

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 September 2019

MEMBERS

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WITNESSES

Ms Tamsin Jowett, President, and

Ms Gayle Vermont, Programs Manager, Aspergers Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. 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 that privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is also being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearings is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

I understand you are going to give a 5-minute presentation, and then we will proceed with questions after that.

Visual presentation.

Ms JOWETT: Good afternoon, and thank you, honourable Chair, and thank you to the respected infrastructure committee for inviting us to present. We really appreciate it. I am Tamsin Jowett, I am the President of Aspergers Victoria, which is a volunteer role. I have lived experience with family with Asperger's, and I have been with Aspergers Victoria for 10 years and since 2016 as President. Gayle Vermont is a counsellor and has been working in the disability sector for over 40 years. She has 25 years of working specifically with Aspergers and supporting them in employment and relationships and beyond, and she has been appointed as our Programs Manager at Aspergers Victoria.

To give you a bit of background, we are the only organisation that is focused on Aspergers. We are specialists, and we are the voice of the lived experience of Aspergers in employment and beyond. Aspergers Victoria became involved in employment because when I became President we had done a members survey in which it was very clear that the key issue in our community was employment and the impacts of unemployment across the community, and we could see the waste of talent that was there. So we have really worked on this issue and we have researched it. We have been running pilot programs, and Gayle has been doing a lot on developing programs that work and knows the sector.

Today we speak for Aspergers. If they came, they would be too traumatised to be present, and it would take them a few days to recover, so we have summarised what their thoughts are for you. To give you an explanation of Asperger's versus autism, basically for Asperger's we are talking about the more cognitively able. They do not have an intellectual disability; they are not cognitively challenged. However, some in our community have social challenges, some are socially able. The socially able are the ones who are experts and professionals in our community; the socially challenged are the ones that we are really focused on and we are here to talk about with you today.

Just to give you a bit of an understanding of where we were. In 2015, when we started on this, the statistic for autism unemployment was 31.5%. This is the statistic that La Trobe University presented recently, and it is four times the rate of unemployment of people with general disability. For people without a disability, at that stage they were saying it was 5.3, which is a huge cost to the economy, and this is only going to increase unless something changes.

We can outline for you the benefits of the diversity, but I am not sure if you want to go into the more general questions. This is a question that you said you would like us to answer. I can talk to it if you like first.

The CHAIR: Yes, sure.

Ms JOWETT: It has been proven in research in the Willing to Work national inquiry the tangible benefits of employing people with diversity as well as the benefits to organisations' reputation and the business. It makes business sense to employ Aspergers. It requires a slightly less onerous investment than some disabilities. The main thing that we have seen, and has been in research, is that the managers become better managers for all staff. It is not just for Aspergers. They learn how to communicate better; they learn to have better systems of support. We have been told anecdotally from our experiences that there is a better work atmosphere and a better interaction among co-workers because they understand the differences. There is less judgement; there is more

support. Even better, that generalisation is taken into their personal life, so at home they understand difference in their community.

A key thing with Asperger's is it is a different way of thinking; it is a different perspective—highly creative, usually high IQ, thinking outside the box when they come into a business. They can see the systems better than other brains—the systems thinking—and the changes to systems that they have made are fantastic. But also, having them in the business, the systems need to change if they are to be employed effectively, and those system changes in HR and recruitment benefit all, not just the Aspergers and autistics. And there is an associated increase in productivity that has been seen. It is not just locally; it is internationally, and it is in Federal employers and State employers where we have been working in the DHHS.

The CHAIR: Can you give an example of how productivity has increased?

Ms JOWETT: They talk about how the work environment is better, there is a better quality of work and there is a better team performance, so there is quite a different delivery, they see, coming through when you have a different thinker involved in the team. To measure productivity, a lot of businesses do not measure it generally, so then to actually measure it for having a diverse thinker in the team is difficult. But it is something that needs to be measured.

Ms VERMONT: I will give you a little example. With one of our local employers—and I can think of two at the moment, and DEET is a good example—we have got a young person in there who has been out of work for four years. He has lived in his bedroom. As he got into that job—and he has been quite challenged getting into the job—within the first, I think, month of him working he had already solved two of the major problems that they had been working on for two years. That is a common story you hear, particularly in the IT field—that is really common—because it comes with a very new way of thinking that just brings those fresh eyes and very much systems. This young boy in particular, he has got this project he is meant to be doing, and he said, 'I think if I went away and wrote a program I could do it. This is going to take me months to do'. He said, 'If I write a program, then I can sell the program to other organisations'. That is what you are looking at; that is the type of worker that you are looking at.

Ms CONNOLLY: How do you think employers should be adjusting their application and interview processes to address the needs of jobseekers with Asperger's?

Ms JOWETT: There is a whole systemic change that needs to happen for those who have communication challenges. There is talk of moving to videos and highly computer-assessed initial interviews. Well, an Asperger has a different profile and different communication style, which that computer may eliminate immediately. So there is that sort of structural challenge. Interviews are a social skills based assessment, and that is not why they are there most of the time. A lot of these jobs are expert roles where the social skills might come in to just being part of a team, not how you interview.

Ms VERMONT: Jobs Victoria did an amazing job recently, and that was the—I always forget—employment engagement team. They did an amazing job with setting up interviews that were much more aspie friendly. What they did is things like provide the questions beforehand. They did very simple things that anyone could do. They made sure that there was very clear language—there were no guessey-type questions where you have got to guess what the answer is. So it made it a very relaxed atmosphere and a very simple atmosphere. In particular they did it with two people who are very socially challenged. I have never seen one of them ever smile before, and he smiled at the interviewer.

The CHAIR: Wow.

Ms VERMONT: I cannot commend Jobs Victoria enough, because they have really done an amazing job.

Ms JOWETT: You can have interview buddies as well.

Ms VERMONT: You can do interview buddies. There are many strategies you can use. The major challenge is the language—the literalness and the abstract nature of language—that we use in interviews. Also the social skills you need—how you greet people when you come in. Within the first 7 seconds of an interview people have already made a judgement about that person, particularly with an aspie, who does not look you in

the eye. And if they look you in the eye, then they cannot think, or they may look down to answer a question or may be very abrupt with the answer, because they will give you the answer that you have asked rather than elaborate on an answer. So there is that.

Sometimes in the interview a lot of aspies really struggle with videos and even seeing themselves on videos. Group interviews are a pain in the neck. One of our young men has missed out on even getting an interview, because the interview question, or the application question, was, 'Do you like group work?'. Of course he said no, but he can do group work! He does not like it.

Ms ADDISON: He does not like it.

Ms VERMONT: I would have answered the question exactly the same, but I knew what they were getting at. He just answered the question, and so he missed out.

Ms ADDISON: He was literal.

Ms VERMONT: He was literal. Exactly.

Ms JOWETT: Very literal.

Ms VERMONT: And to teach people not to be literal is really, really hard. I have been working with Jesuit Social Services, and we work with Specialisterne as well to up-skill the job coaches there. I was working with Rob, who is the head honcho in Fitzroy. He came in, and he was showing me how direct he was. I sat down with this man, who was really, really quite a challenging situation, and he said to me, 'Oh, that's straight', and I went, 'Mm-hmm, that's straight'. So it is about how do we learn? Because we as non-aspies tend to be very obtuse in the way we speak. We think we are being rude.

I am actually a relationship counsellor, and when I do relationship counselling most men say to me, 'But my wife, she wants me to read her mind, and I can't read minds', and the wife goes, 'But if he really loved me, he'd know what I was thinking'. So I try and teach every non-aspie how to speak straight, and that is a really good thing. That is a positive thing from aspies. We need to learn to speak straight.

Ms ADDISON: I have been a teacher for the last 12 years. I only stopped teaching in November, so I have taught a lot of children with Asperger's, and everything you are saying is ringing true in terms of my direct instruction in terms of no ambiguity.

Ms JOWETT: Yes.

Ms VERMONT: That is right.

Ms ADDISON: In thinking about support that we can provide people with Asperger's, what on-the-job support would you think would be worthwhile and would add value in terms of not only for the individual with Asperger's but also the workplace around them?

Ms VERMONT: Can I move to my model? I need to go to my model. Let's go to my model.

Visual presentation.

Ms VERMONT: We are new in this space. One of the things that we do at Aspergers Victoria is we say, 'We actually speak aspie, and our job is to teach other people to speak aspie'. We are really lucky because we understand the non-aspie world and the aspie world. One of the most important things is that any successful employment program has to have a really good job coach that speaks aspie. At the moment at Jesuit Social Services and Specialisterne—I am working with both those organisations and a number of others—we are going in and working with their job coaches, because what I find all the time is that people say, 'Oh no, we know Asperger's', but in reality they know the theory, but they do not know it on the ground and what it really means. That is where our lived experience is absolutely vital. We are the experts in the field.

I go to schools. We work in schools. We work in a whole range of places. It was amazing listening to the disability organisations talk, because we add value to those. We do not want to be a separate employment

agency. We want to add value to the agencies that already exist. We do not want to duplicate services, we want to educate.

Ms CONNOLLY: So you have got ongoing specific education for co-workers?

Ms VERMONT: Yes, and one of the most important things we need—we have the certified job coach—is to educate the employer. It is absolutely critical. It is not a one-off education, because people go, ‘Yes, yes, yes’, then they start to work with the individual, the aspie employee, but it does not make sense until they have actually worked with the aspie.

Ms JOWETT: And they are in the environment.

Ms VERMONT: Then what you find is a buddy is absolutely critical because that trained buddy is the person who does all the social coaching and does the employment. Again, and we have heard it over and over in this Inquiry, it is not just gaining employment; it is maintaining employment, and that is really, really critical. So with these things—having the employer educated and the buddy—you are going to keep the person employed.

Co-workers are really, really important and educating them as well, so you are not only just educating a work area; you have got to educate the whole system, and that is what has happened at Medibank. We were involved with Medibank with an employee there who had come to us for employment support—middle management level—and the bottom line is that he had been misunderstood and it had really caused a lot of problems. We were very fortunate and privileged to be able to come in. By working with the employer and his manager and him, instead of being, you know, almost out the door, he ended up getting an employee of the month award. Then he had a video made and now they have a neurodiversity hub set up and HR are actually looking at their interview practices. But that was just one intervention, and that manager there sent us a letter saying that she was one of the ones who said she is a much better manager now of everybody because she has now learned to listen and to hear and to be able to see what difference really is. So for me it is really, really important because not only are we upskilling a jobseeker or an employee—that is the pre and the post—but we are also educating the whole work environment, and it is really, really critical.

We are currently working on a job coaching program where we can actually educate, because our aspie jobseekers fall through the cracks. Jobactive and the DES providers do not serve our people very well at all. The JVEN—as I said, that is why we are working with Jesuit Social Services—are beginning, but I am coaching their coaches. Again—and I cannot speak more highly of the employment engagement team—they are working really hard to keep us engaged and keep employers coming through so that we can have throughput for our people and to provide that support. So it is really important that we look at all avenues on that little triangle in order to get successful, because this will make a lot of economic sense.

There are many models out there at the moment—you have got the Specialisterne model, you have the DXC model and you have got the JVEN model; there are a variety of models—and there is actually one that I think is much more economically sound and one that you can sell to businesses much more productively because you do not need intense support on the job, you need to educate the people on the job. That then means that we can almost do ourselves out of business. We can do ourselves out of a job because then if there are any aspie employees coming in, because they have got better recruitment processes and they know what an aspie is on the job, they do not need the support; they have got it internally. It is a much more productive way of doing things.

Ms JOWETT: And Specialisterne and DXC tend to have a pod, don't they?

Ms VERMONT: They do pods, yes.

Ms JOWETT: They have pods and aspies altogether.

Ms VERMONT: But Specialisterne is a very interesting model, particularly the Rise program. We are involved in the Rise program. Aspergers Victoria is reviewing the Rise program to make it much more systemic so that you can move it to different areas. But that pod is a really interesting one because we are putting in a throughput model where you start, and then with the supports you move through to other employment opportunities.

Ms JOWETT: State Government organisations. So that is in DHHS.

Ms VERMONT: And we are in DET and DELWP—there are whole lots of really good—

Ms JOWETT: It is spreading.

Ms VERMONT: And Public Transport Victoria, they are on their way to doing some very good things.

The CHAIR: So there are about 30,000 aspies in Victoria, is that right, roughly?

Ms VERMONT: Those are the ones we can count. It is very hard to know.

Ms JOWETT: There is no data.

The CHAIR: There is no hard data on that.

Ms VERMONT: That is our biggest problem with Asperger's. When you have got autism now under the DSM-5, it makes it really difficult to actually identify how many people, because you put in people who are cognitively able and cognitively not able. That is one of the reasons why we have kept Aspergers Victoria as a name because we do not work with people who are cognitively challenged, and I have done that for many, many years. As you heard from the previous speakers in the disability organisations, you need very different strategies to work with intellectual disability.

Ms JOWETT: And we were a small not-for-profit, so it is focused, and actually it has been a good strategy.

Ms VERMONT: And add 'unfunded'.

Ms JOWETT: Unfunded. We are only just getting funding now. Once we got our strategy right and our programs, through Gayle, now we are getting funding.

Ms VERMONT: We are hoping to, yes.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: I just had a point of clarity just around the certified job coach. Is that intended as someone that the employer employs in a paid role, or is it someone from a social service that pops in and out of the workplace?

Ms VERMONT: I use the word 'certified' because we are developing a program to actually say 'If you've got this certification, we can guarantee that you really know Asperger's and that you'll be able to work'. At the moment I have been pulled into a situation where an organisation has put some aspies in a workplace. They were meant to know what they were doing, but in reality they have not actually understood what it meant to have these particular challenges in the workplace, and it really has not been identified for probably three months. Now it has got to the stage where this person is really not appropriate for the work they are doing, but what do you do? It is really traumatising for this person because they have been out of work and they are going to be out of work. So without the right training—and that is why the in-depth pre and post-employment evaluation is absolutely critical, because sometimes the pre-employment does not actually identify a number of the issues that come out on the job, and that is again because of context blindness. It can be about executive functioning, it can be about mind-blindness—there can be many issues that do not come up in pre-employment stuff that you see on the job.

So, for me, why I put 'certified' in is because it is not saying 'any job coach'; it is actually someone who really understands Asperger's. I use another example, because when we talk about disability—that was one of the hardest things when I was listening to the other disability organisations talk—it is about homogenisation. I use an analogy. It is a little bit like if you are a linguist, it does not mean you can speak. You might understand language, but there are all separate little languages under there, each with their own nuances, their syntax—all that type of stuff. And Asperger's has its own syntax. It is not the same as autism. It is not the same as physical disability. It is not the same as sensory. It is different. And I have worked in all those areas. I have worked in intellectual disability, and I know that what you do in those fields is very different from what we do in Asperger's.

One of the things is even understanding sensory sensitivities. Sensory sensitivities are something that the average person does not really understand. Until you can really understand what that means on the job and how that challenges productivity—it is really, really important. So there are many issues that we as non-aspies do not really understand until you have the lived experience, and we work with aspies every day. I say I am aspidified at the moment because we hear what the challenges are on a daily basis.

Ms JOWETT: And we do have the challenge that ‘Really, if you have met one Asperger, you have met one Asperger’. They are all different, and it does take a trained eye to really see what is going on.

The CHAIR: Very good. Thank you very much. Thanks for coming in.

Ms JOWETT: Thank you for hearing us.

Committee adjourned.