

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 February 2020

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**WITNESS**

Mr David Spriggs, CEO, Infoxchange.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. Thank you, David. Thank you for coming today. I will declare the meeting open. Just before we start, there is a little bit of housekeeping. This is, as you know, the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, and all evidence that you provide today is protected by parliamentary privilege and that is given to us through the Constitution Act and through the Legislative Council standing orders. That means anything that you say is protected by law here; however, if you were to make the same comments outside this place, you may not be protected. We would also let you know that any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As you can see we have Hansard here, who will be recording this and producing a transcript. You will get to see that transcript in the next couple of days. That transcript will end up on our website for everyone to learn from. We are also broadcasting today, so the World Wide Web is also watching and listening.

**Mr BARTON:** Millions of people.

**The CHAIR:** Millions of people, that is right. So we would love you to make some opening remarks—I can see that you have got some PowerPoint for us—and then after that we will open it up for a discussion with the Committee members. Thanks, David.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Fantastic. Well, thank you very much for the opportunity to be presenting to you today. I would like to start by acknowledging that we are meeting on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I guess I was hoping that my presentation today might be a little different from some of the other submissions that you have heard, and that is not in any way downplaying some of the scale of the problem of homelessness and some of the critical needs which others have talked about in terms of investments in social housing and other areas. But what I was going to talk about was the role of technology and data and how that can be an enabler in breaking the cycle of homelessness—

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** and of truly putting people at the centre of that and thinking a little bit differently in terms of cross-sector collaboration. So as governments and not-for-profits, we do not have to think that we have got all the answers and we can actually collaborate with the private sector. So that is what I will speak a little about, and I would love to have questions.

**Dr KIEU:** Data is my favourite topic.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Fantastic, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** You got him at ‘technology’!

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Very, very quickly about Infoxchange, we are a not-for-profit social enterprise founded on the vision of technology for social justice, which is really all about empowering people and communities through the use of technology and working with the not-for-profit sector to help them have more impact in their work through technology. A real part of our secret sauce has been that cross-sector collaboration, so working with governments, working with not-for-profits, working with the corporate sector and working with academics to try and bring all of those things together. I joined Infoxchange 11 years ago now, and it was one of my observations in joining the sector just how siloed not-for-profits were—having strange conversations with government, corporate partners, academics. So part of what we have been trying to work towards has been bringing those things together. We have been growing fairly rapidly in recent years, so we have got about 150 employees now across the country and headquartered here in Victoria.

I thought that for the purposes of this I would talk through a couple of our initiatives, both helping people who are homeless and then some of the work that we are doing with the sector.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** A number of people in this room have already commented that they know of Ask Izzy, which is fantastic. Ask Izzy is a mobile website that we developed for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to be able to connect in with services in their local area. So it is developed as a mobile website. It picks up your location and then can help connect people in with food, with shelter, with health, with legal support, with family violence services, with a whole range of categories.

**Ms LOVELL:** Is it an app or—

**Mr SPRIGGS:** It is a mobile website—

**The CHAIR:** You can just go through Google.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Yes, and very deliberately it is a mobile website rather than an app—in working with people with lived experience of homelessness, acknowledging that the App Store puts up a whole lot of barriers of having to put in credit card details and having to put in all of your information. So it is a mobile website.

It uses a directory that we have had for many, many years at Infoxchange, a directory of 350 000 services across the country, and that ranges from well-known government-funded homelessness services through to a church, for example, that might provide a free meal service once a week in a certain location, through to health services, family violence and that really broad range of services that exist across the community. And that directory has been used for many years by people in the sector and by people in government, but our vision with Ask Izzy was, ‘Well, how can we put that information directly into the hands of people who need that information?’, and connecting them in. So we came up with this concept. We approached Google, and we were fortunate enough to win the Google Impact Challenge with this initiative, which gave us the funding and the bootstrapping to get it going, and then quickly it very much turned into what we call a whole-of-community partnership. There were many corporate partners involved, community organisations, governments and academics. Interestingly, it was primarily funded by corporate partners—so Google, realestate.com.au, News Corp, National Australia Bank, Telstra and a number of others.

In thinking about that kind of corporate partner contribution, yes, it had been for funding but also for what each of those partners could bring to the project. So with Google, for example, a big part of it is finding services near where somebody is, so they gave us their expertise from their Google Maps team which is based here in Australia. Working with people like Telstra, they have made available what they call meter free on the Telstra network—so if you have got a phone with no credit, you can still access Ask Izzy. Working with people like News Corp, the importance was: how do we get the word out that this thing exists, and particularly to people at risk of homelessness, so they are aware of what sorts of services are available?

**Ms LOVELL:** Excellent.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Yes, so we are bringing all of those things together. The most important collaboration we have had along the journey has been with people with lived experience of homelessness. They have so generously given their time to develop Ask Izzy. We use the word ‘co-design’. Co-design is often a little bit overused these days, but this has truly been a site that has been developed with the community—so everything from the concept through to the design and through to the development—and the people we have worked with are now our biggest advocates in the community as to why people should be using the tool.

Just to give you an indication of some of the critical insights that team has given us, it is with things like the branding. People in the homelessness sector almost exclusively said, ‘Well, you should call this Homeless Assist or Homeless Help or something like that—call it what it is’, whereas the opinion of people with lived experience of homelessness was very different. Young people might see themselves as couch surfers, not homeless, and a kind of welcoming, character-based name was far more appropriate. This goes through to how you design it around ease of use and how you connect people in with the sorts of services they need and even very simple things like one of the colours we were using in the early design. One of the people we were

working with picked it up as the colour of Centrelink, and they said, 'If anybody's ever been into Centrelink asking for help when they were homeless, that experience might be scarred within them'.

**The CHAIR:** What colour is Centrelink?

**Dr KIEU:** Green—green and yellow.

**Ms LOVELL:** I have never had a payment from them and probably never will!

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Yes, exactly! So do not use that colour—all of these sorts of things. It was an incredibly generous contribution. So where we have got to, we launched—

**Dr KIEU:** Before you continue, that is why you have the name Ask Izzy?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** That is why we have the name Ask Izzy, so it is a welcoming, character-based name that people feel they can interact with and ask questions of and get provided support.

**Ms LOVELL:** But isn't Centrelink kind of that bluey green?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Yes, on the left.

So we have extended Ask Izzy out beyond the original use around homelessness and people at risk of homelessness as well and obviously related areas. We did a big piece of work funded by NAB around family violence, to help connect people experiencing family violence into support, and a large piece of work funded by the Victorian Government out of the Public Sector Innovation Fund, which we called Ask Izzy for Aboriginal Communities, helping Aboriginal communities connect in with health and wellbeing services again in their local area.

**The CHAIR:** And I note you have got a bushfire tag on it now as well.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Yes, and most recently we have seen a huge spike in the last month or so of people looking for services in response to the bushfires.

We launched this back in 2016, and our goal was to help 100 000 people in the first two years. We actually passed that target within the first three months. You can see there that we have had 1.5 million searches in the last year, but it continues to grow. In recent months we have had up to 200 000 searches in a single month on Ask Izzy for people looking for help. We say it is fantastic people are aware of it, but how sad is it that there is that many people in our community needing access to pretty basic services.

**Dr KIEU:** So did you see a peak during and after the fires?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** We saw a peak immediately at the time of the bushfires, particularly here in Victoria and New South Wales, of people getting access to services. Our team swung into action and added a bushfire support category as well, but even before that we saw the increase in usage.

I guess that probably feeds into my next point, which is now around the insights that we can get from the anonymous usage data that come out of Ask Izzy to give us a true picture of service demand across the country. It is really the first time that we have seen that information available as to where people were and what they were looking for as opposed to where the service providers are and what they are able to help with or not.

**Ms LOVELL:** So you can break this down to postcodes—so I could look at Shepparton and say, 'Well, obviously we have a need for food banks' or whatever.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Absolutely, yes. We break it down to basically a postcode level in terms of the demand for services that are available, and those are some of the national statistics there. The number one thing people are looking for is food, then money help and then housing, and there are some really interesting insights from the demographics. Some would not be surprising, around mental health and people fleeing family violence, but some of the statistics—things like 8 per cent of people have pets and are looking for housing, and we know that

so many services cannot support people with pets—are actually starting to produce some insights around that sort of data.

**Ms LOVELL:** So is Izzy able to direct them to services that are pet-friendly?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Yes. That is one of the things they can indicate when they are searching, that they are looking for a service that can help them with pets, for example.

**Ms LOVELL:** Excellent.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** It obviously helps us then understand some of the demographics and usage. Back to your point, in terms of looking at Shepparton—for example, one of the things that we have done is launched what we call the Ask Izzy Open Data Platform. It is a service that we developed with support from Google, and we have brought in the Infochange information about demand for services across the country but also brought in some datasets from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

**Ms LOVELL:** So how do we access that?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** That is available online at no cost. If you just Google ‘Ask Izzy Open Data Platform’, you can then access the information in there. Our team has an additional depth of information, which we are happy to provide to service providers and government to help inform them, but the idea of the open data platform was that it could be used by service providers in the local area; it could be used by government, it could be used by advocacy organisations—it could be used by anybody. Really, in putting that out there, we were hoping—you know, can we move to a bit more of a service demand driven and predictive view of the needs across the community, and then how do we respond to that? That is Ask Izzy.

The other piece I wanted to touch on is the work that we do with the sector across the country. So we provide a web-based client and case management system to not-for-profits across the country. It is used by a bit over 5500 services across Australia—everybody from the large organisations, like your Red Crosses and your VincentCares, your Launch Housings, your Sacred Heart Missions. But we are also very proud that it is used by very small services that might only have a handful of staff, and they are able to access the same technology that those larger organisations can access. The data that we are storing in that system is 4.3 million client records—so if you think about that as a proportion of the Australian population that is accessing social services across the country. So that is the system that a lot of those organisations are using for their day-to-day service delivery.

What kind of interests us around that is then how that can support some of the major sector reforms that are going on across the country, and there are a few examples up there. We have been working for a number of years now with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. We provide a standard client and case management system that all homelessness and family violence services across the country can use. That helps government with a better level of data collection, but that also helps particularly those smaller services that do not have the resources to go and select and invest in a client management system. Then how we have been able to build—

**The CHAIR:** I am assuming it helps the clients as well.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Absolutely. Instead of having this information in a spreadsheet or written down on paper, you can have that as a coordinated case plan for the client.

Then what we have seen in a number of jurisdictions has been building on that for their own reform initiatives. So in New South Wales there has been the Going Home Staying Home reforms and the Staying Home Leaving Violence reforms around family violence. It is a Premier’s priority around youth homelessness, and now the Premier in New South Wales has a specific Premier’s priority around reducing rough sleeping by 50 per cent by the year 2025. So they are using our technology in the background to support those initiatives, and what they are doing is sharing client information with consent between service providers, sharing assessment information to avoid clients having to repeat their story over and over again, sharing information on vacancy and capacity between services, linking that then through into their homelessness call centres and their domestic violence call centres—pulling all of those things together and actually having the sector working together, again for the benefit of the person in need.

Queensland has taken it one step further. They also have 8000 police officers with iPads, and they are actually able to make referrals directly into community services, homelessness and family violence services, but also a much broader range of mental health and drug and alcohol and other services across the state. Tasmania is another that has done a great job of pulling it together in a sort of one-stop shop kind of model, pulling together homelessness, social housing, family violence and that broader range of supports, and again they are using our technology behind that to help the service providers collaborate with each other.

My final piece is just what some of the messages may be to leave with the Committee. Technology, data and design thinking can be real enablers. I talked a bit about putting the person in need at the centre. I think service coordination is something that is very easy to say and much harder to do. So how do you break those silos between service providers and government? How do you move away from that idea of ‘my sector, your sector’, ‘my service, your service’, ‘my client, your client’ and actually have service providers and government and others working together for the benefit of the person in need? I think we put up so many silos within the sector, with different services funded to provide different services, and even within government having a department like the Department of Health and Human Services setting up another agency for family violence, Family Safety Victoria; the potential for that to happen again with mental health; and the fact that disability has moved into the federal arena with the NDIA—how do we pull these together for the benefit of the client?

Then hopefully, in some of what I said, acknowledging that as government and not-for-profits we do not have all of the answers, and how can we work I think more closely with the private sector? Certainly an observation of our work here in Victoria: how can we look to what is happening in other jurisdictions rather than assuming we have to reinvent the wheel every time for so-called unique needs of the state here in Victoria?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is right. Well, one size may not fit all sometimes, but you can find a part of it that may fit you. Thanks very much, David.

**Dr KIEU:** My background is in science and a little bit of technology, so it is very pleasing to see how technology can help with these social issues. So congratulations, and I am commending you on your work.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Thank you.

**Dr KIEU:** I just have a quick question. You have been able to have the data collected and then also to help the people with needs—to identify where and when and then who to see. In another step forward could we use that for case management to follow a particular person, rather than just aggregated data? I know there are a lot of issues involved because you have to get the permission of the person and you have to get the different departments or agency to coordinate themselves together, but some permissible agency could access it to follow a case.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Yes, absolutely, and we do do that now in that client and case management space, where for a client visiting a service, the outcomes of that individual or that family can be tracked over time as they are seeing that service provider. As I said, in some of the work with the other jurisdictions that information is being shared with client consent between the service providers. Given your background in science and data science, one of the things that we do in the national data collection with the institute of health and welfare is use a statistical linkage key, so that is to be able to tell that it was me that visited four or five different services without exposing my name or personal information. We use a linkage key to be able to identify that over time.

**Dr KIEU:** Anonymise the person.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** That is right. But I think it is a real challenge for us then to think beyond that specific collection, because if you look at an individual service provider that might be working to support somebody in need, they report that to government for homelessness services, then they will report a different set of data to somebody else for mental health and a different set of data to somebody else for family violence. And so to me that is the challenge: how we work across government and the sector to really pull all of that information together.

**Dr KIEU:** I am also curious. What more resources would you need to further your development and your website?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** I think there are a few things. Obviously funding helps in developing these initiatives, but the other is a bit of that change in mindset from government and the not-for-profit sector in terms of how they can use these solutions. I think in terms of the data—we have talked a little bit about the service demand data that we have—we are really only scratching the surface in terms of what we could do with that and the extent to which it could be used with government. I think we have had probably a lot more inquiries from a Federal Government perspective than we have from state governments at this point in terms of data. So I think that is part of it—starting to acknowledge the value in these datasets and how they can be used to better tailor services for people in need.

**Dr KIEU:** It is a valuable commodity, though.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Absolutely.

**Ms LOVELL:** This is more of a statement than anything. I think it is absolutely fantastic. I redesigned the housing website when I was the housing minister so that people did not have to go in and read all the screens on community housing, public housing and homelessness and decide where they fit. It asked them a series of questions so that they then knew what they would qualify to actually apply for. I am kicking myself now that we did not go a step further, but we probably were not that advanced that we were connected with Google Maps et cetera, but this is just sensational.

The comment you made about ‘my client, your client’—and again, this is just a statement—we certainly find that. I come from Shepparton and we have significant disadvantage, so we have become a panacea for all of the social services and not-for-profits and everything. There are two streets that are just about all offices from some different welfare agency or another, and one of the things that does frustrate us locally is this corralling of their clients because that is their income base—so it is, ‘They’re my clients, not yours’. There is a reluctance then to actually find solutions to people’s problems so that they go out of the system. It is inbred in them to keep them in the system because that is their income base. We have to get past that funding model—the funds for throughput not outcomes.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Absolutely and my observations in terms of seeing in other areas where that has changed to have more of that focus on working together for the client—

**Ms LOVELL:** Are you able to tell us about some other areas where that has changed?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Yes. Some of that has been service providers driving and wanting to do that, but in other areas there are some of those government examples I was giving. In New South Wales they recontracted all homelessness services and one of the requirements if you wanted to be an ongoing funded service was that you had to be willing to participate in that new way of working. The other one that we have worked with, though, that I felt was quite inspiring was in Tasmania, working with Housing Tasmania around their one-stop shop and again sharing client information with consent between providers. They took the sector on a journey to say, ‘This is where we would like to end up, but we want to work with the sector on that journey’. And so we did not have a single design session where there was not strong representation from the sector.

**Ms LOVELL:** At some early hearings that we had I raised the concept of recommissioning for outcomes. We did get a little bit of pushback from a couple of the providers for obvious reasons. But I think that is something that is really important—that we look at recommissioning.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** That is right, and New South Wales is now looking to take that a step further with outcome-based measuring, outcome-based measurement and potentially recommissioning again based on an outcome-based funding model.

**The CHAIR:** In going back to Tasmania, which has kind of rebuilt this, does that mean that all services would be using the same platform?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** That is right. So in that case all of the services are using our platform to be able to share the information. But we do not mandate that and do not necessarily suggest that that is the way it has to be. In New South Wales I think there is one major service provider, being Mission Australia, that does not use our system, and so we provide open access—in the technology field we call it API access—for those service providers to be

able to interact with our system. But there is a lot of benefit from people being on a common system, particularly for those smaller providers that would not be able to afford the technology-based investment.

**The CHAIR:** That is right, and I think we have certainly heard many times that retelling of the story—that ability to easily share with consent that information. Do you have any idea of what percentage of service providers around the country are using your system?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** It is different across different parts of the sector. In the homelessness and family violence sector we would be suggesting that 90 or 95 per cent-plus plus of services would be using our system, and then it is in a different boat by different areas of the sector. A partial driver for that has been us working with the Federal Government in collaboration with each of the states and territories that then fund the system on behalf of those services. It does not mandate that those services have to use it, but out of all of the organisations that can I think there is in the order of a dozen or maybe 20 services that are not using it out of the 1500 or so that can make use of it.

**Mr BARTON:** I just want to congratulate you. Information—we cannot make decisions about moving forward without all that information. People here far smarter than I understand the technical data and all that sort of stuff, but I am so impressed with this—so impressed. It is a great tool.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Thank you.

**Dr RATNAM:** Thanks so much for the presentation and all the work that you do. I was going to ask a question as well because it sounds like in terms of the service response it is just invaluable. You made the case for the data sharing and knowing what is happening. At an earlier hearing we were hearing as well about the points of vulnerability on the homelessness journey—when people have lost their home, when they are actually in precarious housing often being the largest chunk of people and the point of intervention that can actually yield quite significant results. Are you able to capture any of that in terms of the point at which people are accessing the services, or is it something you are thinking about?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** It is certainly something that we are thinking about, and it is certainly possible in the work we do with client case management with service providers—they are capturing all of that data. So that is possible. But while Ask Izzy is a great tool for people in crisis that need to connect, we would like to think that our primary audience is people at risk of homelessness and how they can connect in with services.

**Dr RATNAM:** I think that would be so valuable as well.

**The CHAIR:** Certainly that is what we have heard. When you capture someone at risk of homelessness, the services have a 70 per cent success rate; when you catch them when they are homeless, that rate drops to 30 per cent success.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Absolutely. The other comment I would make about that is that one of our core focuses is connecting the broader ecosystem.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** We work closely, for example, with some of the corporate hardship teams, so people like NAB Assist within the bank, who are a hardship line for their customers. They use Ask Izzy within the call centre for NAB Assist to be able to direct people in need to the most appropriate services that can help them. So that is an example of how you connect into that broader ecosystem that people might be interacting with when they are in the at-risk category to help them be aware of what services are available and connect them with services. I think it is really critical.

**The CHAIR:** That is wonderful, David.

**Dr KIEU:** I am curious about the dynamic or behaviour of the data. Do you see any seasonal trends, for example, in homelessness or the food setting? And is there any potential for predictions so that we can know the scale and the need of the people so we can respond appropriately?

**Mr SPRIGGS:** I think that is the whole future wave we would like to work on—that sort of predictive analytics with some of that data. We have done a little bit of work around that, and we have done some work with the University of Melbourne in looking at some of those datasets and looking at basic trends, for example, around weather. So in poor weather you are seeing increased demand for services in general, but increased demand for food services, for example. As we said before, with the recent bushfires we have seen a significant surge in usage with people looking for support services, and we can tell partly from the sorts of areas that people are searching in as well as what they are searching for. But I think that is a whole future area that we could spend a lot more time and effort on.

**Ms LOVELL:** Excellent.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, David, and thank you for the work that you are doing—really impressive.

**Ms LOVELL:** I think it is one of the most innovative things we have seen—probably the most innovative thing.

**The CHAIR:** I think it wins, yes, so gold stamp for you. In all seriousness, this is really groundbreaking, and wonderful for us—how we can incorporate this into our recommendations. It is good food for thought.

**Mr SPRIGGS:** Thank you very much for your time and for listening to us this afternoon.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, David.

**Witness withdrew.**