# TRANSCRIPT

# LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

## Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Monday, 13 July 2020

*(via videoconference)*

### MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

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### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

**WITNESSES**

Associate Professor David MacKenzie, Director, Upstream Australia, and Associate Professor, University of South Australia,

Ms Anne-Marie Ryan, Executive Officer, Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network,

Mr Max Broadley, Executive Director, Client Services, Barwon Child, Youth & Family, and

Mr Ken Stewart, Assistant Principal, Student Wellbeing, Geelong High School, The Geelong Project; and

Ms Rebecca Glen, Project Coordinator, The Albury Project.

 

**The CHAIR**: Hello, everyone. I would like to declare open again the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. Again, thanks, everyone, for joining us—for members of the public, for the committee members and certainly for our witnesses. This is part of our virtual regional tour of this inquiry.

To the witnesses, I just need to give you some formal information before we start proceedings. For those of you watching from home, we have Rebecca Glen, Anne-Marie Ryan, Ken Stewart and Associate Professor David MacKenzie joining us on behalf of The Geelong Project. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* but also under the standing orders of the Legislative Council, therefore the information that you provide during the hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As I mentioned, this is being broadcast, but it is also being recorded by the parliamentary Hansard team. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and transcripts will ultimately form part of our report and will be posted on the committee's website. Thank you all again for joining us today, and if you would like to make some opening remarks we will then open it up to the committee for further discussion and questions. Who would like to start?

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: I will start off. We are actually waiting for one of our colleagues to join us. I think there has been a mix-up with the link.

**The CHAIR**: No problem. Hopefully Max will be here shortly.

**Mr BROADLEY**: I am here. Can you hear me?

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: There he is. Terrific.

**The CHAIR**: Max, great to see you. Welcome.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: All right, I will lead off and then Max will follow, then Anne-Marie and Ken. We will give you different perspectives on the work, trusting that you will have lots of questions.

**The CHAIR**: Yes, so if you can make sure you leave time for those questions.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: Oh, yes, we definitely want to do that. Just to introduce us: I am an academic researcher. I have been part of the leadership and development of this project from the very beginning as part of the committee leadership. That is all I need to say about myself. Max, who has just joined us, is the Executive Director of Client Services at Barwon Child, Youth & Family, which is the lead agency of The Geelong Project and the collective work that we are doing. Anne-Marie Ryan is the CEO of the Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Network and a representative on the Barwon Regional Partnership, and Ken Stewart of course is Deputy Principal of Geelong High School, one of the original pilot schools that has been with us since the very beginning. Last but not least, Rebecca Glen is the Project Coordinator of The Albury Project, which is exciting—one of the two new funded pilot sites in New South Wales funded by the New South Wales government. So that is who we are. We are going to speak for about 4 minutes each, and as I said, we hope there will be a lot of really good discussion about some of these issues and where to go with this.

I just want to make a few general points. I have been a researcher on homelessness for a long time, and a lot of people in the general public think of homelessness as rough sleeping because it is what they see when they go into the city. It is, if you like, the stereotype. There certainly are people that are in that situation—a relatively small number—but as you undoubtedly appreciate, homelessness is a much broader range of circumstances where people do not have a home. You have heard of couch surfing. There are people floating around who are sheltered most of the time but do not have a home in the sense that we all do. We have an affordable housing problem in Australia, but homelessness is more than simply a housing problem. It is often oversimplified when people talk about homelessness. Women and children primarily do not become homeless because of a housing problem. They become homeless because of domestic violence, and if nothing can be done to ensure they do not become homeless at that early stage then they certainly do have a housing problem. Young people— adolescents—primarily become homeless because of problems in families, not because of a housing problem. If we cannot get in early and avert that, if we cannot assist that, then they certainly do have a housing problem. Of course that is the simplification that is commonly around, and I just wanted to put that to bed because it is a bit more complicated than that and I am sure you already realise that.

We are specifically going to talk about youth homelessness. We are specifically focusing on young people. To cut a long story short, The Geelong Project was born from a sense of discontent, if you like, amongst a number of leading practitioners in services and in the community that our current siloed system of programs really was not delivering. It was not reducing homelessness. And the problem we all face—you as politicians and policymakers and others as providers, people like myself—is that homelessness is still with us. Too many Australians become homeless. Too many young people become homeless. And it costs us as a community because we do not do stuff early on to prevent it. It costs us a huge amount of money in the long run, and in the lives of the people that do experience long-term disadvantage it is a very troubling long-term thing that they have to deal with.

The other point I want to make is a general point. We have one of the better homelessness services systems in the world—I should say that—in terms of the diversity of services and programs. If you go to the United States and other countries with the huge shelters and so on, you will see a very big contrast to what we have done in Australia over many decades and various changes of government, I might say. If all we do is invest in crisis services and crisis responses, then we can never conceivably actually reduce homelessness. There is a compelling logic about that. Now, in some places we may need a crisis service. I do not deny that. We have excellent crisis services in many communities, and we have very good, dedicated people working in them. But it is a bit like the road toll. If all we did was invest in emergency beds and trauma beds in hospitals, we might save a few more lives, but we would not reduce the road toll in the way that we have with cameras and improvements on cars and roads et cetera. That is the general argument of why early intervention is so important. And it is really one of our big policy failures that we have not invested to the extent that we need to in early intervention to actually reduce people going into this terrible experience of homelessness. Now, having said all of that, that is a general kind of argument. I think it is a pretty compelling one, and I think it is one that is gaining ground. More and more of us are starting to think along these lines, and what we have got to do is to translate this into policy and into things that follow when policy is implemented.

I think the signature achievement, if I can sing our praises, of the Australian innovation is that we have demonstrated how early intervention can actually make a difference—and a significant difference, a hugely significant difference—when you do it in the way that we have. And that is why interest in it has taken off around Australia and overseas. It has been incredible, actually, to be part of that and to realise the attention that we have got because of what we have done in terms of innovation here in Geelong, in Victoria and in Australia. Very quickly, some of the key features are: it is a collective effort as community organisations come together in a deeply collaborative way. And I know that is an overused word, 'collaboration'. Everyone is collaborating, aren't they? Well, it has got to be formalised. It has got to be a very strict coming together to work together. There are new forms of institutions and new ways of using data that we have developed. I do not want to hear the word 'coordination'. I have heard that so many times over 30 years. Yes, you need to go and coordinate. Well, what does that really mean? But we have actually created a collective effort in Geelong that is really the basis on which everything else can be achieved.

The other feature I want to highlight for you is the approach to population screening. This is one of its key innovations. I will not go through the detail of it, but if it is possible to identify young people and families at risk before crisis—because they identify themselves in crisis—and to intervene earlier than the crisis, then it is possible to avert the crisis. And that is what I think we have demonstrated. We have demonstrated that you can

screen a population in a way that works, that is acceptable to parents and that works in schools and in the community. That is one of the innovations.

We have tailored a needs-based response. How many times have you heard people talk about needs-based service delivery? We work with an entire cohort. It is not a crisis response at all. Those young people and families identified as at risk—we are always going to be taking an interest in them as the young people proceed through school. We are not going to be doing casework with them most of the time; we are going to be doing whatever we need to do with those young people and their families at the time they need us to do something, and we stay with them—we actually need to stay with them beyond school, which is something we might talk about later.

The other important thing—and I know Max and Anne-Marie will talk about it as well—is: the work we do is youth focused, so we are focused on the young people's issues, but it is very much family centred. The family is so important, when you think about it. If your family is okay, even if it is not the greatest family in the world, you have got a support network around you of family members et cetera, and we must never forget that. For too long a lot of youth work was focused just on young people and it ignored the importance of family. Well, in our work that is not the case. When you work with a young person, you end up also working with their parents. There are all kinds of things that you need to deal with. It is a homelessness response. It is also a response to early school leaving. It is also a response to whatever the incipient issues are that you actually encounter when you intervene early. And there are also mental health issues in families, there is poverty et cetera—there are all sorts of things—and you need workers that can actually do that sort of work from family reconciliation and mediation right down to maybe family therapy or, if they cannot handle that, can bring someone in to help with that. It is whatever it takes to make the difference with that family and keep those young people in school.

We also have a very strong data-driven approach to social and educational outcomes. One of the points I hope that you will appreciate is that it is not just about the social outcome of reducing homelessness and preventing it; it is also about educational outcomes. Everything we do with young people needs to be addressing their needs to be educated and trained on some sort of pathway to viable employment in life, whatever that is, and we have often not done that in our siloed system. And so we really need on the ground a cross-sectoral approach, which I think we have demonstrated how to do. We also need the two key departments, DHHS and DET, to be working together in a much more collaborative, cross-sectional way than they perhaps normally do, so that is something to be addressed, and Headspace and mental health services are very much part of the picture as well.

I am nearly finished with what I am going to say. What are the achieved and achievable outcomes? I mean, that is what the bottom line really is and that is one of the roles that we have played. We last reported in 2013 and 2017, but we have got longitudinal data since then, and we found that we were able to reduce adolescent homelessness across Geelong by 40 per cent. It used to be about 230 every year, and we brought it down convincingly, on a hard measure of their entry into the homelessness service system, to about 130. We think it has been held at something like that level, although there may be a bit of a drift up with the COVID-19 things; we do not quite know what all the impacts of this terrible period have been. But certainly that has never been achieved before. We should feel proud that what we have done in this state, in this country, has been to achieve something that no-one else has ever done. No-one else has ever got anything like that, and while youth homelessness has been relatively stable, not rocketing through the roof in terms of increases, it has not come down to anything like that extent.

And in terms of early school leaving, when I had a look at that in terms of the three original pilot schools, I have to say I was totally surprised to find that in those three schools we had actually shown a decrease in educational disengagement of about 20 per cent and in the other nine schools it had actually gone up. So when you looked at the early school leaving data in Geelong, it had not changed very much. You know, it goes up and down, as data does. That was huge news when we actually measured that—really hard measures. They are not satisfaction surveys; they are not subjective kind of, 'I think it's great; it's a great project'—I do, but for good reason. And it was expanded in 2018. The government poured some more money into it. We had a big injection from the IAP previously that really kickstarted it, and then we have had a more recent injection of funds to expand from the three pilot schools to seven.

I think we are very ready, given the interest. Given the inquiries we get every day, there is tremendous interest out there from agencies and people in the community to think about, 'Could we do this? Can you help us do

this?'. So there is a bit of a movement out there to talk about other Geelong projects in other communities throughout Victoria. That is something we might discuss later. I think that is all I need to say. That is sort of a bit of an overview. I am going to hand over to Max, who will take you through something a bit closer to the coalface in terms of what actually goes on, and my other colleagues will come in as we have planned.

**Mr BROADLEY**: Hello, members. How are you all? Thanks, David. As David said, my name is Max Broadley. I am the Executive Director of Client Services at an organisation in Geelong, a community service organisation called BCYF. BCYF runs a full suite of programming along a life course: programming in early years, family and community services programming, out-of-home care, youth homelessness, youth justice services and adult mental health and drug and alcohol services, as well as a Headspace service.

What that selection of programming gives us is really good visibility into what is going on for families from birth, through developmental stages and up into early adulthood and early parenting. And what we can see going on in the community is that about one in four children in our community is reported to child protection in their lifetime, about one in three women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15 and one in four sexual violence since the age of 15. We all know the mental health prevalence statistics of one in five Australians, and we know that the prevalence of mental health is clustered around people who are also experiencing other issues, like drug and alcohol. We know that there is a huge prevalence of drug and alcohol in the community as well.

We also know through AEDC data that about 10 to 20 per cent of our population here locally are children with one or more developmental vulnerabilities. You look at those kinds of high-prevalence issues that are going on in our community, and it starts to make absolute sense why we, as a service provider, get 1200 presentations of young people seeking a homelessness response every year. That is 1200 young people, and over half of them are young women. The most common reason they say they are seeking a homelessness service from us is that they are fleeing family conflict. So that is the reality of our community, and that is the reality of many communities over Australia. It is not particularly worse in Geelong compared to other areas—this is a fairly typical town.

What do you do about that as a homelessness provider? We can keep coming to the government and keep on saying, 'Hey, we've got 200 young people on our waitlist tonight and we can't house them'. But actually when you look at that data and you look at the prevalence of things that are going on for people, you come to realise that the state or the federal government can never build enough bricks and mortar to be able to compensate for that kind of widespread community disorganisation on community issues. And nor should it. What we think we are able to do in The Geelong Project is be able to meet these families much earlier through strong partnerships with schools. We could, as a homelessness provider, just wait until all of those issues mean that the young female in the family flees and then comes to our door. We could wait and wait for that to happen, and then we could see if we could provide her some bricks-and-mortar-type response for housing. The problem is: if we do just wait, by the time people come to a homelessness service's front door 85 per cent of them have already disengaged with school or are not in any employment. So by waiting to provide a homelessness bricks-and-mortar response, you are committing young people to experience a burden of disease that is totally preventable and you are also waiting for their life to become so complex and problematic and so risky to them that they have to actually flee, and then they have to leave all of the other securities behind and all of the other platforms that are essential for adult wellbeing, such as a good education, connection to the community and prosocial attachments.

So we think that early intervention has a really important place in a multisystemic homelessness policy platform. The way that it works is that community services professionals like ourselves work with education professionals like Ken here and academic professionals like David, and we go to school-based populations and use some screening tools to be able to identify who are these families that are at risk of their young people fleeing and falling into homelessness. We identify the families before the family has broken up. And then we have adapted our youth homelessness model to become a youth for family model. So we intervene in the young person's life and we intervene in their family life and we remediate what is going on for them in their family life.

It is that kind of intervention that turns out to be preventative. It turns out to work. It means that families are functioning better, young people feel safer and securer, young people are reconnected back into education, they are part of that education system, they stay in education years longer and actually they do not leave the family

home. So they do not become unemployed, they get a better education, and they are the kind of foundations that we need for young people for them to have good adult wellbeing.

The alternative is we just sit back as a homeless provider and wait for it all to fall apart and for them to come to us. Now, if we did that and then we are able to put them in housing, we are putting them in a homelessness system with lots of other young people that are also homeless, unemployed. Then communal drug use starts to happen, long-term unemployment starts to happen. So we feel very strongly that it is really important to be able to keep people in prosocial environments, in their neighbourhoods, connected to school, connected to work, connected to coaches, aunties, uncles and to remediate what is going on in the family home.

There was a 43 per cent increase in homelessness in Victoria from 2006 to 2016, and I think young people represented about 29 per cent of the homelessness population at that time. It is simply not possible for the government to be able to finance a response behind the broad scale of determinants, such as mental health, drug and alcohol, family violence—broadscale determinants that are precipitating to people's homelessness. It is simply not possible that we will be able to keep up with that demand. You have to move your effort to the root causes, to the social determinants and precipitating causes of that homelessness, and The Geelong Project sort of demonstrated that that is what we can do. I think that is all I kind of wanted to say in my opening remarks.

**The CHAIR**: Thanks very much, Max. Anne-Marie, were you going to speak now?

**Ms RYAN**: Hello, everyone. Look, I am sorry, my internet is unstable—a bit like my personality! So if I drop out, I apologise in advance. Can you all hear me fine?

**The CHAIR**: No, I think Anne-Marie has gone. Anne-Marie, if you can hear us, we cannot hear you now. You are either standing very still or we have lost you! Maybe you would like to click out and try and click back in again.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: Maybe Ken will go next and Anne-Marie can come in—

. **The CHAIR**: Ken, that would be great. Thank you.

**Mr STEWART**: Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Ken Stewart, I am the assistant principal at Geelong High School. I have been working in Bendigo and Geelong for 25 years as an assistant principal leading wellbeing in schools, so I guess I have some reflections about whether this model would work in other towns. Certainly Geelong is not that different to Bendigo in lots of ways, and I guess that sort of gives me confidence about the model that we have developed here in Geelong working elsewhere. I guess there has been a frustration for years in schools with schools being isolated from the community services sector, and I guess the other issue associated with that is that quite often the services are particularly funded, so for a young person who is experiencing disengagement from school and possible homelessness, there tends not to be just one or two issues involved with that young person; it tends to be numerous issues. Certainly with family violence our experience is that that is probably the biggest presented issue, but then when you look into family violence in the family home, that relates to maybe drugs and alcohol, maybe to poverty, maybe to a whole lot of other different things. So homelessness is not a simple, easy issue to address.

I guess the thing about schools is that community is still connected to schools and schools are trusted as a place to assist with families and assist with students. We have built up that trust over a period of time, and generally I would say that students and their families trust schools. When we engage with The Geelong Project, which is a community of schools and services model, we already have the existing relationship with the family and with the student, so when we do a referral to The Geelong Project the parents trust that what we are doing is something that is in their interest and of benefit to them and their family. They also trust that we are not there to break up families; we are actually there to support the family, and we are there to support the young person to have a positive relationship in the family and stay in the family. So I think that is a key element as well. In the past schools have tended to work a bit in isolation from families. I guess one of the things we have learned very strongly from this is that every student in the school is well supported by the families. I have never met a parent who has bad intentions about their children. Some of them struggle a bit and, I guess, do not necessarily have the skills, but I have never met a parent who does not care about their child. So working with the children and their families I think is critical to this project and the success of the project.

David mentioned the survey. Each year our students do a survey. Every student in the school sits down. The survey takes about 20 minutes and measures a whole range of things, including psychological distress, potential for homelessness and any other presenting issues which may cause homelessness. I think this year we had 26 students identified through that survey who were quite highly at risk, and of that 26 there were probably six of those—and this has happened in each of the years we have done this since 2015—we had no idea about. They are young people who manage to, I guess, hide their distress and are not comfortable about talking about their family situation, and that is quite often because they are protective of their families as well, so we certainly identify through that survey students who we were not aware of.

I guess the other thing, which everyone would know, is that family circumstances can change very suddenly, very quickly. Now, a family can be going along nicely, and everything is good. Suddenly there might be an alcohol issue that starts and may lead to family violence, may lead to loss of income or may lead to poverty. People's circumstances can change very quickly, so you need a model that is wholly responsive, and I guess The Geelong Project is that. If we become aware at school of a young person whose situation at home is not going so well or who may be interacting with drug or alcohol issues, then we are able to connect them very quickly to The Geelong Project—within 24 hours in most cases. So we have a response within 24 hours for that young person. The worker from The Geelong Project connects with the parents, and straightaway there is some support put in for that young person. Previously we would have had to contact three or four agencies to get that same level of support. We might have had to contact a drug and alcohol service. We probably would have had to contact DHHS further down the track, and we certainly try and avoid that. Obviously if it is a mandatory report, we will do that, but if it is not, we try and prevent the DHHS becoming involved, because our service is much more responsive, much more family friendly and certainly not regulated by regulations which the DHHS workers need to follow. I guess that is a big advantage.

The other advantage is that for young people to tell their story once is a big thing, and if they are required to then go and connect with, say, three other different agencies and retell their story, after a while it is very difficult for them to share that story with so many people. It takes a lot of courage to do that in the first place and be open and aware and honest. For them to be able to tell that story once and then that story is taken seriously by the TGP worker and then that person can tell the story to others they might wrap around in terms of supporting that family. The young person does not have to retell the story, and I think that is a critical advantage to this project: one person looks after that young person and looks after that young person's family.

I guess the other thing is that it is a bottom-up approach, so The Geelong project started with services in Geelong knowing that they were not responding as well as what they could—they were pretty much operating in silos and schools were not doing as well as they could either because we were having trouble connecting with the right agency and the right worker to provide support and services. That was really the momentum for The Geelong Project to kick off. David, with his experience and expertise in homelessness, came on board as well, and from that we have been able to develop a model which is highly effective. It is still ground up, so at board meetings every now and then I will say, 'Just remember this is not a service, this is not a program; this is The Geelong Project, and it is a ground-up project. We need to make sure that you don't get carried away ahead of yourselves, let's just come back to what our real purpose is and then sort of reorientate ourselves'. We have had pretty challenging conversations at times, and in the early days of establishment we had some challenging conversations as well. It was not easy, but we opened our minds, the services sector opened their minds and now we work really seamlessly together, and that has been a huge advantage for our young people and their families as well.

I just want to tell a quick story about one of our students—I guess it is a good example. This young person's family had serious drug issues. The DHHS described it as one of the worst situations they had seen. There was drug making occurring in the house and the kids were slightly affected by the drugs that they were taking. The DHHS worked really well with that family under the legislative arrangements, but at some point they then closed with that family. There are still challenging issues in that family, and this young person at the time was a student in year 10—a female student. She has got a younger sibling who—she would often talk about going to live with an aunty but she said, 'I would worry about leaving my younger brother there at home without me there to support him, to watch out for him and to look after him'. The TGP worker worked with her, provided support for her and engaged with the family, and the family now trust her. If things are not going so well for this young girl—she is in year 12 now, so we are going to get her through to the end of year 12, which will be fantastic—then the project worker will have a talk with her, try and get some assessment of what the issues are and work with the family, and I guess the big advantage of it is that the younger sibling—who is not at our

school yet; he is still in primary school—also benefits from the work that the TGP worker does. It is certainly about the family as much as anything, and now that young person, as I said, will finish year 12 this year. Probably three years ago we would have said that that young person would have probably disengaged from school and certainly entered the homeless sector.

I just think the way that the project is developed—it is not a program; it is a project—it is very agile. We listen to each other and we build relationships, which we previously did not have, and I think that is why it is so successful. Having worked in Bendigo for 30 years—a different community—I can quite readily see that this project would be different, because every community is different, but the project and the model would certainly work in a place like Bendigo as well. I will leave it at that. Thank you.

**The CHAIR**: Thanks very much, Ken. Anne-Marie, welcome back.

**Ms RYAN**: Look, I will have a try. I am on the phone and I am here, so fingers crossed. This working from home caper has really gotten the better of me.

**The CHAIR**: Good luck. Thank you. I am glad you could make it.

**Ms RYAN**: Okay, thank you. My role in all of this is that I am one of the community ambassadors. I am the CEO of the Geelong region LLEN and I am also a community member of the Barwon Regional Partnership. In both of those capacities my role is to ensure that the community comes along with us with this work. While we have our eminent professor and we have got some fantastic service providers through BCYF and partners and we have got schools working with us, there is a much broader community of interest that is very keen to be involved in the work that is taking place.

I suppose many of you know Geelong is a very busy space for services. All of those services are sometimes tripping over each other and sometimes duplicating what one another is doing, but there is a lot of interest and will to be able to work together and a lot of interest in addressing disadvantage for children, young people and families. So my role, together with others, is to make sure that all of our agencies and our leadership groups in the region are very clear about what we are doing with the project and invited to participate as part of the collective effort to work on Barwon's response to addressing the needs of children, young people and families.

One of the comments that I will make as the community ambassador is that the work of The Geelong Project has captivated the imaginations of the community, so much so in fact that it has now been picked up as one of the priorities within the Barwon regional partnership. We have started to work on what is known as the Barwon blueprint, where we are looking to start working differently in Barwon to address the needs of children, young people and families by taking a prebirth through to age 25 approach to the work. The Geelong Project, through the work that it is doing, has demonstrated how to set up a community architecture and how to mobilise the community to address disadvantage. So with the Barwon blueprint we are using a lot of the infrastructure that The Geelong Project has designed and taking that same approach in the work that we do in the earlier years, so from prebirth through to young people in and around grade 6, and then thinking about what happens with young people from 15 through to 25.

One of the key features of the work that we are doing with The Geelong Project is that we are putting children, young people and their families at the centre of our practice, which is not always what happens. Very frequently it is the services and the contracts that people are obligated to work with that become the centre of attention. Here part of the reform project is putting the children, young people and their families at the centre of the practice. So I would love at some stage when we get to the questions to talk to you a little bit more about this continuum of support that we have developed, which is our model for working from prebirth through to age 25, and how we are mobilising what we are calling our ecosystem of stakeholders. We have a very large number of people across industry, education and housing services, people working in the health and wellbeing area who have all come together. They have been involved in The Geelong Project, but they have now come together to say, 'We can do this differently in Barwon to make Barwon a fairer place', so focusing on prebirth through to age 25.

I will just leave that bit there but say that bringing along the communities behind this work is absolutely critical to the work that we are all doing together. Thank you.

**The CHAIR**: Fantastic. Thanks very much, Anne-Marie. Now, I am correct in saying that we can open it up to discussion at this point? I am sorry, Rebecca. Please pardon me. Welcome.

**Ms GLEN**: Thank you. I am the Project Coordinator of The Albury Project, employed by the lead agency—we are called Yes Unlimited—and we have been funded by the New South Wales government as one of the two COSS model pilot sites in New South Wales. I will be briefly just sharing some of our experience of implementing the COSS model with you today.

Yes Unlimited is the main provider of specialist homelessness services in our region as well as youth homelessness and engagement services. Our organisation and others in Albury, much like we have already heard here today, have been exploring shifts towards a more early intervention-focused service system for some time. Our organisation implemented a major service reform towards a more systems-focused approach in the local sector, but our services and programs were still geared towards a crisis response, which meant that while we were meeting a need, we were not reducing it.

We first encountered the COSS model in 2015 at a conference where David spoke, and these new ideas helped us to engage with the issue of how we might reconfigure our own local system with a lot more direction and purpose. So we started to follow what was happening in Geelong and reached out to David in late 2017, and he came to Albury to advise us on what we could do to shift our thinking and aspirations into making change. During the visit we held a community forum. About 60 people attended, including the two mayors of Albury and Wodonga as well as the local high school principals. Out of this a group started planning and organising, and with some seed funding from FACS we started to build the community collective that became The Albury Project.

The COSS model provided an anchor point for our collaborative intent, so the framework really helped us to organise, plan and act in a very purposeful way whilst allowing flexibility to make it work for us within our own context. Our work has progressed quite rapidly from development to implementation, and this year we have completed our second round of surveys. I think there are some critical reasons for this, and one is funding. Whilst our collective in Albury was committed to proceeding despite no funding on the horizon, the seed funding that we received to employ a project coordinator dedicated to progressing the initiative, and then the pilot funding, was extremely significant at two crucial stages of the project. I think without someone driving the work, collaborations do have a potential to fizzle out, and the pilot funding has really enabled us to fully realise our early intentions for The Albury Project in a very timely way.

So combined with that funding, the model itself and the access and the support from everyone involved in The Geelong Project and Upstream Australia has taken so much of the guesswork out of developing our initiative. Being part of a very strong community of practice and having dedicated backbone support has meant that we have been able to really hit the ground running in Albury. I think that one of the lessons that we have picked up in Albury is just how important critical thinking and constructive discontent are in driving reform and also what can be achieved when that is really fostered and supported. In The Albury Project and at Yes we have been able to really visualise how our internal service reforms combined with the COSS model could create change locally, and where we are now is a really great example of what can be achieved when bottom-up, community-driven change is enabled from many angles rather than stifled through a more top-down approach. Thank you.

**The CHAIR**: Thank you so much, Rebecca, and I am so pleased that we got to hear about the Albury approach. I think certainly when you look at homelessness and the response that people have been having to this inquiry and in general, that constructive discontent—we were probably in that perfect storm of time to be trying different things and to be working in different ways, and certainly the COSS model almost seems like a magical unicorn in the way that I think it brings everyone together. We have been hearing about overlapping of services. We have been hearing about focusing at the pointy end and paying for the ambulances at the bottom of the cliff rather than providing those fences at the top, which seems exactly what The Geelong Project and this COSS model do.

Just to start things off, in going through the submission—and I must say I read it some time ago so I just was refreshing myself—David, you were really looking at how we can scale this up and in what ways we could do that. I am just wondering for the purposes of this public hearing if you could expand on that. My initial thought

was: well, there are six postcodes in Victoria—two of which are in Geelong—that we know are the most disadvantaged areas in Victoria. Is that where we should be focusing the scale-up, or is that simplistic?

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: We have written at some length and we have put a lot of thought, all of us at different times, and we are talking amongst each other a lot about this in terms of what the experience in Geelong was and now the experience in new sites both here in Australia and elsewhere. We do need to think about implementation. In history in Australia there have been lots of good innovations that have captured some interest and that have just fallen down when there has been an attempt to roll them out and implement them on a wider basis. We certainly do not want that to happen here.

I think one of the lessons is that the implementation needs to be developmental, rather than doing a massive program rollout in the way that programs are typically rolled out. Now, I just want to say I have been around for 30 years as a researcher very involved in policy and programs, working with various governments over that time here in Victoria and around Australia. I am not going to name any, but I have become very intolerant of programs that get rolled out that cost millions of dollars and that actually do not get significant results. So one bit of advice I give to all the governments that I work with—and I work with several—is that at some stage you do need to take some hard decisions and review some of the existing things that are happening that are not particularly effective and redeploy those funds in a way that is more effective. Now, that is a hard thing to do, but that is what we need to do. I am not going to publicly name any programs. People have heard me sometimes sound off in private about that. But the developmental approach means that it takes a couple of years to get going. And if we take the bottom-up approach seriously, there has got to be some community interest to begin with. There has got to be the seed that will start to flower. You put in a project coordinator to start with. You do not roll out things willy-nilly. You do not impose it top-down.

One of the good things, I think, about the model is that it is a community-focused model. Where communities are interested in doing it and want to do it—and they are popping up all over the place—they are the places to start. And then you can go community by community while the rest of the system continues on pretty much as it is. There are quite a few changes that we need to make. We think we have worked out how to do it on the ground, but there are some other changes that need to happen as you go up the line in terms of how the departments work together. In New South Wales, for example, the Department of Education and what is called DCJ—Department of Communities and Justice—have a formal MOU, so they are working together for the first time. They struggle with that a bit, I must say, but it is working, so that is a positive thing. We need to explore these changes. This is unfinished business. We do want our service system to be so much better than it is. But how do we do it? Well, we have got part of the answer to that, I think.

We have suggested a different way that the implementation could be handled. There are precedents for it, and I will not go into the detail of that, but a stock standard targeted program rollout of these solo programs is absolutely not what we need more of. We need to actually learn from what we have done in Geelong and a few other places in the world and do it differently. And I think there are people in the departments that are starting to perhaps think, 'Yeah, maybe'. It is quite a challenge, but that is the way we need to go. I could go on further, but I do not think I will go into the detail of it.

**The CHAIR**: Could I just ask Rebecca, in that case, what is different about The Albury Project in relation to The Geelong Project? Because obviously it is a different community, and I would be interested in following on from David's comments there.

**Ms GLEN**: Sure. There are different systems, a different government and a different education system to navigate, so there are all of those sorts of things. Other than that, I think that the levels of disadvantage are quite on par—not extremely high, but not really low either. Our lead agency is obviously different to the one in Geelong. We have a different model of practice. They are obviously very closely aligned. There are a lot of similarities there. We have a slightly different governance structure. But I think every community is going to have its small differences and the COSS model is flexible enough to provide that structure to the individual within it.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: Sorry to jump in, but I have just had a thought. I think there are two extremes when you roll out programs. One is that you can roll things out too top-down, so you do not give the people on the ground much scope at all to adapt and to make it their own. And then the other extreme is that you roll money out into programs where it is left up to the community to do whatever they want to do. And we have

seen examples of both of those not work so well. I think one of the salutary features of the COSS architecture is that while there are some things that are not really negotiable—you do not get to define risk in any old way that you want to, you do not get to make up your own outcomes measures to suit yourselves—the communities are different, so the process might be a bit different. There is a little bit of a difference in terms of how the two communities have organised their institutional structures. There is adaptability that is allowable and in fact necessary in the architecture, and I think that whichever the community is, there is scope to adapt and own it. What I have heard from a number of different communities both overseas and here is they say, 'What I really love about this is that we own this, this is ours'. And I go, 'Yeah, it is'. So regardless of whatever role I might think I have played or other people think I might have played, the community has taken these things on board and made it their own. I think that is one of the great strengths and common themes across things.

**The CHAIR**: And I think that is interesting, and in listening to you and in looking at the submission, is this something that would work as well in metropolitan areas? Do metropolitan areas have that sense of community or that sense of self that you would find Bendigo or Albury or Geelong has?

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: It is funny you ask that question—I am not going to be the only one who answers this—because I thought of questions that might come up and we might answer, and that was one of them. So the two most developed communities, Albury and Geelong, are regional communities, and I think the reason for that is that regional communities do have a sense of being a community because they are a place that is regional. That has been something I have been aware of for a long time. But, you know, the model is not only regional. Mount Druitt, that is a metropolitan area, things are happening there. That is the second site in New South Wales. There is a site in Seattle and Minnesota. So there is absolutely no reason to believe that it is only going to work in a regional centre and not in a metropolitan. The point I want to make, though, is that the sense of community is really a community of services and schools, and it will have a geographical kind of footprint but it is a community that you actually build. People have got to come together and work together. And that may not fit some of the administrative areas that government departments roll out, and sometimes it will. So I do not know whether other colleagues want to jump in—

**The CHAIR**: Actually, I would love you to, but I am also really conscious that I have got to give my colleagues fair time, so maybe incorporate it in one of the answers.

**Mr BARTON**: Ken, you touched on something just before about screening the population, and one of my first thoughts was that kids are pretty good at hiding stuff if there is drama going on at home and things like that. Can you just tell us a bit more about how you do the screening of the population apart from the survey? What is the strategy to get these kids to come out and get them to talk?

**Mr STEWART**: Thanks, Rod. So I guess the strategy is that we have been doing the survey for a number of years now and I guess there is a general acceptance in the school that we are not on about finding out secrets; we are on about supporting young people. So the students who do the survey tend to be engaged in it honestly. We get the odd survey where they have a bit of mischief about it, but most of them are really quite accurate. Following the survey we then do a screening interview with the young person. So the first step is just to try and confirm that the information we have got from the survey reflects what the situation is with that young person. So we have that discussion with them initially, and that is with parent permission. So once we have done the survey and have done that initial screening, the parent is aware that we are going to provide some support so it does not come as a surprise if we decide then to make that a situation where we engage with the young person and their families.

The thing I was going to say is that because we have been involved with this for a period of time and we have got the doctors in schools program as well, we have got a strong sense of help-seeking behaviours in this school. So it is quite okay for a social worker to pop into a classroom and say, 'Oh, Michael, do you want to come and see me now?', or they have got a doctors appointment in the school—'Pop down and see me now'. It is just seen as a normal thing to seek help. I think in developing that culture, The Geelong Project has played a big part, because of the workers around the school—we have a psychologist from Bellarine Community Health who is part of the same agency that provides the doctors in schools program. She is in here two days a week, so it is just seen as a normal part of living, that at times we all need some support for something. I think it works pretty well.

**Mr BARTON**: So you are not finding there is a stigma at all among the kids?

**Mr STEWART**: No, not at all, Rod. But mind you, that is not to say five years ago we did not have that. I guess that is a culture that has changed. And that has been an advantage of The Geelong Project as well: it is very open, it is very visible, kids will see other kids heading out with one of the workers to have a discussion. So it is just normal.

**Mr BARTON**: Great. Sounds great.

**Ms LOVELL**: Hi, David, how are you?

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: How are you?

**Ms LOVELL**: Yeah really good, thank you. David, you talked about the frustration of having services that are currently funded but are not delivering, and I am not going to ask you to name any of those services. But obviously we have spoken a lot about this during the inquiry and a lot of people share your frustration. One of the themes that is coming through to us strongly is recommissioning. I am just wondering about your thoughts on recommissioning and if you would be supportive of the recommissioning of homelessness services.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: Hi, Wendy. I will make a general comment. Look, at some point things need to change, and what you have just outlined is the way that some change needs to be affected. I would cite Albury, where there was a very controversial Going Home Staying Home reform process. I was on one of the committees there, and I will not go through the whole story; it is still a bit of a sore point. However, what happened in Albury was that when they recommissioned Yes Unlimited, rather than coming up with a cobbled-together, local, fake sort of response, they said, 'No, we need system change'. They are now the agency which is doing the change that benefited from the reform process. Other people will talk about it in New South Wales and will say, 'Oh, it was terrible, blah, blah, blah'. It is a difficult thing. I think there has always got to be some thought into how you do that sort of process—an orderly, well-managed process will be accepted and participated in.

I remember with JPET at one stage—that was an employment and training program that the federal government used to run—the department decided to recommission all of them at once. It was a bit of a disaster, and I was brought in on a committee to kind of help repair all of that. It was really a case of managing the process appropriately. You need to have a review—not reviewing things one by one, because those kind of reviews typically will tweak the particular existing siloed programs. You need to have a review of youth programs and a review across the board so that you can think of things in a systems way.

I think one of the documents that we have shared with your inquiry is the AHURI report that I did with a team of people. I think for the first time we took a systems view of it. Once you do that, it is like the penny drops and you go, 'That's obvious. We can see how that needs to be changed'. The process of change needs to be managed. The answer is a qualified yes, really. It has got to be managed appropriately.

**Ms LOVELL**: It is a very difficult process, and we have seen some clumsy ones in the past: the recommissioning of domestic violence services a few years ago, even the recommissioning of some mental health services that Mary Wooldridge did. They were maybe not done in the most constructive manner that they possibly could have been done. It is always a difficult process. You talked about collaboration, and we are hearing a lot about people working in silos and not collaborating and about the funding for throughput rather than outcomes—and we all want to see outcomes for people.

Congratulations on The Geelong Project. It has been a big effort from you to get this off the ground. I was just wondering if you can give us some stats on your successes in family reunification or keeping kids out of the homelessness network, and also what options you have for kids in Geelong if you cannot keep them out of that homelessness network. I am very aware that you do not have a youth foyer down there. It was a commitment that I made in 2014, to establish a youth foyer at the—I am trying to think of the name of the institute down there—Gordon Institute, and whether you think a youth foyer would be beneficial for Geelong as well.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: I might defer to Max, initially.

**Mr BROADLEY**: Sure, Wendy. In answer to your previous question as well, about recommissioning, from a service provider's perspective, bring it on. Recommissioning is a really great opportunity to reset an entire service system platform, so we see that as a really good opportunity. But I would say that actually the policy

position has to be really well articulated first. In terms of effectiveness, The Geelong Project has demonstrated there is about a 30 to 40 per cent reduction in presentations to youth homelessness and a corresponding 20 per cent improvement in school retention for the school-aged population. So that is pretty remarkable in terms of both a social return on investment and a financial return on investment. So that has been articulated as well through research, where Deakin indicated that for every dollar you spend in early intervention in homelessness you save about $20 later on in child and family, justice, leaving care services et cetera.

In terms of this other suite of services that are available for young people in Geelong should they become homeless, we have a refuge, a City Limits Youth Refuge, which is [inaudible]. It is the only refuge left in Victoria where young people share bedrooms, but it is a refuge all the same. We have brokerage for crisis housing. We have a number of lead tenant properties. We operate about 90-odd properties on behalf of the state for the Transitional Housing Management program. We are also successful in the Housing Pathways Program, which is about brokering the private rental market to make the private rental accommodation available for leaving care clients.

So there is a bit of a suite there. But as we sort of said at the top, it is really important that there are those safety nets in place because some people do become homeless despite all of our best efforts. But what we know is that people that are moving into that system have probably already experienced quite significant hardship and trauma in their life. Leaving home is traumatic as well. They have left school, they are unemployed. And to be able to then casework people out of that level of complexity back into civic society is very, very difficult, once you have hit a level of homelessness and complexity. So you hit homelessness, drugs and alcohol, mental health, no security—that is committing people to a very long journey of repair, and we just think that that is a burden of disease that is totally preventable.

**Ms LOVELL**: Absolutely. So is there still a desire for a youth foyer in Geelong?

**Mr BROADLEY**: Yes. I think that they are a legitimate piece of the service system, for sure. When young people do become homeless, then giving them a tenancy that is well matched to a no-fail education pathway, great idea. We think that the Education First foyer model is absolutely preferred over the non-education-linked model.

**Ms LOVELL**: The Education First Youth Foyer model is the leading model in the world, and I am very proud of it.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: I just want to add to that, not to comment specifically on foyers, but in New South Wales—I should disclose I am the chair of the My Foundations Youth Housing company, which is the world first—I have been working very closely with the New South Wales government in terms of building a social housing provider for young people, not because we want young people to go into social housing as a lifetime destination. We have got a model whereby—a transitional housing plus, where they come in, paying a very subsidised rental, and then the rent is increased over time as they participate in education and training and get on an employment pathway, and then move somewhere else. So we have probably done more in New South Wales in five years than the youth sector has managed to do with boutique housing projects over about 30 years. And that required government to sort of recognise that young people do not get much of a share of social housing and our model is very connected to supporting them into education, training and employment— so everything we do with young people. That is what is so important about the foyer approach, which I have been an advocate for for more than six years.

My only qualified caveat on foyers, to be honest, is that they need to be connected, because it is a homelessness response in Australia, the development of foyers. They need to take young people out of the homelessness services—not any old young person but those young people who can engage with education and training, and not all young people exiting a homeless service can. So that would be the one caveat that people have heard me talk about a few times in terms of foyers, and maybe if it is a person linked rather than multistorey buildings.

**Ms LOVELL**: I am very aware that a foyer is not for every young person, and we have had to—I have not; I no longer run the housing department—the government have had to evict some people from youth foyers because they just do not fit that model. So we need to have other models as well, but it is a great model for those kids who do fit it, and it changes their pathway in life.

**Mr TARLAMIS**: Thank you for presenting to us today and talking about the fantastic work that you are doing and a great initiative in The Geelong Project. The line of questioning I had was around that scalability, so it has largely been answered, but I guess just to recap: with any scaling or looking at expansion of a project like that, you are essentially saying that in order for it to be effective the architecture or template around that would need to allow for adaptation and variation to take into consideration regional or local issues and obviously jurisdictional overlays in terms of the various laws and service provision and things like that to make sure that it was fit for purpose and that the local aspect was being driven by local service providers and having that interest and buy-in is key at the beginning to make it as successful as it can be. Is that a fair assessment or summary?

**Mr STEWART**: Lee, I might comment on that. Geelong High School are a bit unique in that our students come from around 40 different primary schools, so they do not come from our local area necessarily. So our community is based on the school, and as such the parents feel part of that community and the students feel part of that community, whereas somewhere like, say, Bellarine Secondary College, their community is very much geographically located. So when we talk about scalability and, say, going to the metropolitan areas, again, once you take a community of schools, that defines your community, not the geography or the postcode. The other part of that, the community sector, is defined by who that community accesses for services. I think it can work very well in metropolitan areas. Because it is based on the school community and the community of services, that defines the community, and that is the same in metropolitan areas as in rural areas. So in a small country town, for example, there might be only one secondary school, so that is a smaller community, or they might partner with a school that is, say, 20 or 30 kilometres away and form a slightly larger community. So there is all sorts of flexibility within it. And I was going to say earlier on that the way our school does Geelong Project can be slightly different to the way another school does Geelong Project because our own school community is unique, as each of the other school communities are unique as well. There is certainly flexibility and adaptability within the model so that we can sort of refine it to suit us the best we can. I guess that is the strength of the bottom-up approach.

**Mr TARLAMIS**: I guess the more you can relate to a project the more it is going to be relevant to your circumstances and you will feel part of it.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: I think you have summed it up pretty well there, Lee. I get contacted every week. I can name a few communities, and I can name agencies: the western suburbs; Dandenong; the northern suburbs; Shepparton, for example; Wodonga; the Bass Coast. So there are three regional centres that are on their own paths, like Albury was, to actually make some changes and to do it in their own communities. There is interest in a number of metropolitan sites. Readiness is a key concept. If it is going to succeed, there has got to be a readiness there and there has got to be some community leadership, and I find it some of the most inspiring stuff. It is true, when I went to Geelong many years ago, without that community leadership nothing happens really. It is not a cargo cult where people are holding out their hands for money; it is people who want to make the service system better for young people and families. Of course funding is needed, but I would say that a lot of the money we need for this in the long term is already there; it is just not in the right places. When I say that, some people gulp, but it is true. We need some hump funding to get things going.

A few years ago we did a piece of research where we spent three, four, five years, nearly, pinning down the costs of youth homelessness in Australia, and in terms of just health and justice costs, I think when we added it up over a year it came to something like $629 million—only in health and justice costs. These were specific costs associated with contact with the justice system and using health services of one kind or another. That was an average figure per person per year, and it added up to $629 million. The astounding thing that really just sort of opened my eyes and astounded me was that we were only spending at the time $621 million on homelessness services altogether in Australia—throughout the country. The health and justice costs do not include the costs of homelessness services. If you become homeless and then go into homelessness services, that cost is paid.

Also, if we deal with early school leaving, if we can keep people on an education path: there was the lost opportunity report by Stephen Lamb, a brilliant piece of work which really assures us that if we can be serious about early intervention we will save money in the long term—maybe not save money in the first few years. If that is factored in, that is a different way of thinking about dollars in and out. So, yes, I have made my point in terms of the economics of it.

**Mr TARLAMIS**: Just finally, in terms of the discussions that you have had in and throughout the people you talk with in the sector, have you spoken to agencies in other areas throughout Victoria that have expressed an interest in your project and the possibility of that being rolled out into their areas as well?

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: Look, there is a lot of interest in a whole number of communities. I suppose it is fair to say that in some places I think there would be crisis services that are simply overwhelmed by the crisis work that they do. We did the research and we spoke to some of the crisis workers, and if you ask them, 'What do you need?'—they are dealing with crises every day—they will often say, 'Well, there are people we can't help. We don't have enough resources to help them. Can we have more money for crisis services?'. I totally understand how workers will say that, why workers will say that, and there is a certain truth in their experience of what they are doing day to day, but if you step back from that and look at it from a system perspective, what I said at the outset of my initial remarks overrides that. If that is all we ever do, as a number of us have said, then we are never going to really get a handle on this problem and reduce homelessness. In some places there may be a good case for a crisis service because they have none, but what we need is a more balanced system— and I think we have tried to make that case in the submission. If we start to do that, over time we will see the difference happening across the state. The system needs to change—I think that has been the core message of our experience with The Geelong Project and our thinking about how this could affect better what is happening in Victoria. I am also working in New South Wales very closely with the government, and there is a lot of interest there. There is some interest in Queensland, South Australia and of course overseas—but travelling overseas has been stopped by the COVID-19 crisis.

**Mr GRIMLEY**: Thank you to everyone who has made submissions here this afternoon. Wouldn't it be great to see The Geelong Project overseas at some stage? That would be fantastic, just to have the Geelong name out there. So many good things come from down this way, and it is really pleasing to hear about this fantastic innovative program. It is good to see some familiar faces here. Max, with all the great work that you do there at BCYF—good on you, mate. Ken, Mandy passes on her regards, mate, and says to say hello; she spoke about you very fondly. I suppose my question is to you, Ken. You spoke about The Geelong Project worker in particular, so my question is: who are they in particular, and what types of skills or qualifications do they possess that make them so successful in their role?

**Mr STEWART**: Thanks, Stuart. Say hi to Mandy for me. I guess when BCYF select the workers, they are very careful about selecting people who they know will both work well with young people and work with families and also make that very quick connection and form that quick relationship with the young person. I know BCYF have been doing a lot of work around staff development to continually improve the skills of their workers, and that has been both through forward planning and reactively. If BCYF see that there is a particular skill that is required by one of their workers, then they will provide that training for them. Trauma-informed practice, for example, I know, is one of the things that they have done some recent training in. I guess it is that ability to respond to the needs of the training that has been critical. They are pretty amazing people that they employ, and I guess the other good thing is that they seem to stick around. In the community services sector, a big challenge has been that people will work on a project for 12 months and then move onto another project and so on, whereas the workers that we have had, they do hang in there, they do stick around, they are very committed to the role and they have got a strong connection with the school as well. So while they are BCYF workers, they are also workers in our school, and we see them as part of our staff as well. I think that adds to the job satisfaction for those workers as well.

**Mr GRIMLEY**: Could it also be a case of The Geelong Project worker being almost tailor-made to a particular client—for want of a better word—rather than a one-size-fits-all model? Is that one of the reasons why the project seems to work so well?

**Mr STEWART**: I guess. Perhaps Max might want to say something about that. I guess from our perspective it is that they are well rounded in terms of the work that they do; they are not specifically drug and alcohol counsellors or specifically youth workers or they do not necessarily have the direct juvenile justice experience, but they are certainly well rounded in terms of their skills and in terms of what they can bring. If they cannot bring a particular skill, then they are more than happy to bring someone else in to support them in terms of a particular service that might be required. Max might have some more to say about that.

**Mr BROADLEY**: Yes, sure. Thanks, Ken. Stuart, yes, it is definitely true. Look, the workforce is based on a youth work workforce, and then it has been adapted to be TGP ready, so it is family inclusive and trauma

informed, and it can do good partnerships and all of that sort of thing. But remembering that core youth work workforce is the workforce that is able to go out and to assertively outreach really hard-to-reach young people—young people in the justice system. Workers are doing foot patrol and doing youth outreach, so that is the sort of prevailing skill that they come with: it is the ability to engage and develop relationships with young people that may be resistant at first. But most of the credit, in terms of the matching and the work, goes to the young people themselves and the families. The great shame about all of this is that, actually, young people want to stay in school, families want to be functional, nobody really wants the crisis and drama and they do most of the work, and actually they self-select into the program pretty readily because—as Ken was saying earlier—it may be the case that families are really struggling, but it does not mean that they have a malicious feeling towards the teenager; it is just that life is complex. We find that if at the right time you can put the right worker in front of a family that is going through some very difficult circumstances, they self-select into the support— they do most of the work. It is not that hard.

**Mr GRIMLEY**: David, before you spoke about how keeping kids in school, like Max was just saying, is so vitally important. Ken mentioned also that prior to The Geelong Project or around those times students and families were feeling more and more isolated from the community services sector. So how important is it to have those community services connected within a school rather than outside the school? I ask that question along the lines of I know that some schools have OTs, speech pathologists and so forth working out of the school as a bit of a luxury. Should there be more of that?

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: In the 1990s I was researching homelessness and I argued we needed better school welfare, we needed stuff put into schools, and we have certainly seen an improvement in school wellbeing or welfare support. We tend not to use the word 'welfare' these days, but it is the same thing. But I think we need to have a service system which is community services based outside that is flexible. You are sort of siloing it if you go into a school-based thing where all the schools are separate, they have got their own separate welfare systems built into them and that is their world. I think what we have done is moved beyond that, and we have tried to get some efficiencies where BCYF has the flexibility to move the workforce around as the need arises or diminishes. We have good sufficient people in schools—so, you know, doctors in schools, there are wellbeing people in schools—and some schools have invested more in in-school welfare. You need in-school, but you need to have this flexible system of workers working into schools as the need arises. I think the only criticism I would have of basing it on schools—I mean, if in the community there is only one school, like in some country communities, well, that is not the issue and of course you do—is that in city locations or in Geelong where you have got nine or 12 schools, having a flexible workforce is much better with close connections into all of the schools. And then of course the workers from the schools and the workers from BCYF meet regularly. They often go on professional development sessions and programs together, so it is sort of an extended workforce. It is making better use of the resources we have got than locking it up into particular schools, I would argue. So it is sort of a qualified yes, but it is also an implied criticism of purely making it school-based rather than a community-based approach. I do not know whether other colleagues want to add to that.

**Mr STEWART**: I guess my experience has been that we have quite a few services coming to the school now as a result of The Geelong Project, really, because it is much easier for the young person if they are at school—particularly our school, where the kids come from, as I said, 40 different primary schools, some from a fair distance, and by the time they get home it is already dark, so to have that service provided in the school is great. But also a visible service is a good thing for everyone to see that it is okay to go and see someone to get some help. It promotes those help-seeking behaviours and also allows us to build relationships with those other community sectors as well. Bellarine Community Health, as I said before, where our doctor comes from, we have a psychologist from there two days a week coming in as part of that service as well, so place-based service is really critical, and more critical for some schools. Certainly in our school it is very critical because many of our students would not be able to access those services if they were not place based.

**Mr GRIMLEY**: I suppose also the benefit of having the flexible workforce would be to assist those transient students who quite often move from school to school and they would have to therefore go through their story multiple times, so I suppose that is a benefit as well. So thank you.

**The CHAIR**: Yes. I think that is interesting that it actually also creates that ecosystem that invites more and more services to come in. I think that is really interesting.

**Ms VAGHELA**: I would like to thank all five of you for your time today, and thanks, David, for a very detailed submission that you have provided. It is good to see a submission which is research-based and data-based. The question that I have is for David. David, this COSS model is on a youth basis. Have you come across any other model similar to the COSS model which is for other cohorts, so for example elderly people or women? Because you have done so much research you might have come across similar sorts of models for other age groups. That is the first part of my question. I will let you answer, and then I will do the follow-up question.

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: There is screening that is done in various contexts, particularly in the health area, not so much in the community services area. I have thought about this a lot, and I have certainly thought about: well, can we identify vulnerable families with domestic violence? Well, we kind of do to some extent with the COSS model as it is. With elderly people is there some way that we can early identify incipient homelessness for that group? There are some issues about whether that is possible.

So in terms of the broader system—this is going beyond our brief—anyone leaving institutional care, be it a jail or maybe hospitals, juvenile justice et cetera and certainly young people leaving care, going back to young people, because we know that they are vulnerable groups who are more likely to turn up in our homeless population, we know the point where they are leaving the institution, there is something that should be done there to ensure that they do not become homeless. So if someone who has been in prison comes out, you do not want them becoming homeless and having all those sorts of issues, because the likelihood is they are going to reoffend or life is going to sort of deteriorate. So it is in the interest of the community to make sure. That is a fairly small trickle of mainly men leaving prison, and we can do something about that. That has been known for some time. Certainly we have kind of addressed the issue for young people.

We do have a lot of emergency relief sort of points throughout Australia, and I have sometimes thought that we could do more to make those points of engaging with a family or often women coming in for help. If you are coming in to get a handout from an emergency relief point, there is a whole lot of other things generally going on in the family, and that is potentially a point for early identification. So the idea is to look for points of early identification and to then do something positive to respond at that early point. That is the logic. I do not really have the full answers, but that is my thinking on it.

**Ms VAGHELA**: So you have spent a lot of time in researching the homelessness sector. How has COVID-19 affected the homelessness sector and what impacts are you seeing, and has that impacted the COSS model that we are talking about?

**Assoc. Prof. MacKENZIE**: I am going to make a couple of comments and then pass it over to probably Max and maybe Bec to talk about what it is like on the ground in terms of working with families. Certainly it has had some effects. I mean, I co-wrote an article in the April issue of *Parity* where I made the point that it has taken a health crisis to kind of provide housing first for people sleeping rough or people that are homeless. We have got some thousands of people who fortunately have been put in safer places during this COVID-19 crisis, and we certainly do not want to be turfing them back onto the streets. So it has kind of exposed the fact. You know, when we have bushfires and emergencies like that we somehow manage to provide housing for people—temporary housing—very, very quickly, but we have not done that so successfully with people becoming homeless. So there are some portable housing models that are providing quality units in clusters that can be fairly quickly set up that are not tents or cheap settings. I think we have to rethink just what we are doing in terms of this. This thing is not going to go away either, not quickly. But I think in terms of the effect it has had on the work, I would defer to Max and to Bec to give you a sense of what the impact has been at that level.

**Mr BROADLEY**: Just quickly—and then I will let you jump in there, Bec—the work has continued. The state government additional funding—HEF funding, which is brokerage funding—has allowed us to take many more young people that were on our waitlist and put them into hotel accommodation. So that has been good and welcome, and that has taken people out of couch surfing or sleeping in their cars. We do not have a lot of rough sleepers in Geelong, but it has certainly taken people out of that scenario, so that is a lot safer for them and safer for other people. It has been particularly difficult in residential-type settings. Our youth refuge is residential, and we also have lead tenant properties, where young people have a tenancy with an adult volunteer lead tenant. That has been particularly problematic in terms of young people needing to change their behaviours in shared environments where we have a duty of care to either workforce or other volunteers. That has been a bit difficult. Look, I think that we have not yet seen the full effects of the state of emergency if you think about

the precipitating issues around family violence and family conflict that lead to young people becoming homeless. That must still be occurring. But what we do also know is we have just got less eyes in homes and on families. For example, our child protection intake in this region would normally field something between—I do not know—30 to 40 phone calls a day. During the state of emergency they may have got four or five, because no kids were in schools; everyone was doing remote. What is happening in the household has remained invisible at the height of the epidemic, the height of the first wave, so I think we will still wait to see the effects. Bec?

**Ms GLEN**: I would definitely agree with you, Max. We have not seen a huge impact as yet, but we are certainly expecting it to come, with the exception of increased reaching out for mental health support. That has been the really big one. We reduced the capacity in our youth and women's refuges just to enable social distancing to occur, but we have not necessarily seen an increase in demand. We are also expecting probably increased financial hardship, which then obviously has a flow-on effect as well once the government starts winding up all of the additional supports and that sort of thing. So I think we are probably experiencing much the same as what Max has outlined.

**The CHAIR**: Just in the final minutes that we have got I will ask my colleagues if anyone else has got a quick question to ask just to put their hand up. But is Anne-Marie still there? Great. We were talking about this being a community model and it was about getting the support and the backing of the community, and I think that helps with some of the issues that Rod spoke about with stigma and things like that and how the school engages. Is this something that, if I was down in Geelong visiting someone and I mentioned The Geelong Project, they would know about?

**Ms RYAN**: The answer is I hope so. The people that you could ask are the key leadership groups in the region, which I think is really important. If you went down and spoke to G21, the Committee for Geelong, the chamber of commerce or any of those groups, they would all be very aware of the project, because we have been working with them around this new way of supporting children, young people and families since 2012. We have been building a kind of mindset for all of that. But the evidence for the fact that they all know about it is that with the Barwon regional partnership all of those groups interact with the partnership, and they have agreed to put the Barwon blueprint that I talked about for how we support young people from pre-birth through to age 25 as one of the region's top three priorities. And it is all because of the work of The Geelong Project, because that has been our concrete example of how you can work differently. So the answer is yes, Fiona, they would.

**The CHAIR**: Thank you. The Geelong Project is sounding more and more like a magic pudding or something. It keeps giving in every way.

**Ms RYAN**: Can I just say something about the metropolitan area, just to pick up on Lee's question from way back. I had occasion a little while ago to go to the western suburbs because they have been running a series of forums on dealing with the crisis of homelessness in their area. So when I had an opportunity to speak to people I was in a room of CEOs of a range of councils, local government councils, together with a range of politicians of various persuasions, together with housing workers and schools. When I talked to them about The Geelong Project, the way they wanted to listen to me was that, yes, we acknowledge that they have got some really significant issues in that area but that we had a solution as far as turning off the tap for having any more young people entering that system. So the interest in that was really, really high. We all agree that we have got to respond to the youth crisis, but you have got to do something about it to stop that at some stage or another, and that is what they heard: that The Geelong Project was in fact an opportunity to make a start to stop any further young people and families falling into crisis. I think that is the most captivating thing about the project.

**Mr BROADLEY**: Can I add to that? Would you mind if I add to that, Anne-Marie? I used to work in Melbourne; I worked in Fitzroy, in youth drug and alcohol. I used to manage a youth residential withdrawal unit there. If anybody knows that area, you will know that it is packed with youth services, absolutely packed—and none of them collaborate at all. So actually when you come out to the regional areas, because there are just many less services you are required to collaborate more. So maybe it is the case that actually the metro areas need a model like this more than anybody else because they need something to bind the partnership together. In the metro regions you are just very, very busy and there are a million services around you, and no-one is really doing any significant long-term partnerships.

**The CHAIR**: Absolutely. And I think the overlapping of services probably does not happen as much in regional areas because you are so stretched and there are so few, where we do see that unnecessary overlap and that unnecessary expense, as David has been saying—you have all been saying it—at the pointy end, at the crisis end, instead of where that dollar could probably be far better spent, at the prevention and intervention end.

**Ms LOVELL**: Sorry, Fiona. Just to add to that, it is also the frustration of the way that things are funded for throughput, which has services corralling people and saying, 'These are our clients, because that is our funding source', rather than saying, 'We can work with you to solve their problems'. So this is all what recommissioning would address.

**The CHAIR**: Yes. Thanks, Wendy. I think that is absolutely right. Thank you all very much. This has been really enlightening, really inspiring, and no doubt you will see yourselves in this report. I am very certain of that. As I mentioned, there will be a transcript of this session and that will be sent to you. Please have a look and make sure that we have not made any errors or misrepresented you in any way. Again, thank you very much for this. I think anyone who has been watching from home or from outside the region will also probably have learned an awful lot in this session. So I appreciate that.

**Witnesses withdrew.**