

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 7 July 2020

*(via videoconference)*

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**WITNESSES**

Ms Bernadette Nugent, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Karen Robinson, Volunteer, Road Trauma Support Services Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

I will read a short witness statement before you can begin the presentation. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected by law. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. We welcome your opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion. Can I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise interference. If you have any technical difficulties at any stage, please disconnect and contact the committee staff using the contacts you have been provided. Could you please begin by giving your names for the benefit of our Hansard team and then start your presentation. Thank you.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms NUGENT:** Good afternoon. My name is Bernadette Nugent, and I am the CEO of Road Trauma Support Services Victoria. I would like to thank you very much for inviting us here today to talk about this very important issue. Twenty-five years ago the founders of Road Trauma Support Services Victoria, all of whom were people who had been impacted by road trauma, began supporting others who had been affected by a road incident. Since then we have grown to become a statewide organisation.

We have developed a positive working relationship with external stakeholders such as the TAC, Victoria Police, VicRoads, the Magistrates Court, community corrections and emergency services. Our post-crash services are funded by the TAC and through fundraising, and we offer free information, support and counselling to over 3000 people who have been impacted by road trauma each year. Eighty per cent of our referrals come via Victoria Police. Our counselling clients often say, 'I don't know how I would have coped without you'.

Our Shine a Light on Road Safety campaign is our major public awareness event, and it reaches more than 4 million people a year. We would like everyone in Victoria to know that our services exist, but our hope for the future is for no-one to have to need them. Our organisation is committed to reducing the incidence and the impact of road trauma, and more than 7000 people a year participate in our education programs across the state. These programs focus on challenging drivers' attitudes and beliefs around unsafe driving behaviour. We target young drivers and traffic offenders who are predominantly referred through the Magistrates Court and community corrections. In a small group format we discuss driving attitudes and a safe systems approach, and a volunteer speaker shares their story. We have approximately 140 active volunteers who are road safety ambassadors, who are trained and supported to share their story. People who have been personally impacted by road trauma give their time because they know what a difference it makes. Eighty per cent of our staff is made up of volunteers. People who attend the program often say to us that it makes them rethink their driving behaviour. What breaks down the barriers and shifts thinking is the personal story that they hear.

I would like to introduce you now to Karen Robinson. Karen is a volunteer road safety ambassador and an RTSSV facilitator with our education program, and she is here to share with you her story. Thanks, Karen.

**Ms ROBINSON:** Thanks very much, Bern, and thank you very much, everybody, for the opportunity of being able to talk here today. I truly appreciate being able to contribute in some small way. Why I am here to talk today is to speak for the many people impacted by road trauma, and like many mothers, I have experienced

the loss of a son killed in road trauma itself. But I just briefly want to talk about the role that I do at Road Trauma Support Services. I came on back in 2011 after the death of my son, looking for something to give meaning and purpose to my life so it would count for something. I did the volunteer speaker training, and for five years I did volunteer speaking at road trauma awareness seminars. I literally shared my story, like many other volunteers do, with hundreds and hundreds of participants over that period of time—participants who had been sent by the Magistrates Court as part of their sentencing or by solicitors who were sending participants, pre-court attendance, in the hope that attending a road trauma awareness seminar would have some impact on their outcome in court; and people from community corrections and some other smaller organisations.

Sometimes people have said, ‘Why on earth would you want to tell your story like that over and over again at these road trauma awareness seminars?’, and many volunteers get asked this question. I have to relate to the outcome that happens when you tell your story at these sessions—the look on those people’s faces, their body language, what they say to you afterwards. It has the greatest impact—it reinforces what the education team does on that night. But hearing the personal story, in person, from a volunteer speaker gives them so much food for thought about their risky driver behaviour. In my case, when I talk about Ben, I know that they are thinking, ‘If I continue driving the way I am, taking these kinds of risks on the roads, I could be Ben. It could be my mother standing here telling my story’. I can remember once a young man who looked like he might have been struggling with drugs, very early in the piece. I thought during the session that probably he did not seem to be paying much attention, but I knew that it really came home when at the end of the session he said, ‘I don’t want my mother standing over my dead body’, because I talked about what it was like to go to the morgue and have to identify my son’s body and how tragic that was. There are lots of stories that I could tell you about what participants say, and this is when you know that it has had the greatest impact.

Like many mothers, I have experience that loss, and I just want to talk a little bit about Ben and his driving history and about what happened on that night when he was killed. Ben was not a bad person. Ben just made a lot of bad choices, like many of the participants that come to these sessions. He was a repeat road traffic offender over a 10-year period, and for us it just seemed like a matter of time if he did not change. Ben had loss of licence once for drink-driving—.06—and once for exceeding 12 points in three years. Loss of points—not stopping at a stop sign; two speed cameras, 10 to 20 kilometres over the speed limit of 70; went through a red light whilst turning. Car crashes—three low-speed crashes; two of the three cars were written off, two whilst turning corners too fast and lost control, both in the wet, and one was cutting the corner on a country road and hitting another car. Now, Ben suffered only minor injuries in these crashes, and every time something like this occurred his father and I would have big conversations with him about his driving behaviour. We lived in fear that some day we would get a knock at the door, and we hoped that that would never happen.

The last time we saw Ben was three weeks before he was killed. At that stage he was not far off from his 26th birthday and he was working in Bendigo. We drove up there to see him, and we can remember driving on the way back we said we thought we finally saw the man in the boy—that he had matured, that we would not have to worry about him like this anymore. But that was sadly not the case. With regard to what happened to Ben, he was killed suddenly and tragically. And road trauma is violent, so as a parent you think that they died violently—and they do. He was killed suddenly and tragically at the age of 25 on 5 November 2009. He was killed in a single-vehicle car crash on a straight stretch of country road at 2.00 am in the morning. He was travelling at 140 kilometres per hour. He had a blood alcohol reading of .08 at the time of his death. He hit a kangaroo, crashed into two trees and was killed instantly. Ben was found by a fellow workmate, lying dead beside his crashed motor vehicle.

When I talk to participants about Ben’s story I make sure they understand that the kangaroo did not kill Ben; it was the choices Ben made on that night. On the night of Ben’s death it was the end of him working seven days of 12-hour shifts at the goldmines. At the end of that they would all go out drinking in Bendigo. You know, it was very much a drinking culture in that industry. They would all go out drinking. But the organisation was responsible; they made sure that everybody caught cabs home, that they did not drive. On that night Ben did catch a cab home, along with all the others, except for one person, his boss, who was walking home. On another occasion when his boss had walked home, he had fallen over and injured himself, so when Ben got home, knowing full well that he should not have got back into his car—he was intoxicated; he had gotten home safely and that was the point of the taxis, not to drink and drive—Ben made a choice that cost him his life.

I explain that to these participants because I do not want them to think that it was the kangaroo. It was the choices. Ben got into his motor vehicle and he found his boss walking home. That could have been another

choice. Both of them should have had a conversation, 'You shouldn't be driving, Ben. You're drink-driving'. They should have parked the car and walked together, perhaps. But that choice was not made. Ben got his boss home safely, thank God, because if Ben had have killed his friend as well, I do not think I could have survived that. To cause that to another family would have been too much for me. Ben got to his mate's place, and they could have made another choice, and that was to sleep on the couch, to stay there, not to get in a motor vehicle even though the next day we already know that he could have still been intoxicated and he would have had to consider that. But these were choices. When we are talking to participants at road trauma awareness seminars we are talking about choices, because we have to accept the fact that they belong to us and that these choices can have outcomes. The participants that engage in risky driving behaviour—they are all choices that they are making, and we are getting them to appreciate that.

When they hear the volunteer's story, it means that the game is up. They know that this becomes very real and that no longer can they blame somebody else. They have to look at themselves and work out what decisions they are going to make. Ben's story is like so many other road trauma deaths. Ben, my beautiful boy—and that is Ben here. I will just show you a photograph of Ben. That is my son Ben. He was a beautiful boy. He was well loved by the girls. And his mates, they loved him too—and his cousins and his grandparents and aunties and uncles and his best mates. The people from the goldmines came down to his funeral in a bus. They hardly knew Ben, because he had only been there for a short time, and they all came. And, you know, he should be here today. He made a terrible choice, a terrible decision. He should not have been driving, and he knew that. He was intoxicated, and he made a choice to get back into his car to get him home safely, a choice that cost him his life—and so much grief and despair. I remember at Ben's funeral thinking: he would have been just horrified if he had seen how much grief and despair for so many people at a young person being killed so suddenly and tragically. He would have been horrified. The choice cost him his life. Ben should be here today, but sadly he is not. So like me and like so many other volunteers, we tell our stories knowing that it does have an impact, that it will influence people to think about their driver behaviour, that those people that come to the road trauma awareness seminars become road safety ambassadors.

We have had fathers in their saying, 'I've been a terrible example to my children, and I'm going to go back and I'm going to have a conversation with my teenage son and tell him about your story about Ben. I don't want that to be me; I don't want that to be him'. And mothers too have come in there and said they are ashamed of their driving behaviour and they want to be better examples to their children. So there have been lots and lots of stories like that from people. And we also speak at community forums where families come in with their learner driver children—I say 'children', but they are teenagers—and the whole family gets something out of it. The family comes in there thinking it is just going to help the learner driver, but it gets the parents thinking about, 'Well, what am I like as a driver? Am I being a really good example? Gee, maybe I need to pull my socks up'.

I am speaking at schools, which is a wonderful thing to do. One of my loves is speaking at schools, because speaking to 15-, 16-, 17-year-olds that are not yet drivers, and they do hear from a volunteer speaker, they do hear it raw, and it is couched around education, and you see the look on their faces, and it gives them a lot to think about. We encourage them to think about the people that they are going to get into a motor vehicle with. What sort of drivers are they? What do they need to say and do to ensure that they can be safe? They need to speak up. They need to be brave, because it could mean the difference between life and death

So our role with the organisation is to try and help people be safe and more responsible road users, to be good road safety ambassadors, to spread that knowledge and understanding about what it means being safe and responsible in the hope that it saves a lot of misery and despair as well, not just lives and serious injury but the ripple effect it has on so many other people. I have not even mentioned the emergency services, because they speak a lot in our road trauma seminars, and we hear the impact it has on them and their wider circle when it comes to family. I remember speaking to the police officer that came and knocked at our door. He was a young man, and he was obviously really quite traumatised himself at having to come and deliver that news to us. So it is a very broad impact, road trauma, and anything we can do to reduce the impact would be fantastic.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Karen, for sharing that story. I can only imagine how difficult it would have been for you. I want to hand over to some of my committee colleagues for discussion and questions.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Karen. You are special. I could not do it. I would cry.

**Ms ROBINSON:** We sometimes do.

**Mr BARTON:** How do we build this into helping young people understand how incredibly dangerous it is when you get behind the wheel? How do we get Ben's story out? Should that be part of your learning or your training? Maybe we do this at the school level? I do not know. What do you think?

**Ms NUGENT:** Can I speak to that, Rod? I guess there were some recommendations that we made in our submission that I would just like to highlight, and one of them is that we would like all community speakers to have access to professional training and support so they can become road safety ambassadors like Karen. So what we are really looking at—part of this is about what personal speakers do. They connect to the hearts and minds of the listeners, so it gives these people an opportunity to put themselves in the speaker's shoes and think, 'What if? What if this was me? How would this impact my family? What we see in terms of our own programs—our biggest education programs are the road trauma awareness seminars that we do. It is the personal speakers that people remember. When we go back and do the evaluation, six and 12 months down the track, they will be able to tell you who the speaker was, what the story was and how it has had an impact on their driving.

So, yes, you are right; part of what we want to do is broaden the training of people like Karen so we can support all the government and local-level road safety initiatives. To be able to combine that, for example, we were thinking of things like: if there is a new road safety policy being released, that it is released in conjunction with someone telling their personal story. We do a fair bit of work in the media. They will call us, for example, and say, 'We would really like to interview someone who has either lost a loved one or been seriously injured', and we will go and approach our volunteers, because we have provided them with that training. So, I think, definitely the short answer to your question is: that is what we want to do. We want more opportunities for people like Karen to tell their story, to really challenge the community complacency.

**Mr BARTON:** A little bit different—in the last month or so in the commercial passenger vehicle sector two different drivers under two different circumstances were involved in accidents where people lost their lives. There was some support for them, but my concern was that I do not think there was enough, because it is incredibly traumatic for them. They were absolutely innocent in the circumstances. They were just horrific accidents, and people have lost their lives. I just felt those people did not get enough support to maybe get themselves back on their feet again or get back to work. Do you get involved in that sort of area?

**Ms NUGENT:** Yes, absolutely. Through our counselling programs one of the things that makes us quite unique is that we see both sides of the story. We see drivers who are involved in an incident where they may have killed someone, and we see the families of bereaved people as well. We manage that balance very delicately, of course, but it means that we see people who are drivers with no judgement. We understand that people make mistakes and make errors. No-one intentionally sets out to kill someone when they wake up in the morning. We support not only the drivers but the drivers' families as well, because all of a sudden people are thrust into a system—being law enforcement and dealing with police, lawyers and courts—that perhaps they have never been in before, so we walk with them through that stage. We also—recently—have a program that we started with Dhurringile Prison where we are working with people who are incarcerated due to road trauma offences. So, yes, it is vital. The problem for us, Rod, is we often do not know that they are out there. The police do an amazing job of referring people to us, and we are working with the major collision unit now to ensure that we getting more referrals for drivers.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Bernadette. On behalf of the committee I just want to thank you both, Karen and Bernadette, for your contributions. It is a good opportunity for us to all reflect on the importance of road safety and the increase in the road toll, so it is very relevant and very on point to the work of our committee. I really appreciate you both coming out. It is very brave of you both. I just want to thank you again for your submission, presentation and contribution to this inquiry. Thank you.

**Ms ROBINSON:** Thank you very much.

**Ms NUGENT:** Thank you very much, everyone.

**Committee adjourned.**