

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

WITNESSES

Mr Bill Westhead, President, and

Mr Ben Vahland, Vice-President, Operations, Warragul RSL.

The CHAIR: Thank you for attending. 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 of this or on social media, you may not be afforded that privilege. Hansard is recording your evidence, and you will get a proof transcript just to verify that it is correct. Do you want to have a look at that first? Do you want to make a presentation? But before you do, can I just say thank you to the RSL. As a former Minister for Veterans I really appreciate the work that you do in the community, and I am so proud of the fact that we have implemented the RSL Active program—

Mr BLACKWOOD: Keep it going though. That's what we'd like.

The CHAIR: and also the employment opportunities for veterans. So I just wanted to say, I think on behalf of the whole Committee, thank you for the services that you provide for the community.

Mr WESTHEAD: Thank you very much, and we truly appreciate being here today and your efforts of coming to Gippsland. And really it is a privilege to be here, and I appreciate it. The presentation will go in the background. I will skate across the top of it.

Visual presentation.

Mr WESTHEAD: Just so you know where I come from, I have been around the block a bit. I have been in and out of the military and the police for nearly 50 years, and I am not a product of a privileged lifestyle. I have been a roustabout. I was actually expelled from school, so I have been self-educated and then military educated. I have been a soldier, an officer, a planner and a trainer, and I have seen the iterations of the military for a long time, the same in the police force. I operated in the special operations environment both in the police force and the military.

We at Warragul RSL have been embarking on a two and a half year project. We initially took advice from Gary and Russell Broadbent on what to do, and we have become an organisation for change and for our members. We have around 250 members, 60 of whom are widows and are technically dyslexic, for want of a better term. We have 140 service members, 70% of whom have PTSD. We have briefed local council, local members, employers. We had the national minister for DVA attend and receive a briefing, and we have participated in a DVA forum. We put together a committee which is well experienced but fairly typical of an RSL throughout the place.

And what I would like you to understand is: who are we as service people? We are competitive. We are ultra-competitive because we have come out of a peer review background. We are patriotic. We believe in our country, and when we go to places we go to win. When we go to war we go to win, so we have certain qualities imbued and ingrained. We are mentally and physically tough but, I will say in both characteristics, brittle, particularly at the finish. We are opinionated, aggressive, because we have to be—that is what we are trained to be. We are alert, reactive and vigilant. Whenever we encounter an obstacle, we are trained to remove it, go around it or get over it. That is the way we are trained.

The emerging cohort—and I say this with the greatest of respect—the majority of Australians, and particularly at local government and State Government, do not know what we have done. In 1975 the army, for instance, was held to a level of 32,500 people. That has not changed. Since 1995 we have conducted 78 operations in Australia and throughout the world, and we have literally flogged that cohort. It is the first cohort never to have had a whole-of-nation support. In the First World War it was whole of nation; everyone was behind it. In the Second World War we had national service—John Curtin introduced it—we had national service in Korea, and of course Vietnam, but we have had no national service to support this cohort, and this cohort has been overworked. Almost immediately after Timor it was overworked and they brought in the reserves, and in the 18 years since, the reserves have been overworked.

At just under 50 I was brought back into the military and was deployed throughout the world, and overworked. My last posting was doing 50-hour days on Christmas Island as Manager, External Operations, in 2013 and 2014, and Ben, a Senior Sergeant of police, was also in border protection. Not only did we wear out two classes of patrol boat, we wore out a generation of soldiers and sailors. Equity and diversity are impacting on our abilities, because we are breaking people. There are three stages that we are at. We are either recovering from

injury, about to be injured or training to rehabilitate to go overseas. So injury is a constant part of our life—mental and physical.

Our veteran numbers throughout the land are in front of you. Veterans do not normally come to Victoria; they prefer the Brisvegases and those sorts of places. But in Victoria we have got 51,500 veterans, and that emerging cohort of about 29,000 is going to impact on services throughout Victoria. And as they grow older their injuries will manifest and they will also grow—their families will grow—so therefore there is going to be a greater number of people in that cohort. I have got the cohort up to 69 because I am 67 and have been employed by the military for the last 20 years. So age is not a barrier here.

If we look at the family unit, as I said, 70% of our people have got PTSD, and the people who are holding the families together are the spouses, be they male or female, and it is extremely important that either the veteran or the spouse gets employment. We have been, as I said, to the local businesses and to the agencies and the councils and State Government. We cannot make headway, and it disappoints me that we cannot make headway, because we have got unique skills. I have been here and I have listened to two iterations of this and listened to what has been said. We have very, very good skills, but we are not employed for a number of reasons. You fear us—the community actually fear us—and that is a concern; there is the military connotation. So there is the prejudice that is part of Victoria, and the military connotation that we operate down the line. But we are actually quite smart.

The soldier today is actually very intelligent. The pool of employment is actually very shallow in Australia. We come to you with unique life skills. We are house-trained. We turn up on time. We dress—we polish our boots. We even wear socks! We are focused on hard work because—I mentioned 50-hour days—when we deploy, we do not have time off. We do not drink. We do not cavort. We are working, and we are mission focused. We are durable: eight months is a long time to do 24/7. We meet deadlines. We present professionally—in my view; there are different views there. We report honestly. This is one of the issues that we have—that is, there is a perception around, particularly as we move into more politically correct times, that it is very difficult to talk honestly without being accused of things like bullying and emotion. We are trained to report honestly, and I can commend to you that if you ever go to an after-action review, bring your boxing gloves, because at all levels of command, from private soldier through to general, you have to justify your position, and that is the way we are taught—because it is people's lives that we have been dealing with and savings people's lives.

Your service personnel will think big picture. They are trained to do that. They think about their enemy; they think about who they are working for. We are not off all the time shooting people. We are actually building nations. We rebuilt Timor. We rebuilt Bougainville. We are rebuilding Iraq and parts of Syria. We are rebuilding. We belong to a rebuilding tradition after the combat has been done, and that is the biggest part—the reintroduction of government. So we need to have a broad understanding of government, process and all the things that go into making a community, and that is not often taken into account.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Bill. I hate to cut you off. We have only got 10 minutes left and there are some pertinent questions that we need to ask.

Mr WESTHEAD: I am just about done. We are equipped to provide you with a service. We are not getting that service back from the community. If we do not, we are becoming activist. If we cannot be employed after we have finished our service, there is no point in going and joining a service, and that is the dilemma that government has. Thank you.

Ms CONNOLLY: That is excellent. I will jump straight in. We have got heaps of questions, Bill. That was fantastic. Obviously we are MPs, what do you want to tell us that State Government should be doing to ensure you guys are employed?

Mr WESTHEAD: I believe that first of all the preferential treatment needs to be in place. I know there is a lot of preferential treatment out there.

Ms CONNOLLY: Like quotas?

Mr WESTHEAD: Yes, but certainly there has been a tradition, after the First and Second World War, for veterans to be employed as a preference. Now, we need police forces. That is almost a natural progression,

being a senior sergeant in the police, but police HR are now saying too many ex-service personnel, they are going to break, they are going to get PTSD. The other big issue with what needs to be done is we probably need assistance with detuning because we are too up-front, too brusque, and we need that support.

Ms CONNOLLY: So you are sort of saying that even though we are trying to break the stigma around mental health and things like PTSD, there is also a stigma that every person who has served is going to have PTSD and be—

Mr WESTHEAD: Graham Ashton, the Chief Commissioner of Police, came out the other day and said PTSD is part of operational service. Now, the police have 1,000-plus—it is part of operational service, so we need to deal with it and get over it. I have PTSD, okay? Ben has been through it. We get over it. Some are worse than others and are unemployable, but we adapt.

The CHAIR: That is one of the things we discussed federally when I was the Minister for Veterans, nationally, about dropping the ‘D’ from ‘PTSD’ and the stigma attached to it, because ‘disorder’ does not fit in. So just in relation to public sector jobs that are available now, we initially started at 250. We have taken that to 750. David McLachlan is in charge of that program. Most of those veterans are going directly into the police force because they fit straight in. There is Veterans in Construction, for example. There are a number of programs that are now dedicated towards veterans. It is interesting to pick up on the comments about, ‘The police are worried about the PTS side of it’, but my understanding is they continue to recruit veterans. Are you saying that that is what is happening?

Mr WESTHEAD: It is happening, but HR are saying now, ‘Let’s ease back’ on these things, because of the numbers. People who get PTSD are generally well down in their career. So if you have an industry that is prone to PTSD, like the military, as you go into another career which is similar—policing, operational, active outcomes, fireys, ambos are the same—down the line it will manifest. Most PTSD actually manifests when we finish.

Ms RYAN: What kind of impact is it actually having for veterans in the workplace?

Mr WESTHEAD: A veteran in the workplace has not adjusted to the politically correct, for want of a better term, environment that is particularly in public service or at a local government level. That is an ADF problem, and that is part of the transition issue that we face on the big picture with DVA. That is where we need assistance. A manager or a leader of an organisation picks up all those skills that I mentioned, but no-one is perfect. He or she has to manage those skills to get the best out of the veteran. The veteran will not be intentionally aggressive, rude or whatever, but he or she will be overt. A veteran is inclined to be thinking outside the square plus thinking about the mission—so what the mission is—and they will give advice that may not be wanted. A manager has to be very careful about how they manage people, as they have got to be sensitive to the cultural mores of other organisations and groups, and it is a management issue in my view.

Mr BLACKWOOD: So, Bill, what you are leading towards is perhaps some post-placement support—

Mr WESTHEAD: Absolutely.

Mr BLACKWOOD: as one of the, I guess, specialised supports that you may need.

Mr WESTHEAD: And that should come from DVA as well, and we are pushing that. I should congratulate the Government on their RSL Active program and their program with Premier and Cabinet.

Mr BLACKWOOD: It was not the Government’s program; it was John’s program.

Mr WESTHEAD: It is the only one in the nation.

The CHAIR: Yes, we lead the way.

Mr WESTHEAD: And that is a sad fact.

Mr BLACKWOOD: We need sort of that backup post-placement, but what other supports do you think you need to transition from military to—

Mr WESTHEAD: The transition is key, but we need an awareness at all levels of government about what the military has done for the country, particularly over the last generation. The country is not aware of it, and I put it to you that all levels of government, particularly in the bureaucratic level, are not aware of what the military can bring to you, because we have deliberately kept these things secret for obvious reasons.

The CHAIR: Part of the problem is that obviously by submitting this evidence it is reinforcing the fact that 70% of veterans have issues psychologically, so that may spook the horses, if I can say, in relation to employers. We spoke very much about getting people job ready, and clearly it is not about skills for the veterans; it is about getting mentally ready for employment. I know there are opportunities both federally and state in terms of mental health assistance. Do you think that we should be very much concentrating on that side of it in job preparedness?

Mr WESTHEAD: Society has changed. I have seen the changes from people back in the 1970s and how the generations change. We actually develop world-class soldiers; we always have done, but we have to meld with society. We have to be part of it; we cannot be separate. Traditionally the military has been inclined to be separate, but today we have to come back into the real world, and we need that transition and mental health assistance. Out here I have got eight acute PTSD people. That means that we are monitoring them hourly. We are unqualified. Out here I have one psych. We cannot get assistance, and we are agitating to get that assistance so we can have that mental health intervention to allow people to adjust to society and go to work and become productive.

I heard here before that if you invest here early with the young veterans, you save the community, you save the family unit and you probably save lives. It is that up-front investment that needs to be done, and we need that intervention.

The CHAIR: Anything further you want to add, Ben?

Mr VAHLAND: I just think that when you have got a veteran that may not even have a diagnosis of a mental health issue—they may discharge from the military and some years later that might manifest, as Bill said. It does not mean that they are not ready for the workforce. It does not mean that they cannot contribute to the workforce. Sometimes they just need a leg up and that connection to make that happen. I am a prime example of that. I have got PTSD from my service 20 years ago in the military. I have gone through the ranks of Victoria Police. So it is not a death sentence, so to speak, or a stamp on your file; it is an individual case that needs to be assessed and then managed, I suppose, through the case management process, in my opinion.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming in.

Mr WESTHEAD: We appreciate the opportunity. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.