

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 24 February 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ms Bronwyn Pike, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Catriona Milne, Manager, Uniting Heritage Service, Uniting Vic.Tas.

The CHAIR: I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and to the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. At this point, all mobile phones should be turned to silent. I would like to for the record introduce the Committee. To my right of course is James Newbury, MP, the Member for Brighton and the Deputy Chair; to my left is Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; and also Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda; and for the record my name is Natalie Suleyman, MP, the Member for St Albans. Today I welcome Bronwyn Pike, the Chief Executive Officer of Uniting Victoria and Tasmania and also we have Catriona Milne, Manager of the Uniting Heritage Service.

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, these comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any verified transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as they are available, unless confidentiality has been requested.

We also have here today Holly. Holly is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk at any point during this hearing, and also after the hearing we are more than happy to provide support services.

The Committee is also very much interested in hearing about the experience from your perspective of forced adoption, in particular services and also, most importantly, the outcomes that you would like from this inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening to the committee, which will be followed by some questions from committee members. Thank you, Bronwyn.

Ms PIKE: Well, thank you very much, Chair, and thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before this really significant and important committee today. It is great to be here with other members of the committee as well, and I too acknowledge the First Peoples of our country as the traditional owners of the land and pay respects to elders past and present.

I am indeed here with Catriona Milne, my colleague who is also the Manager of the Uniting Heritage Service. Uniting Vic. Tas is the community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We have around 3800 staff and we deliver nearly 600 programs in the area of child, youth and families; aged and carer services; alcohol and other drugs; crisis and homelessness; disability; early learning; employment; and mental health. We are a very big agency and we cover a lot of areas, and we are also a significant provider of services and programs for children and families, including adoption and permanent care services.

Uniting Vic. Tas actually came about as a merger of around 25 separate agencies that were all Uniting Church agencies known by different names, like UnitingCare Ballarat, UnitingCare Geelong, Kildonan, Connections in your area and others—UnitingCare Sunshine, all of these programs. We have now come together and that is why we are so big and so diverse, but we also have a very, of course, long history, which really brings us to why we are here today—because of course our predecessor agencies were babies' homes and orphanages and a lot of those kinds of services where we did see forced adoptions and the outcomes of those things taking place.

So we operate a heritage service for people affected by adoption—for those who spent some or all of their childhood in out-of-home care services provided by the Uniting Church and its predecessors, the Methodist, Presbyterian or Congregational churches, and their family members. I just want to say—and I am going to hand over to Catriona because she runs this service—this is a huge value-add for the funded services that government provides, because we self-fund a number of these services and most of the work that Catriona and her team do is funded by our organisation. We do that because we recognise that the practice of forced separations caused immense grief and pain and trauma and for many people has had a devastating and lifelong impact on them and on their families. So we think this is a really important thing that we need to do to acknowledge some of the practices of the past and to really be involved in helping to heal and bring about a better future for people.

We commend the Victorian Government for the apology that was issued in 2012 to mothers, fathers, sons and daughters who were profoundly harmed by past adoption practices in Victoria, and we think that all of these

people should be provided improved access to their records, to information and of course to the professional support that is very much critical to them and their identity and their sense of wellbeing. So I am going to hand over to Catriona now, who will fill out some more information about the services that we offer and also what issues are raised in her work.

Ms MILNE: Thanks, Bronwyn. Thank you. We are very grateful to be able to speak with you today. Since Uniting submitted our recommendations, we have moved further towards what we believe is a unique model that takes the work with people affected by adoption to a deeper, more positive and meaningful experience for them. Uniting holds records for approximately 6000 children and families affected by adoption from the former Methodist, Presbyterian and Uniting Church agencies. We have operated, our predecessors, a statewide adoption information service since the 1980s. This service was integrated into the Uniting Heritage Service in July last year, so this provides a model of person-centred, wraparound service delivery. We are a team of six that offers records, support and searching for anyone, or their families, who lived in an orphanage, children's home, residential care or foster care or has been affected in any way by adoption. This is the only service of its kind, and we believe it demonstrates best practice. We can offer integrated ongoing service that responds to the needs that we see.

In addition to the issues highlighted by Bronwyn, we continue to strongly recommend that the legislation be amended to allow parents identifying information they can currently not access. The submissions to this inquiry contain overwhelming and painful stories, and I imagine they are difficult for you all to hear also. There are some strong recommendations from knowledgeable sources that we respect stating that past providers, such as Uniting, should not have a role in providing adoption information services. That is valid and understandable; however, at Uniting we believe we have something unique to offer. We do not hide from what was done in the past; instead we wish to acknowledge this trauma and offer resources and support in the present, and to some people the chance to experience this is hugely significant.

Currently we are funded by the Department of Justice and Community Safety to search our records and to meet with people to give them their adoption information. As Bronwyn was saying, we take this many steps further. Uniting funds additional support and services that are unique, and they are valued by the people who contact us. We believe that people should be given a choice as to the organisation they choose to approach for a service, and this is critical to empowering families and adopted people who have gone through a system of separation and dispossession in giving them ownership in self-directed care. We know of mothers who signed adoption consents and later learned that their child was never adopted, rather it was fostered or lived in a children's home. Within our approach, instead of referring the mother to another service, we continue to offer supported access to all records from out-of-home care. Often children were adopted and then faced rejection and trauma in their adoptive families. They were placed in out-of-home care. In other situations families were separated when older children went into homes and younger children were adopted. The integrated approach that we take is able to offer services to the whole family on a continuing basis.

Formerly at Uniting and in other services the process is usually as follows: people seeking adoption information make an inquiry; they are asked to submit a written application; the case is then allocated to a gazetted case worker or manager, who collects the records and contacts the requester to make a time to meet, sometimes in person and sometimes virtually or on the phone; interviews take about 60 minutes; information is given to the person, who is then able to search for family on their own or with the help of a service or perhaps referred to a search agency. The time to get to an interview can take six months. Over the course of the whole experience a person may be dealing with two or three different workers, and contact often ceases with the adoption information service at the end of that interview.

At the Uniting adoption information service the requests come directly to me. There is no application form; people telephone and I speak with them. They may speak of their wishes and their fears, and we acknowledge how difficult that first call is. They may contact via email. If another Heritage Service caseworker is allocated, the requester is contacted within 2 to 12 hours and connected with the worker, who will stay with them throughout the whole journey, from initial contact to receiving records to ongoing searching and support. There can be several conversations leading up to that interview and the release of information, and people are continually updated as to the progress of their request. This takes between five and eight weeks. The worker may travel to meet people at a place of their choosing and with a person that they choose to support them. We provide food. We have several hours with people. We have travelled as far as Bendigo and after lockdown eased have met people in parks, in a local cafe. This is part of an email from a mother:

Thank you so much for our special time and the lovely lunch. You are the first person that has really listened. You are able to just get it. There have been so many years of silence with little help or care along the way. Thank you for your precious time.

In the last five months, as one part of the work we do, we have been asked to locate seven people from natural families—this is the work that Uniting funds, the searching—including three mothers. Six out of seven people were located and all six are moving ahead with contact. One sister said she was very reluctant and frightened at first, but because she was supported and she was given time she is going ahead with contact with the worker present. Another mother was very fearful about telling her three children, who knew nothing about her first child, and because she was supported her courage in telling her three children has already reaped benefits for their relationship.

As you all know, this is a complex and many-layered story. There is joy. There is fear. There are secrets. There is a lot of silence and grief and a lot of guilt. Providing person-centred wraparound services based on experience can greatly reduce the risk of trauma and further harm to both people who have been adopted and family members. When we contact birth mothers, natural mothers, they say things like, ‘What do they want from me?’, ‘Are they angry with me?’, ‘I’d always wondered but I didn’t want to disrupt their life’, ‘That was the worst decision of my life’, ‘I felt like I was a carrier for someone else’s child’, ‘I felt so powerless and dirty’, ‘I don’t want to meet yet but I will give you photos’, ‘I don’t want to meet but I will give you information to pass on’. They also ask, ‘What if my child doesn’t want to know me?’, ‘How much should I say?’, particularly if there was abuse and violence around the birth and the conception; ‘What is expected of me?’, ‘What questions can I ask?’; and ‘What if we don’t like each other?’. Imagine feeling all that—that emotion, that distress and that turmoil—with no-one to talk it through with, which is what happens; no-one to share the shame and the questions and the excitement.

After our submission was published we received an email from a mother:

I have just read your submission. It addresses what I have found so difficult. It made me cry as to the support needed in reconnecting.

Sometimes when a child contacts their birth family directly it works well, and the Heritage Service has no desire to deprive people of that choice. Too often, however, there is not enough help and children and their families are left on their own. There are too many stories of further loss and rejection and trauma. In our experience, 80 per cent of people if offered a choice prefer us to do the searching and the initial contact. The Heritage Service continues to work with the person and the people to support them through possible rejection, misunderstandings, complex family dynamics. Because we have been in contact since the beginning of the request we can develop trust and connection and a deeper understanding of the person’s unique needs and wants. One of the Heritage Service teams said the other day, ‘Every person who contacts us has their own missing piece, and in each person, it is different’. We work with each person until they choose to end the connection with us. Just to finish, this is part of an email from an adopted person:

I appreciate the assistance you are giving me. Thank you for the release and compassion you gave me today.

Uniting really wishes to continue to work in this way with those who contact us—in collaboration with others—and to continue to offer this contribution. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That was very important evidence from Bronwyn and Catriona. If I can, just before I pass on to my committee members for questions, my first question is: Uniting’s submission notes that Relationships Australia is the only federally funded organisation to provide counselling to adoptees and birth parents, which limits people’s ability to choose their own counsellor. I think you made reference to the importance of choosing a service, and in particular service for people in regional areas as well. Would you be able to just add further to Uniting’s recommendation for consumer-directed counselling and also the increased funding to other organisations to provide some of these services?

Ms MILNE: You may be aware that there is an organisation called Open Place, which is funded by the Victorian Government to work with Forgotten Australians, people who grew up in out-of-home care. We are suggesting that a model like that would be very helpful for people who have experienced adoption, because they provide brokerage. The State Government pays brokerage for them to then pay counsellors. So if a person is living in a particular area and they already are seeing a counsellor and want to continue with that counsellor, then the funding can be used for that. They do not have to use a particular provider, they can choose someone close to them and they are funded up to a cap. Often 10 to 12 sessions a year is what it ends up being. We think

that meets people's needs more closely than having to go to a single provider who by nature is not going to be able to offer the breadth.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms MILNE: I suppose it is giving an organisation that is already involved in the field some brokerage funding that they could use. That would be the practical outcome.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr NEWBURY: I just wanted to ask, if I may—thank you both so much. The point that you made about the six-month wait was very notable, and it is something that I would appreciate if you would elaborate further on both why that may be the case and also what we as the Committee could take away from that in terms of future recommendations.

Ms MILNE: Sure, yes.

Ms PIKE: And that is around accessing records?

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, sorry. Yes. Excuse me.

Ms PIKE: Yes.

Ms MILNE: Yes. I think it is an issue with other providers, such as the Department of Justice, and the workload. We are a smaller service. Justice works with people who have been adopted through the Salvation Army and the Royal Women's Hospital. They have a huge reach in terms of they are the only ones that can work with those people. Those of us who hold the records for the former Methodist, Presbyterian and Uniting churches only work with those people, and they are smaller by comparison. And it is partly because Uniting funds for extra staffing to do this work actually. If we were just using the funding that we have, either we would not be able to offer the breadth of the service or it would take a lot longer. And that is what happens. I think it is to do with the number of workers and the internal processes as well. Because we connect with someone very quickly with that initial call, we are working with them much more closely the whole time. They do not have to wait six months to hear from someone, because what happens at the moment is they will submit a request and they will hear six months later.

Ms PIKE: Often there is an optimum time that people are reaching out and then there is a delay.

Mr NEWBURY: It must seem like—I mean, six months sounds like a long time for anything—

Ms MILNE: It does, yes.

Mr NEWBURY: but for people in these circumstances it would be an eternity, once they have made that decision.

Ms PIKE: Once they have made that, yes.

Mr NEWBURY: So thank you for making that point. That is a very useful point.

The CHAIR: Christine.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both very much. We really appreciate your contribution today, and your submission. It is really valuable for the Committee to hear your perspective and of the work that you have been doing, so thank you very much. Just going back to the waiting list, so is there any form of waiting period to access your service?

Ms MILNE: No.

Ms COUZENS: No? Okay. So someone can ring up and come in—

Ms MILNE: Someone rang today, and they said, 'Oh, are you Catriona?'. I said, 'Yes'. She said, 'Oh, I thought I'd get a receptionist'. I said, 'No, straight to me'—and people value that.

Ms PIKE: And I might also that Catriona's team do not only do the adoption service, they also of course provide heritage services for adults and people who have lived in, you know, some range of our other services for other reasons.

Ms MILNE: Yes. We have records for 30 000 children altogether.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. And you mentioned 6000 files that you have.

Ms MILNE: Six thousand people.

Ms COUZENS: People, sorry.

Ms MILNE: Yes, and records for them.

Ms PIKE: And how many photos? You told me the other—

Ms MILNE: Well, we have just started a project. This is the other thing that we can do because we are a past provider. We have contact with the former mothercraft nurses. We started a project two years ago because we were aware that there were lots of photos that they took—these young women, the 17-year-olds who worked in the homes.

Ms PIKE: In the orphanages—they took photos.

Ms MILNE: They took photos. They were not supposed to, but we are really glad they did. And we have been collecting their photos and meeting with them, so we have met with 50 of them and we have 4000 photographs. So we are always adding to our records. The other wonderful thing about that is happening in a couple of weeks. When we know the nurses who have donated the photos, and we get a request, we can have them meet. So we are having people meet the nurses who cared for them when they were babies—in person.

Ms PIKE: And the nurses. I mean, you know, they are older.

Ms MILNE: You have met them.

Ms PIKE: I have met a number of them, you know. They are older people now, but yes, they have such affection for the children that they cared for and everything.

Ms MILNE: And that is healing. I mean, I am a bit reluctant to use that word sometimes, but I cannot find a better one. I think it is helpful for people, and the natural mothers also, to know that—because people think of institutions as hard—these women had one baby each they were allocated. They cuddled those babies, they took them home for the weekends. It is really helpful for an adult to learn that they did actually get touched, because that affects their sense of self.

Ms COUZENS: Is there a risk of trauma attached to that, though?

Ms MILNE: To which?

Ms COUZENS: To actually meeting the nurse.

Ms MILNE: Yes, and we would only do that if that is what they want. We are happy to be bold and try things, and the only way we would do it is if the person has the photos and we say, 'We do actually happen to know the nurse that gave those photos. Are you interested in meeting them?'

Ms PIKE: It is all up to them.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. So—

Ms PIKE: Yes, we got away from your question.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, that is all right. So the 6000—do you have an idea on a percentage of those that have had a request?

Ms MILNE: That is a good question.

Ms PIKE: With the Department, you mean?

Ms MILNE: Or do you mean—

Ms COUZENS: Or through your service.

Ms MILNE: It is difficult to tell because those records start from 1929, and we have been offering post-adoption services since the 1980s.

Ms COUZENS: Okay.

Ms MILNE: I do not think the records—there is not a central spot where you can count it all up.

Ms COUZENS: Okay.

Ms MILNE: I am sure it would not—well, I am not sure, but there would be a lot of people who never come for records, and we would be in trouble if they did, probably. But certainly the biggest number of people who request records were born in the 1960s, and we do get some that are for children. We get quite a few requests from children of adopted people, but they would not be the majority.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. And you talked about the support that goes around people when they do approach you or contact you; is there specific counselling that is attached to that? I mean, you talked a lot about support, but I am just wondering whether that includes some specialised counselling as part of that.

Ms MILNE: Yes. I would say that we are not counsellors in the sense that a person would go to a counsellor once a week for a session. Every person who works with the people who have experienced adoption has a psych or social work qualification—we have to be gazetted anyway. We would say that every conversation needs to be therapeutic, so every time we talk to someone it is not an admin process for us. It is about listening to that person, giving them space and having several conversations. One man spoke to me, and when we first spoke the thing that was foremost on his mind was he had just told his adoptive mother that he was doing this and she was furious and angry, and he was really distressed by that. So the process for him, before he even got his records—I spent an hour on the phone with him talking about the dementia. So I would say our aim is that every conversation with us is a therapeutic one and a listening one. It is not about admin.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. Okay.

Ms PIKE: Yes. I guess as an organisation that is in the family and child welfare area, we actually do have a therapeutic kind of model for the whole organisation which informs all of our interactions with our clients and consumers.

Ms COUZENS: So would you say as part of the recommendations of this inquiry that there is a need for specialised counselling outside of what everybody else is doing? Because from what we can understand, there is not really any specialised counselling.

Ms MILNE: No. I think it is that—so it is having more people. For example, VANISH—you will have read, and I read VANISH's submission—have got a list of counsellors. Instead of someone ringing and speaking to an admin person, and just as they do have an intake process where they will speak to the workers, it is about the first person that you contact not necessarily being a person who is a receptionist or who is not able to take that conversation any further.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, and there has been a bit of evidence from women saying the counsellors did not understand their circumstances, what happened or the trauma attached to that, and they found that actually put them off going to counselling. Even though they probably needed that, it was not something that really was serving them in any way.

Ms MILNE: Yes, I think that is right, and it is great that you picked that up, because I think that is one of the key issues. We need to have more skilled people. VANISH does a lot of training, and we are talking about

collaboration too. We are not a standalone. We do not want to do all of this on our own. It is not a good idea for people anyway. But I agree with you that there needs to be a much better skill base.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you both.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr TAK: I have just one last one. I do not have a question, but I would just like to add for the record: thank you for your presentation, but most importantly thank you to Uniting Victoria and Tasmania for the important service that you provide, including connections in my electorate in Clarinda. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Heang. I echo the sentiments of Heang too. Thank you both for being here and for all the great work that you do amongst our Communities, and in particular for submitting a very in-depth submission, I must say. As I said, the committee appreciates your time and effort in attending today, and the next steps will be—so we are at the point where all evidence will be deliberated by committee members, and strong recommendations will be put forward in our report to the Victorian Government. The Committee envisages that the report will be tabled by 1 July this year, and we will do our very best through our secretariat to keep you updated of the progress and more importantly the Victorian Government's response to the recommendations. Thank you so much for being here. It was an absolute pleasure. Great to see you.

Witnesses withdrew.