

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 November 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Julie McKay, Founder and Managing Director,

Mr Jonathon Papadopoulos, Program Participant, Enable Social Enterprises; and

Ms Despina Papadopoulos, parent.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much for attending this very important Inquiry. 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 say it outside or repeat the same things on social media you may not be afforded that 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. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. Did you want to kick-off with a 5-minute presentation, then we can ask questions?

**Ms McKAY:** I would love to. That would be terrific. Thank you very much. First of all, thank you so much for having us here today. It is a wonderful opportunity, and Jonathon is also here today to offer his input as well. We have been invited to attend here today on the back of our recent recognition from the main Premier's Sustainability Awards. It is fair to say that on the back of those awards we have been recognised as a small player doing really big things, so we are quite chuffed to be here. We acknowledge and concur with the many barriers to sustainable employment outlined in the submissions, as well as the stats showing that ongoing employment participation rates for people with disability still remain poor. We are pleased to share our learnings and opportunities of how training and employment-based social enterprises, such as Enable, can get involved with potential solutions, and some of those we will be happy to offer today.

Enable's interest in placing disadvantaged jobseekers in sustainable employment is core to Enable's reason for being. We focus on a localised approach, meeting a local need with the aim of a replicable impact model to grow both program reach and commercial revenue. We acknowledge the work of the many Victorian and federally funded employment services, such as NDIS, training, community and social services, currently in place to support disadvantaged jobseekers, and many of these organisations have provided input today and also in the submissions. So it is this very ecosystem that Enable supports and our business model is built on. We have a very good understanding of the many programs on offer, and by mapping these many programs and stakeholders we were able to join the dots and identify two main gaps, which became our primary focus, the first being what the employers want—employability skills, technical skills and also a place where we can practice that before the employers take on that challenge; and secondly, the gap of the lack of supported work experience opportunities for disadvantaged or those at risk to support their career goals and aspirations, just like we are doing with Jonathon. These two gaps are consistent with the many findings in the submissions filed with the Committee, and having identified those gaps Enable have emerged with a 'collaborate, not duplicate' business model. In effect we are operating as an industry host for people of all abilities, teaming up with the many government-provided services to help improve their prospects of getting a job.

I hope that sets a good context there. Specifically, the industries that we operate in are those identified in stable and sustainable industries. They are growing sectors. We operate in computer recycling and testing and repair. We also do e-waste, online retailing to support the former, and also warehousing and logistics. Each of these industries are identified as stable and also growing in the area of Broadmeadows, where we are located. This in turn assists us to facilitate some pathways to local jobs for local people—very real jobs—in robust sectors.

Enable's impact report shows since 2015 we worked with over 750 participants with barriers to employment and worked with almost 50 government-funded stakeholders, including schools, employment, training, community, social services and health services. I think that is fine evidence of our collaboration in action.

Enable, whilst being a not-for-profit, currently does not receive any form of government service provider funding, relying on our commercial acumen and our quality of service to access business-to-business and business-to-government social procurement opportunities. Importantly, 100% of our profits are redistributed back into our cause and our employability programs. In this context we believe that the recent momentum from the Victorian Government's social procurement strategy can be a major driver of commercial revenue for Enable—in particular, contracted services for our accredited technology and asset decommissioning and recycling enterprise.

The social procurement equation is very simple: the more procurement, the more training, the more work experience, the more employment opportunities and pathways to industry jobs that we can provide. Enable, whilst a not-for-profit, can also be offered up as an example of what is possible for for-profit businesses—that is, our success provides evidence that highly commercialised entities can adopt supportive work and learning

strategies for people of all abilities whilst being efficient and effective and, importantly, still able to deliver excellent customer service.

Finally, whichever way you look at it, industry-based technical expertise, employability skills and supported work experience sets the groundwork for pathways to industry jobs, opening the door for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. If this is successful, it also provides a broader social return through decreased pressure on welfare, health, justice, social and community services and also employment services systems. In this respect our entity model should be of interest and I hope it is of interest to both local, state and federal governing bodies.

With that I would like to introduce Jonathon and a little bit about how we work with him. Jonathon engages with Enable as a client of Hurdle. Hurdle is a specialised NDIS ‘finding, keeping and changing a job’ provider. This is a practical example of our collaborative approach in action, with Enable’s role in supporting Jonathon as the supportive host and part of the team helping Hurdle and Jonathon reach his employment goals and aspirations—and here it is—to be a fully paid customer service officer or customer service support person in a role where he can show off his passion for helping people.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you for being here, Jonathon. Did you want to add anything, Despina, or Jonathon?

**Ms PAPAPOULOS:** I have got something prepared, just from a parent’s perspective in the situation that we have dealt with of Jonathon’s disability. I have written it down because I am a little bit nervous.

**The CHAIR:** That’s all right

**Ms PAPAPOULOS:** Personally I would like to say how proud I am of my son Jonathon for being brave enough to speak for all people with a disability who do not have a voice and for how far he has come despite his own disability. From a parent’s viewpoint I feel providing a channel of continued support for these children, from their primary school years right up to their adult work life, is a fundamental foundation which will provide them with a purpose in life and help make them a productive member of society with a skill base that will grow over their working life. The sense of accomplishment and achievement, whether it be small or large, considering the various levels of disability a person has, will be priceless both to the individual and to their families and the community.

Organisations like Hurdle and Enable are fighting the fine fight and giving the help and skill base for our disabled. Please support and work with them so they have the resources they need. We as Jonathon’s parents have fought for this support as it was not readily available from day one. He is an example of what your support to families and individuals can result in: a confident young man with self-worth, productive in society and not a burden. Jonathon is supported here today by me, his mum; his brother, Joshua; Julie McKay from Enable and Andrea Clark from Hurdle. I thank you for the opportunity to speak.

**Ms ADDISON:** That makes you sound pretty special, doesn’t it? Jonathon, how old are you ?

**Mr PAPAPOULOS:** I am 31.

**Ms ADDISON:** And what are you doing at the moment?

**Mr PAPAPOULOS:** Working at Enable with Julie, and at Hurdle, too.

**Ms ADDISON:** So when you are in Enable, we have just been hearing that they are doing stuff with technology and e-waste and stuff like that, what do you do when you turn up? When you arrive at work what do you do?

**Mr PAPAPOULOS:** I check the computer for the phone accessories or eBay orders, and then I get ready to pack the accessories and send them off to the post office, like on the computer.

**Ms ADDISON:** Excellent. That sounds great. Do you enjoy it?

**Mr PAPAPOULOS:** I love it.

**The CHAIR:** So just in terms of unconscious bias, and it is out there, what do you think are the most common misconceptions from an employer's perspective about employing a person of non-ability—or how can you say it?

**Ms ADDISON:** A person with a disability.

**The CHAIR:** A person with a disability.

**Ms McKAY:** Look, part of what we do is around employability skills. It is the technical skills—i.e., not up to speed by way of disability or varying levels of ability—and what those perceptions are. I think probably one of the big ones for what we see is the perception around OH&S—that because Jonathon necessarily has a different learning style to others in some way he would be unsafe in the workplace. That is a load of hobcobble, if I may say that. It is ridiculous, and what we find is the supports that we give our guys are to actually break those myths down. We spend a lot of time with safety. So, Jonathon, can you do me an action—I will put you on the spot—the types of safety things that we have at work?

**Mr PAPADOPOULOS:** I have a good understanding of the goggles, gloves, wearing a safety vest and boots and stuff like that, that you have to walk inside the yellow lines.

**Ms McKAY:** Evidence. So I think that is probably one of the major ones, the perceptions. I think how we bust those myths is by providing education to Jonathon. He can take that to his interview and then hopefully the employers will go, 'Oh, hang on a minute, that's quite surprising', which would be a wonderful thing, and then back it up with some genuine offers for employment.

**The CHAIR:** So just to follow on from that, what types of training do employers need to apply in their workplace to be more inclusive of people with disability? Do you think there should be a program in place just to educate people around them about—

**Ms McKAY:** Well, the obvious answer is disability awareness training and an EEO policy. That is the obvious answer. For me I think it goes a little bit deeper than that. There are barriers there. They have been there for a long time. It is possible that systems such as the NDIS, which has recently changed the way it looks at employment supports, could possibly see a brave new world where Jonathon is in an open employment job, a fully paid job, with his support worker. Those supports then become what the employer does rather than what we have to do and what Jonathon has to do. Then that onus is also shared with everyone. That is one suggestion. That is a brave new world, and that is something that we currently do. That model is what we have been doing with Jonathon, so we do know it works. Employers in effect get two for one—you get a support worker and wonderful Jonathon here on site—and it is just a different way to look at something, employment strategies, for people with a disability.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Do you feel like there are particular industries of employment that are more willing to take on and employ people with a disability than others, and have you got any comments around that—like the difficulty in working with particular types of industries or trying to make a breakthrough with them?

**Ms McKAY:** Sure. That is a great question. We chose the industries that we operate in quite specifically, one, because we knew that they were robust—they were either stable or growing, which means there are jobs for the future, particularly with the e-waste sector and particularly with tech. Testing computers, anything with computers—young people like them and young people with a disability like them as well. There is a level of interest, so you are getting that engagement straightaway with the guys who are interested in that sector because it is cool, it is something they want to do. You then can overlay that with the fact that the industry is growing. We are accredited, as in e-waste accreditation. The guys are learning in an accredited environment, and you can see the follow-on from that in industries like the one that we operate in: we are a perfect opportunity to have industry-type-based referrals from what we do to other e-waste accredited for-profit businesses. We have just got to turn the key to make that happen.

**Mr BLACKWOOD:** Julie, what are some of the positive attributes that people with a disability bring to the workplace?

**Ms McKAY:** Loyalty. I think that would be one thing, particularly in Jonathon's example. He is very, very passionate about what he does, eager to learn—all the things that one would look to in any employee. I think with the guys in particular, one thing that I have learned from the many, many people that I have supported in many, many jobs over the years is to actually love what you do. Sometimes we take our jobs for granted, and that is something that Jonathon and the crew teach me every day, so I feel quite blessed to do what I do as a result.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** Julie, for a lot of employers who do not have the level of understanding that you do in this space there might be a misconception that taking on an employee with a disability could be a cost or an impost or a risk. You have developed a model that totally flips that on its head and you have been recognised through the Premier's Sustainability Awards, so what would you say to employers who might have that view or indeed employers who are on that edge of thinking, 'Hey, I could maybe get into this space, but I'm not quite sure how or if'? What would you say to them? What advice would you give?

**Ms McKAY:** There are a few things. Obviously if you are in the industries that we operate in, with online retailing, e-waste recycling and computer recycling, then you could look to getting transitions from our programs directly into your recruitment strategy. That is one way. Another thing that we look at to include everyone is job design and process engineering—so down to that really finite level. For example, with Jonathon, he is probably a very good example, he wanted to get involved in the testing of computers. He was a little bit daunted, I think would be a fair call, by the database, which can be quite complex. There is lots of information and it is very, very computer technical, so what we ended up doing was breaking down the process. Jonathon was doing the testing and working with someone that was really comfortable doing the data entry into a rather sophisticated database. In actual fact productivity increased by 25% by breaking down the task and streamlining it that way. Jonathon, we had a good day that day. I think we did 130 in one day, didn't we?

**Mr PAPADOPOULOS:** Yes.

**Ms McKAY:** It was terrific. So that is a really good example.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** It is a great example.

**Ms McKAY:** So thinking about the work that you do, and again back on the work recruitment strategies for the future with the recent changes in the NDIS, that whole concept of having a support worker and someone like Jonathon on-site and then seeing what organisations need to do to adapt to that change, whether it be physical support or an extra chair in the lunchroom—it could be something as simple as that. But there is a massive opportunity here in front of us, and we would be happy to give anyone any advice should they need to use the examples of what we have been doing.

**Ms THEOPHANOUS:** I guess that is the crux of it—that you are seeing it as an opportunity rather than a risk.

**Ms McKAY:** It is definitely an opportunity, and we do need to move away from those barriers to employment. They are there, and there are some recent changes that have been made and there is a really good opportunity for employers to step into this space and give some great opportunities for innovation in HR, if that is possible.

**The CHAIR:** The NDIS, has that changed how you provide a service? Are there any challenges in relation to the NDIS?

**Ms McKAY:** So for us, we partner. As an organisation we decided that we were not going to move ahead and be a service provider. We felt there was more value in us being an industry host. So the challenges that the NDIS sector has are the very well documented challenges that the NDIS system has. Ever the optimist, I still do believe that there is more opportunity in that 'finding, keeping and changing job' support for the guys, and that way they can access the support they need at different stages of their employment, whether it be trying to get to an open employment job, wanting to change industries or wanting to try something new, and those supports are available.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** What do you find are the retention rates? So if you place someone, are they likely to stay there for a really long period of time? You talked about loyalty and passion for work and things like that. So people that you have placed, are they staying in the jobs for long periods of time, or is the employer finding it difficult and that they cannot overcome their own barriers to having someone with a disability in the workforce?

**Ms McKAY:** With our current support model we would work with employment service providers who would then take on the role of doing the placements. In that respect, I can tell you that what might make it a little bit easier for us and what Enable could be a part of would be some sort of support system around pathways to industry jobs at a localised level. I am talking about existing providers in the space that are doing pathways to employment. You could get council involved with economic development and all the linkages to the industries, and you could have social enterprise at the table preparing those guys for specific industries. It does not just have to be Enable; it can be other social enterprises that do cleaning and gardening and other things. So to open up that door so that that could happen, where it is sustainable, we believe that there is an opportunity here to bring those players together at a local level and run some pilots and see if it works—and directly having us involved. We are the key. We are the turnkey.

**Ms ADDISON:** Jonathon, we are all members of the Parliament, and we are so pleased that you are here. Is there anything we could do better to help someone like you get a job?

**Mr PAPADOPOULOS:** The Government can help more with training and life skills for suitable ongoing employment. NDIS gives a strong focus on employment support as providing access to jobs that challenge me. NDIS gave me the opportunity to get the job I wanted. I did not like the supported employer as I was only getting \$4 an hour. What I am doing now helps me to get to full pay and have a good understanding of safety in the workplace over safety vest, boots, goggles and gloves.

**Ms ADDISON:** Well said. It is important to get paid properly. When you do a full job, you should get full pay, so I think that is very important.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** Chair, if I may just ask a question of mum as well. Despina, do you feel as though you as Jonathon's mum were well supported yourself in supporting Jonathon to reach his potential?

**Ms PAPADOPOULOS:** It was very challenging. Starting from his school years, we had to fight every year to get full aid for Jonathon to get through school. The reason we fought was that we wanted to build a great foundation for Jonathon. We always knew that Jonathon would most likely not be a doctor or a lawyer or anything like that, but we wanted as parents to give him the best opportunity for him to flourish to his capacity—to be a participant in life and not just be sitting around and to contribute for himself, mostly for his self-worth. He spent years working in a supported workplace, not earning a lot of money, but we felt that that was important for him to build his skills and to build his confidence. It was more about those things than about money at the time. It was very important to see him grow like that. But on the other hand it was very sad that he was putting in five days a week, nine to five, and not earning the money that he should have been. So, yes, it was very challenging. Also there were some criteria in the special school that he attended, Montague, which was in Port Melbourne. To attend that school he had to learn to use public transport on his own, and as a parent that was extremely daunting. I had numerous occasions where trains were cancelled or platforms changed, and I had people that I did not know ringing me and saying, 'We're with Jonathon. Don't worry, we've got him on the right train'—situations like that. It has been very hard—very hard. But with the continued support that he has had he has managed to overcome those issues. He has learned to use the transport system very effectively, and he was making his way from home to work daily for many years. So that was another success for him. Yes, the challenges are great out there for parents.

**The CHAIR:** Can I follow on from that with school career advice. Did you think that that was adequate for a person with disability—the advice that he was getting at school for his future?

**Ms PAPADOPOULOS:** The schools were also finding it difficult to deal with getting the support for the students with a disability, and they actually asked us as parents to really push because the schools were not being heard. That was our experience. My husband fought so hard for Jonathon. He was completely knocked back from prep. He got a note, 'You're not getting an aide', just outright. We did not give up. We kept going

and going, and from a complete 'No' he got a 'Yes', and he had a full aide, supported at school from then on, but we had to apply every year, so it was not easy up, until Year 9 in high school and then he moved across to Montague, which then helped him into work.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you so much for being here today. Well done, Jonathon.

**Witnesses withdrew.**