

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 Dalal Sleiman, Community Capacity Building and Engagement Leader,

Mr Fahim Elsheikh, community member,

Ms Ebtessam Chniker, community member,

Mr Alexander Mouassab, community member (*via Arabic interpreter*), and

Ms Helen Elsheikh, community member (*via Arabic interpreter*), Arabic Welfare.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon to you all. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds.

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

I also acknowledge my colleagues participating today: Michaela Settle MP, the Member for Buninyong, and of course Meng Heang Tak MP, the Member for Clarinda.

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

All evidence taken by the 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 on social media and other forums and repeat those comments, they 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. All transcripts will be made public and posted on the committee's website.

I now invite you to make an opening statement to the committee, which will be followed up by some questions. I will introduce members of Arabic Welfare here today. First off we have Ms Dalal Sleiman. We have Mr Fahim Elsheikh; Ms Ebtessam Chniker; Mr Alexander Mouassab, who is being interpreted by Ms Samia Mikhail; and we also have Ms Helen Elsheikh here, a community member.

Ms ELSHEIKH: 'El sheek'.

The CHAIR: For a Turkish background my Arabic is not that good at the moment, so my apologies.

Mr ELSHEIKH: 'El sheek' means 'very cheeky', so I will leave it as 'El cheek'.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Wonderful. Look, I will open up the platform to you to make a contribution. We will start from Ms Dalal Sleiman. Thank you.

Ms SLEIMAN: Good afternoon, everyone. Before I start I would like to acknowledge the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to the elders past and present of the original Australian community and to any Aboriginal people in this room and to any elderly people in this room as well.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to come and speak to you. As you mentioned, my name is Dalal Sleiman. I am the Community Capacity Building and Engagement Leader from Arabic Welfare. Arabic Welfare is a not-for-profit community organisation that provides many services to the CALD communities. I will start with settlement services. We provide settlement services for newly arrived migrant and refugee people who have been in Australia for less than five years. So we do casework support with them as well as community development, and of course we provide migration advice and assistance to them to get them reunited with their families as well.

We have a few other programs within the organisation. So we have the QOWEH program, which is a gambling awareness program. We provide that support to the community who get impacted by gambling. As you are aware, many CALD communities, unfortunately, when they come to the country are very socially isolated, and the first place they get introduced to, because of lack of social participation and also lack of other social activities that are in the community that are tailored to the needs of CALD communities, are gambling venues, in particular with elderly people actually. I see many service providers who are providing the service. Unfortunately, in order for them to attract elderly people to their service, they provide free lunch for them, and that is held at gaming venues, so they get introduced to those as well. So that is heartbreaking to see, because for us, as an Arabic welfare organisation, we try our best to support the community so they do not get impacted by this important and also harmful issue, because many families get broken down because they have lots of financial burden due to gambling issues, and of course family violence and divorce and so on. We also provide family services for people who are experiencing family violence, in particular for CALD communities.

As you are aware from the name of the organisation, our services are only targeted to the Arabic-speaking community. But when I say ‘Arabic-speaking community’ that does not mean one country. There are 22 countries that speak Arabic, and you are aware from the department of immigration and the services that are delivered to the newly arrived of the cohort of the intake for the last few years because of persecution and war and trauma that Arabic-speaking communities, in particular Iraqi and Syrian, have been through from 2014 until the current time. The main intake has been from those countries, and that is why there are a very large number where we are living. We are trying our best as an organisation through my program, which I am leading, to work with lots of faith leaders and community leaders to build their capacity and also to make them aware of the services. Also I will often go to them and do consultations to find out what their needs are so we can tailor our services to their needs. We also provide youth programs to CALD youth. We do information sessions, and we also deliver mental health and wellbeing to those community members. We do activities and home work support.

We try our best to support them to integrate into the Australian way of life. However, sometimes, because of the lack of funding and the resources that we have, it is really difficult for us to meet the community demand and needs, because we are Victoria wide. Even though we are a small organisation, we often do lots of outreach everywhere. We often do our outreach at AMEP centres—for example, Kangan Institute, Melbourne Polytechnic, a few schools that are high schools and primary schools—tailoring our services to their needs, in particular working with parents and trying to help parents to resolve their intergenerational conflicts with youth and their children as well. So basically that is a summary of what we are providing. But when COVID-19 came about as well that impacted more on so many people similar to those who came with me, and I am really grateful that they all accepted the invite and joined me in this meeting so you can hear their voices as well. We delivered many, many COVID-19 information sessions, and right now we are even distributing rapid antigen kit tests to the vulnerable community members.

We always work in partnership with local government organisations such as Hume City Council, Moreland City Council, Whittlesea City Council and also DPV Health and many other organisations to deliver those sessions so that people are aware so we can maximise the number of people getting vaccinated. I will stop there, because you might not have time. I tried my best to cut what I wanted to say.

The CHAIR: Excellent. We move on to questions. Do you have any questions? Thank you, Michaela.

Ms SETTLE: I would like to ask Alexander a question. How difficult has it been to negotiate what services are available when English is not your first language?

Mr MOUASSAB (via interpreter): Yes, we have friends who speak English. They help us. They interpret for us into English.

Ms SETTLE: Do the service providers have enough translation services, or do you just have to rely on friends?

Mr MOUASSAB (via interpreter): Some of the organisations use translators or interpreters, but my in-law helped me to integrate into this society more than anyone else.

The CHAIR: My question is: what can government do better, whether it is your local council or the state government, do to improve the services and make access much easier for the Arabic or migrant communities?

Ms SLEIMAN: Is that question for me?

The CHAIR: Anyone. What do you think government can do to make it better?

Mr ELSHEIKH: Well, I can say advertise so that people can see. You have got the TV, you have got radio. You cannot go to an organisation that sometimes you do not know. Like, I have been to one group at church for almost 15 years. It is like we do not know anything—15 years, nothing. We do not know where the grants come from. We do not know about this, we do not know about that, what we are entitled to and all this—nothing. They kicked me out because I have got a big mouth, and we started a new group which was mostly refugees. I tried and some others tried to help, either with language or health—what they can do and what they cannot do, what they are entitled to and all these things. There is a bag of information to go through. We need more through our group—

Ms CHNIKER: As a refugee we came here. At our club, we named it western seniors club, 80 or 85% of the club are Syrians, are refugees. Of course we need support from government or from council. Most of us follow the Hume council in Broadmeadows because we live in the area—Westmeadows, Broadmeadows. I am in Roxburgh Park. So we need really more support from the council, because most of the people do not speak English. They speak Arabic. They do not speak English, and also they feel depressed because they are old. We are seniors. Our club is from 60 and above. So they have difficulty learning English. You know—memory and like this. They feel depressed and feel loneliness, so they need activities to be involved in society and to feel more relaxed. So in this case I think our Hume council, we need more support in this point. Thank you.

Ms SLEIMAN: As for me, actually I have worked in the community sector for over 20 years, mainly assisting newly arrived migrants and refugee communities in most of the positions that I worked in. When I was employed in one particular organisation my role was as an Arabic-speaking settlement caseworker, and we did not have one single client who spoke Arabic at the time when I was employed. But because I was a bicultural worker and word of mouth works really well with CALD communities in terms of promotion, once I started delivering the service that was a quality service to their needs, they promoted it to everyone. At the time when I left, over 90% of the clients who accessed that organisation were from Arabic-speaking communities—Chaldean and Syrian. My point here is that actually employing bicultural workers in different sectors in different organisations makes the service more easily accessible because, as Fahim was saying earlier, it is really difficult for people to navigate their way around and learn about these services. However, if there is someone from their own community who speaks their language in that particular organisation, then that attracts people to that service and the service will benefit and the community will benefit at the same time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will move to Heang. He has a question.

Mr TAK: Okay. This may be a comment rather than a straight question, but anyone can answer. Do you think that the assistance from all levels of government sometimes focuses more on newly emerging communities? And because, let us say, Arabic-speaking communities have been settled here for a long time and so are considered to be a settled community, do you feel it needs more assistance? Because, like you said, 20 years ago maybe you could speak English, but nowadays even when you progress the language also goes back to the mother tongue. Is that your experience?

Ms SLEIMAN: I think one size does not fit all. Depending on the people's background, like education, country they come from, culture and economic background, some of them can integrate into the Australian way of life even within a year's time, but some of them will take longer than five years. For example, in certain services we can only work with people who are newly arrived on their settlement grants for five years, and after that we have to tell them, 'You are not eligible for our service'. But there are so many vulnerable community members who do not speak the language even if they have been in the country for ten years, and that is not because they are not trying their best but because of what they have been through. I mentioned earlier the majority of those people came from war-torn countries, and they have been through a lot. There is a lot in their minds, and in terms of them being able to concentrate and learning the language easily, that is not going to happen overnight. Their main priority will be safety for them and also for their loved ones who are left behind, and I think these are the things that we need to take into consideration when we are trying to fund organisations.

So sometimes even funding is for one year or two years. By the time we get to know the community and find out what their needs are, there is no funding left to move forward, support the community and deliver the services that are needed in the community—due to lack of funding. So all these issues impact on what service providers can offer.

However, when we say that, I think it is really important again to consider ethnospecific organisations, because they are in the heart of their communities and they know what their community needs are. In particular we tried that within the COVID-19 project, and the VMC was dealing with community leaders. I think that is a great model that the government needs to take into consideration when it is dealing with the community to find out what their needs are—through the appropriate channels—who are community leaders and faith leaders, because people trust these members and their first point of contact is them. And if we go back to family violence issues, I know faith leaders are not trained to deal with these matters, but why don't we look into, for example, setting up hubs? If we set up hubs in these organisations, I think the services delivered will be tailored to their needs because they know about their culture, they know about their religion, they know about their

needs and also the trust is belted there. So why don't we help those to grow and deliver the service in the community?

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you. We have not heard from Helen, and the question I would ask Helen is: what is the biggest issue that you think is facing the elderly community—in the Arabic community or any community? What is the biggest issue? It could be services, home help, financial help.

Ms ELSHEIKH (via interpreter): It is hard for them to learn the language, especially when they are old. Isolation, learning English—they need a lot of support to learn about Australian society and integrate into Australian society. They are very isolated, most of them, and they cannot learn because of many different reasons.

Ms MIKHAIL (interpreter): Especially over-60s.

Ms ELSHEIKH: Yes, over-60s. Very hard.

Ms MIKHAIL (interpreter): I interpret for them. It is very difficult for them to learn English, to focus on learning. They go to school. They have a lot of problems in their bodies. It is hard for a lot of them to sit and listen to the teacher. They would prefer less hours of sitting and listening—a different type of program of teaching English.

The CHAIR: That makes sense.

Ms MIKHAIL (interpreter): One hour or two hours, but not five hours and going to school every day. They come from a different environment, and it is hard for them to fit into the Australian very active society. I am the interpreter, and she agrees with me.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thanks, Helen. And I think we had a final one from Ebtesam.

Ms CHNIKER: I think finding jobs for young people and for old people—of course from 60 and above it is very difficult to find a job. For me, I applied for several jobs, and I could not find one really. I had a certificate as a teacher aide and I applied to many schools, but they told me, 'If you want to volunteer, come here'. I volunteered for about eight months or more in Brisbane—for one year, because I was in Brisbane two years. So I could not find a job. For old people it is too hard, and also for young people who come from overseas it is hard to find a job.

Ms SLEIMAN: If I could just add, actually, with elderly people, I think there are IT issues. Especially right now most of the government organisations are moving into online services, and that is extremely difficult when it comes to completing what is required from them online. Whether that is with Centrelink, the Australian Taxation Office, government, migration and so on, all these are impacting on people, including banking, so internet banking, and many banks are closing branches. So for elderly people to be able to do all these things online, that is extremely difficult. For us as an organisation, during COVID-19 we tried our best to deliver services to people via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. There are witnesses here, many of whom attended, and we were having face to face 40 people, but when we were delivering online, we would have 15, 12, 10, because people were not able. Thank you for listening to us.

The CHAIR: Yes, that continues to be an issue and challenge for everyone, online technology.

At this point I will conclude, and on behalf of the committee I want to thank each of you from Arabic Welfare for being here today and for providing discussion and evidence to the committee. The next steps will be for the committee to deliberate on all the evidence, and we will prepare a report to government with some strong recommendations on some of our findings. So thank you for being part of that, and I wish you all the very best in your endeavours.

Witnesses withdrew.