

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Geelong—Thursday, 24 October 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 Ricky Kildea, Director, Wan-Yaari Aboriginal Consultancy Services.



**The CHAIR:** Thank you for coming in, Ricky. We really appreciate it.

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, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

If you can give us a five-minute presentation, we will ask questions as we go along.

**Mr KILDEA:** Thank you for the opportunity. Firstly, I would just like to acknowledge Country and acknowledge the Wathaurong people, the Traditional Owners of this Country that we meet on today. I pay my respects to their elders, past, present and future, and the ongoing connection to this Country. Myself, I am a proud Dja Dja Wurrung, up Bendigo way. My father's side has close ties to Gunditjmara as well. Geelong has got a special place for me. It is home for me now, and I feel really connected to this Country. As an Aboriginal business conducting work on this Country as well, we like to do that really respectfully and link in really closely with Traditional Owners and the wider community here as well. So I would like to acknowledge them, and also thank you for the opportunity to talk today.

I thought I might just provide a brief overview of Wan-Yaari and who we are and what we do. Wan-Yaari is an Aboriginal business. It means to listen, learn and understand. Our business really goes on a journey with our community. That is represented in our logo. I might just quickly run through that. We have got the footsteps leading into a meeting place. The circle at the heart of that is coming together, similar to what we are doing today and any other program that we deliver. The half circles on the outside represent people sitting around and doing just that—talking, listening, learning, understanding, sharing that knowledge, sharing that experience. And then continuing on—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Ricky. Do we need a copy of this?

**Mr KILDEA:** I can send through a copy if you need it. That journey then continues on the other side. That really underpins all the work that we do. We have a really strong educational focus in every program that we deliver. We are set up as a consultancy business but we also run community programs. With any of the work that we do we look at that sitting around and understanding, listening and learning as key elements. I think where Wan-Yaari is a little bit different is that we sit in between the community and other organisations. The consultancy work that we do is cultural awareness training with organisations, looking at reconciliation action plans and cultural awareness training. We work with those organisations that have really good intentions to increase Aboriginal employment and do really positive things in the space but do not often get to grass level and make those impacts in community.

Our community programs that we deliver—right from our boys' community youth programs to pre-employment programs, right through to our prison contract that we deliver a wellness program in the prison system—we work with our community and find out those real barriers to employment. We bridge that gap between the community and those organisations.

We do a lot as an Aboriginal business, but the employment space is our key focus for our business. About 18 months ago we commenced a contract with the Department of Jobs and Small Business, and that was called the G21 Aboriginal Employment Initiative. It really came about because of organisations in the region having those really good intentions but not necessarily getting the outcomes. So what we did, we partnered with five organisations and worked really intensively with them on Aboriginal employment strategies. We looked to assess their organisation to see whether it was a culturally inclusive and respectful organisation for our community to go and work at, and we developed certain strategies with each organisation. We also developed partnerships with employment service providers in the region as well and also the Geelong Aboriginal community.

We completed that contract—it was a 12-month contract—achieved the outcomes and the department were very supportive of ongoing work, which culminated in a Geelong Aboriginal Employment and Careers Expo. That was earlier this year, which was to really showcase the great work that was happening in that space. It has

been a big focus for us and we are wanting to continue that work that we do. That has led on to some other initiatives that we have created now: an Aboriginal employment website we are about to launch officially which looks to be a central location for the community to go to to access employment opportunities. We will probably cover some of the other information, I am sure, in the questions today, so I might just leave it there for now.

**Ms RYAN:** How long have you been operating for, Ricky?

**Mr KILDEA:** Only three years now. The business was set up by my father a little bit prior to that, just set up as a consultancy business for myself and my brother-in-law to transition into. He unfortunately passed away—had an accident—and at the time it was really tough for our family. We were working in Melbourne at the time and we then looked to jump into the business full time about three years ago when that accident happened. Wan-Yaari, I guess at the heart of it, is continuing on his legacy and his dream of us creating the business. It has been tough, I will not lie. We jumped into it with no funding behind us and I guess a shell of a business set up, so it has been really tough to develop the program and our business, but we think we have done him proud. Last year we were awarded the Aboriginal employment sector award at the Wurreker Awards, so that was really good recognition statewide about the work that we are doing in that space.

**Ms RYAN:** So you spoke a little bit before around the fact that perhaps some of the organisations you are working with have good intentions but do not always know. I suppose, can you explain a little bit around your role? I assume when you are talking about organisations you are primarily talking about employers. What are the things that they are missing that might actually help more Indigenous people gain employment?

**Mr KILDEA:** I think they definitely have really good intentions. Things like reconciliation action plans, employment strategies, are fantastic documents to have. An example I guess is the Geelong Aboriginal Employment Agreement, which was put in place a couple of years ago. We saw those key employees in the region sign that agreement but not necessarily get the actions from it and get some outcomes. Multiple reasons around that, but I think a big one is just that connection with community. You need to really understand community and understand jobseeker disadvantage but also create an organisation that is really welcoming and respectful to get those outcomes. So I guess that formed a big part of our G21 Aboriginal Employment Initiative, that we saw there were agreements that organisations were signing, and they had those good intentions but were just not getting any outcomes.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** Ricky, you are not only an ideas man but a solutions-focused person, and I think that is really refreshing.

**Mr KILDEA:** Thanks, mate.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** What in your view is the biggest barrier to Aboriginal people not only getting into employment but getting into medium to long-term sustainable employment?

**Mr KILDEA:** Yes, multiple barriers. I wish there was an easy answer. I guess, when we look at our pre-employment programs we deliver—we are delivering one at the moment actually—when we look at the barriers to employment for some of those candidates, it is a lot different to, I guess, some of the other community that we have, as well. So there are general issues that I am sure you would have heard today.

Things like criminal history checks are a big barrier, driver's licences and others, whether it is working with children checks or formal qualifications. But we also have the other side of it as well, so we have community who do have experience, do have qualifications but are still finding it really hard to get employment. Some of those barriers include organisations not necessarily being culturally inclusive and respectful workplaces—you know, community going into those places, having a bad experience, will then leave, and they will tell other community not to go and work there.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** And that still exists? My goodness.

**Mr KILDEA:** It definitely still exists, and it does become a big barrier. You know, if you have a great experience somewhere, you are going to tell, or if you have a bad experience, especially in the Koori community, that really gets around out into community as well.

But I think there needs to be some more strategic approaches to employment. So when you have organisations who have those things in place—cultural awareness training, employment strategies, RAPs—and they are looking to employ Aboriginal people there needs to be a specific approach to it, and that is what our program was designed around: how can we look at really specific marketing and recruitment for those organisations?

I think sometimes when you look at Aboriginal unemployment in the region, it really is focused on that cohort of entrenched unemployment, job seekers, lots of barriers to employment. Under our G21 Aboriginal Employment Initiative contract with the department, our first placement was with WorkSafe, and it came to a guy who was one of 600 applicants for the role. I think there were four to eight positions at the end of that, so we developed some strategies to look at that short-listing process, that formal recruitment, and I guess a trusting relationship between the organisation and us that that candidate we were referring was very specific and suited to the role, and he was able to go through those checks and get that placement. So he is on about 85 to 90K a year—you know, a fantastic placement.

When we look at some of the other ones that we get of those entry-level roles or people just getting into employment, that is not really what we are about. We are about finding people the right job for long-term, meaningful outcomes for our community. That is where some of the work that we do is a little bit different. Employment service providers do a great job, don't get me wrong, but sometimes they are too focused on 'We need to get you from here—unemployed—to working', and what is the shortest—

**Ms ADDISON:** It is like a sausage factory.

**Mr KILDEA:** yes, what is the shortest way—

**Ms ADDISON:** A sausage factory, how do we get people through?

**Mr KILDEA:** and let's get you through, and, 'Hey, we'll put some support around'. We'll catch up with the—hopefully you enjoy it. A lot of the time people are going into places they do not want to work at. So we look at really specific outcomes. We look at meaningful, long-term solutions and find people the right jobs, but I guess some reverse recruitment as well and kind of matching community to organisations and roles so they are really perfect matches, and we find that really works.

**Ms ADDISON:** Building on from that response, which was a really great response, how well are the Victorian Government's social procurement policies working for Aboriginal jobseekers in Geelong?

**Mr KILDEA:** Probably not well enough, to be honest. I think there is still a lot of work to be done. I think part of it is that understanding and awareness piece I guess for those organisations and employers to understand really who is who and what services are on offer. I think that is a big part of it and I think funding becomes part of that as well.

As an Aboriginal business, we often get people saying, 'Well, you've got all these things set up in government organisations, you guys must be doing it easy', and to be honest it is like pulling teeth sometimes to get contracts with big organisations. Money is there but unfortunately when it comes time for those organisations to put their hands in their pockets it is a really difficult conversation to have.

**Ms ADDISON:** That being the case, how could it be improved? Have you got any suggestions of how it could be improved or streamlined?

**Mr KILDEA:** I think it becomes part of it to have some accountability as well. We did a review as part of the initial Geelong Aboriginal Employment Agreement, and some of our feedback in that review was that there needed to be more accountability to those organisations. It is one thing to have really good intentions and sign up and commit to something, but to have as one of the outcomes 'to increase Aboriginal employment in your organisation'—it is really not good enough for those organisations to come and at the review say, 'Yes, we're doing that; we've ticked that box. We've gone from one staff member to two' in a workforce that is a couple of hundred, maybe 1,000 strong.

There needs to be more accountability and really specific targets for those organisations, and I think when they do have that they can strive to achieve really great things. Even some of the organisations who are doing

fantastic work in this Aboriginal employment space sometimes still are not meeting their targets as well, so it becomes a really constant process. I think organisations need to commit more resources into that, and they do not at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** Can you tell us a little bit about the pre-employment programs that you have got going and that 3 Fires Aboriginal Mentoring Program that you have got? It sounds like it is really good. Can you go through that, please?

**Mr KILDEA:** I sure can. We are running one at the moment actually here in Geelong. We run it as a collaborative program with multiple employment service providers, so we have jobseekers from Gforce, APM, MatchWorks and sometimes WDEA Works. We have run these programs here in Geelong and also down in Colac and Warrnambool. We get really good engagement from jobseekers. The 3 Fires Mentoring Program looks at those three fires of your personal fire: looking at personal wellbeing, your personal goals and aspirations; your professional fire: looking for work, job-ready skills; and the cultural fire as well. That is really the underpinning of our pre-employment program as well. So within our pre-employment it is not a traditional, I guess, pre-employment program. Participants come thinking that they are going to do mock interviews and look at résumés, which we do, but our big focus is on the individual. It looks at their personal fire, some of those things I mentioned before—finding what their passions and motivations are to find the right job for them, not just get them into any work. But understanding that cultural fire is so important for Aboriginal people. To be a strong person individually and have a strong sense of identity a cultural element is so important, and also understanding how you can embrace that in the workplace, whether you are going into a workplace where you can express who you are as an Aboriginal person and your Aboriginality in the workplace or maybe you cannot. So we look at cultural loads and we really discuss that.

We have got some really good engagement from our programs. We have probably delivered five to six over the last two years, and they range from five weeks to 10 weeks. We get some really good outcomes from those programs. We continue on with the 3 Fires mentoring for some participants. Gforce, for example, we have an agreement there where we can do some post-placement support for those jobseekers who go into employment, and their 3 Fires form part of that. And it was also a key element that we included in our G21 Aboriginal employment initiative contract as well. As I mentioned earlier, it was not just about getting 20 people into work. We wanted to ensure that we had built into that allocation to make sure they stayed in employment out of that 13, 26 weeks and beyond.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** You started your own business three years ago with your late father, as you mentioned. That is not always an easy process, and you indicated that in your earlier remarks. With the benefit of hindsight, what supports could perhaps a State Government have to make that an easier process, a more streamlined process, for Indigenous people wishing to perhaps even consider starting their own small businesses?

**Mr KILDEA:** There are some great programs out there. I think definitely some mentoring programs around business and, I guess, the complexities within that. When you are running your own business it is easy to be caught up in just focusing on the business side of it and not necessarily the running of the behind-the-scenes business with your money management, tax—all those other business requirements. But that initial start-up is cash flow. That is the biggest issue. As I mentioned, there are some organisations who are really committed and doing some great things in that space, but it is sometimes really difficult to earn those contracts. For the first probably 12 months, 18 months, we really relied on short-term contracts, and our ability to approach organisations with an idea, be able to pitch that and get that contract was something that we were able to do really well, but it was really tough.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** So if capital is your issue, is it a low-interest, short-term business loan for a period of time?

**Mr KILDEA:** Yes, things like that. I mean, there is Indigenous Business Australia that provides some business loans and things like that as well. Start-up funds are really crucial to, I guess, the set-up, but the managing cash flow I think is the biggest issue. Then I think it is more broad than that. I am not saying that there needs to be funding and start-up money to Aboriginal businesses; I think if there is more accountability for bigger organisations in those regions to support those businesses and to work with them and develop longer

term contracts, it is so much easier to look at the sustainability of your business rather than going from a three-month contract to a potentially 12-month to three-year contract.

**Mr ROWSWELL:** It is building a sustainable client base.

**Mr KILDEA:** Yes, definitely.

**Ms ADDISON:** Moving on from that, what should the Victorian Government use to measure success in employment services for Aboriginal jobseekers? What does success look like and how should we measure it?

**Mr KILDEA:** Great question. For people that are I guess stuck in entrenched unemployment, just getting into a job and getting some money coming in can change their life. We look at where others in the community end up. We do a lot of work in the prison system, and it is quite easy to be caught in that space of money being an issue and unemployment and then leading down to other issues, like drug and alcohol, family commitments and leading to imprisonment ultimately. We look at high rates of that, and high rates for suicide in the community are really shocking as well. So I guess for some really disadvantaged jobseekers, getting them into employment and seeing how that can change their life is a really good outcome. It is really rewarding for us when we deliver programs locally and then we see those same participants a year later just down the street, in the supermarket, and we see how much they have changed physically. They are presenting a lot better and feeling so much more self-worth about themselves.

I guess for others in the community as well when they have those additional pressures to maybe travel outside of the region, up to Melbourne or bigger places, to find work, sometimes the measure of success is finding local employment opportunities, which do not add those additional family pressures and community pressures as well. And then I think it is also looking at the level of employment that we are focusing on. There are so many traineeship opportunities, which are great, there are so many entry-level opportunities and pre-employment programs, but I think it is that next step of looking at Aboriginal employment at those higher levels within an organisation. I think that is when you get real change—when you have those big employers in the region and you have Aboriginal staff at those really higher up levels. That is where you can start to make a big difference within those organisations, because usually it is those key Aboriginal people who are really driving all those Aboriginal issues, and when they are gone and they move on, things usually stop. There are definitely those types of jobseekers in the region. My brother has two university degrees and an MBA, and he is working at probably five levels below what he is capable of working at because of the opportunities here in the region. But we know of so many Aboriginal community members that can step up into those higher positions at some of those really prominent organisations like WorkSafe, the councils, TAC—those big organisations—but unfortunately they do not have Aboriginal people in those higher up roles.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Thanks for being here today.

**Ms ADDISON:** All the best for the future. It sounds like you are doing really good things; that is great.

**Mr KILDEA:** Thank you very much for that. I appreciate your time.

**Witness withdrew.**