

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Geelong—Thursday, 24 October 2019

MEMBERS

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WITNESS

Ms Robyn Stevens, Director, Community Life, City of Greater Geelong.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and welcome.

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. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check.

It is a 5-minute presentation. We will ask questions as we go. Thank you for being here.

Ms STEVENS: Thank you very much. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Wadawurrung Traditional Owners of this land and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are part of the Greater Geelong community today.

As you know, my name is Robyn Stevens. I am the Director of Community Life with the City of Greater Geelong. I would thank you, Chair, and Committee members, and welcome you to Geelong to discuss this important topic. The city is blessed with many organisations, all with the goal of a better economy and maximising employment here in Geelong, particularly for those people for whom this has been difficult due to factors often outside their control. I would like to acknowledge that there are many other contributors after me today who are all working in this space. I would like to acknowledge my colleagues from the Economy, Investment and Attraction Department led by Brett Luxford and the other members of the Community Life team who have contributed to the submission and for pulling together the information today.

Importantly, the most significant benefit of placing disadvantaged jobseekers into sustainable employment is that it provides pathways out of disadvantage for individuals and their families. Supporting those most in need in our community to achieve jobs and economic independence has broader and long-term benefits to the wider community in improving equity, opportunities for participation and community pride. What is widely known, however, is that disadvantaged jobseekers often present with multiple and complex needs, which create significant barriers for people to be job ready and to remain in work. These barriers can include things such as mental illness, substance abuse, unstable housing or homelessness, low educational attainment, lack of transport or limited financial resources to pay for work-related expenses, and there are many more.

In order to achieve successful outcomes for people, in many circumstances the job itself is not enough. What is needed is a response that includes wraparound services underpinned by partnerships that include service providers, education, employers and business that support the individual and their family at the centre of the system to achieve their goals. Responses need to be provided locally and be flexible to adapt to individual needs, with funding models that can also adapt. Current employment service funding models are limited in their support of this approach, with short-term targets and rigid guidelines to work within. Evidence of this is seen through the outcomes achieved through the city's own JVEN-funded program, with around half the participants securing employment but only a third sustaining it for the 26-week period. While this program has resulted in successful outcomes for some people, the most disadvantaged with the most complex needs are often the cohort that generally find it more difficult to succeed in this environment.

Here in Geelong we have some of the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria. We also have a large number of organisations across the community, business and education sectors that are committed to achieving tangible change for people experiencing disadvantage in our community. This commitment has delivered a range of innovative programs and solutions aimed at supporting our most vulnerable people. Some of these include Whittington Works; the regional industry sector employment, or RISE, program; and Geelong Regional Opportunities for Work, or GROW, as opportunities to support economic participation. Others include the Geelong Project, aimed at supporting school retention and addressing youth homelessness. All of these are factors in people in our community who are disadvantaged achieving successful outcomes and securing employment in an ongoing way.

These innovative programs have been shaped around the needs of those accessing them and have provided many benefits to participants, the wider community and the business sector in improving economic participation. Many of these programs have the capacity to be adapted across locations and sectors, and benefit more Victorians. What is needed to successfully achieve this is long-term integrated funding; a culture of

educational attainment and lifelong learning with a focus on school completion, local delivery, employment readiness and job preparation; and the ability to address the needs of the local industry through employer engagement and demand-led employment models. I welcome your consideration of our input today and thank you for the opportunity to present.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Robyn. Obviously in Newcomb, Whittington, Corio, Norlane, though the unemployment rate generally is quite low compared to what we were five or six years ago, it is relatively really high in those particular areas. You know Northern Futures are doing a great job. They will present a bit later on.

Ms STEVENS: Yes.

The CHAIR: Whittington Works is another program that we have got.

Ms STEVENS: Yes.

The CHAIR: In terms of social procurement, we have a framework of social procurement. The jail that is being built, for example, in my electorate of Lara will have a component of social procurement to let locals, long-term unemployed, be part of that project. Does the City of Greater Geelong have a social procurement policy?

Ms STEVENS: We do have social procurement. We are a signatory to the GROW Compact, so as part of that there is social procurement around purchasing local products as far as is possible and also local employment opportunities, particularly with a focus on people from disadvantaged communities. So, yes, that is all part of it. We are also reviewing our broader procurement policies and programs to make sure that social procurement initiatives are included as part of the criteria for our tenders and any contracts that we let to ensure that people who need more support to participate in employment are there. It also increases the focus more on social outcomes rather than the contract being around the cost, so broader factors than just 'Is this the cheapest contract provider?'—as opposed to what are the outcomes for the community that may mean that the contract is let for a slightly higher rate because of the benefits that that will drive in our local economy.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Robyn, you mentioned that only about one-third are getting to the 26-week mark in your JVEN program.

Ms STEVENS: Yes.

Mr BLACKWOOD: What changes do you think would help improve that situation? It has been funded until May 2020, so what changes would you like to see if the program is funded beyond May 2020?

Ms STEVENS: The structure of JVEN as it currently stands is really purely focused on the achievement of the 26-week outcomes, so the issues around people's readiness to enter employment and their ability to have the skills—not just the job skills to do the task that they are employed to do but actually life skills around how you write a résumé, how you understand how you get yourself to work, what are the childcare arrangements you might need. So all of those things that are around a person that makes them successful.

Mr BLACKWOOD: To be job ready.

Ms STEVENS: To be job ready. They are the parts that are a bit of a gap. We have bolted that on through our Whittington Works program, so we do try and funnel the participants through the job readiness component with the education to employment aspects of Whittington Works and also the case management part, so that as an overall part of the funded program would be helpful. I think the targets to be achieved as set out through the schedule make it really difficult.

It is almost like if you do not succeed after your 26 weeks, it is really hard for the participant to have a sense of being successful because 'I couldn't maintain it, so then I fall off the program' essentially. What we know about the people in these communities is that has possibly been a lot of their life experience—that there has not been the investment in them—and they need the allowance for them to make mistakes and for things to go wrong and for the program to actually support them to work through that and be successful rather than, 'You haven't met the targets so we need to move on to something more'. It is difficult for us as a provider in terms of

trying to get the targets, because your funding is target driven, to then also have the capacity to be able to address those really complex needs with those people.

The other part is the support for employers, which I think is critical. The employers that we are working with are fantastic. They are really committed, they are engaged, but it is not easy for them or the staff in their businesses often where you have got someone coming in who has a lot of challenges that they need to address. So the employers and their other staff and their teams need support and systems that they can access in terms of being able to fulfil their role in helping that person to succeed as well. That is the other side of it, I think. It is there, but it needs a bit more focus around understanding and systems that you can have in place to support people to be able to flex around if something goes wrong—how they might not risk their employment through that small error.

Ms ADDISON: I am very interested in people's access to internet services and because we are seeing more and more that that is the avenue to apply for a job or to seek employment, and a lack of digital literacy in internet access can be a real barrier to employment. To what extent do these barriers impact jobseekers in the Geelong region, and how could they be addressed?

Ms STEVENS: In the areas that we are talking about in terms of Corio, Norlane, Whittington, they have some of the lowest—I am not sure of the percentages, but they certainly have some of the lowest—internet access in our communities and also access to devices. That has a significant impact. If people need to be in an environment that is open in office hours to be able to apply for a job and then follow up, that is quite difficult, so that is a barrier that has come up through our programs in terms of how people access that. We are working through a range of digital connection programs in the City of Greater Geelong ourselves in terms of increasing community internet access to help to overcome that. But it is certainly a barrier right now for many of those people.

Mr ROWSWELL: Do you have a view on the 26-week requirement and, as I understand it, the 15 hours per week as well? Is that the right amount of time? Should it be more, should it be less? We have asked other witnesses about this particular time frame and we have got different views on the matter. A particular concern for me is that after the 26 weeks then what happens. Should there be other measures in place at the end of the 26 weeks that more accurately measure success or otherwise? Are you able to speak to that, Robyn?

Ms STEVENS: Clearly you need a level of time that enables a person to understand and commit to what it means to have a job and turn up week on week, so a shorter program I do not think would be effective. The 26 weeks itself is not necessarily a bad thing, but then it is how it is measured as part of the overall program. What happens if there is a gap in the middle? How does that all work? It is the flexibility around that. Obviously at the end of the program we do not want people to be employed for 26 weeks and then be back in unemployment, so with the idea that it is a sustainable job that someone has to secure for a period of time to be successful in the program, we need measures in the things that we fund. We understand all of that. But in reality they need to be ongoing jobs for people. The 15 hours is good for people transitioning into work.

But what we know are not seen in the unemployment stats are people who are underemployed. We know that one of the issues in those communities that we are talking about is that people do not have full-time work. So it is about, if it is a 15-hour job, how does it transition to a full-time opportunity? And if it is only a 15-hour job, how do we support that person into securing either an additional job that has got 15 hours or some other mechanism to give them a living wage, essentially—because if you are the primary breadwinner, 15 hours is not enough to support a family or probably yourself, really, if you are looking at the costs of rent and the like. Does that answer your question?

Mr ROWSWELL: Broadly, yes. Thank you, Robyn.

Ms RYAN: Robyn, just in a slightly broader sense I am really interested to know whether Geelong has mapped its labour market conditions. I know the Victorian skills commissioner has been doing quite a lot of this work to understand whether people are being pointed towards the right fields, effectively, to land in long-term, secure employment. One of the things that I was really interested by a couple of years ago was that when the skills commissioner first did that piece of work in Mildura he found that there was a huge disparity between where people were being encouraged to skill and the actual labour market shortages that were out there.

Does Geelong have a good sense of where its growth is going to be? And how do you actually match people towards that in where you are encouraging them to train and to pick up work?

Ms STEVENS: I think that in terms of a holistic map I could not answer that, but what I understand through the programs that we are involved in and some of the conversations that I have had with our economic development team is that we do have an understanding of our growth areas—so something like health care and social assistance is a large growth area. Obviously our construction and trade sector is increasing with the large amount of residential development and new industry coming to the area, so they are the areas that we have been focusing on in terms of where we have tried to target.

Our RISE program, for example, does just that. That is working with the housing construction sector in terms of getting young people, particularly young people from Corio, Norlane and Whittington, into apprenticeships and traineeships in that sector. What we do know, however, is that the knowledge of the broader apprenticeship sector is limited and needs wider promotion. Everyone knows about a chippy and an electrician and a plumber but there is a lot more breadth in terms of opportunities for people, and potentially opportunities for traineeships in the hospitality and tourism sector, which is also a growth area down here.

So the model that has been established in RISE has been really effective in working in a niche, essentially, albeit a large one, in getting young people into trades. But the model could easily be adapted across other trade or job group areas because it is about the support that is provided for the person who is trying to secure the employment and the relationship with the employer. The employers will come to us around the things that are needed, and a case management approach in partnership with Gforce is critical in the successful outcomes there. So there is a level of knowledge and I think a fairly good understanding of where our growth sectors are here, but a detailed map, I could not tell you.

Ms ADDISON: We have been to Bendigo and Ballarat for the last two days, and particularly in Bendigo they talked about the importance of having a driver's licence. Geelong is obviously bigger than Bendigo and Ballarat. How important is it for disadvantaged jobseekers to be able to drive and have a car? Is that an issue for Geelong?

Ms STEVENS: Yes, that has come up as one of the most significant barriers, particularly in the RISE program because the trade school is in East Geelong. If you live in Corio or Norlane, it can be an hour-and-a-half bus ride to get from Corio to East Geelong and if you are starting at 7.30, that is pretty early. In the absence of a really robust public transport system, yes, it is a significant issue and certainly something that has come up for people. We do run the L2P program and have huge numbers and a huge waiting list for that for people who, either through lack of access to a vehicle or whatever it is—

Ms ADDISON: Or the 120 hours.

Ms STEVENS: Or to get the 120 hours. We have really high demand for that program, which is an indicator that that is a significant issue for lots of young people. Also too we have had significant growth in refugee and migrant communities, particularly in Corio and Norlane, and for them to also be able to participate in employment the need for a licence is critical.

The CHAIR: Evaluating employment programs—how do you evaluate whether they are working or not, and how often do you do that?

Ms STEVENS: With our JVEN program we have been evaluating that obviously under the program guidelines, so responding to that. As part of that we are also doing some qualitative evaluation around the experiences of people participating in the program. We would do that probably six monthly to 12 monthly around that. The RISE program is an annual evaluation. They are up to their sixth intake of people into that regional industry apprenticeships program. They will be evaluating that at the end of each program in terms of what the outcomes are and what needs to change.

Mr ROWSWELL: Do you have any views on increasing the completion rate to more than 30% through the JVEN program?

Ms STEVENS: I would love to get 100% because that is a fantastic outcome for people. Regardless of whether you think the structure of it is the right structure, certainly the opportunity to get people into employment for 26 weeks is pretty cool. We feel quite disappointed that we have not been able to achieve that. We are engaging with a lot of people through Whittington Works and through JVEN. There are a lot of people who are keen and really enthusiastic to get back into employment, so it is disappointing. However, we have still got a little while to go, and we have been continually working on our relationships with employers, most recently Go Traffic.

Mr ROWSWELL: So is that the biggest barrier to success at this point in time or to greater success? Is it at an employer level?

Ms STEVENS: It is a combination of the employers and having the jobs available—so that demand-led side of things—because you cannot just go to an employer and say, ‘Can you create me five jobs in your business?’, because they have got a business model they are running to. It is about being able to be open to what they are looking for and then being able to support the people we are working with to get holistically the skills they need to be able to participate in the jobs that are there, because that is the best potential for success.

Ms RYAN: So when people are coming into the program would you be guiding them towards where you know those shortages are, or would you be skilling them in what they are looking for? Do you know what I mean? How much of that is kind of push-pull?

Ms STEVENS: It is probably a combination of both. Obviously you are not going to try and encourage someone to work in an area that they are totally not interested in, because that is not going to be successful. But it is about understanding what the issues are for that person and where they want to be in their life and then determining whether the JVEN program is in fact the right program for them, and if it is not, trying to work with them to get into something that is more suitable to get them where they want to be. Certainly advice around where the opportunities are is really critical for them to understand—‘If I wanted X job but they only employ five people a year, maybe I need to think about Y job because there are more opportunities’. They are decisions every person has to make in terms of employment, but it is working with them to make sure that match is there.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Robyn, what is roughly the age group that you are dealing with here in Geelong in that situation?

Ms STEVENS: In our JVEN program? We have got more middle-aged people. The RISE program is much more targeted to young people. So we have probably got two key cohorts that we are working with and it is a bit around the demographic of the areas.

Ms RYAN: Do you have any sense of, particularly for that middle-aged cohort, how long they have been out of the workforce on average? Sorry, I know that is a very specific question.

Ms STEVENS: Yes. It can vary. Over the course of the program we have had some people that have been out for many years due to a number of reasons, whether it is family circumstances or women particularly who might have left the workforce to raise a family and then cannot get back in. It can be people who have had—

The CHAIR: Redundancies through Ford.

Ms STEVENS: Redundancy and all of those things and so have needed to retrain into something else to be able to secure a new job. The majority of them are probably in the longer-term unemployment category.

Ms RYAN: What is the split of gender?

Ms STEVENS: I do not know that off the top of my head. It is more women than men, I believe. We can certainly send you those stats. It is more women than men. For a lot of the women the common theme seems to be: we have been out of the workforce due to family reasons—whatever they may be—for a period of time and cannot get back in, particularly in that Whittington area.

Ms ADDISON: Confidence is obviously a big issue when it comes to getting a job, and we know that people's confidence is often absolutely battered through the job-seeking process. What do your programs do to try to build people's confidence up? Whilst they may have the skills and ability, they may not really be able to put themselves forward in a job interview or a job environment to be able to say, 'Do you know what? I am fantastic for this job'.

Ms STEVENS: Yes, so that is really through those front-end education-to-employment and job-readiness programs that we offer. So they are not just about, 'Do you have a licence?', 'Can you get there?', and 'Have you got a résumé?'. It is about working with people to understand what those barriers are to them successfully getting a job, and that can be things around confidence. Particularly if you have got people with mental illness, that can be a barrier for them in terms of feeling confident about their level of wellness to be able to participate in employment. So working with them, the one-on-one job coaching is really important in terms of that, as well as the broader programs.

On networking, anecdotally feedback we have from participants who enter through our Whittington program is that the networks that they establish in terms of just coming to the centre and connecting with other people who are also looking for jobs and are in the situation reduce that sense of 'I'm worthless and the only one in this situation'. You can see that other people are equally having challenges. So that peer support, which is really not a specifically structured part of the program, is a benefit that the participants feel in terms of their participation and is really, really important. That is the other critical part about having local service provision—because if you do not have that and you just have a central model that funnels out to people, that opportunity would be lost, which would be a real shame.

The CHAIR: Any further questions?

Ms RYAN: I just have one quick one: you mentioned in your presentation about the need for those wraparound services. Can you just explain a little bit about how that would work? According to your submission about 48% of participants face 11 to 15 barriers to work.

Ms STEVENS: Yes.

Ms RYAN: So when you have those people coming through the door, do you have a structure in place where you work with other agencies to refer, and how does that process play out?

Ms STEVENS: Yes, absolutely we do, because the job service provider cannot be the solution for all of the issues that people present with, given the number and the complexity. The critical success to some of these programs is the partnership. One of the challenges is the competition in the service system around that and how we share out employers and how we share out people looking for jobs.

So there is a model where the person is at the centre and works with a caseworker. We have got a similar program in RISE around where you have sort of a key contact that helps someone to navigate the system so that they can access those services. And creating a less competitive environment so people are more open with information and resources is a way to better achieve that, I think, and then making sure that the central point coordinates all the information so that we can track the level of success. For example, if a person is needing a mental health care plan and they have a number of goals as part of that, there is regular checking in on how you are going so that that caseworker-type model can refer them back to say, 'Oh, look, it's not really working'. Because what often happens is that the people will not want to necessarily say that they have not been following their care plan. So it is about creating that safe environment with a person at the centre and a system working around them rather than the more fragmented approach which can evolve at times with a lot of providers.

Ms RYAN: How do you create a less competitive environment, because obviously everyone is chasing a funding pool.

Ms STEVENS: Yes.

Ms RYAN: And I have had other service providers say to me that because of that people tend to even describe themselves in very broad terms because funding is always changing, so agencies are always trying to be as broad as possible to pick up whatever funding bucket might come out. How do you actually—

Ms STEVENS: That is a really difficult question because of those reasons, but I think certainly place-based models—where rather than having seven providers in a region, that is allocated to a provider and they are the provider for that region—could be a way of looking at that in the first instance. So that means that every service has an opportunity to be part of the system, but you might not be part of it for the whole of Victoria; you might just be part of it for the Geelong region versus Ballarat or Bendigo or whatever it might be. It is a difficult thing given the number of providers and everyone's commitment to wanting to make a difference and do good things. It is not a really good answer, because it is a really hard question.

The CHAIR: One last one: the RISE program. We have got the employer groups coming in a bit later on and we will obviously ask them some questions, but just in relation to the RISE program, how can we better support employers in terms of this cooperation that we need to get disadvantaged jobseekers into sustainable employment? And how would you encourage other councils to do what you are doing here in Geelong?

Ms STEVENS: So in terms of employer support, one of the challenges that we have found with the RISE program is that, we know, the construction sector is very fragmented. There are lots of subcontractors, there are lots of different providers. Often the small and micro businesses—if they are sole traders, as an example—are not developing leadership skills to support people because that is not their role. So better employer support would have some sort of program that enables business, regardless of the size, to understand what the requirements might be in terms of supporting people who are participating in the RISE program and people who have significant barriers to employment. Engagement models are interesting given how trades and things advertise—they do not necessarily; it is a lot of word of mouth rather than formal advertising and those sorts of things. So part of a network-type model might be a way of increasing engagement and people's understanding and also the sector's understanding of the benefits of social procurement rather than the cheapest quote as an outcome would be critical. Because it is a very competitive environment, again, you need the big business to be pushing the social procurement model in terms of how they are engaging their subcontractors as well not just in terms of their overall model.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Anything further you want to add?

Ms STEVENS: In summary the things that we talked about in terms of greater economic participation and place-based models are that it needs regional collaboration on delivery and local responses in local communities; community engagement to support the participants to understand their needs and barriers; ongoing job coaching and work mentoring, which is critical; and post-placement support—that is the other part of the JVEN and other programs that is really critical in terms of, once you are in the job, how you are supported to stay in the job. They are probably the main things. I would really like to thank you for the opportunity to present here today.

The CHAIR: Our pleasure. Thank you for being here.

Witness withdrew.