

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 1 July 2020

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WITNESSES

Ms Sarah Langmore, Coordinator (*via teleconference*), and

Ms Zoe Vale, Chair (*via videoconference*), Western Homelessness Network.

The CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. Good morning, Sarah—I am sorry we cannot see your living room, but welcome—and Zoe, welcome. It is lovely to see you. Welcome.

I now declare open the Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues public hearing into the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. Obviously everyone at home and all of the committee members, please make sure that your phones are switched off so we do not get that interruption. I know that most of you have yourself muted as well, which is great.

Before we get started I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the many lands that we are meeting on here today and pay our respects to elders past and present and emerging and also to any Aboriginal people who are listening today or any who are here who will be joining us today to impart their knowledge. We know and what we have heard in this inquiry so far is that all of the issues around homelessness are very often felt exponentially by our Aboriginal brothers and sisters.

I would like to welcome any members of the public who are watching this broadcast live via the worldwide web. I would like to welcome our committee members who are joining us, and we have had some apologies from some other committee members.

For Zoe and Sarah I just have a quick brief statement to make. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under our *Constitution Act* but also the standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore any information that you provide today is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside this hearing may not be protected, and any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded and, as you can obviously hear, is also being broadcast. We have got Hansard taking a very accurate record of this, and they will provide you with a transcript of this hearing. I would encourage you to have a look at that and make sure that we have not made any fundamental errors in your statements. Ultimately that transcript will make its way to the committee's website.

I welcome you to make some opening remarks, Zoe and Sarah—I do not know how you want to order that—and then we will open it up to the committee for a more general discussion and questions. Thank you, and thanks again for joining us today.

Ms VALE: Thank you very much. I am going to start by reading through a statement on behalf of the network, and then Sarah and I can both answer any questions that you might have. I would also like to begin by acknowledging that we are meeting on the various lands of the traditional custodians and specifically discussing the issue of homelessness on the lands of the Woiwurrung and Boon Wurrung clans of the Kulin nations. I would like to pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that these lands were never ceded. I would also like to acknowledge that as a direct result of colonisation Aboriginal people are represented amongst those seeking help from the homelessness system at a rate 12 times higher than their proportion of the general population.

I would like to thank the members of the inquiry for the opportunity to meet with you and for your concern for those in our community who do not have a safe place to call home. I and my colleague Sarah Langmore are speaking today on behalf of the Western Homelessness Network, which is a network of all the specialist homelessness-funded services operating in Melbourne's west who work together to provide a coordinated system response. My name is Zoe Vale. I am the Chair of the network. I am also a senior manager within Melbourne City Mission. I have been working within the homelessness sector for 22 years. My colleague Sarah is the homelessness network head for the west. Her role is to resource the network to achieve its strategic objectives. Sarah has been working in the homelessness sector for 29 years.

It is challenging and sometimes distressing to have worked for so many years in a sector that aims to help vulnerable Victorians only to see the problem of homelessness endure and in fact worsen. As a network we

regularly survey the consumers of our system, and their feedback is clear: being without a safe, secure home is traumatic, destabilising, distressing, harmful to their health and mental health, makes it harder for them to care for their children and to find employment and makes it impossible to plan for a future. As one consumer told us:

The experience of homelessness is absolutely horrific and there are no words that can describe it. I can understand now why so many people just give up, it's so sad. It could easily be resolved—just buy some more houses, there are so many vacant properties in buildings, why can't these be donated or bought. These places could house so many people—it's unbelievable.

Today we want to provide some information that adds to what we have already provided in our two written submissions and discuss the impact of the pandemic in the west. The current pandemic has highlighted the central importance of home to our wellbeing and the effective functioning of our communities. This unique situation has brought many of our system's deep-seated challenges into stark relief. The most compelling issue currently at hand is how we respond to the very large number of people who have been placed in emergency hotel accommodation in the west, many of whom are single adults and young people and have complex needs. Both western access points, Unison and the Salvation Army, have identified a significant increase in the numbers of people they have had contact with during the crisis—more than double for the same time last year. For the Salvation Army, for example, this means that their five staff are having contact with up to 150 households per day. This is being driven by two main factors: more people have been accessing services for the first time due to a loss of income; and there has been a concerted and assertive effort to provide accommodation to everyone who requires it, and this includes many people who have been sleeping rough. In response to the pandemic we have now provided hotels, motels and serviced apartment accommodation to approximately 600 households throughout the west.

The majority of these are single people and mostly single adult men. The network has welcomed the opportunity to help so many people. Additional funding to purchase accommodation has been allocated for a four-month period, with a small amount of additional staffing capacity pending to facilitate this. We have found that whilst a doubling of funding was provided, the two access points have in fact had to treble their usual spend in order to ensure that as many households as possible are accommodated, but these measures are short term. The additional funding is now drying up and access points have to again start limiting the number of people they are providing purchased accommodation for, and they are reducing the length of time that funding is available. Consumers also need to contribute 30 per cent of their income to the costs of hotel accommodation.

The homelessness system in the west prior to the pandemic had capacity to provide case management support to about 11 out of every 100 households that sought help. Given these numbers, the services understandably prioritise families with children first, and single adults often miss out. We are now being asked to stretch these resources to respond to every person that is being placed in hotel accommodation, and there have been no additional resources for case management or outreach support provided.

The biggest question now for us as a network—and no doubt for those currently in accommodation—is where do they go next? This situation has brought into stark relief two major issues that the west is grappling with. The first is the high numbers of people who require intensive cross-sector, wraparound support to assist them to work through some very complex issues, and the lack of affordable housing options for single people. The increased funding in response to the pandemic meant that the majority of people who were sleeping rough were able to be accommodated in hotels, and this is a fantastic thing. Many people in this group experience a range of complex issues related to their mental and physical health.

The western region about two years ago missed out on funding that was specifically targeted to the rough sleeper cohort, and the support services in place now are struggling to meet the extra demand and the high level of complexity presented by this group of consumers. We currently lack a coordinated, region-wide, cross-sector response for rough sleepers. Many of our community service systems such as mental health are so overloaded that it is challenging to access specialist support in a timely way. The loss of community mental health services in Victoria has been particularly challenging for those experiencing homelessness. Clinical mental health services and the NDIS, whilst often providing high-quality support, are challenging to navigate, particularly for consumers who are or have been sleeping rough and are largely disengaged from services.

The other clear gap that has been highlighted by the pandemic response is the lack of affordable housing for single people. There is a complete lack of affordable private rental for single people on low incomes in the

west—and probably all of Melbourne—particularly those on Newstart or, even worse, Youth Allowance. There are also very low numbers of singles stock amongst public and community housing. When a single person comes to one of our services for help, there is more often than not very little that we can offer them beyond short term assistance into emergency accommodation.

Young people are in a uniquely difficult situation when it comes to housing because of their extremely low incomes, and the pandemic has exacerbated this. For young people who are unable to continue living in the family home, most often due to family violence, there are very limited housing options, so staying with friends or couch surfing is a common fallback position. During the pandemic, however, couch surfing and moving between households has not really been possible. Young people have therefore accessed homelessness services in greater numbers. Young people who enter the homelessness system are at real risk of graduating to long-term adult homelessness, and many of these young people have entered homelessness upon exiting state care—and we really just have to do better than this.

The situation for young people and single adults is similar. There are few realistic housing options for them, and we currently have large numbers stuck in hotel accommodation that they will not be able to pay for themselves, with funding fast running out and nowhere for them to go. We also have a high number of single people in hotel accommodation that will require intensive support to address complex issues who are not receiving help that they need.

It is true that the situation created by the response to the pandemic has shone a light on the problem of single adult and youth homelessness. However, in highlighting this today I do not want to overshadow the equally problematic issues of women and children experiencing homelessness due to family violence, severe overcrowding, which is a feature of homelessness in the west, the dire situation for asylum seekers and refugees without access to income, and the overall dearth of affordable housing in Melbourne for all people on low incomes.

In closing I would just like to restate the conclusion from our written submission to the inquiry. The Western Homelessness Network believes that the key to addressing homelessness is quite straightforward: we must increase the supply of long-term affordable housing, and we must work to prevent homelessness from occurring, which includes providing adequate support to people to maintain housing, responding rapidly if people do become homeless and intervening early to prevent young people from entering homelessness. But as with many simple solutions, this does not mean that it is going to be easy. We do need all levels of government and the community sector working together to end homelessness. I will just finish by stating the obvious: every Victorian should have a home.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Zoe, and thank you, Sarah, for joining us. We have got about 20 minutes for questions now. I will start off with just a really quick question. What sorts of resources would you need to keep everybody that you are currently housing in serviced apartments or hotels or whatever housing that you have? What sort of funding are we looking at, given that none of those places are probably going to be pulling out or dusting off their no vacancy signs anytime soon?

Ms LANGMORE: Can I answer that, Ms Patten? I am so sorry about my video; this is the only day it has never worked. Our services are generally funded for \$1 million a year to buy purchased accommodation. They have spent at least three times that through the last four months, so that would be the equivalent of \$3 million a year. But what we have found is they have had to continue to source low-end accommodation—they are generally trying to still source accommodation that is about \$60. So our aim was to look for accommodation with better amenities—serviced apartments. I think for the families that has been prioritised, but for the single people services have only been able to stretch the funding they have by asking consumers to co-contribute to the costs of their accommodation and sometimes fully fund them for periods of time. So that \$3 million a year certainly would not house everybody, and that is based on a model where we would generally not house someone for more than two weeks in purchased accommodation. So if we were to stretch those lengths of stay longer, the amount would be even more—and it is still inadequate accommodation. Most of the accommodation we source still does not have kitchens, so consumers are relying on very expensive takeaways, and it is one of the things that parents most commonly comment on—that they are so distressed not to be able to look after their children. It also means whole families are living in one room for months and months on end.

The CHAIR: No, that is certainly not adequate, Sarah.

Dr KIEU: Thank you for your submission. We appreciate it very much. I have a few questions. The first one is that, as you mentioned, because of COVID you have been approached by many cohorts, including asylum seekers and refugees. What about overseas students? They are also here, and some of them have got stuck. And I know that in the western area there are quite a lot of students over there. So have you had any approach? And how have you been dealing with them?

Ms LANGMORE: We certainly have. The services have noted quite a significant increase in the numbers of overseas students presenting to them for assistance.

Ms VALE: I was just going to say that is a group that is particularly challenging for us to respond to because they lack an income, and a lot of our system is really kind of built around people who have some kind of statutory income usually, so we can do steps and planning for them. For the international students and also for some asylum seekers who are not receiving an income, we find that incredibly challenging because we cannot do any planning for them. It is very hard for us to work with them to imagine a future in some kind of housing because they just have no income at all, and that is one of the things that I think is playing on the minds of my staff. I know they have come to me and talked to me about that.

Ms VAGHELA: Sarah and I have had a lengthy discussion about homelessness and related issues, and she has visited my office in the past. I am aware of the great work that Sarah and the team do. The question that I have is: in your view what should be the three strategic priorities of the government in addressing the issues related to homelessness and housing?

Ms LANGMORE: I would like to say I think the first is housing creation. I think the housing crisis is so severe that we are at the point where we need to take any creative solutions we can to get more housing on the ground. I think it is so distressing for individuals to be without a home, but I also do not think it is economically sensible for the community to have people living without homes. They cannot participate in the community in any way. While they are homeless it is like their whole lives are on hold. The issues that they are facing are accumulating and becoming more complex, so then their lives deteriorate further and that becomes more costly for the community. There are certainly groups of people who will need a level of support to stabilise, and we certainly need more support resources, particularly more support resources for people with complex needs. We need a wraparound capacity. But I think primarily we support the Housing First model. It is not possible for anyone to address any of the issues they are facing unless they know where they are going to be staying every night, they have a place to store their belongings and they have a place where they can feel safe so they are less heightened and can start to look at some of the complexities that have evolved in their lives.

Ms MAXWELL: Actually, Sarah, you just ultimately answered the question that I had. We have to have a holistic overview in all of this of how we are supporting people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. So I am wondering, and I will take it a step further: how do you address the barriers and issues for those who are at risk of homelessness? Because that can often be a very tricky cohort, particularly when we see young people who are perhaps at the age of 16 who have been asked to leave the family home, who have been couch surfing and that is no longer sustainable or viable. What options do you have in that specific instance for those young people?

Ms VALE: Could I jump in there, Sarah?

Ms LANGMORE: Yes, thanks, Zoe.

Ms VALE: I was actually going to mention the importance of early intervention, particularly in the youth space. In my previous role I worked in adult homelessness, and now I have moved into a role where I am working primarily with youth homelessness. I remember being in the adult services and being really frustrated that we were just getting all these people growing up into homelessness. We really need to stop the problem well back before we have long-term chronically homeless people. I think it is really important to get in there and intervene early, and to try and keep family units together where that is possible and where there is no risk of harm, and if that is not, we need a better youth response. We have got quite a lot of response at the crisis end for young people. We have a refuge system—that is a good system—but beyond that we have foyers, which are fantastic; they do not suit every young person. So we have this quite large gap in between those two things—not to say we would not welcome more foyers, but I think there is real room for something that is for young people with more complex needs who really need a lot of support to make that transition into adulthood. It is a

different experience for young people than for adults. We cannot just replicate adult services; we need a really good, specific youth response so that we divert them away from adult homelessness.

Ms LANGMORE: And we have some small positive early intervention models for young people. There is a federal program called Reconnect, which focuses on mediation with young people and families. We have had some models that work in schools that I think are very successful. We had one model that did attempt to work with Centrelink offices, seeing Centrelink as a first-to-know program. So with more outreach-based resources we can focus on some earlier intervention.

The research also shows us, as Zoe alluded to, that those people who are most chronically homeless and those people who are most commonly reincarcerated in prisons, the highest proportion of them became homeless before they were 18 as a result of leaving out-of-home care. So by not providing the sort of solution Zoe suggested, which is intensive support and a housing guarantee for young people early on, we do cost them and our community a lifetime of far less positive costs.

The CHAIR: Tania, I am sorry; I am conscious of time and I know we have got Catherine, Rod and Lee, who would all like to ask questions. Lee, if I could move to you, and then I will go to Rod, then Catherine.

Mr TARLAMIS: Just following up on that last one, early intervention, you mentioned there are a number of programs out there. I am assuming that the only thing stopping them from expanding and their obvious scalability is the level of funding. If there was more funding available in that space, those successful programs would be scalable and able to be rolled out at a greater level if there was additional funding in that space?

Ms LANGMORE: Absolutely, yes. They are well-documented models.

Mr TARLAMIS: And, just quickly, in terms of case management you mentioned that you have received no additional funding for case management despite the fact that you have moved from 11 out of 100 to now the expectation that you are dealing with everybody. I am working on the basis that when you were dealing with numbers around 11 out of 100 you were also under-resourced and stretching to meet that. How short is the funding in that space in terms of if you were looking for additional funding, what sort of funding are you looking at in that space to be a reasonable level? Probably the more the better, I guess. Could you shed some light on that?

Ms VALE: Did we prepare an answer to that one, Sarah?

Ms LANGMORE: The obvious answer would be a tenfold increase in order to respond to 100 per cent of households, and with a tenfold increase we could organise ourselves better to cover some early intervention and some more wraparound responses to those consumers with very high needs. At the moment with very limited funding we try and provide a flexible service response, but we are so limited by the ongoing demand. But I think the other thing is when I first joined the homelessness sector it was relatively easy to find housing for someone. I worked in the family violence sector, and within seven months a woman could usually access public housing. Within two months she could access private rental. On her low income and given she would generally be supporting children, the private rental would not be very highly desirable, but it was available.

At the moment there is such a housing crisis that homelessness workers are spending so much of their time on this terrible churn with consumers trying to find housing. We were always designed as the program of last resort for people who fall through gaps of other systems, so if we could actually house people first, we could go back to focusing on addressing all the other things that have contributed to them becoming homeless and that might impact the stability of their housing. So we would love a tenfold increase in support, but it would probably be more efficient to provide more houses first then look at the gap.

Mr BARTON: Good morning, Zoe and Sarah. I have a couple of questions. One that is really concerning, I think, for a lot of people, is that we have got our rough sleepers off the street and we have got them into hotels temporarily and all that sort of stuff, and I feel like we are going to let them down. I do not want to say it as brutally as this, but we are going to kick them out on the street again. Do we know the numbers we are talking about at least?

Ms VALE: Yes. Probably about half of the people that have been accommodated in hotels will have a history of rough sleeping and transience, so for that group we are struggling to respond to them well. We are

certainly seeing them and touching base with them, but we do not have the type of intensive support that they require. That is our biggest fear at the moment—and I think we were probably surprised by the high numbers because they have been hidden for such a long time—that with that group we are now having contact with, and we are able to start getting in some health services and having some positive contact with, we will lose them again when the funding dries up and we are not able to keep paying for the hotels. We have got some people that really have not had contact with services in two or three years, and their health is pretty poor. We were able to really start doing some work with them in these current circumstances. But the reality is that when we cannot pay for them to stay there, they will have to go back to where they came from.

Ms LANGMORE: And successful programs for people sleeping rough with complex issues show that it can take up to a year just to engage appropriately with someone before they feel ready to access other services. We cannot enter into the relationship with them in the hotels on the assumption that we will still be working with them in a year because of the cost of the hotels and our own capacity.

Dr CUMMING: Could I thank Sarah and Zoe for the amount of work that they have done in the west and especially for their very, very detailed submission. For myself, it has been very confronting being a member of Parliament in my electorate office and seeing the amount of people that I am getting on my doorstep, including families. Just last night, Uncle Larry, an Aboriginal elder in my area, put on Facebook how he is struggling in these times to actually find accommodation. He is quite used to couch surfing, but because of COVID times and his becoming elderly he is really struggling.

Zoe and Sarah, I know there is not a silver bullet, but my understanding is that if we look after our young—and I think that is the point that you made about making sure that they do not become homeless in the first place, that they have a job, that we look after their mental illnesses at a young age—then we would actually save the system a lot of money. I understand that there is 15 per cent youth unemployment. I also understand that we have eight ministers in the west. Apart from throwing money at it—and yes, we definitely need housing and it would be great if the government actually looked at Braybrook and Maidstone and the social housing stock that they have got, renewing it and then adding additional stock—is there anything else that you can actually see in the way of youth unemployment and looking after our mental health facilities, as you touched on in your submission? And where and what kind of housing could we possibly as a government create to actually help this issue or get on top of it, especially for the youth in the west?

Ms VALE: Thank you for that question. Young people obviously is a particular interest of mine and how to respond to them to get them out of this situation. I think employment and education are absolutely key, and I think particularly employment services for young people really need to be very tailored and very specific to their needs. The issue of housing and the low incomes that young people are on if they are on Youth Allowance—there just is not housing that they can afford, and again we cannot just replicate an adult response and expect that to work for young people, which is kind of what has happened to date in terms of our social housing. So I think we really need to have a look at social housing for young people or subsidised housing or rental subsidies, whatever it is that is particularly tailored to their incredibly low incomes. Then I think we need to look at really tailored employment services for young people. Sarah, did you have something to add?

Ms LANGMORE: No, I think that is about it.

Dr CUMMING: Zoe and Sarah, you touched on mental illness and services as well for young people, and I think—

The CHAIR: Catherine, we have just gone over time.

Dr CUMMING: Sorry, I apologise.

The CHAIR: Zoe and Sarah, do you want to touch on something on mental health very quickly? Then we will wrap it up.

Ms VALE: I really would just because I have recently done a project. I interviewed a number of young people about mental health and what sort of response they needed, and they are quite unhappy with the current mental health system for them and it does need to be a really flexible, tailored response. We know that young people come into homelessness with histories of trauma, quite significant trauma, and they told me that they

really struggled to get a response that worked for them. Headspace provides a service to a lot of young people, but for homeless young people it did not work particularly well for them, and that came through loud and clear.

Dr CUMMING: It is affordability.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Sarah Langmore and Zoe Vale, from Western Homelessness Network. We really appreciate your contribution. Again I am sure the committee shares in my thanks for all the work that you are doing on the ground at this moment. You will receive a transcript of this session, and as I mentioned before I would encourage you to have a look at that. The committee will just take a short break to bring in our next witnesses.

Ms LANGMORE: Thank you so much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.