

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Management of Child Sex Offender Information

Melbourne—Thursday, 13 May 2021

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WITNESSES

Ms Aileen Ashford, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Nicole Artico, Chief Operating Officer,

Ms Jackie Bateman, General Manager, Evidence-Informed Practice, Kids First.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I would like to read out your privilege. All evidence taken by this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act* and also by the provision of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing. However, if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, your comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered as a contempt of Parliament.

Also, all the evidence is being recorded and broadcast live. At the end of the hearing, given a day or two, you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. So please go through that and make sure that you are not misrepresented or misheard in any way before it goes to the public forum.

So before we begin, for the Hansard record, can you please state your names and the organisation that you are representing?

Ms BATEMAN: I am Jackie Bateman, Kids First Australia.

Ms ASHFORD: Aileen Ashford, Kids First Australia.

Ms ARTICO: Nicole Artico, Kids First Australia.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much. My name is Tien Kieu. I am chairing today. I am the Deputy Chair of the Legal and Social Issues Committee. On screen, from regional Victoria, is Ms Tania Maxwell, and on my right is Mr Stuart Grimley.

So to begin with, could you please go through a summary of your testimony and what you would like to present to us.

Ms ASHFORD: Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. We have already introduced ourselves, and we would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Our presentation today will focus on item (b) of your terms of reference:

... prevent sexual offences from occurring through improved public awareness ...

Just a little bit of background first about Kids First Australia: our organisation was born not far from here, at a meeting at Government House 125 years ago. The Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was established as one of the few secular non-government agencies. In 1971 we became the Children's Protection Society—CPS we were called—and in 2018 we changed our name to Kids First Australia, better reflecting our purpose and remit. We are still very proudly independent and driven to see all children and young people thrive in resilient, strong and safe families, because we believe all kids deserve a bright future.

Our work spans all of childhood and adolescence. We have early years services, where we provide a unique trauma-informed model of education and care; we offer parenting and support programs for parents as well as those experiencing challenges that may impact family relationships and child wellbeing; and we work with children, young people and adults to assist their therapeutic recovery from sexual assault and from family violence, neglect and abuse, and this includes our role in the north-eastern Orange Door.

The trauma of sexual abuse has enormous impacts on children, young people and their families and carers. Without specialist intervention the impacts of these experiences can be long-lasting and profound. Kids First was a pioneer of sexual abuse services for children and young people in Victoria. Since 1999 we have provided sexual abuse counselling and prevention programs, providing both sexual assault counselling and support and working with young people with sexualised behaviours from 0 to 18 years of age. We have got three discussion

points that we would like to talk to you today about. Firstly, young people who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviours need early, specialist support. Children and adolescents engaging in harmful sexual behaviours are not the same as adult perpetrators of sexual violence. The cause of the behaviour can be complex and a result of any range of factors, including past trauma, feelings of anger, confusion, anxiety, poor impulse control, exposure to pornography and family violence. Working with young people who have displayed these behaviours involves an assessment and intervention to understand their own sexual health and safety. We work systemically with their family to look at the environment the young person is growing up within and whether any violence is present. Kids First believes a targeted and specialist service approach is essential for young people who display harmful sexual behaviours. It is really important to note that of these young people, nearly 97 per cent of them do not grow into adult offenders. Early and appropriate intervention leads to better outcomes and less chance of continuing behaviours into adulthood.

Our second point is that education is critical to preventing sexual offences from occurring. In 2015 we partnered with Melbourne University to explore the prevention of sexually harmful behaviours by young people who had abused behaviours, and this was young people talking to those researchers. Three key opportunities were identified through that research: one was making their relationship safe, second was helping their management of pornography and third was to reform their sexuality education. On this last point, young people believed that they needed messages about sexually abusive behaviour delivered to them in late primary school and early high school. They also said that the messages should not focus on the mechanics of sex but rather the rules about consent and age.

A public health approach considers schools as having a crucial role in prevention. As research highlights, programs can be delivered universally at moderate costs without stigmatising those at high risk. Teachers who see children regularly can observe changes in a young person's behaviour, appearance or health. School staff who are knowledgeable about those indicators and how to respond offer a protective community support for those young people.

In the last few years our team in our sexual abuse counselling program has seen a trend in the number of young people experiencing sexual exploitation and grooming, although many of them were unaware that they were being exploited. Evidence and the lived experiences of young people have informed the development of prevention programs we deliver through a whole-of-population lens, primarily through schools.

Two years ago we developed Stand Up!, a school-based consent and protective behaviours program for year 8 students. Reaching year 8 was a very deliberate choice. Year 8 is when social groups are being established by young people, and it is developmentally indicated that the onset of puberty will bring up many of the topics, and this can be a positive time to guide these discussions in a helpful, open and informative way. Stand Up! uniquely bridges the gap between the existing school curriculum around cyber safety and sex education and explores sexual relationships while promoting safety, space and boundaries offline and online. The program content delivered over four sessions supports young people to consider the complexities of negotiating authentic and healthy intimate relationships and avoid being exploited or exploiting others. A teacher and parent information session is included as part of the program to convey key understanding and unpack the program content.

Our SACAPP team have delivered Stand Up! to more than 320 students, and here are some highlights of our findings: the concept of grooming was not known at all by 48 per cent of students prior to the sessions, and afterwards 59 per cent described themselves as very confident about the concept; the knowledge of sexual exploitation was not known at all by 28 per cent of students prior, and 45 per cent were very confident about their knowledge post the program. And feedback from some of those students—quotes were:

(Stand Up!) cleared up most of the fog around the topic.

Really interactive with ideas.

I enjoyed the activities and the fact that I learnt a lot.

And from a parent was:

Thank you so much. I never would have been able to have this conversation with my son without the program.

So while educating students is essential, we must make this final point: education does not stop with students. We need to build systems, community agency and capacity.

It is important to highlight that the issue of child sexual abuse is complex and pervasive, impacting children and young people who may have many vulnerabilities or none. Despite some perceptions that are supported within our community, there is no one type of vulnerable young person. Sexual abuse does not discriminate by income, family composition or postcode. By increasing community discussion of this issue we can create a wider societal and cultural shift. As we discussed, schools are a perfect starting point. Beginning with teachers, students and their parents, we can create a ripple effect of knowledge, shared language and understanding. It should not stop there, though—sporting clubs, employers and so on. Being able to recognise potential signs of abuse and feeling equipped to respond proactively and knowing who to turn to for help is vital, and community partnerships are crucial to this approach. If we can reach victims as well as children who display harmful sexual behaviours early, then we have the best chance of preventing a trajectory of further trauma and harm.

We will close now by sharing our Stand Up! video, where you will meet Thom and Jane, who helped to develop the program and deliver it regularly. We hope it plays.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I am sure the IT is capable.

Video shown.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: That is very good. Thank you so much for the presentation today, and I would like to thank you and Kids First for the important and good work you are doing. It is very important. Some of the works Kids First are doing is on education, particularly to raise awareness for young people at a very vulnerable age. I would like to seek your thoughts and opinions. Stand Up! is a program from Kids First to complement sex education and also cybersecurity at school, and it has been quite successful from the numbers and the statistics that you have presented. But the numbers that you have reached at the moment, you mentioned, are only 320 and we have many, many more out there. How would you see the Kids First Stand Up! program could be adopted or further spread into schools in this state? Also the federal government is launching, or has just launched, a consent program, so how do you see yourself fitting into that?

Ms ARTICO: At the moment we are actually co-designing with young people how we can enhance the program and make it more attainable for others. We also are open to looking at opportunities for not only how we can spread the reach and deliver it ourselves but how we can equip other organisations in other states, because although there is the success there and we have developed the program and evaluated the program, we do not need to have ownership of that program. We know the benefits it delivers, so our preference is to be able to equip others, and that is also through the development of the program into more of a digital space that will help increase the spread more broadly across Australia to reach more kids, their families and schools.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Do you see that your program at the state level could be used, adapted and widely spread into our schools in the state?

Ms ARTICO: And integrated into the curriculum?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes.

Ms ARTICO: Yes, most definitely. We are more than happy to work with the department of education and with the schools and to look at the curriculum content for Respectful Relationships and so forth and to see how that can be integrated in and become an everyday part of education and the core educational elements.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I have some more questions but let me pass to Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Deputy Chair. I read the *I Knew It Was Wrong but I Couldn't Stop It* policy briefing paper. It was very interesting actually, and I have got to say it makes a lot of sense. Thanks for your submission and all of the work that you do. The briefing paper was from September 2016. Are there any plans for additional research and studies in the near future?

Ms ASHFORD: We just recently put in for an ANROWS grant, but we were not successful with that, particularly to extend that research and to look at what resources would resonate with those young people in terms of education. Jackie is probably more au fait in this area than me, but many of the young people we work with have disability—undiagnosed disability at times—so the resources are particularly important and what you use. I do not know if you want to add to that, Jackie.

Ms BATEMAN: Yes. Young people with an ID and also neurodevelopmental conditions—so like autism and ADHD—are definitely over-represented in the programs where we engage with young people with harmful sexual behaviours. And that is not just in Australia, that is internationally; we know that. So it is really important that we have individualised programs, particularly around learning around consent and healthy relationships and navigating those platforms so they are able to make those right choices, but also work systemically with the families. Because we can guarantee that generally you are thinking double the time with that group of population. Also, we need to think about changing the environment that those young people are living in, so that is important to do that systemic work as well.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks for that. So there are currently some programs that are underway for offenders, particularly adolescent offenders, that do not necessarily go through the court system. I am a previous SOCIT detective and I am just reflecting back on my time there, and rather than putting a young person through the courts, they get diverted through to a—I cannot remember the term or the program that was offered at the time.

Ms ARTICO: Therapeutic treatment order?

Mr GRIMLEY: Yes, that is the one.

Ms BATEMAN: And the SABTS programs?

Mr GRIMLEY: Yes. So what is Kids First's experience with those types of programs? Are they effective? Do they work? Can they work in conjunction with programs like Stand Up!?

Ms BATEMAN: Yes, definitely. I have worked in the area of harmful sexual behaviour for the last 20 years, and we know that the trajectory for young people who engage in these behaviours is extremely positive. We know that we can reduce the likelihood of them engaging in further harmful sexual behaviours when they engage in this program, so definitely. And also, because of the sibling sexual abuse, there often that crossover in terms of working with them as a family, so working with the child that has been harmed alongside working with the child that has done the harming.

Mr GRIMLEY: And just on that, are there any post-program follow-ups that you can refer us to, either through your organisation or others, that—

Ms BATEMAN: No, and that is definitely lacking, and I think it is something that we need to think about as an organisation and, you know, wide in terms of the system. You can tell I am from the UK. My service in the UK was involved in a retrospective study where we contacted young people 10 years on. And again what we found was that they had not engaged in further behaviours, but what had happened was they were very disconnected from society. There was lots of substance misuse, loneliness. And we know, in terms of research around social anchors, the importance of embedding and having connection to community and culture for children and young people. So that is also a part of the intervention as well.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks. Thank you, Chair.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Maxwell.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Ladies, thank you so much for coming and presenting today. I love anything that is early intervention that can change that trajectory of young people, whether it is from entering youth justice space or going on to become offenders at an adult age. So I do congratulate you on the work because I know it is not easy, and I know funding to continue that work can be often difficult to gain. You spoke about ANROWS and trying to get some funding through them; they do some fantastic work. I know that the Daniel Morcombe Foundation is also doing some work with a new program called Changing Futures. What sort of outcomes do you think are achievable with having these early intervention initiatives, programs, and how difficult is it to identify those children that you feel need those initiatives?

Ms BATEMAN: I think that is when we start thinking around the primary and the secondary intervention and prevention in terms of we need to know around recognising and responding to what those signs of child sexual exploitation are, and we need to do that as a system as well. You know, schools are in a really good place to identify those signs, but often those workforces do not have that increased capacity to understand and recognise what those signs are. So there is definitely a place where we need to be doing that, not just where we are working with the young people but also the adults in those places, and also thinking more universally about

health services and clinics where young people might be coming in with STIs or early pregnancies, but also really thinking around our night-time economy and again educating them around those signs as well—our A and E services, our taxi ranks, our bars and nightclubs—because this is where those behaviours are happening in terms of those times of night.

I also think in terms of the secondary intervention it can be very much around engaging with the system in terms of being able to be really proactive in the response to those children and young people who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviours, so not minimising what the behaviours are but also not overestimating the risk and really taking a multidisciplinary approach as well. I think we could do better with mapping out in terms of our areas, in terms of those young people that we have identified are at risk, so working across agencies with the police, with the department and with voluntary agencies and then being able to pick up and respond to those children and young people.

Ms MAXWELL: We used to have programs such as Partysafe, which used to go into schools and educate people about drinking and going out, and it was a learning process for young people to be exposed to what can happen—‘what if’—and responsible drinking, learning to look after yourself, and more importantly, to look after the people that you are with as well. Obviously we all wish that there was never a need to have a sex offenders register. I think we can all agree with that. Wouldn’t it be great if there was no need to for that to happen? Do you think that going from Partysafe we need to be moving with the times and we need to have something similar that goes into the schools to teach more around sexualised behaviours—I mean, we sometimes have the police going in to teach kids about sexting, but I am wondering whether schools or particularly the young people are actually getting it and what the consequences are—so that we work in that more preventative space and so that they can actually learn the true consequences of not only what they do but the impact on the person that they are doing it to?

Ms ARTICO: Sorry, Jackie. Ms Maxwell, I would just add that we strongly agree about the need to educate and get in there and raise awareness, and that is what we have found with our program in the evaluation. The four sessions also educate the parents and also educate the schools—so the welfare officers within the schools are accessible and educated—because the one-off session going in is not enough for it to resonate necessarily and connect. That is why it is over four sessions with that class. Also too for us, for Kids First, what we have also looked at from a very sort of early intervention stage is how within the early years setting we are also beginning to look at educating educators and lead teachers within kinders what signs to look for and triggers to look for with those small children and also how to educate parents in a safe way in that setting for them to also be aware of what to look for as well. So our extremely strong focus on community development and education through a preventative lens is, over the course of the years, to build a greater awareness and a greater confidence to engage in conversation and reduce that stigma and a greater perception of what is behaviour that does not equate to sexual exploitation.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. I would like to understand more about the use of or access to pornography among young people—how widespread it is and what are the consequences in terms of going on to falsely normalise sexual behaviour as seen in pornography, which is totally false, and also whether it could and would lead to some of the offences, particularly amongst young people.

Ms BATEMAN: We know that pornography is not necessarily a direct cause in terms of harmful sexual behaviour, but we do know that when we are engaging with young people they have sighted pornography and it is becoming a big influence in them understanding what healthy relationships are definitely. In the SACAP program, when a young person comes in they will have part of their intervention around pornography and really understanding that pornography is not the real world—that is not how you engage in healthy relationships—and how to navigate that, and also how to keep themselves safe as well when they are online, because we know that online sexual abuse is happening more increasingly as well. So we do it from both keeping yourself safe but also engaging safely online as well.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Have a guess what percentage of young people have seen or accessed pornography.

Ms BATEMAN: Going from what they were saying, we are probably looking at, yes, around 60–70 per cent definitely.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: That is quite a large number.

Ms BATEMAN: Yes. I think when it gets to around over 13—between 13 and 15—that is increasing.

Ms ASHFORD: I think the key thing in the video when Jane talks is that you do not go in there saying, ‘Don’t do this. Don’t do that’, because we know that most young people will—

The DEPUTY CHAIR: ‘We will do the opposite’.

Ms ASHFORD: Or they will go behind closed doors and do it—but you accept that that is maybe the world they are operating in but then educate them about what is safe and how to protect themselves really in those situations.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: The other thing in the three points that you presented earlier: the first one is about specialist support for exploited victims. I would just like to ask: what type of support is it? Can you tease that out a little bit more? And the opposite side is: have you or Kids First ever worked with the young victims rather than the perpetrators?

Ms ASHFORD: Yes, we do, and Jackie is probably best placed to talk about that.

Ms BATEMAN: Yes. Within the SACAP program as well they work with the child that has been harmed, whether that is from an adult or from another young person. So they will come in and do counselling and therapeutic work in terms of responding to their trauma and how they are going to manage that and take that forward but also working with the family as well in terms of how to support them so that they can support their son or their daughter in moving forward as well. The real great, systemic work that the team does is when it is intrafamiliar abuse, so where it is the child within the home that has gone and harmed the other child as well. Work there is done both individually but together also as a family to support them to have conversations, to increase safety, to look at it around parental capacity and increase that parent or carer’s knowledge around what the future signs could be but also to really think about the restorative capacity as well—that element—because these children are living together and we want them to have a healthy relationship moving forward but we also want them individually to be able to engage in healthy relationships as adults as well.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: One of the terms in the terms of reference for the inquiry is about the gathering and also whether a registry would be or should be made publicly available. From your point of view, do you think that a public registry would be adding in terms of protecting young children in any way?

Ms ASHFORD: Well, we do not really have a position on that. I think we sort of made it clear at the beginning that we are here to talk about the education side of things and the systemic side of things, so we probably would not want to comment on that.

Mr GRIMLEY: If I may, thanks, Deputy Chair?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes.

Mr GRIMLEY: Just getting back to education, my wife is teacher and is she is currently doing sex education with grade 3s. We were talking about the program, and from what she was saying nothing has changed in terms of teaching sex education, particularly to that young cohort, since I went through school. But when you look at the flip side in terms of pornography and access to pornography, a hell of a lot has changed since then. So we just have not moved with the times, and it is clearly obvious that that is a major part in preventing sexual offences. There is a big gap there that we need to fill, so I have just got a question around the Stand Up! Program. You may have spoken about this; I was finding that sometimes I missed things. Is that delivered as a whole-of-school or a whole-of-class program, or is it more referral based to individual students? Or can it be both?

Ms ARTICO: It is generally year 8s, and it is the whole year. With the introduction of the consent program and so forth, some schools are looking at multiple years, but our research has found that for that 13-year-old, year 8, cohort it is the most influential and most of timely—it is also around puberty then as well. So it is the whole year level, not individuals, and generally, depending on the size of the school, the class comes in together and engages in the program. And to your point earlier, yes there is sex ed, which has not changed much—sexual education. Partnering that with healthy relationships and understanding what sexual exploitation is and how to protect yourself from that and engage in healthy and safe relationships is really something we believe that needs to complement, as children age, sexual education.

Mr GRIMLEY: Do you find through your program that children have come forward and disclosed certain things at all? And if so, what sorts of numbers are we speaking about and what happens from there? What is the process?

Ms BATEMAN: I could not comment on the numbers specifically with Stand Up!, but in terms of if somebody makes a disclosure then obviously we have to follow policy and have to inform the department about that, so that is what the process is that the Stand Up! trainers will do.

Mr GRIMLEY: Yes, and I suppose that is a positive result for that program—that that child feels comfortable enough to come forward and say something.

Ms ARTICO: Yes. What we have found is that they may not in the moment, and that is the integral nature of educating the welfare division of the school or the teachers as well so they are equipped to respond or able to reach out to us for a secondary consultation if needed and also the parents, because it might not come in the moment as relationships build over those four sessions. It may be then with a trusted teacher or so forth after that.

Ms ASHFORD: And that is why I suppose the program is really good, because they are counsellors. That is what they do on a daily basis, so they can prepare those school welfare officers about the disclosures. They might pick it up themselves while they are running the sessions and say to the teacher, ‘There might be something going on there’. And I think the positive thing about the program is that they are trained counsellors providing it.

Mr GRIMLEY: Just one more very quick one?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Sure.

Mr GRIMLEY: You mentioned briefly about young offenders going on to be adult offenders. In your experience or do you have any access to any data or evidence that we could sort of look into further with that as to the percentage of those that commit offences whilst they are young or children going on to commit offences as adults?

Ms BATEMAN: I think on the current research, but I do not know the name off the top of my head, it is around 3.4 per cent of children or young people that are continuing their behaviours. But we also know that that is also around those young people that are mentioned in terms of intellectual disability and neurodevelopmental conditions, which is why we really need to have a focus on being able to provide increased support to that cohort of young people. But also there are young people in out-of-home care, because they are being moved around and so the messages that are being provided to them are not going with them, and that is a really big area that I think we need to focus on as well—not just in terms of harmful sexual behaviours but also child sexual exploitation—because they are a really vulnerable cohort of the population.

Mr GRIMLEY: Agreed. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Tania?

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Deputy Chair. That is actually a great segue for my next question in relation to the Caring Dads program. First of all, what sort of engagement do you get, and do you find that that Caring Dads program also provides a conduit for conversations for young daughters or young sons and their fathers because of its inclusivity? Because often dads are left a little bit on the outer, and I think it is fantastic that we are actually now doing more with fathers. What sorts of results are you seeing in that?

Ms ARTICO: The Caring Dads program, for those that are not aware, is a 17-week program for fathers who perpetrate family violence. And the difference for Caring Dads compared to men’s behaviour change programs, which are just as effective, is that in our program we target fathers and we draw on the motivation of their fathering and the impact of their behaviours on their children as that motivator for change—and trying to restore and hold a healthy relationship moving forward. It has evolved over the years, when you are looking at engagement rates as a result of only the first three years of the pilot here. It is an evidence-based model that has come from overseas that is proven, but when we were applying it in Australia we found that we had a greater level of dropout, so we adapted the original assessment process to incorporate more so the voice of the mothers and the children. And so now we have, I think, about a 71 per cent retention rate throughout the course of the

17-week program. And I am sorry I am not 100 per cent confident with these stats, because I did not come into today with them, but the initial assessment period over three different appointments and the broader engagement of the family there also does increase the rate of the men in that time and their motivation in commencing the program, and then the support we give around them outside of the 17-week program also helps sustain engagement throughout.

Ms MAXWELL: And the reason I brought up Caring Dads is I have worked in that sector, where I have seen some really good results. And when we are talking today about sexual offending and that primary prevention I am wondering—Caring Dads is a fantastic framework and it is evidenced-based—whether that could be adapted to work with families where there is sexual abuse. Because we know that often the victim or the perpetrator is known to the victim, you know, whether or not it is a member of the family. But I am just sort of thinking about that, and that is why I wanted you to speak about Caring Dads, knowing that it is adapted to family violence but also gives us an opportunity to explore whether that could be something that could be adapted to prevent sexual offending. Particularly if you are seeing children who are displaying those behaviours, where is that coming from? You know, it could lead to perhaps some different outcomes.

Ms ASHFORD: We would have to talk to the founders of Caring Dads to do that—in Canada. And the reason why we chose Caring Dads is that they were very open to adapting the model to Australia. And a lot of evidence-based models from overseas will not change the fidelity, but they were quite happy to do that. And I think you have made a good point, because for a lot of the young people we see in the sexual abuse counselling program there is family violence present more often than not.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much, Aileen, Jackie and Nicole, for your presentation here today, and thank you for your very important work, particularly for our young children. You will be provided with the transcript, so please go through and make sure that you are not misrepresented in any way. Thank you once again.

Witnesses withdrew.