of communication.

Ms FEISS: Especially when it is about the child—

Ms ROCKES: Oh, most definitely.

Ms FEISS: and if we are trying to talk about how they are learning or what is happening for them in a setting.

I probably echo a lot of the sentiments you have already heard here today. My role at Baptcare is that I work in the Home-Start program, and we match families with volunteer mentors for parenting support. We are seeing quite a few more families from CALD backgrounds. That is a challenge for us, because that changes the way we train our volunteer mentors, but we are also seeing how important it is and how necessary it is that these families gather that support. I am thinking of one family in particular of refugee background and the barriers that they are facing every single day around access. Finance is terribly stressful for them and then they got one of those robot debts from Centrelink for \$9000. Mum nearly passed out at that. There are also barriers to accessing things like swimming lessons and trying to provide practical support around school uniforms.

For Mum even to get her drivers licence, which she so desperately wants—one, she cannot afford the lesson. She got \$50, so she booked a lesson, but she could not take her child in the car for the lesson. She then needed somebody to care for the child for that hour, which was very difficult. It came down to a neighbour in the end, but that was by no means something that she could rely on. That is just an example, I suppose, of the issues she is facing.

The main thing I see in my supported playgroup—we have a lot of families come along to that—is the difficulty in accessing services. When I invited several of them today no-one chose to come, but I did ask what feedback they might have, and it was around accessing service, completing forms and needing help with that stuff. Child care is an absolute minefield for these families—if they can get it, if their visa allows. They all want to learn English but if their visa is not appropriate, they cannot. So their access, I suppose, to being able to enter more broadly into the community when it comes to employment and stuff is very limited.

Ms ROCKES: One of the things that was really highlighted from talking to all of our different staff was around this concept of professional knowledge competence and confidence in engaging with CALD families. From everybody I spoke with there was this absolutely high desire to meet the needs of CALD families. However, because we do not have high numbers in Bendigo they are not doing this regularly, so their skills have diminished. They might have attended some fabulous training, and yet they might put into practice twice a year. And that is really tricky. I do not know what the answers are to managing that, but I think it is a reality of professionals working in this space. And with that as well, when you are not doing something regularly and then a process changes your confidence just plummets.

I think one of the other things on this theme was around the delicate nature of navigating differing cultural perspectives. When we are thinking about early years, the differences in child rearing practices and the staff wanting to respect and acknowledge a family's child rearing practices, we have to think about how to balance that with safety issues, for example, or their own beliefs and community beliefs around that. This is particularly relevant with some of our programs that are looking at parenting around routines and bedtime and sleep and getting your child to child care, and it is a complex space to navigate. Although there is a desire and a reflection to do it well, there was a sense that we are not quite getting it right.

The other thing around that is around the differing cultural perspectives of the role of the professional worker. So much of our work is collaborative work with parents: what do you want for your child, and how is that going to look and work? For many families there is an experience of power over them and so there is always deference—'You're the expert; you tell me'—or the perspective of, 'You're the teacher. The teacher will tell us'. That is something that came through very strongly, and that has a real implication on the delivery of service. We as a professional community might talk about, 'Family knows their situation best and we really want to see the families identifying their own needs'. For a CALD family who has always been told, 'We know better than you', that is completely foreign and a really difficult space to navigate as well.

We do have some success stories to share, though. Most workers I spoke with suggested that the CALD family they were working with have really good connections to either LCMS or to community. Certainly that would not be all families but the majority felt like there was good connection there and that they were able to be supported to access services. One worker talked about a kindergarten who knew they had a big Karen population coming in for the next year so organised proactively an interpreter to attend their parent information night and how that had worked really well and held them in good stead for future relationships with those families. We know this stuff is about the relationship, because once trust takes place what we see is that is trickled through the community. So then more families will feel confident to engage with that particular worker or that particular service.

The other thing that was really important was about walking alongside the family. If a referral needed to be made to another service, that could not be done with the traditional, 'Here's the card, off you go', but instead had to be, 'I'll come along with you; I'll introduce you'. Doing that in a very warm way was a way of establishing and supporting that family to move through and navigate the service system.

One of the things that I have not actually included in my notes—you just tell me to stop talking when you want to ask questions—and something that I was thinking about as I was coming here today was that successful engagement is more than just attendance and participation; it is actually about inclusion. The confidence of

early years staff to include families and children in their programs is an ongoing learning process. When I hear those community representatives saying, ‘It was really good to go to that’, what are we doing as a community to actually skill ourselves up to do that better in being proactive and engaging? We heard about the playgroups. They are multicultural playgroups; they are not mainstream playgroups. Supported playgroup—again, it is not a mainstream playgroup. So this concept of inclusion beyond participation is really important to capture.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both for your presentation—we really appreciate it—and for your submissions. It is really useful for us to have that information and to hear from you obviously. You have covered a few points that were of interest to me. One of the things that I am interested to get your feedback on is around the employment of people from community and skilling them up to be part of those organisations that deliver service. What is your view on that, and are you actively looking at employing people from community in the services?

Ms ROCKES: Like I said before, it is all about relationships. If we are wanting to support community engagement and there is the ability to employ people from those communities, it makes sense. I know within early years here in Bendigo there has been Havilah Road kinder. I am not sure if they have been mentioned already today. They won a grant through which they have been able to employ a Karen worker to work in their service, because they had a high population from that community. It is certainly something that I think organisations need to be thinking really carefully about. In our seven projects at the moment we do not actually have that.

Where Communities for Children is at in its funding cycle—our funding runs through until June 2020. I think we will be re-funded, but it has not been announced as yet. But it means we are moving into a needs analysis phase, where we are actually looking at what the community need is to be able to think about how we can be responsive to that. Certainly this opportunity today to think about CALD perspectives is really welcomed from my perspective as a project manager. But the idea of tailoring services we need to balance with ensuring that mainstream services are skilled so that those specialist services can refer out, and if that means developing the relationship by employment, I think that makes sense.

Ms COUZENS: I am not sure if you touched on this in your discussion earlier about cultural training. The people working in the organisations—are they having cultural training on a regular basis or—

Ms ROCKES: It probably depends on what kind of service you sit with. I certainly know that if you are a Commonwealth-funded child care service, you have access to this and if you are a State-funded kindergarten service, you have access to this and that those services have self-determination about what that looks like. So it would depend on priorities, interests, staff confidence and competence et cetera. There is heaps of training out there. I just cannot tell you what is being accessed currently in Bendigo.

Ms FEISS: Yes, and I do not think it is specific enough to cultures that we are seeing in Bendigo necessarily.

Ms ROCKES: Well, I know that was available. I can talk out of turn a little bit in that once upon a time I worked in the program called the inclusion support program, which provided support to Commonwealth-funded child care services. The program is now called the Victorian Inclusion Agency, so things have changed slightly. There was a lot of training available around things like child-rearing practices, using interpreters et cetera. It was all based in Melbourne, and they would happily come to Bendigo; we had lots of training in Bendigo—for a fee. So that is where it becomes cost prohibitive, because if you have a childcare centre that has X amount of children attending and families attending and you have a very small minority, you need to think about what your budget for professional development looks like and where the greatest need is. I am not saying that is okay, but that is the reality of it. I know that there were very tailored programs available that were very good, and often they would link with local community members—but there was the cost to come from Melbourne.

Ms COUZENS: Would you agree that it should be mandatory for those children’s services to have cultural training?

Ms ROCKES: Well, I think that under quality assurance there is a very strong push to ensure that there is—

Ms FEISS: That there is cultural competency.

Ms ROCKES: Yes, that is right. I think what is interesting, though, is how that is interpreted, because if you went to a centre here today which did not have any identified CALD population, they would still need to talk and still need to respond to that criteria of quality around cultural needs. But how that is done and how meaningful that is is a whole other story. So I do not know about 'mandatory'—I am not sure about that as a concept. What I think is that there are already processes in place, but—

Ms COUZENS: But they are not taken up, though, necessarily.

Ms ROCKES: I think some services are doing an incredible job.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, some are and some are not.

Ms ROCKES: That is right, but I do not know that things that are mandatory, that that is always an effective way of working. I think it is about creating a change in the community mindset and about what culture is actually about and how we skill staff in that space, and that needs to come from a training perspective as part of their courses and things like that as well as ongoing leadership in this area. Because we also know that with early years, many of these services are affected by who their leaders are, so it is about leaders being informed of this as well. I think I have skirted around your question there.

Ms COUZENS: You mentioned volunteers doing some work with—is it the Bapcare component?

Ms ROCKES: Yes.

Ms COUZENS: So I was interested in what the volunteers are actually doing—if you could explain that a little bit.

Ms FEISS: Families are referred—or they can refer themselves—but they are usually referred via a service such as maternal and child health or family services or Child First. We work with them in the home once a week for 2 hours. Largely we are looking to support their mental health and wellbeing. It is around parenting, but really it is about the parent, not the child, I should say. It is for children who are nought to five, so before they go to school we will work with the family. For the length of time, it could be six months or it could be two years. It depends on the family. Volunteers are working with them in a variety of ways, offering emotional support, practical support, engaging with the child and assisting mum, perhaps, with various appointments, to get better access to health as well.

Ms COUZENS: Is that a big program? How many volunteers do you have?

Ms FEISS: No, we have 30 families that we work with at any one time and 30 volunteers thereabouts, give or take. The EFT for the program is 1.6, and we only have an opportunity to train volunteers once a year. It is an eight-week course to train, and at the moment we are training 12 new volunteers.

Ms COUZENS: Would you say that that is a successful program?

Ms FEISS: Absolutely, it is a fabulous program. It is a step-up, step-down program. We keep a lot of families out of secondary services, and we help a lot of families before they fall into a hole. So it really targets a lot of different vulnerabilities, and now that services working with CALD families are more aware, too, we are getting more referrals for that, which is so helpful because, again, it is about 'How do you catch the bus from here to kindergarten? How can we enrol you in this? How about I come and take you to playgroup?'—well, not take you—'meet you there, and we can do this together?'. So it is sort of walking with, not doing for.

Ms COUZENS: I am interested in what sort of promotional material you have for CALD communities in terms of accessing services.

Ms ROCKES: Within our language and literacy program there have been a number of documents translated into Karen, primarily. A lot of the other programs under our umbrella can access, not specific documents for that program but relevant documents through some of the other peak bodies that will have information about child-rearing practices and things like that in other languages. But there is never enough. It costs a lot of money,

unfortunately. Bendigo Health are currently having the pregnancy handbook translated into Karen, and that will be a really, really useful tool for those families as well.

Ms COUZENS: And just the final question: what are the gaps that you see or the key barriers that are an issue?

Ms FEISS: I think the interpreters are really the biggest issue for families.

Ms ROCKES: And I think it is staff confidence. There is goodwill, but not being sure of how to navigate this space. That was what came out very clearly. Quality interpreters in a timely way—I mean, what about waiting a week? That was shocking. I have not heard stories like that, but I have heard stories about interpreters being half an hour late for an appointment and the impact that has on the relationship, then, ongoing—

Ms FEISS: It isolates people and then they do not bother. They do not try and they let it go because there are 50 other things more important or that require my effort.

Ms COUZENS: I suppose a good solution is to have people from community working in those roles.

Ms FEISS: Yes.

Ms ROCKES: And I guess to have an understanding of our seven projects. The highest EFT is 0.5, so it is really limited. We just do not have capacity to recruit an additional staff member in that space—not to say we would not like to. But what is the biggest gap? Resources.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both.

The CHAIR: I think Christine has done all the questions.

Ms COUZENS: I am sorry.

The CHAIR: No, that is fine. We will conclude on this note. I take this opportunity to thank you on behalf of the Committee for taking the time to present. It means a lot to us. You can also keep up to date on our web page on the progress of the Committee. Again, I thank you.

Ms FEISS: Thank you.

Ms ROCKES: Thanks for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.