

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Epping—Thursday, 27 February 2020

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WITNESSES

Ms Jade Blakkarly, CEO, WISHIN (Women's Information, Support and Housing in the North); and

Ms Jo Doherty, Practice Lead, Elizabeth Morgan House Aboriginal Women's Services.

The CHAIR: As you know, this is a public hearing for our Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. We are the Legal and Social Issues Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. That is provided by our *Constitution Act* and by the standing orders of the Legislative Council. That means that any comments you make here are protected by law. However, if you were to repeat those comments outside here, that same protection might not be offered or available. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As you can see, you are being recorded. You will receive a transcript of that. We encourage you to have a look at that and see if we have made any errors in it. Eventually that transcript will go up on our website and will be made available publicly.

We would love it if you could give us some opening comments. Thank you for this, and particularly the tab. Then we will open it up for questions.

Ms DOHERTY: Thank you, I just wanted to start by acknowledging that we are meeting today on the land of the Wurundjeri Willum. I wanted to pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I also want to pay my respects to everybody in the room today, and of course to Jade, who I am quite happy to be presenting with.

I am from Elizabeth Morgan House Aboriginal Women's Services. I have worked in homelessness and family violence for 20 years, and the majority of my work has been basically from the city up the northern catchment, so north and west is where I have worked. I have worked for quite a long time.

Elizabeth Morgan House has been operating since 1976. We work with a number of very vulnerable groups, not just people who are homeless or experiencing family violence but also people from the Aboriginal community. A large number of people that we work with have brain injuries and are experiencing family disruption through child removal. We know that Aboriginal people are 10 times more likely to experience homelessness, and in 2019 they were 10 times more likely to present at funded services requesting assistance. We see that this has a flow-on impact with the broader Aboriginal community because they are often not in a position to be able to absorb those families in need but they do, and that then places additional stress on families. In addition to the challenges that members of the Aboriginal community face, we also have those challenges that families who are experiencing family violence are feeling.

One of the things that we like to say is that often leaving family violence is an illusion for families, and it is an illusion because there is actually nowhere for them to go. We know that Aboriginal children are removed at greater rates than non-Aboriginal children, and we are seeing Aboriginal children currently being removed at rates higher than during the stolen generation. So what we see is that leaving those relationships is an illusion, and it is an illusion because there is nowhere to go, and if they do leave, we see them often entering into the homelessness sector, which then often brings them to the attention of child protection, and we then are seeing children being removed.

The fact sheet that you have all got with you—of Aboriginal children that are in out-of-home care, 88 per cent of them are in out-of-home care and family violence is identified as an issue. Of the children in out-of-home care, in about 50 per cent of them it was recognised that homelessness was a factor. So what we are looking at is too many of our children being removed because of homelessness and family violence.

I want to focus on the things that we do well in terms of homelessness, because I am really lucky in that I work for an organisation and I think we do great work and I think we get really fantastic outcomes for our community. A couple of things that I wanted to focus on—and I am not going to talk too long because I am more interested in having a conversation—is I did want to let you know that we do really great work around family violence and that what we look at doing is avoiding homelessness in the first place where we can. So we work really hard in making those homes safe for families to be able to remain in the home. Where we cannot do

that we work collaboratively with other services to look at accessing them supports and housing, which is very difficult. The supports with our families, we have short-term case management and long-term case management. Because of the current situation with transitional housing and how long it takes to get long-term housing, sustainable housing, we are looking at our support being up to 10 years per family.

The CHAIR: That is transitional?

Ms DOHERTY: Yes. So most of our families that we stay involved with for that long are in transitional housing as well. But the work that we do with those families is very holistic. So we do not just focus on one area of support; we are a holistic provider. So we look at: are they on their correct Centrelink benefits? How are they going with their child support? Do they have fines? Family wellbeing, counselling—it is a very broad range of issues that we support our families through.

The other program that I am really happy with, and it is one of the ones that I am involved in leading, is the work that we do out at Dame Phyllis Frost, the women's prison. For example, I did a group the other week where I did intakes with 10 women. Of those 10 women, seven had brain injuries. Only one of them had her brain injury diagnosed. None of them were on the NDIS. All of them were homeless. The primary issue we face with our women going through the criminal justice system is that their bail and parole is being denied because we cannot get them accommodation, and if we can get them accommodation, then the courts—

Mr ONDARCHIE: They have got no address.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, we cannot get them accommodation, there is no address, and any address that we can get them, the court system will say it is not acceptable. So any of the crisis accommodation that is put forward is not accepted by the courts. So we have women that are being detained, are being incarcerated because we cannot get them appropriate accommodation. The ongoing impact of that is that many of these women have children, so if they get incarcerated, then their children are going somewhere else. If family are able to take them on, that is fantastic, but we also have child protection and the courts deeming a lot of families as inappropriate because of overcrowding. Perfectly capable, loving, caring family members who are unable to accommodate these children because child protection says, 'They'll be overcrowded' or, 'They are overcrowded'.

The CHAIR: Even though the aunty or the grandmother is saying, 'Sure, we can find some space'.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, and even if it is temporary. We are looking at this just being until the remand hearing comes up. I do not have the actual number, but in terms of statistics for how long people are incarcerated for, we are not talking about several months or years; we are talking about shorter periods of time. But in that time we can see children going into out-of-home, out-of-community care, so they are not even with the Aboriginal community anymore.

But the work that we do do in the prisons is we work to ensure that the women understand their tenancy rights. We work to do correctional transfers—so correctional transfers is where they can relinquish their property and the office of the social housing provider can re-tenant people so we do not have a house sitting there empty. In exchange the social housing provider says, 'When you know your day to be released we will offer you a new property'. So what we are doing is making sure that properties are not sitting there empty, because when properties sit there empty we see squatters. and the rent goes down to about \$15 a week, so we see the social landlord losing income, squatters, damage, fires, so that is one of the big things that we work quite closely with social housing providers on, to make sure that is an opportunity that the women that we work with are aware of, and we facilitate that process.

The other project that I just wanted to talk about that we do really well—and I also sit on the VCAT advisory committee, so the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal—is where we work very closely with our families to avoid eviction, to sustain housing. Often we find that the majority—it is about 80 per cent at the moment—of the single mums that come to us are not on the correct income. They are on reduced incomes, and they are on reduced incomes because their kids are not up to date with immunisations or they have not taken the steps they need to for child support, so their Centrelink income comes down, so they cannot pay the rent. They end up in rental arrears and it goes to VCAT. We also work very closely with families to sustain tenancies and prevent evictions.

They are the types of things that we do, and that we do very well. I can talk a lot longer about the way the system does not work well, but I will stop.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Keep going, keep going!

Ms DOHERTY: No, no. I will stop because I am sitting next to Jade.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Jo. Thanks, Jade.

Ms BLAKKARLY: I too would like to begin by acknowledging that we are meeting on the land of the Wurundjeri people and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I guess I would like to start off by saying that, like most other people here, we are all really aware of the problems of the homelessness system. But I think as well, I try to stay optimistic because I think there are solutions. Like Jo, I have worked around the place for a long time; I think I have probably done 25 years in the sector, a lot of that in family violence. I guess for me that has been a real example of where we have seen an issue that has been critical for lots of people, no-one wanted to know about it, no-one wanted to pay any attention to it. And we have seen a shift. We have started to see a shift in community attitudes, we have seen a shift in Government responses, and I think we can do the same with homelessness. For me I am quite optimistic and really grateful for the Inquiry.

I guess for us I would say that WISHIN, probably along with Elizabeth Morgan, is one of the smaller agencies that you are probably going to talk to throughout the process, and I think for us that really places us in an interesting position. We operate across all seven LGAs of northern Melbourne with a very small team, and we are funded specifically to work with women experiencing homelessness and family violence. We do not work with a lot of women. We do not have the high volume that some other services that you have been speaking to do, but it puts us in a really interesting place. We are the only service in the northern suburbs that is specifically funded to work with homelessness as our primary function and in an outreach capacity. We have got high-security refuges but we have very few—part of Elizabeth Morgan's work which is predominantly funded as family violence work. Our work, which is mostly funded as homelessness, is kind of it, so it puts us in a unique position to see what is happening for women.

One of the challenges we find is that a lot of the services still see homelessness as, you know, the visible person on the street, that pointy end, and that is usually a guy. We know why: it is not safe for women to be sitting on the street at night. It is not safe for anyone but it is especially not safe for women, and particularly women with children. So women who are at that extreme end of homelessness are in their cars, they are in overcrowded accommodation with family and friends, they are swapping sex for somewhere to stay. They are equally as unsafe; they are just not as visible. But too often when we talk about homelessness, and even when we have had some great Government responses around rough sleeping and things again it is very focused on what is visible and on the street. So we think it is really important that we are able to have that kind of voice, to keep talking about, 'What does homelessness for women look like?', because it is not what we often perceive as homelessness, and a lot of our responses do not take into account what is happening for women facing homelessness.

It is interesting being a small service. We deal with a lot less people but we know them really well. Although I am the CEO, I could probably list off half of the clients' names to you and tell you half their stories, and having worked in much larger organisations, you cannot always do that, which is a blessing and a curse, I think. But it means that we really get to know what is happening for the people we work with, and I think that is really important. I think it really helps us to kind of highlight that difference—the recent gender equity bill has been a fantastic thing to come from the Victorian Government; thank you very much—but I think it also highlights why we are still in the situation where in initial homelessness we are still having to really have a gendered focus, because women's experiences are just really different.

Family violence is the key issue that is driving homelessness across our state. We have had some great responses from the family violence royal commission, but the challenge in the housing space has been that those responses have primarily been at the pointy end—so at the very acute where women and children at risk of death or serious injury, which we have needed them to be and we still need them to be, and recent events would show us that that is not resolved. But the challenge with that is that it often means that other women who

are homeless because of family violence are missing out on accommodation services. So there is a perception that family violence accommodation has been fixed and that all women who are homeless are there because of family violence so we are kind of done and dusted.

The CHAIR: We have not heard that from anyone actually.

Mr BARTON: We would not be here if we believed that.

Ms BLAKKARLY: We hear it in the system. We hear people saying, ‘Oh, but family violence has already been really prioritised, we need to prioritise other things now’. One of the things I am really conscious of is that across the state there is very little crisis accommodation for women unless it is a high-security refuge. We do not have enough crisis accom for men, but we certainly do not have enough for women. In the north there are no beds available for a woman with a child unless it is a high-security refuge, and that is just not—

Mr BARTON: So if someone comes to you tonight—

Ms BLAKKARLY: If someone comes to any of the services tonight, if she is at immediate risk of danger, we might be able to get her into a high-security refuge.

Ms DOHERTY: A hotel.

Mr BARTON: It puts it in perspective.

Mr ONDARCHIE: And we know which ones they are, too.

Mr BARTON: As nice as they are.

Ms BLAKKARLY: But no, there is nothing. There is no supported, staffed crisis accommodation in the north for women who are homeless unless you are in a family violence immediate crisis. We have got so many women who are homeless because of family violence but maybe they are not at that extreme threat of death end. Maybe they have left the house and tried to manage themselves—they have stayed with family, they have stayed with friends, they have done that for a couple of months and now they have got nowhere to go, that has kind of run out. The service system says, ‘You’re not homeless because of family violence anymore’. They still need family violence support, but it is not deemed to fit the criteria. Women who have tried to stay in their own properties and then have actually gotten to the point where they just cannot afford it because they were in that house with two incomes before and now they are in that house with one and they cannot do it.

Those women are all excluded from our current family violence accommodation system, and so they end up in the homeless system even though it is clearly because of family violence. What we find is because we do not have any options for them, it is one of those terrible, unstable, unsafe, horrific motels, and that is the only option for them. Those motels are bad for everyone, but they are particularly bad for women. There are stories of threats of sexual assault, of having four kids in one room with no cooking facilities, of locks that do not work on the doors—it is horrific.

The CHAIR: Trying to keep those kids in school, trying to keep any routine while there is screaming and—

Ms BLAKKARLY: And we have had women in those places for months and months. We are not talking about staying somewhere for a few days and then we will get you into something.

The CHAIR: Without transport.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes, no transport, no cooking, unsafe—and that is all we have got to offer people. It is slightly better in some other bits of the state, but it is not great anywhere. If you are a single woman, Ozanam House now has a few beds, but there are no other beds in—

I do not know if that is technically the west or the north, but that is the kind of closest. There is McAuley in the west, there are a few in the south, but for our region there is just nothing. So if you do have people that want to keep kids in school and want to try and hold onto connections to family, all of those things—

Ms DOHERTY: Or need to stay connected to support services—

Mr ONDARCHIE: Yes, you dislocate them, that is the problem.

Ms DOHERTY: And they are not eligible for their established supports anymore, who then close on them.

Ms BLAKKARLY: So that is a really huge gap that we have. I think it is bad for everyone, but there are some options for men. For women there are just very, very few options, and I think again that is that reflection of what does homelessness look like? It looks like the single guy who is sitting on the street, and that is what we have built accommodation for. That is what we have built a response for, those people, because as a community we do not see what homelessness looks like.

Mr BARTON: My understanding is that it is about 5 or 6 per cent of homeless men around the city, the rest is out here, out in the suburbs.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Definitely. And so that is a real issue we see. We were very lucky, through the Royal Commission into Family Violence, to receive some additional funding to look at putting some specialist family violence workers into our homeless service and then to try and look at addressing support for those women that are flocking into homeless services, who really are needing a family violence-informed response. That has been really successful. It was initially short-term funding, it has become ongoing. It has been great, but again it is not something that happens anywhere else. We have a small amount of funding to have a couple of workers who sit out at the homeless access points, talk to everyone who comes in facing family violence and do a combination of homelessness work and family violence work. They are doing a fantastic job. The demand is through the roof. But again it is if you happen to land at one of these services, you get it, and if you happen to land somewhere else and walk into a different door, you do not. There is no consistency. I think for us we need that emergency kind of stuff. Obviously we need and we echo everyone else's calls for more social housing.

And I think some of the responses from the family violence commission we have seen in housing have been interesting—the rapid rehousing programs, those head-leased private rental programs. There is a lot of debate about them in the sector. We would say in our experience they work well for a particular group of women. So if you are not so vulnerable, women who have been maybe managing work, managing private rental prior to family violence, they are an okay answer. But for most of the women we work with, they are not. The support services—there is no funding for support to go alongside that so there is an expectation that those women have support but no-one is actually funded to provide it. The problem without funding proper support is that the reality that those women are going to be able to sustain those tenancies once that subsidy stops is really, really low. We think it should be a longer program and it should have funded support, and the focus of that support should be about helping—

The CHAIR: That person get on track.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes, helping build economic independence. We know housing affordability for everybody is terrible at the moment, so for our clients, unless we can really change some of those economic issues for people, we are not going to get a change. It would be great if we all had lots more social housing and all of that, but that is a long, long, long-term strategy. In the meantime we also have to think about what we do now and how we support people now. I think if we could support people in some of those options for longer with funded focused support to actually look at where you are going to be in two years time when the subsidy is not there anymore, what you need to have happen, how we support you to actually be in a different place, we would get much better outcomes and it would be more suitable for a broader group of people.

I think that the thing that really stands out for us at that intersection of gender and homelessness and poverty and family violence is all of that stuff about really needing to change the way we are working with people in the long term, because I think our services at the moment, whether they are crisis accom or case management, whatever, they are addressing the crisis and we are advocating for housing, but they are not addressing some of those other long-term things around particularly the economic security and all of those things that we know across the board are creating problems. We know that can work. We have been looking at some great programs internationally that are really working to move people out of poverty in the long term. They are evidence based and they are really great, but they are not happening here. Here we are still doing for people rather than actually supporting people to be able to do for themselves. What we need to do to actually get long-term change is to

actually work with people to recover in ways that actually enable them to do stuff for themselves rather than rely on us.

The CHAIR: Jade, thank you. I thank both of you. It is great to hear something is working. I was reading a submission the other day around the access point in Sunshine rather than the access point—

Ms BLAKKARLY: We know that one.

The CHAIR: Yes. The madness of people turning up at 7 o'clock in the hope that they would get an appointment. Is that your experience, because your clients have to come from access points?

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes, our clients have to come from access points. It is to a degree. I think the demand is just managed a little bit differently in the north. The challenge for those things too is that often women have got kids to try and get places and all of those things so by the time they get to a queue they have got no hope.

Ms DOHERTY: We do not see the queues in the north like we see in Sunshine, but what we do see is people just missing out on crisis appointments and then being redirected down to the St Kilda Road crisis service after hours with their kids.

Ms BLAKKARLY: I think in the last 12 months just over 35 per cent of people who were coming in on the day in the north said, 'I need somewhere to stay tonight'. The ones that got seen were just getting told there is nowhere to go, not even a bad motel.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, and the other thing about that is that we have had a couple of bad hotels being closed down, and we now have the rolling strikes of the boarding houses, which I am hoping you have all heard of through *A Crisis in Crisis*. If you know your accommodation is about to end on Friday, you cannot go in on Tuesday or Wednesday; you have to wait until Friday. So you cannot even plan where you are going to go.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Say that again, Jo.

Ms DOHERTY: So if you know on Friday—

The CHAIR: You know on Tuesday.

Ms BLAKKARLY: On Tuesday you know—

Ms DOHERTY: If you know on Tuesday that your accommodation is ending on Friday, if you present at an access point, they will say to you, 'We can't see you until Friday'. So you know you are going to be homeless but no-one will help you plan until the day, and then when you go there on the Friday they will say, 'Sorry. There's no appointments available for you'.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Come back on Monday.

Mr ONDARCHIE: What?

Ms DOHERTY: Come back on Monday.

Mr ONDARCHIE: But it just does not make sense.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Because they are trying to manage demands.

Ms DOHERTY: They are trying to manage demands, so they are every day too busy with people who are homeless that night—

Mr ONDARCHIE: I understand that. I understand the demand. I could speak for half an hour.

Ms DOHERTY: But there are some things that could be getting done that also are not being done. I should say as well that Elizabeth Morgan House has the only Aboriginal high-security refuge in the state and the only Aboriginal refuge in Melbourne. I extend an invitation to all of you to come and visit it if you like. It is in the north. You are very welcome to come visit.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms DOHERTY: One of the things we are seeing is that in Aboriginal communities people are more likely to become carers or have their elders come and live with them than in non-Aboriginal communities. We see that Aboriginal women are getting pregnant and having children younger, and we increase child protection focus. What historically we would be able to do was get bungalows and movable units put on the back of properties. I do not know if you are aware but in the north, DHHS has sold off a lot of the larger blocks, so we have fewer properties with larger blocks, so we have less opportunities to put movable units—

The CHAIR: We heard from Kids Under Cover the other week—

Ms DOHERTY: Okay. That is exactly one of the—

The CHAIR: and they were saying that almost the majority was now in regional areas because of exactly this point.

Ms DOHERTY: But the majority of Aboriginal people live in metropolitan Melbourne.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Similarly, when Jo was talking before about the families that we have got for long periods of time in transition housing, predominantly they are large families. We have got people who for seven, eight years have been in transitional housing with us who are just waiting for a large property that just does not exist, and that ability to put bungalows or those things is just not there anymore.

Mr BARTON: There is so much that needs to be dealt with. I just want to go back and hear your views about protected tenancies. We raised this with the previous group regarding what is happening in Wales. When someone gets an eviction notice, the council that manages the property gets advised as well. Then they make an intervention and go, ‘What’s happened?’.

The CHAIR: Jo, you are doing some of this work.

Ms DOHERTY: It is also one of our recommendations. I am not sure what number it is, but it is in there.

Mr BARTON: Certainly in Wales they have had a huge success by doing something differently. They have had a massive reduction in homelessness, and I think a similar thing is happening in Finland, isn’t it?

The CHAIR: Well, Finland just does—

Mr BARTON: Does things well.

The CHAIR: They just build houses for everyone.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, that is one of our recommendations. I created the Aboriginal Tenants at Risk program, so I wrote that—

The CHAIR: Yes, fantastic.

Ms DOHERTY: at the Aborigines Advancement League, I do not know how many years ago now. But what we would like to see is more facilitated referrals through social landlords. There are not enough services who do that well. They might be very focused on stopping the eviction but not necessarily focused on what got you to that point. That is something that we do, and we think that there does need to be, not just send them a flyer—I do not even think that happens—but ‘Have you actively facilitated a referral?’. We work a lot with people where we get notified the day that the eviction has happened, whereas if we had been notified beforehand, even if there is an order of possession, even if there is a warrant, I can still stop that. I can make an application to VCAT and I can stop it, and sometimes I think that landlords deliberately do not tell us about them so that we cannot stop it.

Mr BARTON: Is there a role for Government to step in over the top of all of this and say, ‘When a person is about to be evicted, we need to put our hand up’?

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes, I think some clearer guidance would be great, but it also does need the resourcing for people to be able to respond to it. I think it is the same—we are picking up people from the access points who are coming in because they have got those eviction notices. The other challenge with the demand in the system means that sometimes you say to people—they come in and they say, ‘I’m getting evicted tomorrow’, and you are thinking, ‘No, you’re not. You were getting evicted when you got that notice a while ago’. But they have learned that there is no point in going to the services at that point. If I was going to a service these days and I was saying, ‘I can’t pay my rent. I’m scared that I’m going to get evicted’, I would not often get a response because again there is that prioritisation of, ‘How urgent is the issue?’. So unless you have got some kind of system where that notification is happening more clearly, people are just left on their own trying to manage it and then they get assistance when it is too late.

Ms DOHERTY: When the police are knocking on their door.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Most often—because there are not enough services doing like what Elizabeth Morgan is doing. We just do not have anyone there to help them save it.

Ms DOHERTY: I do think that if there was some kind of protocol in place that forced landlords to ensure that they had done all that they could to engage tenants into appropriate support services, that would reduce evictions.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes, it definitely would.

The CHAIR: Yes, and looking at the work that you have been doing with the Aboriginal community, I feel like there is an opportunity to upscale that. But going on your point, Jade, what we are also hearing is that with some of the evictions it is a churn rate. We have got people moving into social housing without the support, so they do not maintain their property in an appropriate way or they do not pay their rent—so back out and back in.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes, and it is one of the main challenges with the way that the homelessness service system is funded at the moment. The system was designed on an assumption that people who are most vulnerable are going to be linked in with transitional housing or with crisis accommodation, and that is who we are funded to support. The world has changed radically since that has happened, and lots and lots of people, more people, are going into social housing. More people are going into private rental. People who would never have been put into private rental before because they would not be able to manage it are now moving into private rental, but the way the homelessness system is funded is that once they move into private rental, we are not supposed to work with them anymore. So what happens is the way that we are funded is that you get support depending upon where you are accommodated, not what your need is. If you are a highly complex person who has ended up in private rental because that is the only option for you, homelessness services are not funded to work with you anymore. So you move in, we help you move in—

Ms DOHERTY: And a lot of support services who are—

Ms BLAKKARLY: We are just not funded to. So our funding says that the person must be homeless for us to work with them. If they are in transitional housing, we can work with them. If they are in a crisis motel, we can work with them. But once they are in private rental or social housing—community-based social housing or public housing—our funding agreement says that we are supposed to stop.

Ms DOHERTY: Generally after six weeks.

The CHAIR: Yes, six-week packages and 13-week packages.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, six weeks—often the goal is that within six weeks of you securing, you are expected to close—

Ms BLAKKARLY: You have got to step away. And that does not reflect the need.

Ms DOHERTY: regardless of whether or not their support needs have been met.

Ms BLAKKARLY: That might have worked back in the day when most people with high support needs got THM accommodation, but it has been a long time since that has happened. We are seeing it failing because we are putting people in and they are falling apart.

Ms MAXWELL: The ironic thing about that too is that then after the first six weeks you close and then the reporting has to be done to gain further funding, and then it is not funded because you have not received outcomes—you have not maintained outcomes for sustainable living. Then the Government says, ‘Well, we’re actually not going to fund you anymore because you weren’t able to reduce homelessness and sustain housing’.

The CHAIR: Because you did not fund us.

Ms MAXWELL: Because they give you that six weeks or eight weeks—you know, different organisations are different—and you put them into that private rental and everybody walks away. Then it becomes a revolving door and that person slips back into—you know, habits are created over a period of time, and they take that period of time and then some to be able to—

Ms BLAKKARLY: And we know more and more now. Research tells us about the trauma—living in poverty and being homeless for a long period of time has very similar impacts biologically to what being a child and growing up with abuse does.

The CHAIR: Jo, your paper on that—

Ms DOHERTY: Oh, have you got my paper there?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms BLAKKARLY: So that just continues for people, and we are not actually addressing that stuff. We are giving them a house and then we are saying, ‘Great, you’re done’, but it is not enough.

The CHAIR: Is that the right one? Jo, you touched on that—

Ms DOHERTY: I was not sure which paper that was.

Ms BLAKKARLY: She has been writing so many lately!

The CHAIR: Yes, you touched on those—exactly what Jade is saying.

Ms DOHERTY: But then on the flip side we also have under-utilisation of social housing properties, so we might have a single person or a couple in a three- or four-bedroom house. I also think we need to be looking at incentivising those people downsizing. I understand it is their home—

Mr BARTON: But are there properties for them to go to, though?

Ms DOHERTY: Yes.

Mr BARTON: There is?

Ms BLAKKARLY: Well, if we did it differently—like, if we had a better system of managing it—

Ms DOHERTY: If we are looking at transfers, if we are looking at focusing on the properties that are in the highest demand, and in the north—of course, one-bedroom properties we are always going to have—we have got the larger sized properties, so the four- and five-bedroom properties. Now, if you look at the occupation of a lot of those properties, you will find that they are not being maximised, so somebody might have been living in them for the last 10 to 15 years, their children have moved out, so now we have a single person or a couple in a four-bedroom house or a five-bedroom house or somebody with only one kid now in a five-bedroom house. There is stock management—the office of housing does do stock management transfers—but that has to often be instigated by the tenant themselves, whereas what we think would really benefit the broader sector would be if there was a review and people who were in under-utilised properties were identified and approached and asked, ‘Where do you want to be?’. Essentially you could give them what they want and then incentivise it: three months free rent, we will pay the removalist costs—all those types of things. Let us free up those larger

sized properties and then also increase revenue at the same time, because your income is based on the income that the house is generating. So for us we are thinking this is a really obvious solution in terms of getting larger sized properties. Yes, we need to buy them, but to a certain extent they are there and not being maximised.

The CHAIR: But even if in the first instance we did that audit and then proactively responded to that through, as you say, incentivising people to downsize—

Ms DOHERTY: The reason why I know this is because I used to work at the Preston office of housing, and I actually ran the report. So I know that it is a real thing.

The CHAIR: Yes, you know that report exists but the action on that report is what is lacking.

Ms BLAKKARLY: You know, the other thing that we have been really looking at in terms of sort of short- and medium-term solutions is the amount of properties that have been acquired by the State Government—usually not through housing; through VicRoads, through land, rail—and that are being leased out on the private market at the moment. So they are Government-owned properties that are being leased privately at market rent while at the same time we have got thousands of people desperate for housing outcomes. We understand they are not a permanent outcome, whether that is a five-year lease or a 10-year lease, and it obviously would be a slight reduction in income, but it would be a cost saving on paying for motels and things. Instead of renting them privately, give them to social housing providers so that they can actually be rented out to homeless people at affordable rates. We have had a bit of a look, and VicRoads have got over 300—they have got about 330 or something—

The CHAIR: Yes, I suspect you are part of that same group with Rita Butera, aren't you?

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes, that we have been looking at. There are at least 330 just from VicRoads, and when we raised that with the housing Minister, his response was, 'I don't know anything about it. I don't know where that money goes'. That money is going back to VicRoads.

Mr BARTON: Well, maybe he should know about it.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Well, he knows about it now because we have said to him, 'You need to go and have a look at this'. And that is just the VicRoads one, let alone rail—

The CHAIR: And it was accidental?

Ms BLAKKARLY: It was accidental, through a personal relationship where somebody knows one of the real estate agents, who said, 'Oh, yeah. I'm renting out all these houses that are owned by VicRoads on the private market'.

The CHAIR: And in fact that same real estate agent said, 'We could actually furnish them and rent them. We would see that as a philanthropic thing to do'.

Ms BLAKKARLY: You know, it is a really cost-effective medium-term solution.

The CHAIR: I think it does raise the point in regard to machinery of government that VicRoads land and the houses that they purchase, that information is not shared with housing, and that is—

Ms BLAKKARLY: No, and we would be asking that they should be—that all properties that are owned by the Government are not put to private market, that they are actually used for community housing.

Mr ONDARCHIE: And they all should be on the one register.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Ms BLAKKARLY: They should be on one register and they should be community housing.

The CHAIR: That was VicRail—you can bet that—

Ms BLAKKARLY: That was roads. There is also rail.

The CHAIR: You can bet that VicRoads would have the same thing, and that information is not being shared.

Mr BARTON: Jade, when we were down in Bairnsdale, just going back to the Aboriginal community, it was said to us that it is almost impossible—in fact it was impossible for an Aboriginal person to get private rental because they cannot get past the agents. Is that your experience up here?

Ms DOHERTY: Absolutely. We had a real estate agent in the north who was actually asking, ‘Are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander’ on their application form.

Mr BARTON: Mind your own business.

Ms DOHERTY: And when we asked them was there a reason why they were asking, they were saying, ‘For statistical purposes. Everybody else gets to ask, “Are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander”’. And I could see their point.

The CHAIR: What club do you barrack for?

Ms DOHERTY: Yes. So we pressed them that it was highly inappropriate and we thought that they were engaging in discriminatory practices. We have actually had real estate agents say to us that they expect these houses to become overcrowded. They therefore do not want to take on Aboriginal families, because they know these families will then take on other families. It is very hard for us to say that is not going to happen because of the pressures of the Aboriginal communities to absorb all these homeless people. So we do actually see that happening. We also have situations when you have to present your wage slips. We have worked with Aboriginal organisations to take off the full name. Instead of it being Elizabeth Morgan House Aboriginal Women’s Services, it will just be EMH so that the real estate agent cannot see that they are being paid through an Aboriginal organisation.

Ms BLAKKARLY: We are fighting that for our Aboriginal clients, and we are fighting it for our culturally diverse clients as well.

Mr BARTON: Bad people do that stuff.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes. It has always been a problem. The private rental market is under squeeze now. So if you are a woman with four children who maybe has the same income as a working couple who are not earning a lot of money, even if you can afford the property, you are not going to get it. You are not going to get it up against other people that are in that market.

Mr BARTON: I went for a walk last weekend past a property that was for lease—it was an open day for the lease—and there were probably 15 to 20 people queuing up to have a look at the property. And what chance have these people who are struggling with a low income? They have zero chance.

Ms DOHERTY: What you are talking about really goes back to supporting why certain marginalised groups do need to have their targets reinstated with transitional housing services. For example, Elizabeth Morgan House several years ago, when everyone lost their nomination rights, we lost our nomination rights to transitional housing, so we just applied for floating properties like everybody else. But what we really do need is for certain marginalised groups to have set targets, and we need to get our nomination rights back.

Ms BLAKKARLY: And we used to have that more in the system.

Ms DOHERTY: We used to have it more. We know that West is going to be reintroducing their targets.

The CHAIR: ‘West’ as in Western Australia?

Ms DOHERTY: No. West SASHS were looking at reinstating. As I said, we have the only Aboriginal refuge in Melbourne. Last year we had a family in our refuge for 13 months because we could not exit them to transitional housing. She could not go into a private rental. She did not have the living skills; she had a slight intellectual disability. It was not sustainable. She needs social housing. She was in our refuge for 13 months. Now, what that meant was that that unit could not assist any other families. We are seeing our families in our

refuge for months, so for four months, five months in our refuge. We need our targets back, so that we can exit them into transitional housing, so that we can then take another family from Safe Steps or wherever they are being referred to us from, so that we can keep them safe. We are a high-security refuge staffed 24 hours a day. We should not be accommodating low-need families because we cannot exit them.

Elizabeth Morgan House believes that those people who are in transitional housing should be on the Victorian Housing Register alongside people who are approved for family violence transfers. So family violence transfers sit at the top of the waiting list. We actually need people in transitional housing to also be approved to that level, so that we see them move.

The CHAIR: So transitional can come back to becoming transitional.

Ms DOHERTY: Because transitional is now long term.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Ms BLAKKARLY: I think the average length of stay in transitional at the moment is about three and a half years.

Mr BARTON: Three and a half years—my God!

The CHAIR: I think I was 35 before I lived somewhere for three and a half years.

Ms BLAKKARLY: That is our average length of stay in transitional accommodation. As Jo is saying, it is just stopping people who need the support and need that crisis support from getting it, because there is nowhere for them to go.

Ms DOHERTY: Our longest is seven years right now in transitional, and this is in Epping.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Ours is eight. We have got eight, a couple of them are eight—two with eight.

The CHAIR: It is not a competition!

Ms BLAKKARLY: No, it is not, but it is the reality for everybody.

Ms DOHERTY: Transitional is not transitional.

The CHAIR: You have just raised so many fantastic points, and I know people are madly writing as you speak. I want to just go back, Jo. You were talking about the empty properties and some of the ways that you are negotiating those empty properties. That just seemed very sensible, certainly for people in remand, but there would also be other circumstances. I am wondering if you think that the Committee could look at ways of how that might be upscaled. I think this is about auditing properties if there are empty properties for whatever reason.

Ms DOHERTY: I am not 100 per cent sure. Social housing across the board generally does do what are called temporary absence rebates—I am not sure if you are aware of this—and that extends to people who are also in drug and alcohol rehabs, in refuges.

Ms BLAKKARLY: And I think in mental health services.

Ms DOHERTY: Mental health services if you are having to pay to be in a mental health service. I know correctional transfers has its own category in the Victorian Housing Register. I am not too sure if they do, but I think what happens is after a certain period of time they do not give you your rebate anymore, and in a way it is to kind of like force you to—you might then become evicted because you cannot pay the rent, because you are paying two rents, and then you re-enter the homelessness sector. But I do think that there would then be a way. I do not really know how large the numbers would be. I think the largest number is those in prison.

The CHAIR: That is actually quite a large cohort, and I think we are seeing—is it up to 12 months with public housing?

Ms DOHERTY: It is up to six months.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Six months and you can apply for an extension.

Ms DOHERTY: You can apply for an extension that has to be approved by the manager.

The CHAIR: If when someone is remanded or goes into custody, that could happen actually relatively quickly, that commitment.

Ms BLAKKARLY: The challenge is that so many people now are in remand, but they also do not know how long they are going to be there for.

The CHAIR: And they cannot get their matters in order.

Ms BLAKKARLY: If I think I am only going to be there for three or four weeks, I am not going to want to do that because then I lose my property, and then I do not have an address to go to when I finally am applying for bail. So it does not work as well for people on remand.

Ms DOHERTY: But the other thing that is really positive about correctional transfers—and this does work for people that are on remand—is those that want the fresh start. So they do not want to go back to the property, because whether or not it is the associations—‘I want to give up that house’, ‘I don’t want to go back to that house’. So there is a certain number of people who are on remand that say, ‘If you can help me get rid of that property, then so long as when my time comes to be released we can negotiate that and I get made an offer of housing’. So right now, we do not. It is not an offer extended to people on remand, because there is not a way for it to be managed, and there is not the goodwill there from social housing providers when they are on remand.

The CHAIR: I think that is an area we could explore, and certainly I remember one of the case studies we heard of a woman who was so scared about living in her property that she was homeless, which meant she ended up in the justice system. She ended up in jail only because she was too scared to go back to the property that was hers.

Ms DOHERTY: We hear that a lot.

The CHAIR: So there is action that we could take there. This has been fantastic. I know my head is reeling with everything that you have said.

Ms DOHERTY: I think it would be the same after everybody who’s in here. I would like to think we are special, but—

The CHAIR: You are. No-one else has been here before—that’s right. You are the first people we have said that to. No, thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to leave us with or any final thoughts?

Ms BLAKKARLY: I think for us it really is about: we need to address the crisis stuff definitely, we need to build more houses definitely, but it is how we are doing that work in the middle and that capacity for agencies to actually try different ways of doing things. I mean, I am old. I was a practitioner many years ago. Case management does not look that different to what it did 15–20 years ago. But we know a lot more about what is happening for people. We know what the impacts of trauma are, and we are doing the same thing, and I think that is frustrating.

There are models that exist and evidence that exists that different things will work, but to date we have not had the encouragement or capacity with the way that they are funded and things. If you are a large agency who has got a big bucket of your own money that you can play with, sure, but for the rest of us we just have not got the flexibility. I think what we are doing has not worked. It works to a degree, and it gets some people housed, but it has not solved the problem. And so I think that capacity to actually look at things differently and to do different work is really, really important—not just more of the same.

The CHAIR: Jade, over the next few weeks if you can further articulate that, even into dot points, that would be really helpful because one of our standard questions is, ‘Do you think we can do better in the

coordination of the sector and all its different organisations?'. We hear that there is, you know, 'Yes, build more houses', but if we could really use the data and the information that we have got more effectively, we could actually get much better bang for our buck.

Ms BLAKKARLY: And I think for us if we are not really addressing poverty for people, which is the common driver alongside all the other things, we are going to be sitting having the same problem in 20 years time. Even if we can manage to get the Government to build lots more houses, we are still going to have the same problem unless we actually address the inequity that is happening.

Ms DOHERTY: And then I would just take the opportunity to make a couple of short statements.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jo. Please.

Ms DOHERTY: We really would like to see services be funded to provide a response to children in refuge because right now they do not get a response because they are in crisis accommodation, so services are not funded to provide support to children in refuge. We cannot get them counselling. There are a lot of things we cannot get them because they will not be provided as a service if the accommodation is deemed to be crisis. Even if their families are in refuge for 13 months, they are not eligible. So we need that to be looked at for the children.

A lack of housing should never be the reason why an Aboriginal child is removed from their family, and this is what we are seeing right now. It makes me quite emotional, sorry.

Mr BARTON: It's all right, Jo.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Just breathe, Jo.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, thank you.

Mr BARTON: Don't cry, Jo, because I cry really easily.

Mr ONDARCHIE: Don't get Mr Barton crying.

Ms DOHERTY: We are very excited about the bill being passed that changes the leaving care age to 21 from 18. It has passed?

The CHAIR: It did not pass. It came so close—

Ms DOHERTY: I was just nearly crying. You are not meant to tell me that.

The CHAIR: I am so sorry, Jo. But we got some very strong and very positive words. When it went for debate in the house, every party, with the exception of the Government, supported that bill, which was phenomenal. Across the board there was not a single political party out of the 11 parties in there that did not support it, and we had some very strong words from the health Minister that morning saying that they were supporting it, so just keep the pressure on until 5 May if you would not mind—until budget day.

Ms DOHERTY: Okay, good. I will remember that. We need culturally specific services. Mainstream services right now are not best placed to be the primary providers of supports to the Aboriginal community. We need our services to be funded.

Ms MAXWELL: Do you have access to VACCA?

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, and they are coming this afternoon, but they provide different services. I would just say to anybody who is interested we would be very happy to provide an overview of a project that we are pushing for which is the tiny homes.

Very quickly, we have a lot of young women that are pregnant that need support that are homeless. They are getting their children removed because of homelessness.

And then the other thing we see, as Jade touched on earlier, is those families who have experienced family violence who have support needs but are not eligible for refuge. We are wanting to be able to put forward accommodation for women from the community that is on one site, where we coordinate services to come to them so that there is more of a wraparound response for—

The CHAIR: We have seen a pilot going up in Preston. Is that correct?

Ms BLAKKARLY: The one in Preston was a temporary one that has now closed down. All of those clients have been moved into their long-term housing, but that project has gone down. And we would echo that as well, I think, for women. We know that the motels and the options we have got are just horrific. For us we would see tiny homes are not a long-term solution but a medium-term solution to give people somewhere safe to stay, to give women and children—

Ms DOHERTY: And to have immediate access to support.

The CHAIR: And to have support there either on site or—

Ms BLAKKARLY: That is right, exactly. And we would echo the same thing.

Ms DOHERTY: We also really support the embargo on the boarding houses and we strongly feel—and this is out of our control—that children should never be put into boarding houses and that state-funded services and access points should not be using money to place vulnerable people into boarding houses and never to place children into boarding houses, because what we are seeing is, again, child protection stepping in and telling families ‘You have to leave this accommodation’ when that is the accommodation that is being provided to them.

Ms BLAKKARLY: And we find the same with motels as well, the really bad motels. We have got child protection saying children cannot be in a motel—

The CHAIR: Look, with the money that we are spending on motels we could have bought those motels three times over.

Ms DOHERTY: Well, the Coburg one closed down.

The CHAIR: I know, yes.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Two of them have closed in Coburg. But, yes, you could be buying. So that issue about tiny homes—I think particularly in the north, where there just is not anything else—we think it would be really fantastic to have a women’s-focused tiny home with support.

The CHAIR: Yes, something we could do quickly.

Ms BLAKKARLY: We could do quickly to get something in to support. And I think although our focus is not primarily Aboriginal clients, we would really echo, I think, and support what Elizabeth Morgan is saying—we see that the over-representation of Aboriginal people in homelessness in our area is horrific and the impacts are devastating. We would really support it.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, and we know the stats are not true, so any stats that you are looking at with Aboriginal people, you have to increase that because Aboriginal people are not being identified or identifying for fear of being treated differently.

Ms BLAKKARLY: Or getting through to services.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, so we find that a lot of people, if they can get away with not identifying, then they will not.

The CHAIR: Yes, and if it is overcrowding in the circumstances, they are not going to identify, because they have probably told the landlord that there are only three of them in the house.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, and thank you for looking at my paper!

The CHAIR: Yes, I read it very closely last night. It was excellent.

Ms DOHERTY: Good. We were also in the *Age* last week.

The CHAIR: Just that link to developmental—

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, and overcrowding is such a big problem for us.

The CHAIR: Guys, thank you so much. It has just been wonderful.

Ms DOHERTY: And as I said, please be in touch if anybody wants to come visit and see what a high-security refuge looks like.

The CHAIR: Jo, some of us will definitely take you up on that.

Ms DOHERTY: Yes, we will order some food from Mabu Mabu, the Indigenous cafe. Whatever it takes to get you there!

The CHAIR: Okay, great. Can we bring Jade?

Ms BLAKKARLY: Yes, can I come?

Ms DOHERTY: Okay, come on. Thank you, everybody.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.