

FINAL TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds

Coburg—Tuesday, 1 March 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr Brad Battin—Deputy Chair

Mr Neil Angus

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ms Barbara Leon, Operations Manager,

Ms Rafaela Lopez, Community Adviser, Committee of Management,

Mr Demetrio Ortega, community member (*via Spanish interpreter*), and

Ms Lucy Salinas, community member and former president of Spanish Window Community Services, United Spanish Latin American Welfare Centre.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds.

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

My name is Natalie Suleyman, and I am the state Member for St Albans and the Chair of this committee. To my right I also acknowledge my colleagues participating today: Michaela Settle MP, the Member for Buninyong, and Meng Heang Tak MP, the Member for Clarinda.

All mobile phones should be turned to silent at this point.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, which means that you are protected against any action for what you say here today—so you can say anything you would like—but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this 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. Transcripts will be made public and posted on the committee's website.

I invite you to make a brief opening statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the members.

And today we have here from the United Spanish Latin American Welfare Centre: Ms Barbara Leon, Operations Manager; Ms Rafaela Lopez, the Community Adviser from United's Committee of Management; Mr Demetrio Ortega, community member, who is being interpreted by Ms Blossom Amelia Ah Ket; and also Ms Lucy Salinas, community member, who is being interpreted by Ms Blossom Amelia Ah Ket.

If I have not pronounced your name correctly, please state your name before you proceed. I thank you very much for being here today. Who will we begin with?

Ms LEON: Rafaela Lopez.

Ms LOPEZ: Thank you. Okay, I will begin with a little shortened introduction, historical introduction, about our organisation, United, now. It used to be CELAS, which are the initials of the original name in Spanish. Now it is called United Spanish and Latin American Welfare Centre. It was founded in 1977 at a time when a lot of arrivals came from Latin America. Previous to that quite a lot had come from Spain, but in 1977 it was mainly Latin Americans—quite a lot of people who were professional, psychologists, and so on, but other people as well. And this group of professional people, looking at the community and the kinds of services that it required for settlement and other issues, decided to establish CELAS. We are going on to our 50 years of life. United has a very long history of responding to the needs of the Spanish-speaking communities. There are more than 20 Spanish-speaking communities—there is the Spanish one and a whole lot from Central America and South America. So that is who we are.

In the early years we assisted with settlement services, community development and training at a time when there was a problem with unemployment. In the early 80s we also provided retraining for a number of people. We responded to the need for support in the very difficult area of torture and trauma by establishing a foundation for sufferers or people experiencing torture and trauma. In El Salvador there was a civil war that lasted about eight years and in the 1970s in Latin America—in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay—there were mainly dictatorships and there was a great deal of repression. So we were becoming aware that there was no such thing in Victoria, and the psychologists that we had contacted had no experience in this field. So we decided that we needed to have it, and with a group of professionals in the areas of health and psychology the foundation was established. It was very busy with Spanish speakers during the first decade or so, and now they are providing services to refugees from all over the world. So as you can see, we have responded to all the needs of our communities, and in some cases it is helping a lot of others.

One of the things that we are here about is the ageing of our community. Because we came from the early 60s—I am an early 60s person—to the 90s we are now ageing, and we are actually older than the median age in Victoria. The median age is 37, and in our community—Uruguay, 56 years old; Spaniards, 54; Chileans, 50;

Argentinians, 48; and Salvadorians, 46. So, as I said, we are an ageing community. There were some people that came to Australia under the family reunion program of the 80s and 90s. So migrants and refugees were able to bring their older parents to Australia—they became very efficient childcare workers—and of course they were the first group that started ageing because they were over 50 when they came to Australia. We have started to see that problem already, having to deal with it, and United have responded by providing services to older Spanish-speaking people in Victoria—Victorians. We started with the social support programs, and we also have the volunteer programs by which we train volunteers to go and visit older people in either residential facilities or at their own homes. So that is one of the main issues that we provide for now, and of course we are providing home support services with the federal government home care programs.

Now, we are involved in lots of other activities. We conduct community development and information sessions in the whole area—and you can add whatever. We are also supporting international students with information sessions, for a lot of international students coming from Latin American countries mainly. We conduct community research and community consultations. In fact we provided quite an important consultation with the older communities to put together our document for the parliamentary inquiry. We are able to interact socially in the community in general, and I have already mentioned the support for people with war and political persecution.

Carers of older Spanish-speaking Victorians need support, and we also provide support in their roles. Some of them have a lack of knowledge of the aged care system in general, and obviously the older ones do not have a great deal of civic participation because of their lack of English language. We often learn English and we can speak it, but with certain illnesses, as you will know—dementia and so on—one of the first things that goes is the language that has been learned late in life. So we have that problem of social isolation, with very little knowledge to access technology. Even though we have had programs that have supported people, not everybody is able to learn in those very difficult knowledge areas.

We support intergenerational projects and promote art-based projects as well, a holistic approach to health and socially based activities. I think the rest you might have read from the document that we presented, our submission. Obviously if you want to ask questions, that would be very welcome.

The CHAIR: We will move to the next presenter.

Mr ORTEGA (via interpreter): Is this working? I work on the radio quite a lot so I understand about microphones. I would like to thank the United Spanish Latin American Welfare Centre for being here today for the Victorian parliamentary inquiry into support for older Victorians. In the first place I just want to acknowledge that this is a historic day for elderly people who speak Spanish. For the first time the Victorian Parliament is going to hear the needs and experiences of elderly people who speak Spanish who are retired.

I am not only here to talk about the experiences I have had visiting Spanish-speaking people in nursing homes, but I have also been a Spanish-speaking person in a nursing home. I went on a trip to Chile with my wife. I left her there with my mother-in-law. When I returned back here, I had an accident, so I ended up in hospital, in the Broadmeadows Hospital, which is not really a general hospital, and so it took quite a long time to recover. They said I needed to be hospitalised and stay there for two months without walking because I had broken the heel of my foot. Throughout those two months I was wandering around Broadmeadows Hospital in a wheelchair and practically had freedom to do that. There was a cash ATM at the front of the hospital, so I would go there and withdraw money so I did not have any problems paying my debts. When 25 days had passed, they said I could not be in the hospital any longer and so they said that I needed to go to a place that was 50% nursing home and something else. I did not have a problem with going to the nursing home because I did not want to bother my children, who work, but the problem was that once I got to the nursing home they began to deny my human rights as a thinking human being. When I was there I practically did not have anyone to interact with; it was a chair or a clock or a piece of furniture.

Ms LEON: No, he is saying he was not perceived as having a personality; he was almost seen as an item.

Mr ORTEGA (via interpreter): I basically could not do anything else. I was like a prisoner in those rooms. I was alone in one room, and then at one stage I was in there with another person, who was also pretty sick like me. I had medical insurance, which I decided to get when I turned 55 for what could happen to me, so I am sure that I was treated a lot better than everybody else, but I was not able to move around or see anything or look at

anything. I came to learn that politicians talk a lot but they tend to have a box where they put old people. They think that they are all equal, but they are not all equal, especially the ones that do not have all of their five senses or that do not have memory. I was there and able to keep doing my radio show on 3ZZZ every Thursday and broadcast from there, but I was not actually talking about the problems I was facing in the nursing home, I was talking about other things. But I came to see that it was terrible within those nursing homes for people who still have all five of their senses, having people tell them what they have to do. I will try and be quick about this, but when I did finally get discharged the doctor came and said that I would be leaving in two days. Once those two days passed, the sister who was in charge of the area where I was—I asked her to call a taxi for me to go home, and she said, ‘No. The person in charge of you has to take that into their own account and get you home’. So I was a prisoner.

I just want to say from the bottom of my heart that from what I have seen I really hope that you can study and take into account these stories, particularly the experiences of people who still have command of all of their senses—all five senses. I know that people can be sick and have problems with all sorts of organs, but they are very different to the people who have lost memory or cannot participate or are in the very last days of their lives. It is a very lamentable situation, so I would like for you to hear that story and know that it is real. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Demetrio. Now we move to Lucy. Thank you, Lucy.

Ms SALINAS: I would like to speak in English. I have a Spanish accent, but I am very proud of that. But I need this help here; we need support. I came from Chile in 1985. In my country—what I was calling my country, because now I think my country is Australia—I was a secondary teacher—vice-principal. I had a very high position. But when I came to Australia I was nothing. I was nobody. So I used to say, ‘I am nobody, but I will be somebody sometime’. And now I am somebody because in my area—I live in the south-east—we did not have an organisation who could look after us. The organisation before was called Prodele, but it finished in 2005. At that time I was a community worker—welfare. I was working in helping the community [inaudible] worker. But we did not have funding. At that time immigration decided that we are an independent community. It was not like that. So many people came to the community service, but I could not see them because we did not have funding. The organisation did not allow me to see Spanish speaking. So I was looking where I could go, and I went to the South Eastern Migrant Resource Centre and in there they provided me with an office and stationery. But all the world should be volunteers. So we started a volunteer organisation to look after our people, because I did not have the heart to tell them, elderly people, to take the train and go. At that time CELAS was in Berwick and in Fitzroy, and I said, ‘They cannot do that’. So I established Spanish Window Community Services in the South Eastern Migrant Resource Centre, and we were working there until the COVID. Unfortunately, because of my health, I resigned last November, last year, but I still receive phone calls when they have problems. For them I am Señora Lucy, and we have been looking after their community needs as welfare workers in more than 300 cases.

I see how people who came before me in the 1970s from my ex-country, from Chile, were suffering there a lot, because there was a dictatorship. There was torture. There was a lot of—what can I say—not knowing what will happen to you tomorrow. It is like being in a war and not being in a war, because if you were a mother, you did not know if your son went to work or to [inaudible]. You do not know if they will come back or not, because suddenly they disappear, and until now there are some people who we do not know where they are. So these people who came in the 70s were taken to a hostel. In the hostel they were there with work. So you came on Friday. On Monday you were going to work at six o’clock in the morning. They took us and put us to work. How can you work from seven o’clock to three o’clock and then go to learn English? They gave you some food, and then you went to learn English. Most of the people went to sleep, because it was so hard. So they started using their own children as interpreters.

That was the 70s. Now we are in the 2020s, 50 years after. What are they doing? They worked since day one or three when they arrived until they were 70—not 65; 70 years old, because they continued working. But now where are they? They pay tax. They are at home, the lucky ones, but the children that now are grown up have to pay mortgages, so they have to go to work. Mum is there alone. What about dementia? You start being a dangerous person for the family because you cannot be in the house.

I have got many cases, but I will tell you one. Yolandita—I call her Yolandita, because she was one of my first clients from El Salvador—decided it was too much to be at home, because the daughter was with her husband,

who was sick, now passed away. So she decided to go to a nursing home, but now she has lost weight. She cannot eat the same food as Australians do. I was in a hospital last year for a long time, but I found the food really delicious—but not for them. In the nursing home usually it is pumpkin, pumpkin and pumpkin. Because of the restrictions some people, as volunteers, said they would like to share food with her, but we could not. Now she would like to be out, but where?

I have been in this problem for a long time. Since 2015 we have started doing petitions to have a nursing home in Spanish, together with other organisations—for example, the Filipino people. Their language is nearly the same as over in Brazil. More than 1,000 signatures. We have been doing three petitions, the last one together with United, but it did not go anywhere. People are still dying. People are still sometimes leaving themselves—dying. I had my mother in a nursing home in the early 90s—1999 she passed away. I had three children, and I had to be in the nursing home from when the children went into school until they left. A lot of the time when I left something would happen because of a misunderstanding in the language. I know that they make many efforts—you put in some card for the carer to see if they can communicate—but it is too difficult. Those people who suffered in El Salvador or Chile, from the war or the dictatorship, now they are feeling like he said: being in a prison. That is why most of our people pass away in less than a year.

This is the first time that I have approached the authorities. I really would like to see if your mother was in a nursing home and was mistreated. Look, in one of my cases a lady did not know that she had dementia. She asked a nurse or the carers, ‘I need to go to the toilet, I need to go to the toilet’. Nobody listened. She was saying in Spanish, ‘Quiero ir al baño, quiero ir al baño’. She screamed. Nobody appeared there. She jumped and she broke her ribs, and she passed away because they could not do an operation. Things like that are happening every day, and it breaks my heart because I cannot do anything more than being here. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Lucy and Demetrio, for sharing your evidence with us today, and also Rafaela, thank you very much. I will move to committee questions at this stage. I might just start with a question for Demetrio and also Lucy. What are some of the things that government can do to help the Spanish community access the services and make it easier for people from the Spanish community or migrant communities?

Mr ORTEGA (via interpreter): They should listen to the organisations that provide community help and just pay a lot more attention to the experiences of the elderly in the Spanish-speaking community and allocate money to their budgets, because I do not think that that money is going to them.

The CHAIR: Lucy?

Ms SALINAS: We did have a project where I was viewing how our elderly people see nursing homes. They call it a prison where they will lose freedom. So what we were planning with them and the people is to have like an activity centre where we do sport and everything, so we all would meet to do that. Also, in combination with home care and all the assistance at home, all together with such independence for them and then starting with respite, but it is more the going to the residential care because, as I said, if you were in a country where you were without freedom and you are going, as he said, ‘I haven’t got freedom’—freedom for us is very important. So I will do that. I will go step by step.

Mr ORTEGA (via interpreter): I have belonged for many years to a Spanish-speaking community group of Hume, which is an incorporated group, and in the past we would receive \$2,000 a year and now we receive only \$1,000, when costs have gone up so much. It is money that comes through the intermediaries of the local council, and we use that money to support people in the community group, but that money is not enough. It is not enough to cater for them. I think that money comes from the federal government technically, and I think that the Victorian government needs to give more money to all the ethnic groups that are incorporated and run memberships.

The CHAIR: Any other questions?

Ms SETTLE: I have got some questions for Rafaela or Barbara which are a bit more around the organisation side of it. In your submission at one point you talk about the need to bring in a younger generation and suggest that perhaps there should be funding almost to create an awareness of the wisdom of elders and so forth. One of the things we are really interested in in this inquiry is how do we build the workforce capacity so

that we are culturally aware and so forth. Are they the same project? How can government grow the cultural awareness of the workforce?

Ms LEON: I would not say they are the same projects really. I think what we were referring to is in terms of intergenerational opportunities for people to learn from each other and have some process around that, so any funding towards that would be great. In terms of workforce capacity, I think starting with community is always important, so coming to us and seeing how that might be. We have a lot of knowledgeable people in the community that could provide training around cultural awareness. We are a really diverse community of over 20 countries, therefore it is not a homogenous community. There is a lot of diversity within the community. So I think starting with community, consulting, gathering the knowledge that is within the community, having an understanding of our history as well, which I think has been beautifully exemplified by the two members that we have brought today. It is hard to really say specifically how it could happen, but I think, yes, starting with the community consulting us.

Ms SETTLE: We have spoken to one of the local governments, and they have talked about exactly that that impacts—it is the relationships with the existing community groups that will see the changes. Are there issues around Spanish people getting the telephone interpreting services? I am obviously getting a sense that the language barrier is a real issue, so are there issues around the telephone interpreting services?

Ms LEON: I cannot speak to that. I mean, I have not heard a lot from what is coming from the clients at United. Would you like to speak to that, Lucy?

Ms SALINAS: Sometimes we have to wait about 10 to 15 minutes, and at the end they say there is no interpreter. I just recently, last week, had a client. Because he went around sick, I supported him. We called the Centrelink multilingual service. We were waiting for half an hour, and at the end there was none—no way. Not just that, if you go to Centrelink they send you to their website. How will you go to a website if you have never touched a computer? And now more sorts of things are going into the mobile—MyGov and a lot of applications. They do not know. They cannot do that. And if they go to their children, they cannot do it because they have not got time.

Now, on the question of training, in 2005 we trained 50 people in the Spanish Window Community Services, together with the Filipinos, but our aim was the Spanish speaking—50. All the people are working now. A service provider went to us. We speak with them and we said that we need language aid—like before when we recently came to Australia we had a teacher there; something like that. So when people did not understand we explained in Spanish, but we tried everything to push them to English, and at the end all the services were in English. They are still working, but I think we need more because the Spanish population is growing bigger and bigger. If you are lucky enough that you understand English, you will be fine. And now there are people who are hiding that they burn their food, because they forget. Because they do not want to go to a nursing home because a nursing home is a prison. So there should be language aid so people will lose their fear of learning another language.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think at this point we will conclude with the questions. On behalf of the committee can I thank in particular Rafaela, Lucy and Demetrio for sharing your experience through your evidence today and thank Barbara as well for being here and your comprehensive submission to the committee. The next stage will be that the committee will deliberate all the evidence and prepare a report back to the Assembly of the Parliament of Victoria with some strong recommendations in relation to this particular inquiry. Thank you very much for being here today and taking the time out of your busy schedules. Thank you.

Mr ORTEGA (via interpreter): Just one thing I wanted to add again about the money that incorporating groups receive—that that is not going to the elderly groups necessarily as much as it should, and it is a very little amount of money. I cannot say for sure if that money is federal from Canberra or whether that is state money. It was just \$1,200 a year.

The CHAIR: That point has been raised, so thank you very much. We appreciate your contribution. Thank you.

Ms LEON: Thanks so much for the opportunity. Take care. Thanks.

Witnesses withdrew.