

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Warragul—Wednesday, 11 December 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESS

Mr Deng Chuor

The CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for coming in.

Mr CHUOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I just have to make a few comments before you start. 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 say it outside, that privilege may not be afforded to you. Hansard is recording your evidence, and you will get a copy of the transcript for you to verify. So if you want to give a presentation, that would be great. Thank you for being here.

Mr CHUOR: Thank you very much for the opportunity that you have given us today to come and share our story with you. The story I will share is my story and leads to how that affects many of the people that I know with a similar experience in not gaining sustainable employment. First of all, I want to thank my Member of Parliament for this opportunity.

The CHAIR: Excellent. He is a good Member.

Mr BLACKWOOD: You're a good man, too, Deng,

Mr CHUOR: Thank you very much.

Mr BLACKWOOD: And so is Kuol.

Mr CHUOR: One of my friends who was supposed to be here is not well, Brad Rowsell. I went to the seminary with Brad. I will start by introducing myself. I live here in Warragul. I came to Australia in 2004 with my mother and four siblings. My father never came to Australia. He was fighting in the Sudan war when we applied for resettlement to Australia, and he has not been fortunate enough since the war ended to come and join us here.

To give you a bit of a picture, how we got to Australia was that at the end of 2003 when one day I decided to go for a nice 3-hour walk from where we were staying to the Australian High Commission in Nairobi. I had no idea that that was our family's lucky day. I got to the very heavily guarded gates of the embassy, and I found that it was lunchtime, but something told me to wait, so I waited—I went for a power nap under a tree across the road. Then after that the little window opened in the gate and they started calling out names. So I walked across to listen to who was the lucky person that day. To my great shock and surprise I heard Christine Riak, which is my mother, being called out and I shouted out in response, and so the letter was handed to me. I quickly opened it, I scanned through for common words that were usually used in the letter: 'refused', 'accepted', 'rejected' or 'successful'. In my little English I was even more shocked to find the word 'accepted'. My English was not good but those words we had memorised to know them. So I ran very quickly back to where my mother was and I shared with them the good news. I still remember very clearly the person who had signed the letter and I have always been longing to meet her, the Honourable Amanda Vanstone. She was the Minister for Immigration, I think, at that time.

A few formalities led then to eventually our travel to Australia and on the eve of Anzac Day we arrived to Australia. I do remember it was the eve of Anzac Day because something else did happen to us on Anzac Day when we were here in Australia, but I will leave that as a story for another day. From there, everything started. I started high school in Adelaide, and then I finished school and joined the seminary to become a Catholic priest. Only seven years I spent there, and then I fell in love and I left the seminary. I got married and I have got now two kids and my wife, and we live just down the road from here and I work at St Peter's College in Cranbourne.

Through my work I come across many people facing a lot of challenges in life, and the biggest challenges that I think families that I work with come across are the financial demands in life. I come across those struggling single mothers who somehow managed to secure a loan and get themselves a mortgage, with the hope of living that Australian dream that we all desire. Their children are in school, and meeting the demands of their needs is nearly impossible, as they try to look and feel like every other kid in school. They need good uniforms, they need lunch. On school casual days they need those nice tracksuit pants that everyone is talking about. But the

mother is not working, or if she is working, it is a casual job that probably does not give many shifts. She relies on Centrelink for her upkeep.

Next minute the child tries to be creative and through speaking with friends they try to solve this paradox of living in poverty in one of the world's richest and greatest nations. They look for ways and those ways will eventually lead them to invading that Apple store or another struggling family's home. The cycle is created with the child being locked up. This same child will, while they are in detention, get better at how to be a thief, perhaps with the help of their new friends in detention, and upon release they will do worse than they had done before. I try to find fairness in this cycle but I find none.

Many members of the South Sudanese community that I speak with decry the lack of jobs and claim prejudice against them. Some would allude to racism as a factor. However, although they might be right to some degree, here is what I think: imagine living in a refugee camp for more than 15 years; imagine you have never had the opportunity to go to school, no work, no owning any property, and suddenly you land on Plymouth Rock—or should I say Uluru as the symbol of that which defines Australia's good fortune. Here I am thinking of the poem of Eric Bogle, *Shelter*, where he says, 'Round half the world I've drifted, no place to call my own. But now my views have shifted, and I think I've just come home'.

We have truly come home to this great Commonwealth that has so much to offer. But when I came to Australia, 13 weeks were designated to my family and it was hoped that in that first three months someone in the family would miraculously unlearn the dependency and pull out that experience from the magic box and perhaps start working to earn a living. We came with no experience and there was a need to give us proper formation of how we could make the most of this great south land. Jobs need knowledge and experience, but the experience and knowledge that we came with was that of a refugee where we relied on the upper hand, namely the UN. No wonder there was something comfortable about being on Centrelink. I think many of the issues that face the South Sudanese community point directly to the fact that there are no jobs for very capable people, but there is something grave that underlies this struggle—the lack of knowledge and necessary experience. People are not given that opportunity at the very beginning to skill themselves for work, starting with that very special social skill demanded by the workplace.

When I was jobless, I went to Centrelink and I was placed on a jobseeker's allowance. With that I was to look for 20 jobs every month. For five months I did this. Many of the jobs that I applied for never called me. The one job that called me for an interview needed special experience in food handling. I begged the guy on the phone to give me a chance and to teach me on the job, and he said he would call me back. I am still waiting. I got the job in the end at St Peter's, probably through the law of who you know. Now, if it was that difficult for me, no wonder those single mothers line up at Centrelink while their children fill up our jails. My mother is a good example, without the jail part because I am here. She has been looking for work for two years. She has no computer skills and she uses the very basic Nokia mobile. She cannot search for work on the internet. She has now been told to go back to school so that she can continue to receive the Commonwealth benefits. But the study she does is not equipping her for work. I know this because I see her homework. What I am trying to say is that the educational centres must equip these refugees for work. They must learn their background stories and figure out how to impart the knowledge and skills they need for work.

I am about to finish, but I will give you an example of what we are trying to initiate at St Peter's. Our work began with the children who were getting into the troubles that I described before. We established a basketball club, Casey Titans, and that became a carrot for us to help build the children's academic and social skills. Many African students from the school have joined the club and enjoy training twice a week at the school and play domestic basketball on Saturdays and Sundays at Casey Stadium. However, to be part of the club they must participate in a homework club one hour before training. Once a month we get a guest speaker to come and talk to them about different social topics. The intention is to bring home to them the emotional and intellectual and social formation that they so need. However, a bigger problem came up. We noticed that it is all well and good for these children during the school hours, but what happens when they go home? They are faced with the reality of living in very financially demanding times. They go back to their jobless mothers and fathers who cannot provide them with the modern-day basics. Through this we have lost amazing, capable kids to jails—kids that I think would have had a great future.

So what is St Peter's doing? We are working on trying to establish an adult educational institute at the school to support the families. So the intention is that this institute would run on the same days as basketball training with the hope of providing a channel for parents to eventually gain sustainable employment. And my hope is that, with the success of this adult educational program tailored to the need of future employment, we will eventually start seeing the results in the behaviour of our kids inside and outside school, because we want to see them sitting in the classroom and concentrating on their future—that is their basic right as a child. And we want to see them leaving school after school and coming back to school tomorrow and—

The CHAIR: Do you want to have a bit of a rest?

Mr CHUOR: I am about to finish.

Mr BLACKWOOD: You have done well.

Mr CHUOR: That they come back to school without being arrested overnight. So we want them to enjoy Australia.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr CHUOR: Any questions?

Mr BLACKWOOD: Yes. Deng, you have outlined there that it is as much about the parents as it is about the younger people, so we have got to do something about the education of the parents to actually then in turn help the younger people.

Mr CHUOR: Yes.

Mr BLACKWOOD: So St Peter's has introduced this program. Are you getting any support from government for that program?

Mr CHUOR: The program is set to start next year, so we are just working on it. We do not know how it will sort of work out yet, but we will figure out the needs. The problems that we are seeing are not going anywhere soon unless we do something about them, and something that we are trying to do is to make sure that parents have got the skills they need for work. And from there, that sort of comes down to the kids to try and solve the social problems that we are facing currently.

Mr BLACKWOOD: It might be a tough question, but how do you think government could help more in that process?

Mr CHUOR: So in that process it is probably the resources that are required for establishing programs like this or the already established programs, which are the educational programs for refugees and newly arrived. They should be tailored to give them those skills, because we are not here to just sit and twiddle our thumbs. We have got to contribute to the building of this country and to make it a better place, and so everyone needs a job and everyone needs to be able to work. But if we do not have those skills, those institutes that we go to are not prepared, are not equipped to help us get to where we need to be.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Well, the education they receive has got to be matched to the skills that will provide you a job.

Mr CHUOR: Yes.

The CHAIR: This issue has come up before in identifying skill sets that migrants bring to this nation and this state, and so it is really hard to get a handle on a skills assessment. For example, though they may not be able to speak English, they must have some sorts of skills that they have brought back from the country that they were living in. So do you think that we need a comprehensive skills assessment? For those community members who want to diversify their skill sets into something else, we can obviously train them in something else, but what do you think the Government should do in assisting to find out what skill sets are available in the African community?

Mr CHUOR: I think the already established institutes do do those skill assessments. Even though the people might not be able speak English, I am pretty sure the assessments could be done through—

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. I agree.

Mr CHUOR: Working out what they are good at, and that skill could be used anywhere here in Australia or in Victoria.

Ms RYAN: When you landed in Adelaide and you started going to school, what kind of support did you have, particularly in terms of learning English? I mean, you said that when you first got that letter in Nairobi you had almost no English, but you have virtually perfect English now. So did you have support when you got to school? Was there additional support around you to help you learn the language?

Mr CHUOR: I was the first African student they have ever had at that school, and the school was very quick to put the support in place. The support was through EAL. So a new teacher was employed and she worked with me very intensely to bring up my English to the standard and also to be able to communicate, even just at the shop basically. She put in a lot of hours, even outside her work, to try and give me that. It was probably more her personal interest that drove her to do that. But my worry is: what about those people that do not find that person?

Ms RYAN: So you would say that there are many within the Sudanese community who are struggling just to access English as a second language programs.

Mr CHUOR: Yes. There are particular hours that are set and they will go on. But you get to a stage whereby those times are finished but you have not learnt anything. What I was saying before was: with those places that are helping them, I am very sure, with a very good education system, that we can create intensive English learning for them to fast-track their settlement and then eventually getting into the workplace. This is my view: our problems are not that the jobs are not there; it is just that we do not have our skills. It goes back to not being equipped right from the beginning from the education system.

Ms CONNOLLY: Deng, that is amazing, listening to your story—thank you for sharing with us today. I am the Member for Tarneit, and we have a large, wonderful South Sudanese population. Your story, I have heard it in various different, I guess, ways, in which people have experienced coming from the refugee camps and being placed in the community with no support. I wanted to ask you: one of the issues that the community talks to me about is that employers are fearful, are more unwilling to hire people in the community from a South Sudanese background, with social stigmas being attached, particularly in Tarneit, with gang crime and things like that; how is it here in Warragul? Do you think locals are willing to take on migrants and people like that?

Mr CHUOR: It has been really great in Warragul, and I chose Warragul for that very reason—that it is not so country but still it has got that community whereby you feel welcome. The social stigmas are very much visible. You go to Pakenham; it all starts there. They contribute to the bigger story of things that I have shared. If you go to places like Tarneit, it would be very understandable that an employer would look at a South Sudanese person and straightaway be afraid. We are very community-oriented people, and wherever I am my brothers will be. Every single South Sudanese family has been touched by this gang crime. We have got cousins and friends. When they come out and I am working somewhere—I get it even at St Peter's—they will just drop in and visit and things like that. We come as a whole community. So for employers like the ones you would have at Tarneit to be cautious about employing a South Sudanese person is pretty much understandable from what we see in the media and the structure of who we are as a community.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We have run out of time unfortunately. Thank you so much for being here.

Witness withdrew.