

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 14 July 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

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

Mr Jemal Ahmet, Executive Manager, Programs and Services, and

Ms Bec Lean, Program Manager, South East, Centre for Multicultural Youth;

Ms Melanie Raymond, Chair, Youth Projects; and

Ms Vicki Sutton, Chief Executive Officer, Melbourne City Mission.

The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Lovell): I declare open the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised. I would like to begin the hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us is gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee, or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would like to welcome any members of the public watching the broadcast via the telecast.

For the witnesses, all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information 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. All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will be ultimately made public and posted on the committee's website. We welcome your opening comments. I would like to welcome those who are presenting today, and I ask if you might introduce yourself first.

Mr AHMET: My name is Jemal Ahmet. I am the Executive Manager of Programs and Services at the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

The ACTING CHAIR: And with you today? Would you like to introduce your team?

Mr AHMET: With me today is Bec Lean, who is one of our program managers and looks after a lot of our direct service provision to young people.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thank you. We will welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 10 minutes to ensure that we have plenty of time for discussion with the committee. I now ask Jemal to commence his presentation. Thank you.

Mr AHMET: Thank you, Ms Lovell. Just before we begin I also want to acknowledge the Wurundjeri clan of the Kulin nation as the original owners and custodians of the land from which I am participating in this inquiry and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and pay my respects to all Indigenous persons participating in or observing these proceedings.

I have got quite a lot of data, so I will actually be speaking quite fast to get everything in, and if I look slightly to the side it is because I have got a screen there that I am actually referring to, so it is not that I am not interested in looking at everyone. First of all I want to begin with just a general statement that in our view at the Centre for Multicultural Youth everyone regardless of their background deserves a safe place to call home, and that is our starting point. Yet in our experience young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness for a number of reasons, and it is estimated that young people from refugee backgrounds in particular are six to 10 times more likely to be at risk of homelessness than Australian-born young people. Despite these vulnerabilities, these young people are at risk of slipping through the cracks of policy and service responses due to being what we regard as unseen, and this is due to two key factors: a lack of consistent data collection by the sector, the housing and support sector, with regard to cultural and linguistic background—things such as country of birth, cultural background, language spoken at home, parents' country of birth—and that is an impediment to actually developing good policy, procedure and access points for young people and their families; and the forms of homelessness they often experience are often hidden from the service system in the form of couch surfing, overcrowding and also

young people's own assessment of whether they are actually homeless and their reluctance as such to seek and present to housing services.

The housing service system's lack of cultural responsiveness and appropriateness, in our view, and the lack of appropriate housing options can create a further layer of disadvantage for young people or families experiencing homelessness. As mentioned just now, the concept of homelessness services can be unfamiliar to refugee and migrant communities. Services are not always experienced, confident, culturally sensitive or regarded as safe. The limited housing options available can be culturally inappropriate—for instance, young women housed in mixed-gender rooming houses or refuges—which exacerbates vulnerability to homelessness and help-seeking behaviour. Negative experience with the housing system can also contribute to poor outcomes for young people and make them reluctant to seek help in the future.

In terms of why that is important, I think a look at the data is critical. What we know about the youth population and its diversity in Victoria is that almost half—48 per cent—of young people living in Victoria were either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas, which is an increase of around 4 per cent on the decade before, and more than one in five Victorians were born overseas, an increase of 6 per cent from one decade earlier. We also know that young people make up a significant proportion of Victoria's homeless population. Young people aged 12 to 24 make up one-quarter, 26 per cent, of Victoria's overall homeless population. The key features of homelessness among these cohorts point to the fact that they are often young and newly arrived and have experienced high levels of overcrowding. People who are newly arrived are very vulnerable to experiencing homelessness. People living in Australia five years or less make up 15 per cent of all those categorised as homeless in Australia. The majority of homeless people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia are young—79 per cent of the CALD homeless population were aged between 12 and 34. Overcrowding is one of the increasing forms of homelessness for young people born overseas, and more than three-quarters of the rise in homelessness in the 19 to 24 age bracket consists of overseas-born young people in severely overcrowded accommodation. CMY's experience is that couch surfing and overcrowding is one of the most common forms of homelessness experienced by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and this is supported by groups like Westjustice, who report young refugees as overrepresented at their youth couch surfing clinic and our own data in our Reconnect program, our Le Mana Pasifika program and our South Sudanese community support group programs.

In terms of why young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, there is the refugee experience, such as separation from families and significant others potentially; experience of trauma; a history of unsafe and insecure housing; family breakdown due to disrupted, separated and reconfigured families and intergenerational conflict; loss of extended familiar and social networks due to refugee or migration experience, resulting in fewer backup options in terms of accommodation; experiences of overcrowded accommodation resulting from financial stress and larger or reconfigured families, including young people in the care of relatives such as aunts, uncles or grandparents; lack of familiarity or lack of trust in the service system in Australia; low socio-economic status; lack of housing options that can accommodate larger families, which can be common amongst most migrant refugee communities, leading to overcrowding and adolescents often feeling squeezed out; and lack of private rental history often required by real estate agents, including facing racism and discrimination in the private rental market.

We have a section here that I wanted to speak to in terms of the COVID-19 experience, but I might leave that for now and look at what we are suggesting may be solutions to some of those issues that have been raised. Firstly, I think we need to understand the nature and extent of homelessness amongst young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and make sure they are specifically targeted in all government strategies, policies and program responses to homelessness. And what that really means is that they are not an add-on to homelessness policies and homelessness programs—they are integral, designed in from the beginning, and where possible co-design elements involving the empowerment of communities and young people in that process of design are incorporated. This does require a more detailed and consistent data collection system in relation to migrant and refugee young people and their interactions with housing and related support services.

We need to increase early intervention and support for young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds if we are going to be really serious about preventing homelessness. This includes those who are often ineligible for settlement or generalist services; for instance, those on orphan visas, those on remaining relative visas, those on spouse visas and their children and those on special category visas from New Zealand.

This includes access to social security income for those who are ineligible or on waiting periods and who are at risk of homelessness to ensure they can access the breadth of housing options available to them, including the private market. We need a well-resourced, culturally responsive housing service system that understands and effectively responds holistically to young people's and their families' needs, including having a variety of accommodation options. Within that response we would be looking at wraparound services and not just at the housing provision. We would look at what it is that prevents people from a stable housing situation. What are the factors that contribute to their risk of homelessness? And we would help people to deal with that and not just provide housing as the panacea to all things to do with homelessness. Because if people cannot sustain their new accommodation, they will experience recurring homelessness.

We need gender-specific emergency and transitional accommodation options for young people, but particularly for young women. We need bicultural workers involved in support services, and that is critical. Our experience over 30 years of working with multicultural young people is that we achieve real success when they are able to work with and deal with people who reflect their cultural and racial backgrounds, and that has tremendous knock-on effects in terms of confidence and trust that means that they will seek help earlier rather than later in any form of crisis that they may experience. We need long-term and significant investment in public, social and affordable housing. I am sure the inquiry and the committee here has heard that over and over again, but just because everyone says it does not mean it is not vital and critical to the solution, and I think we cannot dodge that. I think, being where we are now, we can read into the fact that that investment has not been significant enough to date.

Finally, we need an immediate housing strategy that works alongside young people and families and communities at risk of homelessness, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 context. We need to make sure that those experiencing housing affordability stress can maintain their housing throughout the course of COVID-19 and beyond, and we also need to prioritise those experiencing secondary forms of homelessness, including the couch surfing and the overcrowding that I have spoken about already. This is essential not only in securing housing and housing stability but to protect their health and the health of the community at this exceptional time.

Now, I do not know if I have used up my 10 minutes or—

The ACTING CHAIR: You have used up your 10 minutes, so we might move onto Melanie now. There will be plenty of time for discussion later as well. Melanie, thank you.

Ms RAYMOND: Thank you very much for the opportunity to join the panel, and I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land. The Youth Projects submission before this inquiry speaks to the enormous operations that we have in the heart of the CBD in Hosier Lane in our Living Room primary health service, which sees about 17 000 contacts a year. Those clients are overwhelmingly in midlife, and they are rough sleepers. We work together with them in a system that is well intentioned however working poorly and unintentionally working against solving homelessness.

I would urge you to look at the recommendations we have made in relation to the frustrations of catchment areas, geography and fragmentation as being absolutely critical to our investment in homeless services and making them function better but also provide a more personal and appropriate experience for highly vulnerable people.

But I would now talk, since we are talking about youth today, about our very large operations in relation to at-risk youth in Melbourne's north and north-west suburbs, where we have traditionally been for over 30 years, the bulk of whom are 15 to 21. They are drawn from the poorest families in our poorest suburbs to the north and north-west of Melbourne, where no-one in their networks has secure, ongoing employment or likely finished year 12. Most of our clients have got to about year 9 and have stopped attending properly by year 7. They are not registered as not attending school; they just do not go.

What bothers me is that without urgent action we do feel that within these young people there are many who are on an almost certain trajectory into forming the next generation of at-risk and homeless youth unless we do something. I would affirm many of the points made by Jemal around the needs of the CALD community, given the very culturally diverse client group who reflect the sorts of needs and challenges that he has spoken of. This is a challenge that presents us daily, working at both ends, from very hard-core, long-term homeless people to

those who are at the edge, where we really know something can be done. And we know that homelessness starts in the suburbs. There is a lot of focus on homelessness in the CBD, but that is not where the problem begins. It begins in our outer suburbs, those areas historically more than 20 kilometres from the economic activity of the CBD. They have the highest rates of unemployment, rent and mortgage stress, lower educational attainment, family breakdown, family violence and insecure and low-paid work. They are our locationally disadvantaged areas. We used to think of places like Broadmeadows, but now we know there are many new suburbs ringing Melbourne where homes have been built but they did not bring jobs, transport, economic opportunity or social mobility.

So today I want to make just three points that are not actually about housing, and I recognise that the committee will have heard much on housing data and housing affordability. The first point I want to talk to you about is the trajectory into homelessness and how it can be prevented by earlier early intervention. By this I mean a greater focus on education, skills and opportunities so that young people transition safely into adulthood. These are the interventions that are often not recognised as homelessness support or intervention but remain very, very effective in terms of stopping the trajectory into homelessness and the risk factors for that. Help-seeking behaviour and engagement into early support is critical and must be provided in a way that is co-designed with young people, that is culturally appropriate and that supports the LGBT community, and in a way that young people trust and recognise as being specific for them.

Our Youth in Hume Outreach Program sits within a national unemployment hotspot. This is a quite small program that might see 148 at-risk youth every year. Of the youth we see, 48 per cent are outside the education system. The team work very informally to find young people where most people do not think they are—when they think they are at the shopping centre, they are not. Over half identified as having a disability or mental health problem. Thirty-seven per cent had already had an involvement with the justice system; 46 per cent were homeless and aged under 17. Using our holistic wraparound model we target those most at risk of, at best, wage scarring, insecure and low-paid work, and, at worst, lifelong entrenched unemployment and risk of, if not eventual, homelessness. However, we have worked with hundreds of at-risk youth and have enabled over 1100 to make that U-turn back into education to find and maintain a secure job. That is good news. I would not blame you if you were weary of the bad news you are hearing. So there is some good news here: that we have some very, very, very impressive outcomes if the early intervention comes earlier and if we recognise that not every solution sits within homelessness services and housing issues.

So the young people that we have helped in our youth-specific employment service are now young adults with self-confidence and a path into the future. They have made that transition and it has stuck. They have not returned in three months. A very, very high number go on to keep that job and go on to further learning and training and we never see them again, and that is fantastic. We do not want to see them in our city service. This also includes our disability employment service. Both our services sit in the top 1 per cent in Victoria for outcomes and the top 2 per cent nationally. We do know what we speak of.

Number two, I want to talk about wraparound services to address multiple and complex needs. I know Jemal went through that a bit, but I think it is very, very important to recognise the fragmentation in the system and that employment services are absolutely in contact with some of the most at-risk young people but it is often not identified or not rated highly in terms of the power of these services to make a U-turn for young people. It is a critical point of intervention for emerging risk factors for young people who are homeless or facing homelessness—seamless, local, youth-specific support across the multitude of challenges they face—and it only costs a fraction of what long-term unemployment costs to do that. Research shows that young people with a mental illness are two to three times more likely to wind up homeless, at which time their prospects of positive health and social outcomes are dwindling. We estimate over 30 per cent of clients are experiencing mental health problems but are reluctant to seek help or do not know how. For those who are using illicit substances, the siloed service system means they may be getting help for an alcohol or other drug problem but they are not getting help with a mental health issue, or vice versa, because one often does not recognise the other problem is ongoing. So we need to bring that more seamlessly and wrapped around so those services can be accessed by young people in a very trustworthy way.

We know that family violence is a contributing factor and is often indicated by young people who are leaving school early. We estimate that 20 per cent of clients in the north-west are currently experiencing family violence but are reluctant to disclose it, and the data again is not kept very carefully or reliably. Sometimes we have to go to anecdotal evidence and the practitioner's own sense of what is going on in someone's life.

The third one I want to speak to is housing and life skills. Homelessness intervention, we think, is more than finding a place where we can store people. We think without identity and connection housing interventions can fail. Loneliness post housing drives many clients back to see us, particularly in the CBD, out of the sheer loneliness of wanting to feel again part of a community who knows and understands them and where people actually know their name and think that they matter. Often they are coming from many suburbs far afield just to be able to say hi and have a coffee. Many of their problems have been addressed, but the ones around the loneliness and isolation have not been. I think while we are all new to lockdown—it is new, we are in our second lockdown—for many homeless people, I feel that they have much experience of lockdown in a sense, where they have felt excluded and had no-one to talk to, nowhere to go and no way to participate in the community.

We think that connection to local community activity and the confidence to be able to step out and feel engaged in the community is actually absolutely critical to sustainable housing outcomes, and it needs to happen for much longer than current housing support might provide—up to two years—to make sure that people are coping and they have the life skills to do that. In the COVID-19 environment we are having some very interesting national conversations about mental health, jobs, education, income and public housing. These have always been our conversations. The problem is that the situation has become more urgent and dire for the foreseeable future and in an unknown future.

In Melbourne's north and north-west, where we are now reaching up into, there are thousands of primary school-aged children who will become teenagers in the next three years in this COVID environment, and among them will be young people who are facing the challenges we typically see. It is frightening to think around the next wave, when a hard job just got worse. They will enter a COVID-19 economy. We have already seen a large jump in registrations, having received more registrations of at-risk youth in one week than we did in the 10 months previously. That is a massive thing to contend with, and many of the systems are not coping with that jump.

By investing in wraparound models that include jobs, training and opportunities to sustain at-risk youth, giving them priority and recognising them as homelessness interventions, even though they are not commonly part of the way we fund and recognise specialist homelessness services, they are one of our earliest interventions to capture early. We think that our proven model shows that when we invest in these sorts of issues, despite the fact that the funding streams might not come from homelessness services, we are investing in the future of young people and homelessness prevention.

The ACTING CHAIR: Melanie, sorry, you are at the end of your 10 minutes. If it is fine, we will leave it at that point and move to Vicki for her comments. I see that our Chair, Fiona, has joined us now. Fiona, do you want me to pass the Chair back to you?

Ms PATTEN: Wendy, if you would not mind, could you maintain the Chair? I have got a very unstable internet connection. I am not sure how I am going to go.

Ms SUTTON: Look, thank you for the chance to talk to our submission to the inquiry. I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are all meeting, the peoples of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects. Melbourne City Mission is a community services organisation, and we provide a really diverse range of programs across homelessness, disability, justice, education, early childhood and even palliative care. Our overriding purpose is about disrupting disadvantage and supporting Victorians to go on and overcome challenges and barriers to an ordinary, positive life. We have got a really strong focus on young people across our services. We have extended into various areas across different service systems as we have focused over the years on developing solutions that address the gaps in meeting young people's needs. As well as being the state's largest youth homelessness provider, we also run a school, Hester Hornbrook Academy, which offers VCAL to over 200 students who are otherwise excluded from mainstream education. Many of those students are involved in homelessness, justice and out-of-home care.

We have got mental health programs, including the Check-In service at Frontyard, which we designed specifically to support young people when they are in a homelessness crisis, and we are extending those mental health supports now into our school when we introduce a new program next year called Living Learning. Living Learning is a social impact bond that is being funded by the Victorian government and social investors through the Partnerships Addressing Disadvantage program. As we develop that social impact bond, we have

started to build our capability around outcomes and we are extending that focus now throughout our services, and within our homelessness service we are currently developing outcomes measures for all of our homelessness programs and we are investing heavily in client management systems so that we can collect the data around outcomes.

Melbourne City Mission brings decades of experience in youth homelessness from early intervention programs like Detour; operating Frontyard, the statewide youth-specific access point in the heart of the city; multiple youth refuges; and running foyer programs, longer term housing solutions. Our Frontyard youth service in the city has evolved over many years to integrate a whole range of services that we realise young people need when they are in crisis. That includes having community partners on site who provide health and legal services. We have Centrelink visiting, we have got our Check-In mental health program, we have got onsite cooking and living skills classes and we have got therapeutic support like music, art and pet therapy. And we also have employment support that is philanthropically funded.

Just over a year ago we relaunched Frontyard as a redevelopment and incorporated into it an innovative crisis accommodation service for 18 young people, and it is targeting young people with the most complex needs who were typically not able to be supported by the traditional youth refuge. Those young people have access to 24-hour, seven-day-a-week support that includes mental health and drug and alcohol support. They can stay as long as they need rather than the typical six- to eight-week refuge stay, and there is longer term case management support that follows them when they do leave to help them sustain the housing.

As we have been developing these responses over a number of years, what we found is that it is critical to integrate services to meet young people's needs and that we also have to keep innovating to respond to the gaps that we identify. Right now there is a huge gap in long-term housing and supports for young people. Our homelessness system is crisis focused, and because we do not have exit pathways for young people, our system is blocked. Young people tell us they are stuck in crisis for too long, they cycle through youth refuges and they are trapped on long waiting lists, and they have some really specific needs. They have a truncated and traumatic transition to adulthood. Half of the young people that present to Frontyard are escaping violence from home, 54 per cent have mental health concerns and 20 per cent come from out-of-home care. Neglect and trauma in childhood, as well as that disrupted development because of homelessness in adolescence, means they have missed out on developing some really important skills, they have got trouble with emotional regulation and they are disconnected from education and their communities.

So as a result of that—Melanie said this, and Jemal as well—they need longer term support post crisis to develop those appropriate skills to address their trauma and connect them to education and employment so that they can make a successful transition to adulthood. But supports in the youth homelessness system typically end when a person exits crisis accommodation. A recent survey by the housing provider Unison highlighted the need for ongoing support when they recorded that in the 18-month survey period 55 per cent of young people that started a social housing placement finished it in that same 18-month period. They simply could not sustain it. The support needs to be coupled with secure housing. Public housing is at a critical shortage, and it is not suitable, really, for young people. It is not realistic. Social housing providers do not cater for young people, because their lower incomes mean they are financially unviable, and in the private rental market young people are disadvantaged because of their low, low incomes and their high perceived risk as tenants.

So what might a solution look like that addresses this gap in post-crisis housing and support? Well, thanks to the support of a generous philanthropist, Melbourne City Mission have been able to spend some significant time and resources on this question over the last six months. We have researched international best practice and we have surveyed young people and practitioners both within Melbourne City Mission and our broader sector, and we have then designed a long-term youth housing and support program that we call the youth housing initiative, or YHI. It takes the best of the models that we have seen nationally and internationally and adapts them for the Victorian context to support young people post crisis to make that successful transition. The youth housing initiative envisages incorporating a mix of housing options from congregate-style settings for intensive on-site support for those with the highest needs all the way through to shared housing that mimics private rental with a much lighter touch of support for those ready for independence.

There are three kinds of support that we have incorporated into the model. The first is support to develop tenancy skills: paying rent and managing landlord relationships. The second is case management and coaching—that is, developing your living skills like cooking, budgeting and cleaning, but also specialist skills

to connect into education and employment. The third component, typically missing in homelessness services, is therapeutic supports to really support young people to recover from those past traumas, to address the associated mental health issues, to develop positive relationships and to build those social connections and capital. A successful outcome would be a young person graduating to private shared rental. That is a common aspiration for most young Victorians. Involvement in the youth housing initiative would seek to mimic a supportive family environment, providing unconditional support and stepping up and stepping down as the young person needs it until they are ready to graduate. Research and design work have been completed, and in the months to come we will be looking to secure some funding to roll something like this out further, including a pilot.

But investing in long-term, youth-specific housing and supports is necessary. It will unblock the youth homelessness system and it will create flow through, so that the current system can support more young people, and it will also provide shorter interventions and better outcomes for the young people that come into the system.

The ACTING CHAIR: Okay, that is terrific. Thank you. We might open it to questions. Fiona, whilst you are with us, do you want to start off the questions or do you feel that you have not heard enough of the conversation and want to wait a bit?

Ms PATTEN: Could I maybe just make a statement? I apologise; I was so looking forward to this session. I changed venues because I thought I would get great internet. But anyway I am hotspotting on my phone in a giant room. Thank you for all of your contributions. I have really appreciated listening to what I have been able to listen to, but at this stage I apologise. I am just going to have to stay listening and be an active but passive participant today.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thanks very much, Fiona. I might just start off and say that they were fantastic presentations. Solving youth homelessness is a real passion of mine, so it is really great to hear your thoughts. Melanie, you spoke about wraparound services and the need for those. When we were in government, Mary Wooldridge and I wrote a policy around *Services Connect* that created a triage system so that clients could get wraparound services. Is that still operating or has that stopped happening for clients?

Ms RAYMOND: To my knowledge that actual program stopped, but there has never been any sense that wraparound services are not the right thing to do. They can be complicated when funding is not shared. I have seen over time the idea of collaboration fall over because of a lack of whole-of-government funding. You want to do a whole-of-client service, but the funding does not come that way, and the fractures and bureaucracy can work against wraparound services. To the best of my knowledge I think that one you are referring to is no longer operating; versions of it might be.

The ACTING CHAIR: Okay. We are hearing very clearly from many homelessness providers that the collaboration is just not happening properly. One of the things that is coming through strongly is perhaps the need for some recommissioning of homelessness services to ensure that we get more collaboration to provide those wraparound services. I was just wondering what your thoughts would be on the recommissioning of services.

Ms RAYMOND: I mean I think that recommissioning is certainly one approach, and there are lots of long-term providers in there. Some of what we have described in our submission is around the multiple times the client has to jump through hoops along the way. Maybe you do not have to recommission. Maybe the slow and painful work of trying to just remove those choke points—maybe there is a way services can, within resources even, work to eliminate, or departmental guidelines can say, ‘Look, we don’t care what side of Bell Street someone lives on’, so they do not have to go off somewhere else, because I know recommissioning is a big and painful process too. So while I am not saying do not do that, I am also saying that I think I am seeing some good examples of service collaboration and really trying to pinpoint what is our fault, what we can do to streamline better and what we need departmental policies, guidelines and funding agreements to do to eliminate some of those problems we are seeing.

Mr AHMET: Can I just come in there. I think recommissioning is probably a part of what I am going to say, but I think it is more about re-visioning rather than recommissioning. I think the way service systems are designed or have been designed, particularly in the housing sector, is the move towards large-scale responses or

responses from big organisations that have a huge footprint. I think what often that misses is the local connection issue for young people, particularly those from multicultural backgrounds. That need to stay within their communities, to have supports from within that community that maintain their linkages and their connections, their community engagement and their relationships with friends and other family members I think is critical. So maybe it is more about, for me, re-visioning how and who we fund to do this work in terms of wraparound services.

In a previous life I was the CEO of Whittlesea Community Connections, which I think may have presented to this inquiry, and we put in place at the time that I was there a very simple project which never got any government funding; it was funded from a very small amount of dollars from philanthropy. That was about giving people an opportunity to access the private rental market in a supported way with some financial support, but also the key factor there was that they had a caseworker who would work with them to ensure that the underlying factors that led to their unstable housing situation were stabilised and also gave them the opportunity to actually contribute back into that program for repaying the financial support that they received in order to get accommodation. The success of that was it was very small scale, it was locally based, but we had by the time I left almost a 100 per cent success rate in maintaining people in their accommodation for more than six months and also in terms of people who were then able to repay the programs so that others could continue to be assisted.

So that was about empowerment, that was about respect, that was about saying those things that have led you to have high levels of risk of homelessness—we will help you work with those things, whether that is about getting work, whether that is about dealing with your family violence situation and getting legal advice, whether that is about getting assistance for your family's needs. The success of that program I think is that because it is simple it has not been seen to be attractive to the big policy framework and the complexity we give this issue. I think some of the solutions for complex problems are often a lot simpler than we think they are.

The ACTING CHAIR: I really like that word that you have both used there, 're-visioning', because I think there does need to be re-visioning. However, I really think that re-visioning would also lead to recommissioning because we would change the way that everything is done. Obviously there is going to be a need to redistribute funding in various areas as well.

Just a quick question to Vicki—I was so pleased to hear you talk about your youth housing initiative and particularly that your emphasis on life skills and training skills et cetera. I just wondered if you had been able to gain access to, I think it is, certificate I in independent living. It is a course that was developed for the youth foyers, and it has been extended I know to young people leaving care. Have you been able to gain access to that for any of the young people in your refuges as well?

Ms SUTTON: I am not sure, Wendy. I cannot give you the exact detail on whether we are using that in any of our refuges.

The ACTING CHAIR: Right, terrific. Okay.

Ms SUTTON: But obviously my broader comment is, the way we look at support is it needs to be all encompassing. It is not just living skills; it is financial skills, it is managing tenancy and it is connection into education, whether that education is TAFE, whether it is that particular certificate, whether it is back into high school or back into a special school like the Hester Hornbrook Academy—and obviously then employment support as well. So it is more about having the holistic supports available to fit the needs of the individual rather than having a specific program and you look for the individual for whom that fits.

The ACTING CHAIR: Yes, and that is exactly what that course is designed to do. It is about gaining independence. So it is financial skills, it is tenancy skills and it is life skills. It is all sorts of skills that these young people unfortunately do not learn at home and need to be taught.

Mr BARTON: Vicki, you mentioned the early intervention and the importance of it. Could you tell us how your program is working and explain some of the successful things that have been achieved via this?

Ms SUTTON: In early intervention, Rod?

Mr BARTON: Yes.

Ms SUTTON: Melbourne City Mission operates some of the early intervention programs that are available at the moment. We operate Reconnect programs and Detour programs, and we have got family reconciliation and mediation programs in Frontyard. And these programs are quite effective at picking up young people that are starting to tip into the homelessness system and helping to, you know, repair their relationships with families, where that is safe to do so, and keep them out of the homelessness system. For Detour, for example, to Jemal's point, some homelessness can be driven by overcrowding, and a program like Detour allows us to resolve that by perhaps putting a bungalow in the family home backyard, so the young person can have some independence, and resolve some of the overcrowding. That works quite successfully.

The main issue is that early intervention has not been invested in across the whole state. Reconnect and Detour are both programs that are in particular areas and have been maintained in those areas, but they have not been more broadly rolled out to be available to everyone. So there is an opportunity with the range of early intervention programs that are available to actually roll them out more systemically and have a strategy around early intervention. That really needs the critical resources that we have got in the homelessness system to be then reserved for young people that really have no choice but to leave home. And we do have half of the young people that we support escaping violence in the home. So there will always be a need for a group of young people to have that intervention, but we want it to be as short as possible and to get them into stable housing and get them on their journey to adulthood. Hence the focus on the exit point—to have solutions for them to move out of crisis—and great also to have focus on that early intervention point to reduce the demand down to just those that really need a crisis intervention for a period of time.

Ms LEAN: I just wanted to add a little bit about our Reconnect program also. We have Reconnect for young people who have been in Australia five years or less, and we are really seeing that we are being pushed away from early intervention in that space. It is designed to be early intervention into homelessness, but because the pointy end of the homelessness services is being overworked we are getting referrals for people who are already beyond early intervention.

Mr BARTON: Right—creating our own problems.

Ms MAXWELL: Great presentation by everyone. Thank you so much. It is very extensive. I have just got a couple of things. Jemal, you talked about empowerment, and I think that that is definitely a keyword in this that is so sadly often not something that is spoken enough about—to empower these young people to be able to move through the process of becoming homeless into being then upskilled and to then be able to almost mentor other people before they get to that stage. So I love that word, and as a previous youth worker I know how important that is to young people, because sometimes that is all they need—someone to believe in them and to empower them.

Melanie, you talked a lot about early intervention, which is like your yin to my yang; it is just music to my ears, and I am just very, very passionate about it. Early intervention I see as something that cannot just depend on a young person being at risk of homelessness or being homeless. We have got to do that early work with the families. What would you see as relevant place-based supports around funding? Time frames is another thing that I know people struggle with. They can work with a family or with a young person for X amount of time and then, 'Sorry, we're not funded to continue that'. We know young people need that ongoing support. Housing—having a house does not eradicate the issues that created the homelessness in the first instance. We know that those young people need those supports to overcome those barriers, whether it is being traumatised from family violence, drug and alcohol et cetera, et cetera. So I love what you are saying about that in the early intervention space, and I do get concerned that there is not enough funding in there.

Vicki, you talked about outcomes and things and out-of-home care, so I guess my question for you is: what sort of stats do you have in regard to those who become homeless from out-of-home care, and what sort of data do you have on their outcomes, because we know that those people who have been through out-of-home care, whether it is residential care, foster care et cetera, et cetera—and that can be so extensive—can be moved from pillar to post for most of their young lives. What sort of data do you have on that?

The ACTING CHAIR: I am just going to butt in here and say we have only got 7 minutes to go, so we need to be quicker.

Ms SUTTON: All right, I will give you a few stats. At Frontyard 20 per cent of all the young people that present are coming from the out-of-home care system, and they tend to have higher needs and more complex needs and need longer support to find the right solution for them. There are some really quick wins here. Obviously the Home Stretch campaign, where we give every young person in out-of-home care the option to stay in care and to stay supported until they are 21, is an obvious solution that will really ease the pressure here. In terms of outcomes for young people who have gone through homelessness, look, we are an output-funded system at the moment. All of our contracts are based on throughput of number of people through our refuges, periods of support—you know all this. This is why we are a really big advocate for moving towards outcome. So the whole sector has to do a lot of work around defining outcomes, capturing outcomes and then being able to use that data to help improve our programs. A lot of the work that we are doing at the moment is to develop that understanding of outcomes and trajectories, but most of our systems at the moment are manual, as many organisations are, and it is collecting the data that we need to collect for funding.

The ACTING CHAIR: Did anyone else want to provide any commentary on that?

Ms RAYMOND: Very quickly in relation to Ms Maxwell, I think the program timing issue where the youth in Hume program cuts out at 12 weeks and they need 13 weeks and they are done—I mean, we do not let them go, but there is no magic 12-week outcome. I also feel that, for example, with the older homeless clients you are at the bottom of the cliff, but what we can do is construct the barrier at the top of the cliff with these multiple youth-based interventions earlier than, we believe, early intervention. We would take that much earlier than years 9 to 12 and onwards; we would be finding the need to push back into grade 6, year 7 and 8.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Melanie, Jemal, Vicki and Bec. I must say, just like Tania and Wendy, this is my heart space. This is something that I truly care about in the way of looking for solutions for our youth, and especially some of the things that you have all said have been extremely thought provoking for me. My ex-partner worked in youth detox for many years.

Melanie, the points that you raised around alcohol and mental services working in silos, and then employment—there has to be a way that we have to look at a holistic approach. The things that I have just heard, I was wondering if you could give me your opinion on if we were looking at, say, something that was not dissimilar to the police assistance line but with a youth focus. So currently for an emergency you ring 000, a police assistance line and then you have an anonymous report line—because there seems to be so many services out there. But to have that one-stop shop being able to actually look after individuals but having that holistic approach and being able to connect youth in the way of one phone call. I have teenagers at the moment, and I had a teenager couch surfing—

The ACTING CHAIR: Catherine, we are down to 2 minutes.

Dr CUMMING: Okay, sorry. I am just wanting to say that with COVID, I think COVID has actually shone a light on a lot of dark corners that we have, one being that when people are experiencing homelessness obviously they do not have necessarily a computer or internet. They would be lucky to have a phone, and making sure that a lot of the services that we provide are just phone based—even with COVID we are not getting people coming into libraries and other places that they would normally use, so I guess that holistic approach. What would you think about having a one-number system that everyone then can connect down into the services in their area?

Ms SUTTON: There is a phone number for young people that is operated out of Frontyard. We get over 9000 calls every year, and interestingly with COVID in one month we got 3000 calls. A lot of that was from young people, from students concerned about rental stress, having lost jobs, so we were able to provide a lot of information and advice through that. For a number of those, particularly at the peak of calls in COVID from groups of students, that was enough. We were able to redirect them to resources, including university resources that could help them. So there is a phone service, a Vic-wide phone service, available for young people to help them navigate this and get information and advice.

Dr CUMMING: So, Vicki, if they were to Google that, would that be easy? Is there a statewide campaign in the way of advertising to make sure that the youth knew that?

Ms SUTTON: I cannot tell you about the campaign, but absolutely that—

Dr CUMMING: Is that something taught in schools, or is that something they would have access to? I am just trying to get that one thing that, when there is a primary school child or a teenager in school, Centrelink or whoever the service is could be handing over and that would be the way they can connect.

The ACTING CHAIR: This is going to need to be our last comment, because we are out of time. So, Vicki, did you want to respond quickly?

Ms SUTTON: We have run schools programs, going around to secondary schools. It is philanthropically funded and actually educating I think it is predominantly year 9 students on what youth homelessness is and what services are available to them. So we have done that. But I cannot tell you how broadly it is advertised otherwise within the school setting as opposed to professionals that have the number.

Dr CUMMING: You know what I mean, I just like a state approach—

The ACTING CHAIR: Catherine, sorry, we are going to have to end it there because we have gone overtime. I would just like to welcome Kaushaliya and Lee, who have joined us later in the session, and thank our witnesses today. Fascinating session, guys. We could have gone on for much longer. Great to have you with us.

Witnesses withdrew.