

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Epping—Thursday, 27 February 2020

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WITNESS

Ms Leanne Roberts, Head of Public Policy and Media, Eaglemont office, Northern Region, Berry Street.

The CHAIR: We are reopening the public hearing of the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. Thank you so much, Leanne, for coming. I will just give you a few formal words first. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act* and by the standing orders of our Legislative Council. This means that the information that you do provide today is protected by law; however, any comment made outside here may not be protected. Any deliberately false or misleading evidence that you provide to the Committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, it is being recorded. You will receive a transcript in the next few days. Have a look at that and make any corrections. Ultimately that transcript will go up on our website and be available to the public.

Again, thank you for making the time to see us. We know how busy Berry Street is. If you would like to open with some opening comments, then we will jump into questions.

Ms ROBERTS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Committee members, for having Berry Street come and present today. I will start by acknowledging that we are meeting on Aboriginal land—always was, always will be. And I want to pay my respects to the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and their elders past, present and also emerging.

My plan to start, as the opening remarks, was just to give a little bit about Berry Street and Berry Street's operations in the northern region to cover what we are seeing as the drivers of homelessness both statewide and also in this area and the four areas that we think there needs to be action particularly. As you would be aware, Berry Street is one of the largest independent providers of children and family services in Victoria. We work with families, children and young people to address the impact of abuse, harm, neglect and violence. We operate across five different regions, including the north region, which encompasses for us the seven LGAs which take in the Hume-Moreland DHHS area and also the north-east area. In the north alone we see around 23 000 service users, largely driven by family violence. Around 21 000 of them access our family violence services.

The CHAIR: Twenty-one out of 27?

Ms ROBERTS: Out of the 23, yes. So quite a large number. Of course we operate in the Orange Door through the north-east metro region as well as outside that in Hume-Moreland. Three hundred or so were service users of out-of-home care. We deliver family services here in this region and also a range of education and training services, including youth homelessness services in this area.

What we are seeing particularly statewide, unsurprisingly, is a growing number of young people going into out-of-home care, which is driven by many of the same issues which drive homelessness, and of course the link between out-of-home care and also homelessness is quite significant, with significant over-representation of numbers. Victoria is closing in on 12 000 children in out-of-home care. Projections which were done by Social Ventures last year are saying that could escalate to 26 000 based on current rates by 2026. That is quite significant and the cost to Victoria is quite significant. Again, unsurprisingly, the drivers are connected with homelessness, so alcohol and other drugs, mental health, histories of child protection—that intergenerational trauma and connection. Poverty, visa issues, immigration issues, are particularly driving family violence, in our experience.

The areas of action: we have framed four particular themes. We need to do work around poverty and affordability, so income poverty and affordability and social housing. We need to keep families safely together, so before children go into out-of-home care, through targeted early intervention; plus also look at how we keep families in housing, which means alignment between our housing policies and practices, our child protection policies and practices and also homelessness. Then also making sure that we have got enough support that before a tenancy breaks down, whatever the tenancy may be, we can actually get a support to people in there. We also need to do more for victim survivors of family violence to escape that situation and move towards recovery, move out of homelessness, particularly those with the highest needs—Victoria has certainly moved in leaps and bounds after the family violence royal commission, but there are still gaps within that system,

particularly for those with most complex needs—as well as helping young people thrive. So it is that pathway out of care, out of youth homelessness, and ensuring that they are on a pathway that allows them to be independent and thrive. They are our things.

The CHAIR: Leanne, you have set us a challenge. I always feel like the homelessness Inquiry is the wrong name for it because all of the intersections that flow into the causes of homelessness is what we need to be addressing. Just to start the questions off, as you heard from the previous speakers, they would love to see another Orange Door established in the north. From Berry Street's perspective, would you be able to name a particular location that you think would benefit from an Orange Door in this area?

Mr ONDARCHIE: Just one?

The CHAIR: I know!

Ms ROBERTS: I guess we have not put our mind particularly to the location. Certainly our experience is that the largest drivers where our services mostly operate across our north region have been Hume and also Whittlesea, being the particular areas, which is unsurprising as they are growth areas and also with those remaining pockets of affordability, which is both a blessing and also a challenge, because it does mean that we are finding quite a number of people come from out of area in order to be able to access affordable housing in—

The CHAIR: And then they do not have the other services, family, friends.

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, absolutely. They do not have family and friends, so they are disconnected from community. They are generally areas where there is poor public transport, which brings in other challenges around cost of living in those areas, so it leads to a greater risk of social isolation in those areas. That would be our experience. But as to a particular location for an Orange Door, we have not got a particular one.

The CHAIR: Yes, but there would be no doubt in your mind that there is a need for something up this way.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely, yes.

Ms MAXWELL: Leanne, thank you for coming. Let me just say that I have firsthand experience of the work that Berry Street does with young people in particular, and it is an incredible organisation. The training that is done around trauma for organisations is incredible, which goes towards supporting young people at risk of homelessness. Also, I was always amazed that teachers while studying at university never had the opportunity or were just never taught trauma training. That still to this day astounds me that that is not happening.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely.

Ms MAXWELL: One thing I would like to ask is we know that the Orange Doors are still piloting and in some areas they are perhaps not working as well as some people hoped. I think sometimes we can respond to things in a more reactive way. So I guess I would like to know whether you have experienced any other mechanisations that may work better or alongside or different to an Orange Door. I know in some areas they are looking at having the police, the courts, family violence services all in the one building for different reasons—the access, so people do not know why you are going in et cetera. Has that been a consideration in this area, that perhaps there is something else other than an Orange Door?

Ms ROBERTS: I guess our general observation is the bringing together of the different sectors has actually been really quite helpful. Being able to be in the same location as family violence services, child protection, family services, actually does break down those silos and allows for working together in a different way, and what leads victim survivors to the Orange Door does tend to cover those areas. I think our observation would be what is actually missing from those sites, particularly housing and homelessness services, has been a huge gap. Given the numbers of victim survivors who are driven to homelessness services or have a homelessness need, the fact that that is not at the Orange Door has actually been a challenge.

The stats say something like 40 per cent of people who access specialist homelessness services cite family violence as a reason for that. We are seeing increasing numbers of victim survivors come to our access points, whether through the Orange Door or the other site, with increasing complexity and also urgency of need at that particular time, and yet where we struggle is in finding suitable locations. There is certainly an extensive use of motel accommodation to respond, and the victim survivors we see come with extensive needs. We did a snapshot survey through our Orange Door. It is only small numbers, so we do need to take care in extrapolating that, but 25 per cent of those who then needed emergency accommodation were from out of the area. About 25 per cent had both mental health and also AOD issues. Over 50 per cent had either mental health or AOD issues, and what we were able to provide was emergency accommodation for a number of nights in motel accommodation and also short-term case management support, and these are the people who we know need more than that.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Leanne, I need some advice. There is a site down on McDonalds Road, Epping. It is a skate park right next door to the athletic centre. I regularly see young people there, so one day I went down there. I lost the suit and wore a T-shirt and jeans. I do own a T-shirt and jeans.

Mr BARTON: Goodness!

Mr ONDARCHIE: I know it surprises you, Chair. I sat with them and just had a chat. Many of them leave home just before dawn in the morning and get home late at night because of the dynamic inside the household associated with economic challenges, drug use, family violence, alcoholism—you know them all. I was chatting to them about their circumstances. All of them did not know there were services available to them. That is just one small example that permeates right across this region. How do we get to those young people to get the messages out there that there is somewhere you can go, there is somewhere you can reach out to? How do we do that?

Ms ROBERTS: I guess the other thing I would say about that is: what services do we have available that actually help the entire family deal with those issues that are driving those young people to leave at dawn and to be at the skate park? We know from New South Wales and a number of overseas jurisdictions that they have been investing in evidence-based, targeted early intervention initiatives, which actually work with families to address those behaviours and challenges which are driving children to be disengaged from school, to be involved in the justice system and to become homeless and also the parents themselves to be able to either manage those behaviours or deal with their own issues.

Mr ONDARCHIE: So what I am saying to this Inquiry is—albeit they are out all day—they are homeless. They do not really want to be at home.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely, and how do we actually enable them and work with the families to keep them home? So a range of evidence-based programs such as multisystemic therapy and also functional family therapy, as I said, work with the family. Something like multisystemic therapy with 24/7 on-call support for the family looks at the behaviours and the ways in which the family interacts that drives that disengagement, and it starts to coach them in a different way. What is very outstanding about these programs is that they start to empower families who generally feel disengaged from the service system—they feel as though they have got no other options—and then empower the children who also figure that they have got no other options. It starts by looking at the strengths of those families and then looks at the patterns of behaviour that lead to disengagement.

We did some work with Social Ventures Australia last year which modelled what the impact would be if we were to invest. We could see around 1200 children diverted from out-of-home care every year and that another 7000 children and their families could be worked with through an investment of around \$150 million a year. SVA's work has indicated that that could save Victoria \$1.2 billion over 10 years in costs—just to the child protection system, let alone to homelessness—

The CHAIR: To justice.

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, absolutely. I think there are things that we absolutely can do. It is not just about how we get to those children to ensure that they know what services are available. It is what do we do to get services to these families—and the right services to these families—to actually keep them together? It not only works on

that child who is at the skate park but on all of their siblings who are growing up and who are starting to exhibit the same kinds of behaviours.

Ms MAXWELL: I think too one of the contributing factors towards that—and, Craig, you are right to ask how these families know—is that we have to have that service in schools, whether it be that case coordinators go in and meet with the kids at school, before they become completely disengaged, to offer those supports and to let the kids know that these organisations are here to help you, they can help you and they will outreach to the family. I think what we find is that often they will go in and support the young person, but you do not have that intervention with the parents as well. We constantly expect the child to make the change without supporting the parents to help the child make the change. That then leads onto, as they get a bit older and they are at the skate park constantly, then seeing them down the track either in youth justice or homeless. It goes right back. The scale of homelessness is so large. It goes back to early child maternal health, and when that baby goes home, we need to ensure that that family is safe, secure and in an environment that is conducive to supporting that baby growing into an adult. It is enormous.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely. Our director of innovation at Berry Street has delivered multisystemic therapy, and he tells the story of a family he worked with where the young person was disengaged from school, he had connections with the youth justice system and his mother was struggling to deal with that. It suddenly went from the young person, who was not allowed to take the car, taking the car and just dealing with that in not the best way. Suddenly they were going out late at night to the young person's friend's house and ordering them home—it just changed the dynamic, because suddenly this young person felt they were part of the family and that there were consequences for their actions, but also they felt cared for.

The CHAIR: That there was care.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: And I think you are right—that we can identify it. We know those trajectories, we know they are intergenerational. We know that when someone has been in care and is raising a young family that we should be targeting those people because we know they are at far greater risk than others. We have kind of got the data there, we have just got to put it into action.

Mr BARTON: Leanne, what a challenge—teaching families how to be families.

Ms ROBERTS: Yes, absolutely, but absolutely worthwhile.

Mr BARTON: No doubt about that. One of the things I want to explore is that I want to keep people in their homes when it is safe to do so. I am not always convinced that when there is a violent situation we automatically remove mum and the kids, take the kids away from school, take them away from their family and support and their friends. This is a big challenge too because we have got to keep them safe. So obviously the person causing trouble is always going to be able to come back. Have you got any views about having a different way of handling that? I am not sure that moving is the perfect result, but our first thing is: get them safe. That is first.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely.

Mr BARTON: But if we can get a situation where we can keep them safe, keep them in their home, and perhaps the men can—

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely. I think it is a range of options on that spectrum, and absolutely, the ideal is to keep a family at home and remove the perpetrator from that situation. In our experience the investment in flexible support packages, in the personal safety initiative, has been useful and helpful in being able to do that.

There are a range of issues just to work through around how we use technology as part of that, particularly given that we are purchasing off businesses who have their own drivers. Also, how we see technology, it is not a fail-safe and it needs to be part of a broader look at the safety of the family—victim survivors—in that location. I would say that there is a challenge whichever way you go, whether it is removing the perpetrator or

removing the family. Again it comes down to: what is the accommodation option that you are actually removing people to?

Mr BARTON: I am not sure putting mum in a motel room with three kids is a great result.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely, and even the perpetrator while the justice system acts as it needs to—suddenly losing sight of the perpetrator who may have become homeless as a result.

Mr BARTON: Yes, that is another driver.

The CHAIR: Exactly. Can I just add onto that: I just wonder if you can give us some advice, because I think certainly the notion of accommodation for perpetrators is something that everybody has been raising. Is there any organisation that you think is doing that well—

Mr BARTON: Or at all?

The CHAIR: Or at all, yes.

Ms ROBERTS: I would say that most homelessness services would be responding to that group. So whether they would be rocking up calling themselves perpetrators I think is a different thing, but certainly we know that there are a growing number of individuals, men and women, approaching homelessness services; some who would be displaced as a result of family violence.

The CHAIR: Yes, because we are constantly hearing about how one parent and the children are being displaced and leaving the other person, who is generally the perpetrator, in place. It does seem ridiculous that you have got three kids and a parent in a Coburg inn and one person living in the family home. Are there actions around trying to flip that? I know that technology can assist with that with GPS and being able to see where that person is.

Ms ROBERTS: I do not have the statistics to know what the ratio would be. I simply know that there would certainly be many more options now in order to be able to keep people in place.

Mr BARTON: Because we could be exacerbating his issues if we make him homeless. But if we give him, ‘All right, mate. You’re here. You’ve got work to do. Go to your job’.

The CHAIR: But you have got work to do on yourself too.

Mr BARTON: And you need to be dealing with this. We don’t just throw him out and leave him angry out there and make it worse.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Leanne, talk to us about the GOALS program. Tell us a bit more about that. Also, I would like to know why we only have one house in Melbourne’s north. I think I know the answer to that question.

Ms ROBERTS: Great question. The GOALS program is Berry Street’s philanthropically funded services for young people leaving care or who are experiencing homelessness. It responds to young people 16 to 25. It has operated since 2012 and is a great model. What we find is that it fills that beautiful space for young people who have no other option, have histories of mental health and potentially AOD issues but not active at that time, and gives them the security to be able to engage in employment, education and develop life skills as well as a rental history while they are in that location. What has been really nice about the GOALS program, and also some additional funding which we have received through the department through some of their investment out of the \$109 million a couple of years ago, is we have started to create a pathways approach. So GOALS itself has the house, which accommodates around three young people, and also four units out the back with a mentor on site. Then we also have funding through the department which gives us flexibility to then also be able to provide that tail response as young people move out. What it has allowed us to do—

The CHAIR: To keep checking in.

Ms ROBERTS: To keep checking in and also to provide a step-down pathway, so step down from the house to the units out the back, from the units out to private accommodation in the community. And there is some capacity to hold on to a unit just to see how things are tracking. That would be one of our number one reflections on youth homelessness—the need for a stepped pathway and that capacity to be able to step up and step down from the program.

The CHAIR: As the need is.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely. We are setting up another GOALS program in Gippsland, again philanthropically funded, but it is something that is desperately needed across Victoria.

The CHAIR: We were in Bairnsdale before Christmas and we certainly heard that.

Mr ONDARCHIE: So it is just lack of money that you have not got enough in Melbourne's north? Is that right?

Ms ROBERTS: It is the funding to be able to deliver the services. As I said, we have the funding through philanthropy but there is a need. I know Government does fund a range of youth foyer models in certain locations, but I guess we would be recommending that Government actually look at extending its funding and these kinds of models right across Victoria because of the need.

The CHAIR: Tania, did you have any more questions?

Ms MAXWELL: I do. Just one quick one, and it is just a follow-on from the GOALS houses that you have. Do you have evaluations of outcomes?

Ms ROBERTS: We have had an evaluation of the north, that program, but it is dated. Certainly the outcomes are very strong, that it has been able to provide young people a pathway to independence. There is an example which we have got of a young refugee who came into the GOALS program—left the family home eventually because of family violence, was in year 12, and GOALS provided that opportunity to both deal with the trauma of the situation at home and stay in school. He eventually got accepted into university, which is a great story.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Wonderful.

Ms MAXWELL: Leanne, are you able to provide us with any of the evaluation case studies? Because if we were putting that in our report, for the Government to consider funding anything, they obviously need outcomes and results. We have heard a lot about the youth foyer and those models, so this is something else for consideration.

Ms ROBERTS: Absolutely. We already have it in our draft submission. I will make sure those materials are part of that as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Is there anything else you would like to leave us with? You have done a fantastic job, by the way.

Ms ROBERTS: Thank you. As I said, really our key themes are poverty and affordability, keeping families safely together, the missing group in family violence who have additional needs, plus also helping young people thrive, which is the GOALS program, and I guess raising the age to 21 as well, being the key component of that.

The CHAIR: We are trying very hard—came close last week.

Ms ROBERTS: Excellent. Thank you so much for your time.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.