

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into perinatal services

Bendigo — 24 October 2017

#### Members

Mr Paul Edbrooke — Chair

Ms Cindy McLeish — Deputy Chair

Ms Roma Britnell

Dr Rachel Carling-Jenkins

Ms Chris Couzens

Ms Maree Edwards

Mr Bernie Finn

#### Witness

Ms Anne O'Brien, Gianna Centre.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — The hearing now moves into an open forum. This session allows for members of the public to address the committee and to speak about your views and experiences of perinatal services in the region. I welcome to these public hearings members of the local community and thank you for attending here today. We will hear short statements, so please keep your comments to about 8 to 10 minutes to allow as many people to speak as possible.

As I have mentioned previously, evidence at this hearing taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975, and is subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and other relevant legislation. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. It is a contempt of Parliament to provide false evidence. These proceedings will be recorded, and you will be sent a proof of the transcript.

We have several community members about to present to us. First of all, we have Anne O'Brien. Could you please state your full name for the record?

**Ms O'BRIEN** — My name is Anne Maree O'Brien. I am from the Gianna Centre, which is in Victoria Lane, Pall Mall, Bendigo. We would like to thank the Family and Community Development Committee for the opportunity to address the committee and the community this afternoon. The Gianna Centre is a registered charity and it promotes itself as a family support, education and referral centre. The centre is all voluntary and has been offering assistance to families and individuals of Central Victoria for in excess of 13 years. Our organisation has evolved due to a strong need within the community. The majority of clients are referred to us by health, welfare and other government agencies. Amongst other services offered our support includes five key areas in relation to the terms of reference of the inquiry: one, support during and after pregnancy; two, emergency relief and material aid; three, professional referrals, ensuring families and individuals are linked in with professional health and welfare service providers; four, pre and post-abortion care; five, stillbirth, miscarriage and newborn death support.

Much of our service revolves around supporting families during and after pregnancy. This service encompasses planned and unplanned pregnancy support and post-birth parenting assistance. Client evaluations indicate one of the most valued services offered by the Gianna Centre is an opportunity to speak one-on-one with our volunteers. Clients are clearly advised the centre is not a counselling, medical or legal identity. However, the opportunity of the proverbial cup-of-tea-service, where thoughts, emotions, opportunities and options can be discussed in a warm and welcoming confidential setting, is highly sought after.

The provision of emergency relief and material aid is a key aspect of our work and we provide all nursery items, which can include new and pre-loved cots, mattresses, bedding, blankets, baby clothing and new infant car restraints, to families on a day-to-day basis. In a number of instances families are contacting us from hospital following the birth of their baby as they do not have a suitable car restraint in which to take their baby home. Inadequate budgeting ability will see families presenting at the Gianna Centre for baby formula, nappies and prescription medication. This may be on an ongoing basis.

Referrals are another key aspect of our service provision. Some of our vulnerable families in particular find it difficult to engage with health and welfare services during their pregnancy. We assist them in organising referrals to relevant health and professional service providers and follow up to ensure this connection has been established, with ongoing encouragement to keep in contact with maternal child welfare nurses, mothers groups and playgroups, and follow-ups regarding vaccinations et cetera continues post birth.

The Gianna Centre has always been transparent to the fact that it does not refer women for abortions. Clients seeking an abortion are referred to their general practitioner. Women facing an unplanned or unexpected pregnancy are welcomed to the centre with care, empathy and non-judgemental support. The centre's primary purpose is to provide options to enable a woman to continue with her pregnancy if she chooses, and much support is on offer during pregnancy and after the birth of her baby. This support continues for as long as the woman chooses. If a woman decides to have an abortion she is reassured of our continued support after the procedure, and much of our service revolves around post-abortion care. Some women regret their abortion decision and seek support in coming to terms with the loss of their baby. Gianna remains one of the few organisations that advertises its care for post-abortive mums, and this care has been proven to be very therapeutic for some.

One of our monthly support groups welcomes new families who have lost their baby through miscarriage, stillbirth, medical termination or abortion. It is very humbling when families and individuals share such a private aspect of their personal journey and we hope that all benefit in some way through their involvement with this peer support group. As a result, the Gianna memorial wall was erected in partnership with Remembrance Parks Central Victoria and was funded by grants and business and public donations. This wonderful community project gives a family the opportunity to place a plaque in memory of their baby lost through abortion, medical termination, miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death, either recently or long ago.

Funding for the above and other services on offer through the Gianna Centre is a huge challenge. Our committee of management has received a number of calls over the years from families and individuals outside of central Victoria, asking if Gianna centres are located elsewhere. We believe there is a real need for this type of service in both metropolitan and rural areas. Whilst a number of successful grants have allowed us the opportunity to fund parenting programs, provide new baby car restraints and build the Gianna memorial wall, the challenge to meet rent and day-to-day running expenses can at times be overwhelming. To date that has been achieved by donations, running cake stalls, sausage sizzles and other fundraisers. This then puts further drain on our volunteers. We thank you, and I am grateful for the opportunity to address the committee and the public this afternoon.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**