

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into perinatal services

Mildura — 9 November 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 Webster, executive director, Zoe Support Australia.

The CHAIR — The hearing is going to move to an open forum. If you would like to speak and have not previously spoken today, please approach Greg, who is in the lovely red, blue and white tie up the front. This session allows members of the public to address the committee and speak about your views and experiences of perinatal services in your region.

I welcome to this public hearing members of the local community and thank you for attending today. We will hear short statements of 8 to 10 minutes. You probably will not have any questions from the committee unless it is something we have not heard already or something that piques interest comes up.

I now invite the first person to come up, as I read my little spiel. All 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 committee 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 copy of the transcript.

Ms WEBSTER — I am Anne Webster, the founding director of Zoe Support. I am a social worker, a sociologist and currently a PhD scholar because I do not have anything else to do! The organisation began in 2012 and we established our first child-care centre and study hub for young mothers. We work with mothers from the ages of 13 to 25. They can stay with us as long as they need to. Our work with them is to build connections amongst themselves, with professionals, with other agencies, with the community and with education. Our work is with pregnant and parenting young mothers to engage them in education and in their parenting journey.

We have a holistic wraparound place-based approach, and fundamentally I think that that is why it is successful. We are currently working with 90 young families and around 96 children. Of those, 66 per cent of our young mothers experienced family violence as they grew up; that has reduced to 23 per cent now. Fifty seven per cent of our mothers experienced child protection when they were growing up, and it has reduced to 13 per cent now. We have 21 per cent Aboriginal mothers and 6 per cent CALD community. We have 30 per cent Aboriginal children and another 9 per cent CALD children.

Fifty three per cent of our mothers have diagnosed mental health conditions. We have many who have either partners with alcohol and drug issues, or themselves. We work closely with almost every agency and institution in Mildura as we can to provide the best specialist services to our mums. We encourage other services to come to our centres because that is where the mothers are comfortable. For us it is around reducing barriers to education and to professional services that they need through their pregnancy and beyond. We have had quite a few complex birth situations for our mothers, even in this last year, that have meant mothers have had to be transferred to Adelaide or to Melbourne, which takes them out of an already vulnerable position and puts them in another one for quite a period of time if their child is premature.

Sixty six per cent of our mothers are now re-engaged in education; 38 per cent of them are doing learn local pre-credited programs with us, which again is a process of building confidence and building community. Their connection and their inspiring, if you like, of each other is very evident and it is really encouraging. I think it is one of the reasons why they love to come.

We have two playgroups. We have a playgroup that is insane; it is very, very large and noisy, and we have up to 53 people in the room. Then we have another new playgroup which is quite a strategic move, which is called Cupcakes because it actually does have cupcakes each week, for pregnant mothers and first-time mums with babies up to eight months old only, the reason being that many of our mums struggle with social anxiety and the big group is overwhelming. In fact one had to leave the other day in tears, because she just could not cope with the noise and activities.

The Cupcakes Playgroup is an excellent time for engaging the mums and building a rapport with other services to come in — and the big playgroup as well. We will bring mental health in. We are working now with Sunraysia Community Health Services, which brings in antenatal work, birthing classes, Circle of Security, anything that will assist our mums to be more confident as mums, to gain the knowledge that they need to gain and to be able to live their lives in a productive way. That might take a few years. For some of our mums who are 14, it takes some time for them to build the confidence to live their lives on their own two feet. We are not in a hurry to move them out. They can stay with this as long as they like.

We are fundamentally funded through philanthropic organisations, as you can see on the last page of the report. We are not funded by government, despite our efforts. I agree with Jason and with Lois this morning talking about flexible block funding being an ideal way to provide this kind of service, because that is exactly what we need. We are severely under-resourced in terms of staff. We rely heavily on skilled volunteers as well as, obviously, trained staff. We are putting our hand up for more maternal and child health time for our mums. That is us, basically.

The CHAIR — Thank you so much. From just reading through this, you do a lot of good work. It is quite amazing. Are there any questions from the committee? No? Thank you for coming in today. It is fantastic work. I might have missed something, but how long have you been running and how many people have come through Zoe?

Ms WEBSTER — We opened our doors at the beginning of 2013 — April 2013. We have been working with 160 mothers, and we are currently working with 90.

The CHAIR — Fantastic. Thanks for your time today.

Ms WEBSTER — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.